

Parashah Eight

Genesis 9:18–10:32; Isaiah 49:1–13; Revelation 5:1–14

notes by Tim Hegg

The Disposition of Mankind

Our Torah section today involves the story of what occurred immediately after Noah and his family left the ark. We are confronted with the notice that the whole earth was populated from the three sons of Noah: Shem, Cham, and Yefet. Why is this put first in our section? Clearly, Moses wants us to see that the disposition of mankind is something which is passed on from generation to generation. In a great many ways (though certainly not in every way), our lives are predetermined by the generations which came before us, and the decisions they made. The depraved heart of mankind, the result of Adam's fall, transcends the waters of the flood, as our text now shows.

A crux decision in interpreting this *parashah* is how we are to understand the text of 9:20. The Stone Chumash translates it: "Noah, the man of the earth, debased himself and planted a vineyard." The NASB has: "Then Noah began farming {margin: to be a farmer} and planted a vineyard." The NIV translates: "Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard." The New JPS: "Noah, the tiller of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard."

Rambam teaches that the phrase *אִישׁ הָאֲדָמָה* (*'ish ha'adamah*, "man of the soil") emphasizes that Noah was a farmer in contrast to others who were intent upon building cities. But the opening word in the Hebrew sentence, *וַיִּחַל* (*vayacheil*), from the verb *חָלַל* (*chalal*), is understood by Rashi to mean "to debase something, or be debased," and connected with the phrase "man of the earth" to mean that Noah craved wine so much that he planted a vineyard before planting anything else and this led to his downfall. The verb *חָלַל*, however, often means "to begin" as in Gen 4:26 and 6:1. Though it could mean "to profane" or "to debase," in this context it makes more sense to give it the meaning "begin." If this is so, there is no reason to fault Noah for planting a vineyard—it was his way of beginning again. What is more, a vineyard does not yield fruit immediately, and the fact that Noah planted it first was only reasonable in light of how much time it takes for a vineyard to root and mature.

So what is our text teaching us? What are we to make of the fact

that Noah, in accordance with his vocation as a farmer, planted a vineyard and then became drunk from the wine which it produced? The most obvious lesson is one about man's disposition, namely, that man as a depraved creature and one bent to sin, has the capacity to *take what was God's gift in the created world and misuse it*. Rather than seeing the bounty of the earth as a call to draw close to the God who had given it, man in his sinful nature could use the harvest from God's hand to satisfy his own base desires.

The sin was not in drinking the wine. The sin was in drinking to the extent of being drunk. Being overcome with wine is to negate God's creative purpose for one's own existence. Man was created to bear the image of God, a duty which requires intellectual as well as spiritual awareness.

This point might be emphasized in the subsequent verses. Here, in some detail, the generations produced by the three sons of Noah are enumerated. But the blessing and curse of Noah upon his sons after the drunken incident are instructive: Canaan, son of Cham, would be a slave, while Shem would be blessed by God. Yefet would be extended, most likely meaning that he would populate an extended territory. The Rabbis make an interesting observation here. Yefet was the father of the Greeks, who excelled in the arts. Shem was the father of Israel, who excels in the study of Torah. Arts are good and to be sought after, but only when they are constrained by the truth of Torah. Though Yefet would be extended, i.e., spread out and thus have a wider influence, his artistic ability would only gain true value if he produced his art in connection with the Torah given to the descendents of Shem. His artistic bent would need to be tempered by the study of the Torah. Thus, art which is found in the context of the light of Torah will have great benefit. However, if one separates art (beauty) from the truth of Torah (God's revelation), it becomes debased altogether.

There is a debate on how a phrase in 9:27 should be understood. The Hebrew reads: *וַיִּפֶּת אֱלֹהִים לְיֶפֶת וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּאֶהֱלֵי-שֵׁם*, literally, "May God enlarge Yefet and may He (he) dwell in the tents of Shem." The question is whether the unstated subject of "may he dwell" (שֵׁם) is God (the closest subject antecedent) or Yefet (the previous object). Targum Onkelos takes the subject to be God: "Adonai shall enlarge Yapheth, and He shall make his Shekinah to dwell in the tabernacles of Shem." Rashi likewise takes the subject to be God: "He shall cause His divine presence to dwell in Israel." Philo understood the

phrase in the same way:

We must now consider who it is who Noah prays may dwell in the tents of Shem, for he does not say very clearly. One may affirm that he means the Lord of the universe... (*On the Prayers and Curses of Noah When He Became Sober*, 13.62)

Other rabbinic commentators (such as Eben Ezra) took it this way as well, as did the Midrash Rabbah: “And He shall dwell in the tents of Shem: the Shechinah dwells only in the tents of Shem” (Mid. Rab. *Gen* 36.8, 1:294). In modern times, Delitzsch along with Kaiser (among others) have taken the Hebrew to mean “God will dwell in the tents of Shem.”

The other option, that the phrase means “Yefet will dwell in the tents of Shem” has its problems. Foremost is what would be meant by the fact that Yefet would be extended, while at the same time living in the tents of Shem. While this option is certainly possible grammatically, it seems most probable to me that the intended subject of “may he dwell” is God Himself. Thus, the blessing upon Shem is the continuing, on-going presence of the Almighty throughout his generations.

The curse upon Canaan is related to the sin of Cham. What exactly was his sin? Was it merely looking at his naked father? Once again, the opinions differ. Some of the Sages taught that he not only saw his father naked, but also lusted after him in a base sort of way. Still others taught that Cham enjoyed the sight of his father’s nakedness, i.e., he enjoyed seeing his father’s shame. Thus, his sin was that of disrespect. Still others suggest that it was originally Canaan who saw Noah, and then told his father, who came and looked at the situation himself. Some even go so far as to suggest that Cham or Canaan castrated Noah in his drunken state.

Another option exists, however, and this rests upon the phrase “father’s nakedness.” Lev 18 may be a parallel text in discovering the meaning of this phrase. Note, for instance, v. 7, which explains the phrase “nakedness of your father” to be the “nakedness of your mother.” That is, throughout Lev 18 the phrase “nakedness of your father” means the conjugal rights which belong to a husband in respect to his wife. It is therefore possible that what is meant in our Torah text is that Cham, in seeing the “nakedness of his father” was watching as Noah and his wife engaged in conjugal relations. One

might even go so far as to suggest that Cham took advantage of the drunken state of Noah and participated in some way in the sexual event.

Such a sin would need to be confronted immediately and dealt with appropriately. In the “beginning again” phase of the post-flood era, nothing could be more important than to maintain the male/female relationship which God initiated at the beginning: “for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and cleave unto his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” (Gen 2:24). The maintenance of the race depended upon the family unit to remain intact, and for parental boundaries to be maintained and respected. Nothing would have disrupted the gene pool more quickly than incest, and the future of the human race was at stake. Cham’s actions, in disregarding the oneness of marriage and the privacy this oneness demands, struck at the very foundation of the family as God had established it. This in turn put the very promise of the redeemer in jeopardy, for his act, if indeed it was one of incest and if it was allowed to be practiced, would plunge humankind into an early demise.

The actions of the other two sons, however, reveal a respect not only for their parents, but also for the order which God had created and commanded. Recognizing their role as the servants of God to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, they covered their drunken father, respecting God’s paradigm for husband and wife.

The results of their actions, both Cham and Shem/Yefet, affected the generations to come and the world as a whole. In the blessing of Shem/Yefet, and the curse of Canaan, the course of nations was set and the flow of earth’s history put into motion.

This, then, brings a very interesting application to our own lives: do we recognize what effect our obedience to God can have in the lives of others? Can we likewise consider what effect our disobeying God’s commandments will have on others? All too often we consider our individual choices as affecting only ourselves, or perhaps close family members. Do we ever consider the possibility that God has placed us in a strategic position in order to make a decision which will have a great effect upon many people? Do we see ourselves as those chosen to carry the truth of God and to reveal it to a darkened world? Do we consider the consequences if we fail to fulfill our task as God desires?