

Who was Ham in the Bible?

Ham was one of the three sons of Noah. Ham and his wife, along with the rest of Noah's family, were saved from the great flood God sent to judge the earth, which had grown increasingly wicked. Once the flood waters had receded, God commanded Noah's family, specifically his sons and their wives, to multiply and repopulate the earth. Ham himself became the father of the Canaanites, the Babylonians, the Phoenicians, the Cushites, and the Egyptians (Genesis 10:6-20).

Ham was involved in a sordid family incident. As Noah's family worked to reestablish civilization after the flood, Noah became "a man of the soil" and grew a vineyard (Genesis 9:20). One day, he became drunk after imbibing some of the wine he had produced. Ham entered Noah's tent and found his father there, passed out and naked. Ham told his brothers of their father's condition, and Shem and Japheth walked backward into the tent, their faces turned respectfully away, and covered their father with a garment (verses 22-23). When Noah awoke, he realized "what his youngest son had done to him" (verse 24). Noah blessed Shem and Japheth for their action, but he omitted Ham from the blessing. In addition, Noah cursed Ham's son, Canaan, who it seems had also been involved in the matter somehow (verse 25).

The exact reason for Noah's curse on Canaan is unknown, because the Bible does not give any detail as to Ham's specific actions in the tent. The curse may have been due to an inaction on Ham's part—that is, Ham did not afford Noah the same respect and courtesy Shem and Japheth had shown him. Some speculate that Ham actively violated his father somehow, and rabbinic tradition states that Ham castrated Noah. Whatever happened, Noah was greatly displeased and cursed Ham's son Canaan: "Cursed be Canaan! / The lowest of slaves / will he be to his brothers" (Genesis 9:25).

The Bible does not relate exactly how Ham's son Canaan served Japheth and Shem. Much later, however, Canaan's line did indeed experience enslavement at the hands of Shem's descendants. The Canaanites were destroyed or subjugated by Israel (who are Shemites) during the conquest of the Promised Land.