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Genesis 9:25-29

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PEOPLES AND THEIR DESTINIES

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

In the nineteenth century the idea of Manifest Destiny propelled the United States to expand westwards until it reached “from sea to shining sea.” Many believed that this country was divinely favored, that it was entrusted with a mission to extend its benevolent civilizing influence across the entire continent. Looking back with the benefit of hindsight, it’s clear that this was a racist doctrine. The civilizers were the white people whose duty was to better the world—what Rudyard Kipling would later call “the white man’s burden.” The native peoples were expected to yield to the civilized supremacy of the whites, while the African-American people continued in their subjugation. Indeed, many Southerners believed that slavery was the God-ordained destiny of these people of African descent.

Does God still ordain different destinies for different peoples? Long ago he did when Noah foretold different destinies for those who would descend from his three sons as they spread out over the earth, repopulating it after the Flood. These three sons had behaved very differently towards their father after he had planted a vineyard, drunk its wine, and gone into the privacy of his own tent. When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what had happened, he spoke of his sons:

he said,

“Cursed be Canaan!
The lowest of slaves
will he be to his brothers.”

He also said,

“Praise be to the LORD, the God of Shem!
May Canaan be the slave of Shem.
May God extend Japheth’s territory;
may Japheth live in the tents of Shem,
and may Canaan be the slave of Japheth.” (Gen 9:25-27
TNIV)

These are the only words recorded for Noah. Throughout the flood narrative he had been silent; he had simply acted, always in full compliance with the Lord’s instructions. But now he speaks. His speech is prompted by knowing what Ham had done to him. Ham had behaved badly. Worse than that: what Ham did to Noah was an abomination, a detestable act. Such an act required a response. This act, coming immediately after the Flood, was the counterpart to an equally-heinous act immediately before the Flood: the sons of God begetting offspring of the daughters of men. Both acts required responses. After the first act, it was the Lord who responded, pronouncing judgment in the form of the Flood. Prior to the second act, the Lord had made a covenant, promising never again to send a Flood. Yet here again, so soon after the new beginning, we have a sin so despicable that a response is again required. But God has limited his ability to respond: he can’t resort to a Flood again. This time it is Noah who speaks. Noah does not speak solely on his own initiative. We must assume that he speaks with divine authority. The destinies

he pronounces are God-ordained destinies. As with the planting, God seems to be entrusting certain operations to humans after he has reset the world in the Flood. After the original creation it was God who planted: he planted a garden. After the re-creation it was Noah who planted: he planted a vineyard. Prior to the Flood it was God who spoke in judgment. Now, after the Flood, it is Noah who speaks. In both cases I assume Noah acted with divine approval. This poses a problem for those who interpret the narrative of the vineyard and wine as being about the fall of Noah, reading it as a counterpart to the fall of Adam. No, it is not about the sin of Noah, but about the sin of Ham, and this sin is a counterpart to the sin of the sons of God with the daughters of men. Noah himself had not sinned, else how could he pronounce cursing and blessing?

This only speech of Noah is his last recorded action. Afterwards he died. So, as far as the narrative is concerned, this is his last will and testament. Similarly, at the end of their lives, Jacob would pronounce the destinies of his twelve sons (Gen 49) and Moses would pronounce the destinies of the tribes of Israel (Deut 33). All three spoke prophetically. These were divinely-ordained destinies.

Canaan

“Cursed be Canaan!
The lowest of slaves
will he be to his brothers.” (9:25)

Since Noah’s speech is in response to knowing what Ham had done to him, he first pronounces the destiny of Ham. Except it’s not Ham whose destiny he pronounces, but Canaan. This has long troubled readers and interpreters. If it’s Ham who did the despicable act, why is the judgment borne by his son, not by the perpetrator himself? Many different explanations have been offered. Since Ham was Noah’s youngest son, he is punished in his youngest son. The sins of the fathers are visited on the sons to the third and fourth generations. Ham has already been blessed, so he can’t now be cursed. Noah knows that Canaan will behave just like Ham and so be equally worthy of judgment. These are just some of the suggestions. The explanation I advocated last week is that Canaan was the result of Ham’s despicable act. What Ham did was an abomination, and the result was an abomination. God would not allow such an abomination to prosper, and so Noah cursed the offspring, Canaan.

This is the fourth time that something is pronounced cursed. After the Fall, the Lord God pronounced the serpent cursed (3:14) and the ground cursed (3:17). After Cain murdered his brother Abel, the Lord pronounced Cain cursed (4:11). “Curse” is a jarring word to hear in Genesis because this ought to be a book about blessing. God created the world for blessing: he blessed the first living creatures, the first humans, and the seventh day. But quickly blessing had turned to cursing: the serpent, the ground, and Cain. God recreated the world for blessing: he blessed Noah and his three sons. But now, just as quickly, blessing has again turned to cursing.

Blessing and cursing are opposites. To bless means to endow with fruitful life. God's blessing of the first living creatures, the first humans, and Noah and his sons is accompanied by the command, "Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth." God's blessing enables fulfillment of that command. I liken blessing to an arrow signifying a forward-moving trajectory in life. By blessing them God enabled his creatures to fulfill his purposes which are for the expansion of life.

Since curse is the opposite of bless, it means to deprive of fruitful life. If "bless" is a forward-moving arrow, "curse" is a line leading to a dead-end. When God curses something he frustrates it, rendering it futile. He may allow it to continue, but only for a while. "Curse" is a harsh word, but it carries a silver lining. A curse is God's pronouncement that he will not allow forces opposed to life to ultimately triumph. He would not allow the serpent's deceptions to triumph. He would not allow Cain's way to triumph. And now he will not allow Ham's abomination to triumph. The ways of the serpent, of Cain, and of Ham lead to death. By cursing such evil God reaffirms his commitment to life.

Noah proclaims a life of servitude for Canaan. Canaan will be a slave to his brothers, a destiny reaffirmed in Noah's oracles about Shem and Japheth. Worse than that, Canaan will be in abject servitude, a slave of slaves, meaning the lowest of slaves. There were times in the Old Testament when the Canaanites were subjugated in slavery to the descendants of Shem. But "curse" implies a worse fate than even servitude.

Noah, speaking for God, placed a dead-end across the trajectory of the life of Ham's seed Canaan. That dead-end was not immediate. God allowed Canaan's line to continue for many generations. As Noah's descendants spread out across the earth, Canaan settled in a land whose boundaries are specified in the Table of Nations (10:19). Two chapters later God promised to give Abraham this same piece of land, as the narrator notes: "At that time the Canaanites were in the land" (12:6-7). This established a tension: God had promised the land to Abraham and his descendants but the Canaanites were in the land. God would give the land to Abraham's descendants, but not yet, "for the sin of the Amorites has not reached its full measure" (15:16), the Amorites being one of the peoples of the land.

Hundreds of years after this promise to Abraham, the line of Canaan met its dead-end, the dead-end that had been hanging over it ever since Noah pronounced Canaan cursed. The Canaanites had forfeited their right to the land. Their vile behavior, mirroring the behavior of their ancestor Ham, had defiled the land, and so the Lord caused the land to vomit out its inhabitants (Lev 18:24-25), as one vomits out a food that has made one sick. As the Israelites prepared to enter the land, the Lord instructed them through Moses to completely destroy the Canaanites. The technical term for this is the Hebrew word *herem*, meaning to devote to complete destruction. This is one of the less savory episodes of the Old Testament, but the Old Testament is full of things we would consider less than savory, as we found out last week. God's command to his people to completely destroy the Canaanites is hard for people to swallow, and is one of the topics about which I'm most frequently asked.

This *herem*, this complete destruction of the Canaanites, was the fulfillment of the curse on Canaan. This end had been hanging over the Canaanites ever since Noah's pronouncement. This was genocide; there's no getting around that. It was specifically targeted at removing an entire people. It was ethnic cleansing. Because of their behavior the Canaanites had forfeited their right to the land. This is

not a pleasant topic, but it's in the Bible so we have to deal with it. Even evangelicals who take a high view of God and Scripture struggle to make sense of it. A volume in Zondervan's Counterpoints series is dedicated to this: *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and the Canaanite Genocide* (2003). Four evangelical scholars struggle to make sense of the issue. The first scholar argues that Noah, Moses and Joshua misunderstood God. When Noah pronounced the curse, when Moses commanded total destruction, and when Joshua executed it, they were not following God's purposes, but only their faulty understanding thereof.¹ I have great trouble with that interpretation. It seems clear that Noah's pronouncement, Moses's command and Joshua's execution were in accord with God's purposes. Why would God command this genocide? There are three very important things to remember in thinking through this issue.

Firstly, God did not allow Israel to do this to any people it pleased. It was specifically the Canaanites or the Amorites whom Israel was to destroy. It was the inhabitants of the land God had promised Abraham, into which he was bringing his people. God would tolerate the sins of the Canaanites no longer. The concept of *herem* could not be used by Israel indiscriminately.

Secondly, God provided a way of escape, as illustrated in the back-to-back stories of Rahab and Achan. Rahab was a resident of Jericho, the city that blocked the entrance of God's people into the land, and therefore the first city that needed to be destroyed. Rahab had heard about the Lord, Israel's God: what he had done in Egypt and what Israel had done to the two Amorite kings east of the Jordan. Our Scripture reading (Josh 2:8-14) related how she responded in faith and asked for mercy:

"I know that the LORD has given this land to you...the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below. Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you." (Josh 2:9-12)

She asked the two Israelite spies to show her *hesed*, covenant loyalty, as she had shown to them in hiding them. When Jericho was captured, the city and its people were completely destroyed, except for Rahab and her family (Josh 6). She responded in faith to the Lord, was saved, was incorporated into Israel, and was even grafted into the lineage of the Messiah, appearing in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1:5). A Canaanite prostitute, on the eve of the execution of the curse that had been hanging over the Canaanites for centuries, in faith responded to what she had heard about what God had done for his people, and she was saved. But in the very next chapter of Joshua (7) we read of Achan the Israelite. He took some of the things from Jericho which should have been completely destroyed, keeping them for himself. When discovered, he and his family were completely destroyed. Rahab and Achan traded places. On what basis? On the basis of Rahab's faith and Achan's disobedience. And so Rahab the Canaanite prostitute is included in the Hall of Faith:

By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient. (Heb 11:31)

The third thing in order to understand the Canaanite genocide is that it is a forerunner of final judgment, of what God will do at the end of time. All evil, wickedness and sin is unbearable to God. In the short term he does forbear it, allowing humanity to go its way. But the day is coming when God will declare an end, just as he declared an end to the abominations of the Canaanites. Why does the Lord delay the inevitable? So that people might be saved, just as Rahab the

prostitute. So that people might cry out to God for mercy and find him to be a merciful God.

Ham's despicable behavior has brought down a curse on the result of that behavior: Canaan. God will not allow Ham's way to flourish. Noah says nothing about the rest of Ham's descendants, his other three sons. Their spreading out over the earth is described in the Table of Nations (Gen 10), and several of the descendant peoples will loom large in Israel's history, never for the better.

Next Noah turns to Shem and Japheth, his two sons who had acted honorably. Noah's words about them are given as a separate speech to emphasize that their destinies are different from Ham's. But their destinies are also different one from the other. Both are given positive destinies, but in different ways.

Shem

**"Praise be to the LORD, the God of Shem!
May Canaan be the slave of Shem." (9:26)**

Noah does not bless Shem directly. Rather, he blesses the Lord, Yahweh: "Blessed be the LORD." Hitherto it has always been the Lord who has blessed: the living creatures, the first humans, the seventh day, Noah and his sons. Now, for the first time, blessing is on the lips of a mere mortal, of Noah. Furthermore, it is the Lord whom he proclaims to be blessed. It is understandable that God blesses humans, but how can a human bless God, for how can we endow God with fruitful life? Instead, when we bless the Lord or pronounce him blessed, we acknowledge that he is the source of blessing. It is essentially an expression of thanksgiving and praise; hence the TNIV rendering, "Praise be to the LORD."

Noah praises the Lord because he has identified himself as the God of Shem. Both Shem and Japheth acted honorably. Why then is Shem favored over Japheth in receiving this honor? Nothing so far has distinguished Shem from Japheth, so this must be pure grace, God's free sovereign choice.

Shem's great distinction is to be chosen by God. Out of the peoples of the world God chose to identify himself particularly with the descendants of Shem. The rest of Genesis shows how God continues to narrow his selection: from Shem to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob. With Jacob the selection process is complete as God identifies himself with all of Jacob's sons, from whom come the twelve tribes of Israel. God will bless Israel in many ways, but its greatest blessing is in having God be its God. As our call to worship began:

**Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD,
the people he chose for his inheritance. (Ps 33:12)**

After delivering his people from Egypt, the Lord brought them to Mt Sinai to meet with him. There he revealed his purposes:

Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exod 19:5-6)

All the nations belong to the Lord, since he has made them. But God took Israel to belong especially to him, calling it his treasured possession. The Hebrew word is *segullah*, denoting a king's personal treasure. Open up God's treasure chest and what do you find? Not silver or gold but people. We often talk about God's blessings, but we usually define those blessings as material benefits. God's greatest blessing is the gift of himself, to undertake to be our God and to take us to be his people. This lies at the heart of his purposes, expressed to

Abraham and to Israel: "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you."

Japheth

**"May God extend Japheth's territory;
may Japheth live in the tents of Shem,
and may Canaan be the slave of Japheth." (9:27)**

Japheth is given a double destiny. His first destiny is that God will extend him, that is, his territory. Here is a wordplay on Japheth's name which is nearly identical with the expression "may he extend." This expansive territory is described, in part, in the Table of Nations (Gen 10), which shows Japheth expanding northwards and westwards into Anatolia and Europe.

But Japheth has a second destiny beyond mere territorial expansion: that he dwell in the tents of Shem. Japheth had acted in concert with Shem in honoring their father. Their destinies will also be intertwined. Though Japheth expand far and wide he will find his home not in his expansive territory but in the tents of Shem.

Noah's Death

After Noah pronounced these three destinies, it remains only for him to die:

After the flood Noah lived 350 years. Noah lived a total of 950 years, and then he died. (9:28-29)

Noah's death ends an era. This death notice terminates the genealogy of chapter 5 which was interrupted by the account of the Flood. That pre-Flood genealogy ran for ten generations from Adam to Noah. But he is also the first of the post-Flood genealogy which will run another ten generations from Noah to Terah, the father of Abraham (11:10-26). Noah is the hinge of these two genealogies; he is the bridge from pre-Flood to post-Flood. Now his work is done. It is his three sons who will spread out over the earth as peoples, following the destinies he has proclaimed.

Peoples and Destinies Today

Noah lived a very long time ago. Are these three destinies still valid today? Linguists and ethnographers have employed the terms Hamitic and Semitic to refer to people groups and languages. More importantly, does this three-fold division of the sons of Noah have any ongoing validity for understanding God's purposes with respect to the peoples of the world? There are many who still try to use this three-fold division as a grid for explaining the world. Most disturbingly, the curse upon Canaan has been used as justification for slavery. Proponents argue that the curse on Canaan was upon all of Ham's descendants, and that their curse lay in being black, which they say is the meaning of Ham's name. Noah pronounced them condemned to a life of servitude, which advocates of slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw as still in effect. Others seek to understand the rebirth of the modern state of Israel in terms of Shem and Japheth. The involvement of Europe and America in a reborn Israel is Japheth seeking entrance into the tents of Shem. The settler movement in Israel wishes to reenact the curse upon Canaan, repeating Joshua's conquest of the land by driving out the local Palestinian population. Opponents of such Zionist expansion accuse Israel of ethnic cleansing.

But is it right to still view the world through the lens of Noah's oracle? Is one people still under a curse? Does God still uniquely

identify himself as the God of one particular people? Is there a people still trying to get into the tents of Shem?

Firstly, the curse upon Canaan. God fulfilled the curse on Canaan by giving Israel possession of the land of Canaan. He clearly told Israel that Canaan had forfeited its right to the land because of its depravity. He warned Israel not to indulge in any of the abominations of the Canaanites, lest Israel, too, forfeit its right to the land (Lev 18:26-28). He set before Israel blessings and curses: obedience would bring his blessing, but disobedience would bring curses (Deut 27-28). If Israel walked in the ways of Ham, repeating the sins of the Canaanites, it would suffer the same fate as the Canaanites. Sadly, this is exactly what happened. Israel repeated the abominations of the Canaanites, and so the curses came true: the land did vomit Israel out, as God expelled his people into exile. Israel brought upon itself the same destiny as Canaan.

What then of God's promise to be the God of his people, descended from Shem? God remained faithful to his people Israel, maintaining their existence until Israel birthed the Messiah, the one who came in fulfillment of all the promises of the Old Testament, going all the way back to the promise given in the garden, that the seed of the woman would do battle with the seed of the serpent.

Jesus was born into the line of Shem, into the line of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. When he came to Israel he looked for faith. Where was faith to be found? One time he journeyed outside Israel to the region of Tyre and Sidon, where a woman with a demon-possessed daughter found him. Mark describes her as a Syrophenician Gentile (Mark 7:26), Matthew as a Canaanite (Matt 15:22). She cried out, "*Kyrie eleison*; Lord, have mercy." And the Lord had mercy, marveling at her faith, because he couldn't find such faith in Israel. Just like Rahab, she responded in faith, cried out for mercy, and found mercy. Even though she was a Canaanite!

I said that we need to understand the Canaanite genocide as a forerunner of God's impending judgment at the end of time. But in the middle of time, God executed judgment on his own Son, Jesus the Messiah, making him who knew no sin to be sin. Jesus bore the curses of Israel. With the death and resurrection of his Son, God has defeated sin, death and Satan, the forces that oppose his purposes of life. Now he extends himself to all peoples, be they descended from Shem, Ham or Japheth. He invites all to come and know him as their God, to find their dwelling place in the tent, the tabernacle, which Christ, the Shemite, has erected as a dwelling place for God and his people. He has knocked down the dividing wall of partition between Jew and Gentile, making the two into one.

This three-fold division of the human race into Shem, Ham/Canaan and Japheth had great relevance for Israel in the Old Testament. Descended from Shem, Israel had the great blessing to have the Lord be its God. Israel occupied the land because cursed Canaan had forfeited its right to it; but Israel was on notice to not repeat the practices of the Canaanites lest it too forfeit the land. Finally, on the horizon in their expansive territory, were the Japhethites, who would find their true destiny in the tents of Shem, there joining Israel.

But after the death and resurrection of Christ this three-fold division has no validity. There is now a two-fold division which has nothing to do with race, ethnicity, or people group. There are two peoples: those who are in Christ and those who are not in Christ. There are two destinies. For one it is entrance into the promised land of the new heavens and the new earth, there to hear it said,

"Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God." (Rev 21:3)

For the other it is a dead-end: final judgment of which judgment on the Canaanites was a precursor. God is still delaying that judgment as he invites all to come and know him as their God, to respond in faith to what he has done—just like Rahab the Canaanite prostitute, just like the Canaanite woman in Matthew's gospel.

Yes, God has purposes for the peoples of this world, but there are only two peoples and only two destinies. The crucial difference is how we respond to the Lord Jesus Christ. Do we recognize him as the one who deals with our sin so that we might know God as our God? Or do we continue in our sinful behavior, rejecting God? In which case, there will come a time when he says "Enough! Your sins are complete," and brings judgment. In the meantime, though, he bids all come to Christ and find mercy because he is a merciful God.

In the Book of Revelation, John sees the heavenly beings acclaim the Lamb in song because he has assembled a people for God from all the peoples of the earth:

**"You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased for God
members of every tribe and language and people and nation.
You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our
God,
and they will reign on the earth." (Rev 5:9-10)**

1. C. S. Cowles, "The Case for Radical Discontinuity," in C. S. Cowles et al., *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and Canaanite Genocide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

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