

# Notes on the meaning of Japheth dwelling in the tents of Shem

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Version 1.0

“May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem, and let Canaan be his servant.” (Genesis 9:27, ESV)

## Introductory Comments

Much has been made of this verse with diverse interpretations. To understand it, let us view it in its context:

“And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father and told his two brothers outside.

Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned backward, and they did not see their father's nakedness.

When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him,

he said, “Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers.”

“He also said, “Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant. May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem, and let Canaan be his servant.”” (Genesis 9:22-27)

Without going into an explanation for verses 22-26 which are adequately covered by many commentators and authors, let us take note of the fact that the following chapter – the famous and unique *Table of Nations* – lists all the peoples of mankind.

Does this verse denote a prophecy? Or something immediate to the writer of the day (Moses)? If the former, how might it be interpreted?

## What the verse does not mean

In my view, the researcher Ray Stedman in his *The Beginnings* provides a good explanation of this. His understanding deserves to be quoted in length:

“... a very widespread distortion of this passage that has been

**accepted for many, many years which says that the curse fell on the Negro people.** The mark of it was a black skin, and therefore they are destined to be servants among mankind. But the Canaanites, as far as we know, were not black-skinned people ... Thus there was loosed in society an evil element which has spread throughout the entire race since, and breaks out in sexual perversions from place to place. This is the biblical explanation for these things ...

He also said [notice how he deliberately sets this apart from what he said about Canaan], "Blessed by the Lord my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave. God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave..."

Here we have the three families of mankind. The family of Ham is represented by Canaan, although not limited to his descendants. In certain of the old versions, in these two verses referring to Canaan, the account reads, "Ham, the father of Canaan," which is probably the more accurate rendering. Now this is a most important passage. We can hardly overrate its importance in understanding the world of our day...

**Notice that Shem is given religious primacy among mankind. The Semitic people, the descendants of Shem, were responsible under God to meet the spiritual needs of mankind** [this is sometimes noted as the *righteous line*]. That is their role in humanity. It is most striking, isn't it, that the three great religions of earth, which can properly be called religions, all come from the Semitic family: Judaism, Mohammedanism, and Christianity. There is much distortion of truth in these, granted, but the sense of mission by the Semitic families of earth is very evident. This family includes the Jews, the Arabs, certain ancient peoples, as well as other modern groups ...

Now, to bring this introduction of the subject to a conclusion, all of this is reflected most interestingly in the New Testament. We have for instance, the so-called Synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), which are very similar to one another and quite different from the gospel of John. Yet Matthew, Mark, and Luke are not copies of one another but they represent differences of approach. It has often been pointed out that they are aimed at different types of people. The interesting thing is that when you inquire who these people are you find that they are Shem, Ham, and Japheth, in that order. Matthew is aimed at the Semitic people. It is the gospel for the Jews, above all others. Mark is clearly the gospel of the servant. This is stressed by Bible teachers whenever they teach Mark; his gospel is profoundly the presentation of the servant, the practical mind, the Hamitic mind. Luke is clearly aimed at the Greek, or the Japhetic mind...

Also, the gospel, was first preached in this order. In the book of Acts we

are told that on the day of Pentecost Peter stood up and said, "Ye men of Israel," and addressed the gospel to them. Then in the next section we find Philip called to leave a revival in Samaria and go down to preach to a single individual in the desert, who is a Hamite, an Ethiopian, the treasurer of Ethiopia. Then, a little bit later on, Peter is sent to the Japhethites, preaching the gospel to Cornelius, a centurion of Rome.

Furthermore, all three of these groups are represented at the crucifixion. Each branch of mankind took part in the crucifixion. The moral responsibility for it fell upon the Jews. It is they who said, "His blood be upon us and. upon our children." The physical burden of bearing the cross fell upon a Hamite, Simon of Cyrene, a stranger in Jerusalem who was impressed into the task of bearing the cross for our Lord on the Via Dolorosa, Finally, as you know, executive responsibility for the crucifixion rested with the Romans, who gave the official order for the death of our Lord." [emphasis mine]

## Select Commentaries

### ***John Gill's Exposition of the Bible:***

"God shall enlarge Japheth,.... Or give him a large part of the earth, and large dominions in it, as his posterity have had..."

### ***Ellicott's Commentary for English Readers:***

"God shall enlarge Japheth.—First, the Deity is here Elohim, following upon Jehovah in the preceding verse, and that with extraordinary exactness. Jehovah has never been the special name of the Deity worshipped by the race of Japheth, though doubtless it is the Greek Zeus and the Latin Jove. But it soon became the proper title of God in covenant with the race of Shem. It is plainly impossible to divide this most ancient poem into Elohistic and Jehovistic sections, and the theory, however plausible occasionally, fails in a crucial place like this. Next, there is a play upon the name of Japheth, or rather, Yepheth, our translators having made the same mistake as in changing Hebel into Abel. The Hebrew is Yapheth Elohim l'Yepheth, 'God enlarge the enlarger' (not 'God shall enlarge'). While, then, it is the special blessing of Shem that through him the voice of thanksgiving is to ascend to Jehovah, the God of grace; it is Elohim, the God of nature and of the universe, who gives to Japheth wide extension and the most numerous posterity..."

**And he shall dwell in the tents of Shem.—The word for 'he' in both cases means Japheth**, though some, by re-pointing the word, make it mean God. But the position of the words is conclusive. It is not God who is to dwell with Shem, but Japheth who is to dwell in the tents of Shem. But how has this been fulfilled? Clearly if these words are to be ascribed

to the time when Shem meant the posterity of Shem, and Japheth that of Japheth..." [emphasis mine]

**Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible:**

"[1.] Shem is here greatly honoured (v. 26): Blessed be the Lord God of Shem. Thus he acknowledges God in the mercies which his family received, beginning at God, as Job did, and not thinking that he made himself master of the manor by his own management. Observe, First, The victories of Japheth are expressed in dominion and prosperity: God shall enlarge Japheth, who delights in the tents of Shem; he shall dwell there where there is room enough for them both, so that their joint interest is no prejudice to either. Second, The blessings of Shem are blessings of another nature. Blessed be the Lord God of Shem. For, 1. God was peculiarly Shem's God. A peculiar interest in the God of heaven was reserved for this family. He was called the Lord God of Shem, because he was to be the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, his descendants; nay, the Messiah was to come from Shem, so that he was the Lord God whom Shem served in a distinguishing manner. Thus he is the Lord God of the Hebrews, as they are called (Exod. 3:18), and the God of Abraham, which Christ takes for a peculiar argument to prove the resurrection. Matt. 22:32. 2. Shem's posterity should have a peculiar interest in him. God should be his God in a peculiar manner, and his God should be blessed as Shem's God, who was to be served and honoured by Shem's posterity. Blessed be the Lord God of Shem, for he is my God also. Note, The blessing of God is then likely to be upon our families when he is the blessed Lord God of our families and we are the true and loyal servants and worshippers of that blessed Lord. [2.] Japheth is here put after Shem because so much younger, and because his blessings were inferior to those of Shem. They are two. First, Temporal blessings: God shall enlarge Japheth. Japheth signifies enlargement, and he was to be the progenitor of vast nations. The posterity of Japheth peopled the isles of the Gentiles, Gen. 10:5. This was done by divine providence to make room for the accomplishment of the promise to Shem, That he shall dwell in the tents of Shem, that is, 'From his loins Christ shall come, and in his gospel Canaanites shall be dispossessed, and Israelites shall dwell in their tents.' And particular care is taken that room be left for the reception of those Gentiles who should upon that be brought into the church, that it might not be too much straitened. And, 'Japheth shall dwell in the tents of Shem,' that is, Gentiles shall share in the privileges of Shem's posterity. We, who are of Japheth by nature, were grafted into the good olive tree."

**Enduring Word Commentary (David Guzik)**

"So Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done to him. Then he said: 'Cursed be Canaan; A servant of servants He shall

be to his brethren.' And he said: 'Blessed be the Lord, The God of Shem, And may Canaan be his servant. May God enlarge Japheth, And may he dwell in the tents of Shem; And may Canaan be his servant.' a. Knew what his younger son had done to him: This strongly suggests that whatever happened to Noah, it was more than one of his sons or grandsons seeing his nudity. This explains the strength of the curse. b. Cursed be Canaan: It seems strange that if Ham sinned against Noah, that Canaan (Ham's son) was cursed. Perhaps Canaan was also involved in this sin against Noah in a way not mentioned in the text. Perhaps the strongest punishment against Ham was for Noah to prophetically reveal the destiny of his son Canaan. i. We can trust God was not punishing the son (Canaan) for the sin of the father (Ham). This goes against the heart and justice of God (Ezekiel 18:2-3). However, through Noah's prophecy, God told Ham what would happen to his son. c. May Canaan be his servant: **In earlier generations, some prejudiced people regarded the descendants of Canaan as black people from Africa, and they used the curse on Canaan to justify slavery.** But black people did not come from Canaan. Canaan was the father of the near-eastern peoples, many of whom were conquered by Joshua when Israel took the promised land. d. Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem: The God of Israel (descended from Shem) is truly blessed. There is an important contrast between Canaan and Shem. Noah did not bless Shem, but he blessed the God of Shem. We have little reason to bless Shem, but every reason to bless his God. e. May God enlarge Japheth: Indeed, the great majority of Noah's descendants came from Japheth)." [emphasis mine]

***The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges online:***

"God] The blessing on Japheth is introduced with the name not of "Jehovah," but of "Elohim." Jehovah is the God who reveals Himself through the descendants of Shem. The blessing of Japheth shall come from God; but Japheth will not know God by His name Jehovah. *enlarge*] The word in the Hebrew, *yapht*, is employed on account of its resemblance in sound to the name of Japheth. The blessing means, "May God extend the rule of Japheth," i.e. may the meaning of his name be realized in the extension of his power! *let him dwell*] Better than *he shall*. **The "he" in this clause is not God, but Japheth. The clause contains the prayer that Japheth may ever continue on terms of peace with Shem, and that his descendants, dwelling as guests among the Israelites, may partake of their privileges.**" [emphasis mine]

***The Pulpit Commentary online:***

"**God. Elohim.** If Gen\_9:18-27 are Jehovistic (Tuch, Bleek, Colenso, et alii), why Elohim? Is this a proof that the Jehovistic document was

revised by the Elohist author, as the presence of Jehovah in any so-called Elohist section is regarded as an interpolation by the supplementer? To obviate this inference Davidson assigns Gen\_9:20-27 to his redactor. But the change of name is sufficiently explained when we remember that "Jehovah, as such, never was the God of Japheth's descendants, and that the expression would have been as manifestly improper if applied to him as it is in its proper place applied to Shem".

**Shall enlarge Japheth.** לִיָּפֶת יִפְתֵּהּ; literally, *shall enlarge or make room for the one that spreads abroad*; or, "may God concede an ample space to Japheth" (Gesenius). "Wide let God make it for Japheth" (Keil). "God give enlargement to Japheth" (Lange). So **LXX**; Vulgate, Chaldee, Syriac, Arabic. The words form a paronomasia, both the verb and the noun being connected with the root פָּתַח, to spread abroad; Hiph; to cause to lie open, hence to make room for,—and refer to the widespread diffusion and remarkable prosperity of the Japhetic nations. The familiar interpretation which renders "God will persuade Japheth, the persuadable," *i.e.* incline his heart by the gospel so that he may dwell in the tents of Shem (Junins, Vatablus, Calvin, Willet, Ainsworth), is discredited by the facts

(1) that the verb never means to persuade, except in a bad sense (cf. 1Ki\_22:20), and

(2) that in this sense it is never followed by לְ, but always by the accusative. The fulfillment of the prophecy is apparent from the circumstance that "praeter Europam (εὐρώμκη—wide, extensive) "maximam Asiae partem, totum demique novum orbem, veluti immensae magnitudinis auctarium, Japheto posterique ejus in perpetuam possessionem obtigisse" (Fuller, 'Sac. Miscel; lib. 2. c. 4, quoted by Glass); cf. Gen\_10:2-5, in which Japheth is given as the progenitor of fourteen peoples, to which are added the inhabitants of the lands washed by the sea. The expansive power of Japheth "refers not only to the territory and the multitude of the Japhethites, but also to their intellectual and active faculties. The metaphysics of the Hindoos, the philosophy of the Greeks, the military prowess of the Romans, and the modern science and civilization of the world are due to the race of Japheth" (Murphy). **And he** - not *Elohim* (Philo; Theodoret, Onkelos, Dathe, Baumgarten, *et alii*), which

(1) substantially repeats the blessing already given to Shem, and

(2) would introduce an allusion to the superiority of Shem's blessing in what the context requires should be an unrestricted benediction of Japheth; but *Japheth* (Calvin, Rosenmüller, Delitzsch, Keil, Lange, Kaliseh, Murphy, Wordsworth, 'Speaker's Commentary') - **shall dwell.** יִשְׁכֵּן, from שָׁכַן, to dwell; used of God inhabiting the heavens (Isa\_57:15), dwelling in the bush (Deu\_30:16), residing, or causing his name to dwell, in the tabernacle (Deu\_12:11); hence supposed to favor the idea that *Elohim* is the subject; but it was as Jehovah (not *Elohim*) that God abode between the cherubim (Exo\_40:34). **In the tents of Shem.** Not the tents of celebrity (Gesenius, Vater, Michaelis, De Wette, Knobel), but the tents

of the Shemitic races, with allusion not to their subjugation by the Japhethites (Clericus, Von Bohlen, Bochart), which would not be in keeping with the former blessing pronounced upon them (Murphy), but to their subsequent contiguity to, and even commingling with, but especially to their participation in the religious privileges of, the Shemites (the Fathers, Targum Jonathan, Hisronymus, Calvin, Keil, Lange, 'Speaker's Commentary,' Murphy, Candlish). The fulfillment of the prophecy is too obvious to call for illustration. **And Canaan shall be his servant.**"

## The Role of the Shemites

This leads us to enter the realm of the Shemites. Many years ago, commentators labelled them *the righteous line* due to it being the carrier [or are supposed to be] of the knowledge of the true God from Adam down through the ages via Israel to Christ Himself.

Firstly, what does his name mean? Driver explains that it means

" 'men of name' or 'distinction' - the titled or noble race ... perhaps nothing more than the ruling caste in opposition to the aborigines ... [some researchers compare it with] the name 'Aryan' " (Samuel Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, p. 95)

Driver was a prominent 19th- and early 20th-century British Biblical scholar and Regius Professor of Hebrew at Oxford University. He was a key contributor to the *International Critical Commentary* series and authored exegetical studies on the Old Testament.

Note that Driver interprets "men of name" or "distinction" as referring to the titled or noble race (comparing it to Greek ὀνομαστός, "famous" or "named"). He suggests this perhaps nothing more than the ruling caste in opposition to the aborigines which posits a social or ethnic divide where these figures represent an elite or conquering group over indigenous or pre-existing peoples. Not unlike when the House of Israel inherited its blessing from around 1800AD on.

This may have something to do with the special blessing in Genesis 9:26: "Blessed be the Lord God of Shem." The above statement, according to Aalders, "implies that Shem would indeed be blessed, but this blessing would come only from the Lord" if He had covenanted with them (Gerhard Aalders, *Bible Students Commentary. Genesis* (Vol. 1), p. 210).

In verse 27 Moses wrote that "God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem and Canaan shall be his servant". Whilst this may mean that Shem shall dominate Japheth, there is another meaning which should be explored at this point. Take time to examine the following Scriptures: Ex 25:8; Num 9:15; 2 Sam 7:6; 1 Chron 15:1; Ps 78:59-60; Is 40:22; Jer 10:20; Rev 21:3.

The clear inference is that God shall dwell with Shem as in a tabernacle. God did indeed do so with ancient Israel and He also dwells in spiritual Israelites through the holy spirit today. He has remained faithful to Israel ever since. Similar wording is used in relation to

Israel in Is 54:2. Here we have what commentators so long ago described as ‘the righteous line’ or as we would say today, the lineage which God is working with.

Where were the Shemites located immediately after the Flood of Noah? Latest research suggests that they inhabited the land of Sumer before being displaced by the descendants of Ham. Scholars have wondered why the Sumerians are not mentioned in the Bible anywhere, with the exception of the land of Shinar referred to in Genesis and a few prophecies (Gen 10:10; 11:2; 14:1; 14:9; Is 11:11; Dan 1:2; Zech 5:11).

According to David Rohl in his *Legend. The Genesis of Civilisation*, linguistic studies by authorities such as Samuel Kramer (*The Sumerians*) and Arno Poebel (various works) demonstrate that the name Sumer or Shumer is remarkably similar to Shem:

“The [original] people of Sumer were designated ‘Sumerians after Shem, son of Noah, who was remembered as the eponymous ancestor of those who re-occupied biblical Shinar following the destruction of the antediluvian cities during the ... flood. The name Shumer is therefore an eponym”. (David Rohl, *Legend. The Genesis of Civilisation*, p. 135)

After the tower of Babel incident, these people moved northward and the descendants of Cush moved into southern Arabia, east Africa, southern India, Melanesia and Australia.

The “tents” here seemingly refers to the Great Tent or Tabernacle of Shem who was a follower of God. (cf. Ps. 84:10; 120:5) (Ethelbert Bullinger, *The Companion Bible*, p. 15) and in the previous verse we are told: “Blessed be the Lord God of Shem”.

Why Shem? Because it is through his descendants (particularly Arphaxad and then Abraham (see Gen. 28:13-14)) that truth (light) would be shed abroad on the earth - God’s chosen people. Allen Ross in *Creation and Blessing*, p. 224 further illuminates this part of Genesis: "The purpose of this section in Genesis, then, is to portray the characteristics of the three branches of the human race in relation to blessing and cursing".

## **Probable Conclusions**

The above constitutes only a fraction of the information out there, but I have endeavoured to extract relevant information from key materials readily available to anyone.

In these notes we have explored the prophetic blessing in "May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem, and let Canaan be his servant" - within the broader context of the Table of Nations and the roles of Noah's three sons.

Key interpretations drawn from various commentaries:

- *Japheth's enlargement* refers to territorial expansion, numerical growth, and widespread influence of his descendants.
- *Dwelling in the tents of Shem* may symbolise Japheth's descendants enjoying physical blessings preserved by Shem's line (the "righteous line" through Abraham, Israel, and ultimately true Christianity).

- Shem holds primacy in spiritual matters, as the bearer of God's covenant and revelation (via Israel).
- Canaan (son of Ham) faces servitude, historically fulfilled in subjugations but not tied to racial curses like those misused in the past.

The author aligns with views (e.g., from Stedman, Ellicott, Matthew Henry, and others) that this prophecy foreshadows Japheth benefiting from Shem's blessings.

Note that this is not paper or article as such. They are my notes on the subject.

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- The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges* online.
- The Pulpit Commentary* online.

## Recommended Reading

- In Search of ... the Origin of Nations* by Craig M White.
- The Sanctity of Nationhood in the Bible* by Craig M White.
- Creation and Blessing. A Guide to the Study of Exposition of Genesis* by Allen Ross.

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