



Societal consequences of Noah's alcohol misuse

To the Editor: The adverse consequences and ramifications of chronic alcohol or substance dependence or abuse can be severe not only for the individual using the substance but also for that individual's family and social and professional contacts. But the substance misuse need not be long-term to lead to tragic consequences. Indeed, a single, isolated instance of binge drinking followed by driving, for example, can shatter not only the life of the abusing individual but also the lives of innocent others involved in a motor vehicle accident, and their families and friends.

Here I note a curious story from the Biblical Book of Genesis (9:18 - 27, quoted below in the King James version) in which the author of the story, quite possibly the Yahwist, Ahimaaz son of Zadok the priest,¹ demonstrating remarkable rhetorical panache and insight into psychiatric disease millennia before its codification,^{1,2} extrapolates the collateral damage from the substance misuser and his or her immediate circle of family and friends, to all of society, for all of time.

While we recognise the literary genius of the story below, we cannot at all agree with its political conclusions or implications – that Ham, his son Canaan and their descendants are to serve the descendants of Shem and Japheth.

And the sons of Noah, that went forth of the ark, were Shem, and Ham, and Japheth: and Ham is the father of Canaan./These are the three sons of Noah: and of them was the whole earth overspread./ And Noah began to be an husbandman, and he planted a vineyard:/And he drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was uncovered within his tent./And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren without./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./And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him./And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren./And he said, Blessed be the LORD God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant./God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant.

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1. Altschuler EL. Reply. *Arch Gen Psychiatry* 2002; **59**: 565-566.
2. Altschuler EL, Haroun A, Ho B, Weimer A. Did Samson have antisocial personality disorder? *Arch Gen Psychiatry* 2001; **58**: 202-203.