

Genesis 9:23

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And Shem and Japheth took a garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father's nakedness.

Analysis

And Shem and Japheth took a garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and c... This passage belongs to the primeval history section (Genesis 1-11) which establishes universal truths about God, humanity, sin, and divine purposes before focusing on Abraham and Israel. These chapters answer fundamental questions about human origins, the spread of wickedness, God's judgment, and the preservation of a righteous remnant.

Recurring patterns emerge: human sin escalating from individual disobedience to societal corruption, divine patience followed by judgment, gracious preservation of a remnant, and covenant promises ensuring redemptive purposes continue. The genealogies connect historical persons, demonstrate the fulfillment of divine promises (blessing and multiplication), and trace the line leading to Abraham and ultimately Christ.

Key theological themes in this section include:

1. sin's destructive progression affecting all humanity
2. God's righteous judgment while preserving mercy
3. human pride and autonomy opposing divine sovereignty
4. cultural development as both blessing and potential idolatry
5. God's sovereign plan advancing despite human rebellion.

These narratives provide the necessary context for understanding God's calling of Abraham and the covenant promises through which all nations will be blessed.

Historical Context

The primeval history (Genesis 1-11) parallels ancient Near Eastern traditions including Sumerian King Lists (pre-flood longevity), Akkadian flood traditions (Atrahasis, Gilgamesh), and Mesopotamian city foundation myths. However, Genesis demythologizes these traditions, presenting monotheistic history rather than polytheistic mythology. The genealogies connecting Adam to Noah to Abraham provide historical framework absent in pagan myths.

Archaeological evidence confirms ancient urbanization (chapter 4's cities), agricultural development, metallurgy, and musical instruments emerging in Mesopotamia's early history. The Babel account reflects Mesopotamian ziggurat construction (stepped pyramid temples), particularly in Babylon. Linguistic diversity requiring explanation was obvious to ancient peoples, making the Babel narrative culturally relevant.

For Israel in covenant with Yahweh, these chapters explained their relationship to surrounding nations. All peoples descended from Noah, but Israel descended from Shem through Abraham—chosen for blessing all nations. The flood demonstrated God's justice and mercy: judging wickedness while preserving the righteous. This pattern would recur throughout Israel's history, assuring them that God's covenant faithfulness endures despite judgment on the wicked.

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Study Questions

1. What does this passage reveal about God's sovereignty and human responsibility?
2. What specific changes in thinking or behavior does this verse call us to make?
3. How does this verse fit into the broader biblical story culminating in Christ?

Interlinear Text

וְיָקַח	שֵׁם	פָּתָח	אָת	הַשְׁמָלָה	יְשַׁׁםְּוּ	עַל
took	And Shem	and Japheth	H853	a garment	and laid	H5921
H3947	H8035	H3315		H8071	H7760	
שְׁנַיְּרָה	שְׁנַיְּרָה	שְׁנַיְּרָה	שְׁנַיְּרָה	שְׁנַיְּרָה	שְׁנַיְּרָה	שְׁנַיְּרָה
their shoulders	it upon both		H1980	backward	and covered	H853
H7926	H8147			H322	H3680	
וְעָרָן	אָחָת	בָּנָיִת	וְעָרָן	וְעָרָן	וְעָרָן	וְעָרָן
nakedness	not their father's	and their faces	H6440	backward	nakedness	H6172
H6172	H1			H322	H6172	
אָבִיה	אָבִיה	אָבִיה	אָבִיה	אָבִיה	אָבִיה	אָבִיה
not their father's		and they saw	H3808			
H1		H7200				

Additional Cross-References

Galatians 6:1 (Parallel theme): Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.

Exodus 20:12 (Parallel theme): Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.