


# Missional perspective of Canaan's curse as a blessing in disguise: A biblical paradox

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This article gives a missional perspective of Canaan's curse as a blessing in disguise within the Missio Dei perspective. The pronouncement of Canaan's curse in Genesis 9 v. 25 not only conscientised us of the fact, namely its comprehension (conception) and reception (application) but also cautioned us on how to handle it, namely, its acknowledgement and appreciation, while avoiding its misconceptions which led and still lead to diverse confusion, contestation and complication that goes with it. The pronouncement of the curse of Canaan, in Genesis 9 v. 25, presents a biblical paradox which has an apparent 'blessing in disguise' message. Without proper handling, this issue affected and is still affecting both the Church and the communities and their socio-political and economic aspects. The question is: what is the message uncovered for the first reader and for today? This article seeks such a message from a missional perspective by discussing three aspects, namely, the comprehension (conception), contestation (misconception) and application (reception) of the curse of Canaan.

**Contribution:** This article adds value to the reading of Genesis 9 v. 25 and uncovers the biblical precept and missional guideline which not only conscientised us to acknowledge and appreciate the paradox in our conception and reception of Canaan's curse but also cautioned us on how to handle misconceptions regarding Canaan's curse to avoid confusion, contestation and complication that goes with it, which is still affecting the socio-political and economic aspects in South Africa and beyond.

**Keywords:** Missional; Canaan; curse; blessing; disguise; Missio Dei.

## Introduction – Towards a better understanding of the curse of Canaan

This article addresses the paradoxical question, aimed at drawing our attention to the comprehension (conception), contestation (misconception) and application (reception) of the concept, the curse of Canaan. In this article, the curse of Canaan is understood within God's covenant relationship with the living creatures including humanity, which is understood as the Noahic covenant in Genesis 9 vv. 8-17. The concept of covenant is understood in this article as Freedman (1996:1179) defined it, saying, 'a covenant is an agreement enacted between two parties, in which one or both make promises under an oath to perform or refrain from certain action stipulated in advance'. In the case of the Noahic covenant (cf. Table 1), God unilaterally took the initiative to establish a covenant with his creation. God reveals his missional care and concern for the whole of creation. It is within this broader missional framework of God's love, care and concern that the comprehension (conception), contestation (misconception) and application (reception) of the concept, the curse of Canaan as it is pronounced in Genesis 9 v. 25 is read and discussed in this article.

## God's covenant relationship with creation

In this article, the framework to read and understand the curse of Canaan is God's ongoing missional commitment towards creation, which is demonstrated in the Noahic covenant as expressed in Genesis 9 vv. 8-17 (cf. Table 1). With its canonical location, the Noahic covenant provides the essential framework for the rest of revelation and redemption history, including all other biblical covenants (cf. Chalmers 2009:214; Smith 1978:47-48). It is considered the foundational standard by which the rest of the biblical covenants are understood. The Noahic covenant is distinct from other preceding covenants because of its scope, which reveals God's care, concern and engagement with humanity and the rest of creation. Other covenants have a specific focus, including the fate and fortune of the elect people. For details, Smith's article (2006:4-5) is helpful. For example,

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**TABLE 1:** Noahic covenant as expressed in Genesis 9 vv. 8–17.

N.	Covenant elements	Main features	Short explanation	Biblical references
1.	Author and Title and preamble	'I and my' are repeated	God's initiated and unilateral authorisation	Genesis (9:9, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17)
2.	Its historical setting	Covenant envisaged	Despite sin, curse and death penalties	Genesis (3:14–19; 6:5–8; 18)
3.	Recipients (the scope)	For 'all of creation'	Humanity and the rest of non-living creation	Genesis (9:8–10, 13 and 16)
4.	Stipulated conditions	It is 'unconditional'	Solely and predominately God's grace and love	Genesis (9:8–10, 11, 12; 16f)
5.	Promises and oaths and pledges	God's responsibility	God preserves 'life' and postpones 'curse'	Genesis (8:21–22; 9:11, 15)
6.	Covenant sign for God	(Rain)bow in the sky	It reminds God to act on his promises	Genesis (9:12–17); Hebrews (6:17f)
7.	Its duration and effects	Everlasting and perpetual	As long as the earth exists, no more flood	Genesis (8:21f; 9:12); 2 Peter (3:7f)

the proceeding covenants have signs, like circumcision in the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, and baptism in the New Covenant, which involve human participation, but as indicated in Table 1 in the Noahic covenant, the Rainbow is the sign which is provided by God (Smith 2006:5).

### God envisaged and initiated the terms and conditions

At creation, God blessed Adam and Eve, urging them to populate, subdue, rule and name the creation (Gn 1:28–30; 2:19–20; 5:2). The flood neither stopped the warfare started in Genesis 3 v. 14, nor erased Adam's sin, and hence, his inherited sin (cf. Smith 2006:3). The post-flood world is not in its original, but it is radically ruined by sin and devastated by natural and human disasters (Blanchard 2002:17), because of God's deserving curse, and death warrant, or penalty to the whole of creation, including Noah, his sons and the rest of humanity after them (cf. Ezk 18:4–32; Rm 1:29–32; 5:15–17; 6:23). It was out of his unmerited, undeserved and unconditional grace and goodness that God not only initiated a covenant with humanity and the rest of living creatures on earth, that is reaffirming Adam's charges to Noah of repopulation, preserving the earth by managing living and non-living organisms alike (cf. Gn 3:17; 4:11; 5:29; 9:1,7,11) but also promised emphatically to keep it, saying, 'never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life' (cf. Gn 9:11b, 15b; cf. Table 1). God's promise, which is guaranteed by the rainbow sign, was to confirm that from that time of the post-flood era to the time of the recreation, there will be no more judgment by the flood. God's judgment was suspended. But suspension does not mean cancelling. According to biblical evidence, God's promise was open-ended and prophetic. It was pointing and anticipating an imminent worldwide future judgment by fire in Christ's Second coming to usher in his kingdom (cf. Pt 2 3:6f; cf. also Archer 1985; Bauckham 1983:316f; Davidson 1981:326f). From the post-flood era to the very end of this creation reality (history), there will be no catastrophic interruptions, as sin has to be paid for in full (cf. Smith 2006:4–5). This fact is important to understand God's judgment of human sin in general and the curse of Canaan in particular. God's rainbow promise confirms the fact that during the rest of this creation reality (history), humanity as God's image is neither eradicated, deleted, cancelled nor destroyed (though depraved, defiled, distorted and corrupted), and hence, God's cultural mandate to populate, subdue, rule and name creation is to be continued by every human being born on this earthly reality (history) (cf. Gn 1:28; 9:1,6, 7,18; Canons of Dordt, ch.3/4 Art. 4).

### It is and should be understood as an answer to the Ancient Near East's view on the concept curse

Hill and Walton (2000:67f) are among the scholars who uncover that in the Ancient Near Eastern worldview, the creation was undertaken with no human being in mind. They were not thought of originally. Human beings were the afterthoughts of the gods. In that way, they do not have inherent dignity and they only exist to offer services to the gods. The Mesopotamian literature confirmed the Ancient Near Eastern worldview with vague or indistinct reflections of human beings and hence was ignored if not disregarded. It was like the mirrors in Paul's day, which were apparently made from polished metal or stone and hence gave a somewhat indistinct indication of that which is reflected (cf. Clark 1817:13; Cowell 1961:63–66). This is made clear in the Ancient Near Eastern worldview which was compared with the Biblical worldview, this includes (1) an account of creation in the Atra-Hasis Epic ( $\pm$  2000 BC), which is related to Genesis Chapters 2 to 9; (2) the Babylonian 'Enuma Elish' meaning 'from on High' ( $\pm$  1800 BC) which is related to Genesis 1 vv. 1-2a; (3) the Sumerian Paradise Myth which is related to Genesis 2 vv. 4b-25; (4) the Babylonian Adapa Myth which is related to Genesis 3 vv. 2, 24; (5) Gilgamesh Epic's 11th tablets, which is related with to the flood account, as in Genesis Chapters 6 to 9 and (6) the treaties from the Hittites of the early to mid-second millennium BC and the Neo-Assyrians (680–669 BC), which is related to God's covenant with Noah. Many things can be said about these relations, but because of time and space, one issue will be discussed, and namely, the concept of the curse as it was understood within the Ancient Near Eastern worldview. Generally, the concept curse was viewed as a death warrant against the offender and his entire family until they were completely wiped out. This is clear in Mesopotamian custom, whereby the guilty person is stripped naked as a sign of loss of power or status. It should be clear that in the Ancient Near East, power and status were hierarchically determined, that is, people in a lower rank had no or little status or power, and hence, were subjects and servants of the king, who were in turn subject or servant of lesser gods, who themselves are in turn subjects or servants of higher power-mongering polytheist gods (cf. pictures of King Ur-Nammu of Ur illustrate the king of Ur as a servant [*slave*] city-god building city-tower, Ziggurat). To be cursed was symbolised by being stripped naked. So, nakedness in the ancient Near East world represents a loss of human dignity, respect and protection. In that context, to see another's nakedness was a major offence,

which could result in the death penalty (cf. Ex 20:26; Pr 18:2; Herodotus, Histories 1:8–13; Avishur 1999:48; Cassuto 1965:153; Matthews 1996:419).

### **It is and should be understood within the parameters and scope of the Noachic covenant relationship**

The fall of Adam and Eve caused the dislocation of humanity and nature and the groaning of the whole of creation is the result (cf. Rm 8:22). The parameters and/or scope of the Noachic covenant are as broad and wide as creation itself. It reaches out to embrace and cover the whole creation (both humanity and nature). Genesis 8 v.1 serves as a turning point of the flood narrative and hence the recipients of the Noachic covenant include (1) the immediate recipients, who are the only human survivors of the flood, that is, Noah and his sons and (2) the distant recipients who are descendants of the three sons of Noah, the table of nations who are mentioned in Genesis 10 from where the Israelites also trace their origin as all others. The framework, the scope and/or the parameter of the history of revelation of the recipients of the Noachic covenant are the whole of creation is broader than the salvation history of Israel. The Noachic covenant is significant for understanding diverse promises made by God, which guarantees his commitment to creation, which include not only the preservation of life on the earth (cf. Chalmers 2009:214) but also blessings and curses whereby the curse of Canaan is included. From a monotheistic view, Genesis portrayed God as one true and living Yahweh, who created, ruled over and sustained everything, and who is supreme over and against the Near Eastern polytheism, which presents confusing and contradictory accounts of gods and creation (cf. Hill & Walton 2000:64).

### **It is and should be understood within the specific interpretation methodology of the text**

There are five major theories that have been advanced regarding what is it that his youngest son had done to Noah that he came to know, which led to the curse of Canaan instead of Ham himself. Firstly, it has been suggested that Ham merely looked at Noah's nakedness; secondly, Ham looked at Noah's nakedness and then gossiped about it; thirdly, Ham (and/or Canaan) castrated Noah; fourthly Ham sexually violated Noah, and last but not the least, Ham sexually violated Noah's wife. This article will attempt to distil (refine) the interpretations behind these theories, into two propositions as illustrated in Line 1 and Line 2:

First proposition: The Bible is the word of God i.e., the text means what it says, or the meaning of the text is found from the text (literal).

Second proposition: A text may appear to be saying X, but what it really means is Y, or Y is not openly said by a text, it is only implied in X (allegorical). (Kugel 1997:86)

In the first proposition (cf. line 1) the Bible is not only viewed as the word of God (Kugel 1997:86), but the Exegetes accept the literal narrative and certitude of the text (cf. Olthuis 1976:3f; 1987:44f). This is called the voyeurism

approach (from the French word *for* or Latin word *vidēre*, to see) because according to this approach, exegetes refuse to see anything in the passage that is not explicit (Bergsma & Hahn 2005:25–40; Ross 1980:223–240). This article concurs with the voyeurism approach that the author helped the readers not to miss the point and start to speculate on what happened. Genesis 9 v. 22 in will be explained in the proceeding verses. Genesis 9 vv. 22, 23 should thus be read together, as they are interconnected (Avishur 1999:48; Cassuto 1965:153; Matthew 1996:419). In both the narrator's and his readers' perspective, public exposure of genitals (Ex 20:26; 28:42; 33:25; Pr 18:2; Hab 2:15; Is 51:17) and animal-like behaviour (cf. Lv 18 and 20; Vervenne 1995:49) was a serious violation of code of conduct, and therefore, when Ham, who was not a little boy wandering into his father's tent, but was a grown man of at least 100 years old by that time (Fortner 2007:108, 347) could not do a modest, proper and an honourable thing and cover up his father's shame (Ross 1980:230), but instead found some amusement in gazing on his father's nakedness. Moreover, he disregards Noah's privacy, and he goes on to tell his brother what he saw. According to Gibson (1977:527–531), a Ugarit myth called *The Tale of Aght* states that 'a dutiful son is one who takes (his father) by the hand when he is drunk, (and) carries him when sated with wine'. The narrator depicted Ham's disrespectful mockery in seeing and making his father's nakedness public, where the reaction of Shem and Japheth to Ham's interaction with them was clear, as they did not commit the same offence in seeing Noah's nakedness. Instead of speaking about it, they knew what to do about it. They took a garment and laid it on their shoulders while they were still outside the tent. They walked in backwards, and in the covering process itself, their faces were turned the other way, so that while covering their father's nakedness, they could not see his nakedness (Gibson 1977:527–531). This article concurs with the explanation that the same kind of arguments were also evident in some early commentaries which range between 250 BC and 550 A.D on Genesis 9 vv. 20–27. Only the main commentaries from a variety available are discussed and include the *Dead Sea Scroll 4Q252* (250 BC to 58 A.D), *Philo of Alexandria* (25 BC–50 A.D), *Josephus* (37 to 100 AD), and *The Rabbinic era* (between 200 AD and 500 A.D).

#### **Commentary: the *Dead Sea Scroll 4Q252* (250 BC to 68 A.D.)**

This commentary reads Genesis 9 v. 22 as saying that Ham was not cursed because he was already blessed by God along with his brothers (cf. Goldenberg 2003:158).

#### **Commentary: *Philo of Alexandria* (25 BC–50 A.D)**

This commentary also argued that Noah cursed Canaan to illustrate the extent of the transgression and to allow the fulfilment of Exodus 20 v. 5 so that Ham is made to bear more guilt than when he was cursed directly, so that just as Ham is a shame to his father, Noah, so will Canaan be a shame to his father, Ham (cf. Philo: Question and Answers on Genesis; cf. also Jubilees, 10:29–34).

### Commentary: *Josephus* (37 to 100 AD)

According to the commentary, Noah refrained from cursing Ham for his nearness of kin.

### The Rabbinic era (200 AD-500 A.D)

Between 200 AD and 500 A.D the viewpoint was that the curse of Canaan as a prophecy that anticipates not only the future judgment of the sins (which Canaan's descendants themselves are yet to commit cf. Keil & Delitzsch 1942:156; Tomasino 1992:130), but also anticipates the future justification of a divine authority given to the Israelites, to subjugate both the land and the inhabitants of the land of Canaan, which was realised during the era of Joshua and the Judges (cf. Ex 3:8, 17; Dt 7:7; 20:17; Jos 9:27; cf. also Genesis Rabbah 59.9).

The proponents of the second proposition (cf. line 2) were not satisfied by answers given by a voyeuristic approach (earlier) to a question: why was Canaan cursed rather than Ham himself? These scholars diverge from the literal context and start speculation, suggesting among others that Ham's act of seeing implies more of a substantial rather than a literal (passive) seeing or viewing. They ignore voyeurism's call to read verses 22 and 23 together (Fortner 2007:108, 347) and hence, miss the obvious meaning (Westermann 1984:488; Avisure, 1999:50), entering various speculations, which included castration and incest, either paternal and/or maternal (cf. Bergsma & Hahn 2005:30-40; Steinmetz 1994:198). In the Babylonian Talmudic academics' circle (also known as the Geonic Jewish Rabbinic law school) around the 550s AD onwards, the two prominent Babylonian Talmud Rabbinic academics attempted to rationalise the curse of Canaan.

The first was, Rav (Abba Arika). Rav maintained that Ham castrated Noah (his father) to disallow Noah to beget his fourth (and youngest of) sons, and hence Ham's fourth (and youngest) son, Canaan and together with all his descendants were cursed into slavery. The second was Samuel of Nehardea. He argued that Ham sexually abused Noah himself (paternal incest) or Noah's wife (maternal incest), by drawing an analogy between Genesis 9 v. 24 and 34 v. 2 (cf. the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin Folio 70a, cf. also Genesis Rabbah 36:7, Tanhuma Noah 14; Baumgarten 1975:68). More speculations could be mentioned, yet the aforementioned are basic. This article does not concur with the speculations of the second proposition.

### It is and should be understood within the parameters of the narration itself in Genesis 9 vv. 18-29

The narrator describes wine as the cause of Noah's drunkenness and the nakedness as the result of it (Avishur 1999:48). Noah celebrated the first vintage freely, and probably was not meant for public humiliation (as it turned out to be); this resulted in his drunkenness, where Noah fell asleep privately in the tent, after having removed his clothes (cf. a reflexive Hithpael form of the Hebrew verb, cf. Pr 18:2; Hamilton 1990:322). There is no explicit

indication that Ham disrobed his father or had committed homosexual acts (Matthew 1996:417, 419). According to Kugel (1997:86), it is not necessary to read into this story, from the narrator's description, as it is specifically done without either prescribing moral judgment or condemning and approving an act (cf. Knight 1981:181ff) or according to a mitigating factor for justifying drunkenness (cf. Cohen 1974:6ff, 1994:417; Gunkel 1997:80; Jacob 1974:67). Drunkenness was circumstantial. It was used as a context of the proceeding narration, which is related to Noah's prophetic blessing and the curse of Canaan in particular.

### It is and should be understood within Noah's prophetic blessing in Genesis 9 vv. 18-29

After concluding the pre-flood and starting the post-account of Noah's genealogy (cf. *tôlêdôt* transition formula in Gn 9:18-19 and 28-29; cf. Dorsey 1999:22), the narrator could have introduced the genealogy of Noah's son (*tôlêdôt* formula in Gn 10:1; Sailhamer 1992:128), but instead, the narrator introduced a parenthesis concerning Canaan, the fourth (youngest) son of Ham, and the multiplication and the diffusion of the Canaanites (cf. Gn 9:18,22,25-27; 10:15-20; Hamilton 1990:321). Though Ham's youngest son Canaan was the central figure of the narrative, Noah's prophetic utterance was not necessarily directed towards the person of Canaan, but towards the Canaanites after him, who were well-known to the narrator and the readers alike. It was the Canaanites' transgressions, which were attributed to Ham, that beg explanation (cf. Gn 10:6, 15; 1 Chr 1:8, 13; Hamilton 1990:320-321).

### It is and should be understood within the future anticipated (or prophetic) blessing

The Patriarchs usually bless their sons at the end of their lives, when death is near, and it was common in the narratives of Genesis to anticipate the deeds of later generations in the acts of their fathers (cf. Gn 27:1, 4, 10; 48:21-49:33; Sailhamer 2008:134). Noah's prophetic utterance on Canaan anticipated the fact that Ham's sins set a course whose effect is inherited, experienced, and reflected by Canaanites that followed him (cf. Atkinson 1990:170). Their own sins had a point of reference or an original link, that can be attributed to Ham's own sins (cf. Cassuto 1965:155). God used the line of Canaan to demonstrate the richness of his blessings. Noah's prophecy in Genesis 9 vv. 26-27 was directed to four representative parties, namely, Yahweh God, Canaan, Shem and Japheth. Noah, who spent 120 years preaching while building the Ark (cf. Gn 6:3; Pt 2 2:5; 3:20), is the same Noah who prophetically preached the gospel in Genesis 9 v. 26a of Yahweh who stood at the centre as the content of his prophetic utterance.

## Towards a better understanding of the curse of Canaan as a blessing in disguise

### The curse of Canaan falls within Yahweh-centred anticipated blessing or presence

As indicated in Table 2, the Noah's prophetic prayer-wish is centred on Yahweh. The possessive pronoun 'his' is referring

**TABLE 2:** Noah's prophetic blessing in Genesis 9 vv. 24–27.

Noah's prophetic blessing	Biblical references	Main features	Short explanation
Author and Title and preamble	Genesis 9 (9:24–27)	'I' and 'my' are repeated	God through Noah anticipated his sons' future
Its historical setting	Genesis (3:1ff; 6:5ff; 9:1ff)	Covenant framework	Despite sins and curses (death warrants or penalties)
Recipients (the scope)	Genesis (9:25)	'Cursed be Canaan'	To Canaanite nations. A warning to all others
Stipulated conditions	Genesis (9:26a)	'The slave of slaves'	The basest servant of Yahweh and his brothers
Promises and oaths and pledges	Genesis (8:27)	'Blessed be Yahweh'	Through Shem Yahweh will bless all nations
Prophecies unfold/ fulfilled	Genesis (12:1–3)	In Israel's history	Directly to remind God to act on his promises

Source: Cassuto, U., 1965, *Book of Genesis*, Magnus Press, Jerusalem; Avishur, Y., 1999, 'The story of Noah's drunkenness and his son's behavior', in *Studies in biblical narrative, Archaeological Center Publications*, pp. 41–56, Graphit Press, Tel Aviv-Jaffa

to Yahweh God (הוה אלהי) instead of Shem (Sailhamer 2008:134). Yahweh God (הוה אלהי) will be present and/or dwell in the tents of Shem. It is from Yahweh-centred anticipated blessing or presence that Noah's prophetic utterance towards Shem, Ham and Japhet and their respective descendants is and should be read:

- It was associated with Abraham (the Israelites) as one of Shem's descendants (cf. Ex 25:8; Dt 23:14).
- It was associated with Canaan (the Canaanites) as one of Ham's descendants (cf. Gn 9:25; 10:6).
- It was associated with Japheth's descendants whom God promised to enlarge them (cf. Gn 9:26).

In all cases, the descendants of Ham and Japhet will dwell in the tents of Shem (cf. Gn 9:26a, Cassuto 1965:153ff; cf. also Table 2). How will the Canaanites dwell? The Canaanites will dwell in the tents of Shem as servants of servants (the lowest servant) not only of his immediate brothers, namely Cush, Egypt and Phut but also of Shem and Japheth (cf. Gn 9:26, 27; cf. also Cassuto 1965:155; Avishur 1999:50; cf. also Table 2).

It became clear when the Yahweh-led curse or judgment of Ham's sin was fulfilled through the Israelites especially realised in the times of Joshua and the Judges whereby they were used as a tool to punish one of the Ham's descendants, Canaan, and the Canaanites after him (cf. Babylonian Talmud Genesis Rabbah 59.9; Collins 1984:325–355; Keil & Delitzsch 1942:156). The Canaanites dwell in the tents of Shem as servants of servants (the lowest servant) (cf. Gn 9:26, 27; Avishur 1999:50; Cassuto 1965:155).

### It points to God's unfolding revelation history which includes his mission to save his people

Canaan's curse is a sign of his care to the Canaanites, and it stands on the one hand as a warning sign of the effects of sin, that is, both the inherited (general) and the actual (personal) sin deserved (viz. a death warrant/penalty) and, on the other hand, as God's continuous way of giving sinners opportunities to turn back to him by deferring,

derailing and delaying the general curse (death warrant/penalty) which includes the curse of Canaan. The same God who, out of his nature and character of love and mercy, was patient in Noah's days as he spent 120 years preaching while building the Ark (cf. Gn 6:3; Pt 2 2:5;3:20), reflects the same degree of fairness and justice by *delaying* the death warrant/penalty, in so doing, waiting for sinners to come to their senses and repent from their sins (cf. Ezk 18:31–32; Copan 2011).

### The curse of Canaan revealed glimpses of God's mission plan through Abram (the Israelites)

Then in Genesis 15 vv. 13-14 (NIV) the Lord said to him (Abram):

Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterwards they will come out with great possessions ... In the fourth generation, your descendants will come back here, for the sins of the Amorites have not yet reached its full measure.

The glimpse of God's love and mercy is clear in many ways. In Genesis 15 vv. 13-16, God is speaking to Abram, giving him a survey of the immediate future, telling him about his future descendants, that they are going to spend 400 years in slavery in Egypt because of the iniquity of the Amorites. They were the descendants of one of the sons of Canaan (cf. Gn 10:15–160). At that point in time, when Yahweh was revealing this prophecy to Abram, in Genesis 15 v. 13ff, the curse on Canaan was to manifest itself and to unfold to its fullness in the Amorites' actual sins themselves. God's glimpse guidelines to Abram is that he (God) will take note of the slavery of Abram's descendants, and will punish their oppressors, the Egyptians (cf. Gn 15:14), and then he will deliver them. It was only in their fourth generation that Abram was told that his descendants will enter the land of promise, namely Canaan. It will be at that time that the Amorites will be punished for their sins.

God, who was willing to spare even Sodom for the 10 righteous people who could be found there (cf. Gn 18:32), was willing to give Amorites an opportunity to repent from their sins (cf. Copan 2011), and hence, God delayed the punishment of the sins, which had not yet reached their full measure. As always God who, out of his nature and character of love and mercy, was patient.

### The curse of Canaan revealed glimpses of God's mission plan meant for all nations

It was within 400 to 500 years of God's grace period which was an open chance for change opened to all. It was the period of God's mercy and long-suffering, where he restrained his death warrant, a curse of Canaan. At the same time, it was a glimpse which points to his measure for all other nations of the world and to each human being. The curse of Canaan was a blessing in disguise. There are many and various testimonies that emerged as a glimpse to justify and testify the fact, including: *Firstly, Moses's ministry in*

*Egypt aimed at making Yahweh and his power known to Egyptians* (cf. Ex 7:5, 17; 8:22; 9:14, 16, 14:4, 18). By means of this ministry, many of the officials of Pharaoh who feared the word of the Lord hurried to bring their slaves and their livestock inside', and hence 'a mixed multitude' joined the exodus from Egypt (cf. Exo. 9:29; 12:38). *Secondly, an interest of the narrator in describing, amongst others, Sarah's acceptance of Hagar, an Egyptian, who bore a child through Abraham* (cf. Gn 16). *Thirdly, Abraham's marriage with Keturah after Sara's death* (cf. Gn 23:2; 25:1). *Fourthly, the two wives of Moses, Zipporah, the daughter of Jethro, the Midian priest who profess the Lord to be God and who also gave administrative advice to Moses* (cf. Ex 2:21; 18:2, 11, 13f) and the Cushite woman (cf. Nm 12). *Amos's comment that like Israelites God take care of Cushites* (Am 9:7–8). *Fifthly, amongst these testimonies is Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute in Jericho profess the Lord to be God* (cf. Jos 6:25; Heb 11:31). *Sixthly, the Gibeonites* (cf. Jos 9) *and Midianites or Kenites* (cf. Nm 10:29f; Jdg 1:16) were incorporated, where the book of Joshua mentions, 'all Israelites, sojourner as well as home-born' (cf. Jos 8:33). *Seventhly, the Moabites, that is, Ruth also profess the Lord as her God, and like Tamar and Rahab, Ruth was not only assimilated, but was one of the great-grandmothers of David and the ancestress of our Lord Jesus Christ* (cf. Mt 1:5). *Lastly, but not least, the Queen of Sheba made a long journey from Africa or Arabia to talk with King Solomon.* The curse of Canaan was a blessing in disguise. The testimonies mentioned in this section are the glimpse that justifies and testifies both the 400 or 500 years as stated to Abram and the whole period of this earthly reality. It is a period of God's mercy, where he restrained his death warrant to save more.

#### **God's measure of sin reveals his nature, which includes his grace for all sinners to repent**

It was within 400 to 500 years of God's grace period and a chance for change open to all, wherein his mercy, God restrained his curse (and death warrant) to the Canaanites. The narrator highlighted that God's judgment, which was delayed out of his mercy, was imminent to the Canaanite tribes living in the plain of Jordan, who scattered from Sidon towards Gerar as far as Gaza, and then towards Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, as far as Lasha (cf. Gn 10:19). The Canaanites' perverse sins of sexual perversion (rape and incest), malpractices (bestiality and child sacrifices) and their religious drunken orgies (cf. Lv 18:3, 21–28) were highlighted to show the Israelites those moral behaviours inconsistent with the life of the people of Yahweh (cf. Atkinson 1990:169–170). The Canaanites were morally responsible and accountable for their sins as much as the Israelites were, and hence the Israelites were warned not only to avoid joining the Canaanites in their sins (cf. Hess 2008:91–92, 142–143) but also to supplant the Canaanites because they were given the time to repent from sin.

#### **God's measure of sin reveals his nature, which includes his open arms for sinners to be saved**

God led the exodus of the Assyrians and the Egyptians (as some of the archenemies of Israel) so that they might

acknowledge and worship Yahweh as much as the Israelites. A mixed multitude of the Exodus, the remnants of Philistines and the Jebusites were incorporated into God's people. Levites, in the cities of refugees, represent and exemplify the larger Israel's vocation to be a holy nation, a kingdom of priests (Ex 19:5–6). Through Israel's cities of refugees and the Priest and Levites' work, God's laws and deeds were channelled through Israel to all nations, who should be reconciled with God's works point (Nm 35:28; Heb 7:26–27; Rv 21:22–23). God's final purpose in Genesis 12 v. 3 was in the process of its fulfilment. For this reason, the nations were neither rejected nor excluded by Israel's election. Israelites were an instrument of God's blessing to all nations. Jonah knew God's patience towards Nineveh (cf. Jnh 4:1–2; Ec 8:12–13), and Nehemiah commented on God's patience in a period between the Israelites Exodus from Egypt (in about 1440 BC) to the times of their Assyrian exile in 722 BC and/or Babylonian in 586 BC (cf. Neh 9:30–31). Though the prophets' chief burden was Judah, Jeremiah was the prophet to the nations (cf. Jr 1:5), and in the latter part of his book, he proclaimed judgment to Egypt, Philistia, Moab, Ammon and Babylon (cf. Jr 46–51). God's ultimate purpose for the nations to be achieved is stated clearly in Jeremiah (16:19–21). Though Ezekiel's message was directed primarily to the exiles in Babylon, he proclaimed judgment to Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Tyre, Sidon and Egypt (cf. Ezk 25–32). God's ultimate purpose for the nations to be achieved is stated clearly in Ezekiel (36:22–23; 38:23; 39:7). Paul quoted Hosea (1:10, 23) and saw its fulfilment when gentiles became God's people through his mercy in Christ (Rm 9:25–26). Though Amos, like Hosea, preached to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, he delivered his message in Bethel – the religious city centre of Israel, announcing God's judgment to Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon and Moab and to the Israelites' surprise, the prophet denounced Judah, his own country (Am 2:4) and Israel, their own country (Am 3:2; 8:14), as other nations, to show God's dealing with all nations (Am 9:7–8).

## **Conclusion**

This article adds value to the reading of Genesis 9 v. 25 and uncovers the biblical precept and missional guidelines which not only conscientised us to acknowledge and appreciate the paradox in our conception and reception of Canaan's curse but also cautioned us on how to handle misconceptions regarding Canaan's curse to avoid confusion, contestation and complication that goes with it, which is still affecting the socio-political and economic aspects in South Africa and beyond.

In this article, the curse of Canaan is read and understood as a blessing in disguise especially when Genesis 9 vv. 18–19 is read within the *Missio Dei* perspective, whereby three aspects are considered: firstly that the curse of Canaan is related to God's covenantal relationship with creation (nature and human life), whereby the curse of Canaan is viewed as a warning sign of what sin, both inherent and personal deserve (viz. a death warrant or penalty), and on the other hand, as

God's continuous way of giving sinners opportunities to turn back to him, by deferring, derailing and delaying the general curse (death warrant or penalty), which includes the curse of Canaan. Secondly, the curse of Canaan was read within the specific context of the newly established nation of Israel's quest for the land of Canaan. Hence the curse of Canaan justifies the casting the Canaanites out of the land (cf. Levinas 1989:192). Thirdly, interpretation methodology of the text, whereby it is understood within Noah's prophetic blessing in Genesis 9 vv. 18-29, and within God's unfolding revelation history, which reveals the glimpses of God's nature towards Canaan, and consequently, towards all nations in general. From these considerations, the Canaanites were morally responsible and accountable for their sins as much as were the Israelites and the Church (Hess 2008:91–92, 142–143).

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