

Justifying Slavery via Genesis 9:20-27: The Vicious Legacy of Racist Interpretation of the Bible

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The use of Gen 9:20-27 to justify slavery and racism extends back millennia and continues to be felt in the notion of white supremacy and the problem of white privilege. This article examines the passage in an effort to demonstrate that just as the biblical writers shaped the story to justify the enslavement of Canaanites, so later generations interpreted it to justify the enslavement of African peoples. It then traces the racist impulse in the interpretive tradition to equip those who encounter it today and to provide an opening for communities to discuss racism, its causes, and potential cures.

An awakening has occurred in the United States in the past few years, a growing awareness of the shameful persistence of racism against people of color in virtually every aspect of life. This vicious legacy of a state-sponsored system that began when the first enslaved Africans came ashore in 1619 underscores the poignant words of William Faulkner that the past is never fully past.¹

A collective conversation about racism must take place on a wide scale in the U.S. and address the multiple sources of racist ideology and practice that are no doubt legion and variegated. Time, effort, and courageous honesty will be needed to ferret out all of them. This article seeks to identify one foundational source—the interpretation of Gen 9:20-27—and chart its development over the millennia so that it might be dismantled and its pernicious effects halted.²

CURSE OF NOAH

The text conveys the story of Noah's drunkenness, the response of his son Ham, and Noah's subsequent curse of Ham's son Canaan. This article will first

¹ William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Random House, 1951) 92.

² I would like to thank my colleagues, David Kiger and Stephen Waers, who provided me with assistance with the early Christian sources. My thanks to Adam Bean, now my colleague at Emmanuel Christian Seminary at Milligan, for reading an earlier draft and offering suggestions. I am also grateful for the editorial insights of my friend and colleague, Gene McGarry.

examine these verses to determine why Noah cursed Canaan rather than Ham and then trace the racist impulse in the interpretive tradition that used this biblical passage to justify the African slave trade.

This paper contends that the story of Ham and Canaan developed in the Bible runs parallel to the way later generations interpreted it. Just as the biblical writers shaped the story to justify the enslavement of Canaanites, so later generations interpreted it to justify the enslavement of African peoples.

In Genesis 9, after the cataclysmic flood ended and Noah and his family were spared, Noah turned his hand to viticulture. The great hero of the flood drank wine from his vineyard, became drunk, and lay down in his tent naked. Seeing this, his son Ham told his brothers, Shem and Japheth, who covered Noah, walking backwards into his tent lest they see their father in such a shameful state.

After sobering up and realizing what Ham had done, Noah declared, “Cursed be Canaan, a slave of slaves he will be to his brothers” (9:25). Concerning the sons who covered him, he said, “Blessed be Yahweh, God of Shem, and let Canaan be a slave for him. May God enlarge Japheth and may he dwell in the tents of Shem and let Canaan be a slave for him” (9:26-27).

Readers of this story will likely have a number of questions. However, for the purposes of this article, the most important concerns Canaan. Why is he cursed for something his father, Ham, did? Noah’s curse is most certainly uttered in response to Ham’s actions.

That Canaan should be punished for a deed in which he did not participate is strange.³ Yet the text insists on dragging him into the story, introducing Ham as “the father of Canaan” (9:18) and reporting “Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father” (9:22).

The key to understanding this is hidden in the so-called Table of Nations (Gen 10), which provides a genealogy of Noah’s descendants that is also a geography lesson: Close kinship between individuals corresponds to proximity between the lands they represent.

Canaan is listed as the fourth son of Ham after Put, Cush, and Egypt (9:6). The Bible uses Put to describe what is today called Libya,⁴ and Cush is the bib-

³ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 482, notes that a few Greek manuscripts attest Ham, not Canaan, as the recipient of the curse. These alterations probably reflect secondary editorial attempts to ensure curses are consistently enacted on violators and not their descendants. Note other biblical examples in which divine chastisement is delayed to future generations. See the kings Solomon (1 Kgs 11:12) and Ahab (1 Kgs 21:21-22).

⁴ David W. Baker, “Put,” *ABD* 5:560, observes the Septuagint translates “Put” as “Libya” in Ezek 27:10, 38:5, and Jer 46:9, in keeping with Babylonian and Persian sources, while some have suggested the reference might be to modern Somalia.

lical term for what is now Ethiopia. Thus, the first three sons of Ham are associated with North Africa.⁵

However, Canaan, who is associated with the Levant, is an outlier here. In conjunction with his position as the fourth and final son, his geographical separation from his brothers suggests he was added to the list of Ham's children at a later date.

Thus, it seems plausible that Ham was the original recipient of his father's curse and that the curse was subsequently transferred to Canaan. Indeed, the curse of slavery imposed on Canaan can be connected to the biblical depiction of Israel's enslavement of Canaanites in the days of the Judges, as Israel conquered Canaanite regions and controlled the inhabitants through "forced labor" (Judg 1:28, 30, 33).

Canaan was the one fated to be the slave of his kinsmen—especially his "brother" Shem, from whom the Israelites descend according to biblical tradition.⁶ This gave the Canaanites' bondage a divine imprimatur. If Canaan was cursed by God, then surely it deserved to have its lands and possessions seized by God's people. Its subjugation would simply be the fulfillment of God's will.

Gen 9:25 became a justification of Canaan's enslavement as described in Israel's history. Later, however, this revision would be reversed. The curse of Canaan would be projected back upon Ham and ultimately used to justify a different kind of slavery far from the Israelite homeland.

The remainder of this article will show how biblical interpreters transformed the meaning and significance of this patriarchal curse in a way that laid a foundation for rationalizing the enslavement of African people and viewing them as inferior beings.

NOAH'S CURSE IN EARLY INTERPRETATION

As noted above, Ham was likely the original target of the slavery curse as a result of his own behavior, and Israelite writers reshaped the text to transfer the curse to their Canaanite enemies. However, after the fall of Israel and

⁵ The explicit connection between Cush and Ethiopia appears to begin with the LXX translation of "Cushite" as Αἰθιοπία (*Aithiopia*) in Num 12:1. For a fuller discussion of how Cush is depicted in the Hebrew Bible, see David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003) 18-25.

⁶ Gerhard von Rad, "The Beginnings of Historical Writing in Ancient Israel," in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1966) 169, made this argument years ago. He notes this is only one of many etiologies in Genesis that explain the origins of various peoples. For example, Gen 19 provides the origins of the Moabites and Ammonites and Gen 27 describes the connection between Israel and Edom and explains how Israel (Jacob) gained ascendancy over these people, represented by Jacob's brother Esau.

Judah, when Canaanite enslavement no longer needed to be justified, the original impetus to shift the curse to Ham's son vanished.

Consequently, early biblical interpreters found it difficult to understand why Canaan should have been punished for his father's deed, and so they "corrected" the biblical account by transferring the curse from Canaan alone back to Ham and all his descendants.

This reinterpretation is an example of what James Kugel calls an "exegetical motif"—a novel interpretation that provides a new twist on the biblical story, often by resolving some difficulty.⁷ In the analysis that follows, this article will use Kugel's terminology to describe the interpretive moves that reshaped the biblical account of Ham and Canaan.

Ham, Canaan, and Slavery

Both Jewish and Christian sources attest to the transfer of Canaan's curse to Ham. In the rabbinic text *Pirque Rabbi Eliezer*, Jacob ponders a journey to Egypt: "Shall I go to an unclean land, among slaves, the children of Ham?"⁸ Some manuscripts include the claim that "all the descendants of Ham are slaves."⁹

Likewise, early Christian interpreters spoke of Ham as the recipient of the curse. Irenaeus,¹⁰ Hippolytus,¹¹ Pachomius,¹² Ambrose,¹³ Augustine,¹⁴ and Chrysostom¹⁵ all say Ham is cursed with slavery. Elsewhere, Chrysostom says Noah's son became a slave through this act.¹⁶ Even the Ethiopian national epic *Kebra Negast* states the curse of slavery was leveled on Ham.¹⁷

In the second and third centuries, Christian literature began referring to the Egyptians as a cursed people. Tertullian writes that Egypt symbolizes the whole world, which is marked by superstition and "malediction."¹⁸ Origen

⁷ James Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) 27.

⁸ *Pirque Rabbi Eliezer* 39; trans. Goldenberg, *Curse of Ham*, 161.

⁹ *Pirque Rabbi Eliezer* 24; trans. Goldenberg, *Curse of Ham*, 344n34.

¹⁰ *Against Heresies* 4.31.1. Irenaeus tells his audience they should not be like Ham, who "fell under a curse."

¹¹ *Blessing of Isaac and Jacob* 5 (PO 27.1-2.16-17).

¹² *Pachomian Koinonia*, letter 5.5.

¹³ *The Patriarchs* 5.29.

¹⁴ *The City of God* 16.2.

¹⁵ *Homilies on Thessalonians* 4 (NPNF 13:342).

¹⁶ *Homilies on Matthew* 6 (NPNF 10:41).

¹⁷ Goldenberg, *Curse of Ham*, 159.

¹⁸ *Against Marcion* 3.13.10.

claims Egyptians are slavish by nature, which is why the pharaohs could easily subjugate them.¹⁹ This characterization of Egyptians as natural slaves would eventually be extended to include all Africans via another exegetical motif.

Ham, His Descendants, and Africa

This development requires an understanding of geography as the biblical writers saw it. Ham is said to be the father of not only Canaan but also of Cush, Mitsraim (the Hebrew name for Egypt), and Put, peoples assumed to live on the African continent. As noted above, Put is identified with modern-day Libya, and Cush is often associated with the region now called Ethiopia, although the exact referent of this term is not always certain. Nevertheless, the names of three of Ham's sons were clearly associated with regions in North and East Africa.

The second exegetical motif is the use of a specious etymology to identify Ham and his descendants with all of Africa. In Hebrew, the name Ham is spelled *ham* (חַם). Early interpreters noticed that the name shared the same letters as the verb *hamam* (חַמַּם), meaning "to be hot."²⁰ These early interpreters assumed Ham, as the ancestor of all of Africa, had a name befitting the warmer temperatures of that region.

Augustine, himself a resident of North Africa, simply glosses Ham's name as "hot" and claims Ham's descendants are metaphorically "hot with impatience with which the breasts of heretics are wont to blaze, and with which they disturb the peace of the saints."²¹ But this "hotness" could also be taken literally as an allusion to the power of sunlight to darken the skin of persons with pale complexions.

Since many Africans had darker skin, this trait became associated with Ham's descendants in general. The idea that Ham himself was dark-skinned, innocuous in itself, proved crucial to the interpretation of Gen 9:20-27 as the single greatest justification for black slavery for more than a thousand years.²²

Ham, Noah's Curse, and Skin Color

Ham's dark skin provided the basis for a third, truly sinister exegetical motif, namely, the idea that the skin of Ham and his descendants was darkened

¹⁹ Homilies on Genesis 16.1 in *Origen: Homilies on Genesis and Exodus* (trans. Ronald E. Heine; Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1982) 215.

²⁰ CAD 6:69. Although *ham* and *hamam* look and sound similar in Hebrew, the word *ham* was most likely originally spelled *ham* and thus is not semantically related to *hamam*. More probably, *ham* is related to the Akkadian word *hammu*, meaning "master, head of family." See also CAD 4:154. Another possible Akkadian cognate is *emu*, "father-in-law, son-in-law."

²¹ *The City of God* 16.2 (NPNF 2:309).

²² Goldenberg, *Curse of Ham*, 1.

as a result of Noah’s curse. The biblical story makes no connection between the curse of slavery and skin color. Yet the first two exegetical motifs described above laid the foundation for this conclusion.

That is, if Ham had been cursed for what he did to his father Noah, and if Ham went on to become the ancestor of dark-skinned peoples (for example, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Libya) residing in the hot climate of Africa, then dark skin was a consequence of the curse. This distorted logic was adopted by early interpreters and made its way into early Jewish and Christian texts.

In a midrash included in *Gen. Rab. 36:7*, Rabbi Huna builds upon an older rabbinic tradition that assumes Ham castrated his father when he went into his tent and saw him drunk and unclothed.²³ Rabbi Huna affirmed Noah cursed Ham (and not Canaan) with the words, “Your offspring will be ugly and dark-skinned.”²⁴

In the same text, Rabbi Hiyya claims Ham had sex with a dog in the ark and as a result, his skin was blackened.²⁵ Note that although these rabbinic interpretations add non-biblical elements to the story, both relate the curse to the assumed blackness of Ham’s skin.

Christian writers also assumed dark skin accompanied the curse. Ambrose related how Noah’s curse affected the darker descendants of Ham through his son Cush. He reasoned the “dark side” of human nature is epitomized by the animal-like Nimrod, who was black like Cush, his father.²⁶

Ambrose also amplified the curse of Ham to include Cush and all his descendants, whom he claimed were condemned.²⁷ Tertullian concluded the darker-skinned Cush and the Ethiopians were the devil’s predestined share of Noah’s progeny.²⁸

²³ *Gen. Rab. 36:7*. See Jacob Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis, A New American Translation* (vol. 2; Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1985) 33.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.* Meanwhile, Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Bible* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1956) 80, notes in his retelling of Jewish legends rooted in the Hebrew Bible that “the descendants of Ham through Canaan therefore have red eyes, because Ham looked upon the nakedness of his father; they have misshapen lips, because Ham spoke with his lips to his brothers about the unseemly condition of his father; they have twisted curly hair, because Ham turned and twisted his head round to see the nakedness of his father; and they go about naked, because Ham did not cover the nakedness of his father.” Although Goldenberg, “The Curse of Ham, A Case of Rabbinic Racism?” in *Struggles in the Promised Land*, ed. Jack Salzman and Cornel West (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 30, wants to downplay the way this text is invoked to prove anti-black bias in Jewish tradition, he admits it “may refer to Black Africans in descriptive language used by different cultures.”

²⁶ *De Noe 34.128* (CSEL 32.1.496).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.105-106 (CSEL 32.1.485).

²⁸ *De Spect 3.A* (PL 1.635).

Perhaps the harshest Christian interpretation connecting Ham's curse with black skin comes from Origen of Alexandria, who saw biblical references to darker skin metaphorically as indicating sin or a sinful soul.²⁹ He also employed "black" as a cipher for the sinful state of all Gentile unbelievers. In his exegesis of Numbers 12, Origen takes Moses as representing the spiritual law, which enters into a union with his Cushite wife, who symbolizes the Church gathered from the Gentiles.³⁰

Yet the churchman's rhetoric seems to be based on more than symbolism. As noted earlier, Origen, himself an Egyptian, claimed Egyptians were slavish by nature as a result of the curse of Ham. Elsewhere, he extends this hostile evaluation by saying, "Not without merit . . . does the discolored posterity imitate the ignobility of the race."³¹

Commenting on the Song of Songs, Origen describes Abedmelek, the Ethiopian eunuch who rescues the prophet Jeremiah from the pit, as a member "of a dark and ignoble race."³² Elsewhere in this commentary, he uses the word "ignoble" to indicate persons unrelated to such important people as the Israelite patriarchs.³³ Some might argue "ignoble" simply means "lowly" or "humble." The placement of "dark" alongside "ignoble" here, however, seems to signal more than an innocuous correlation.

AFRICAN SLAVERY IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

While the early Jewish and Christian interpretive tradition linking the curse of slavery with dark skin was taking shape, a concomitant development can be seen within the broader Greco-Roman culture, one that informs and undergirds the exegetical motifs noted in this article.³⁴ Simply put, African slaves were becoming a familiar sight in the Mediterranean basin, and were probably first introduced into Greece in large numbers during the fifth century BCE as captives of Xerxes' Persian army.³⁵

²⁹ Goldenberg, *Curse of Ham*, 169.

³⁰ *Commentary on Song of Songs* 2.1, *Origen: The Songs of Songs Commentary and Homilies* (ACW 26; trans. R. P. Lawson; London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1957) 97.

³¹ *Homilies on Genesis* 16.1, *Origen: Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, 215.

³² *Commentary on Song of Songs* 2.1, *Origen: The Song of Songs*, 104.

³³ *Ibid.*, *Origen*, 92.

³⁴ Frank M. Snowden, Jr., *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970) 171, notes that Greek traditions explained the origins of slavery on the basis of the assumed inferiority of certain peoples, but Roman culture offered no counterpart to this position.

³⁵ Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity*, 184.

In subsequent centuries, more Africans would enter the Greco-Roman slave markets, along with many other non-Greeks and non-Romans.³⁶ Roman xenophobia likely was initially directed more toward the northern Germanic peoples, who threatened the empire in the first few centuries CE. However, Cracco Ruggini suggests an unfavorable attitude toward black Africans arose in the third century CE due to African-based marauders active in the empire's southern regions.³⁷

Darker-skinned Africans likely became increasingly associated with slavery in the Roman period because the largest portion of Ethiopians in Greece and Italy undoubtedly arrived as prisoners of war or slaves.³⁸ This connection was reinforced following the Islamic conquest of the Maghreb in the seventh century, as Islamic armies gained control of much of North Africa and enslaved some of the local populations.³⁹

AFRICANS AND SLAVERY IN MEDIEVAL WRITINGS

In the following centuries, the association between the Hamitic peoples and slavery remained a touchstone for Jewish, Muslim, and Christian writers. Benjamin of Tudela, a Jewish Spaniard who traveled much of the world from Europe to Persia in the twelfth century CE, kept a diary of his travels and took careful notes on Jewish communities everywhere he visited. They could provide a safe haven for Jewish Europeans, who were persecuted in the wake of the Christian Crusades.⁴⁰

In his report on Egypt, Benjamin includes a discussion of “the sons of Cush”:

There is a people . . . who, like animals, eat of the herbs that grow on the banks of the Nile and in the fields. They go about naked and have not the intelligence of ordinary men. They sleep with their sisters and any one they find. The climate is very hot [*hamah*]. When the men of Assuan make a raid into their land, they take with them bread and wheat, dried grapes and figs, and throw the food to these people who run after it. Thus they bring many of them back prisoners and sell them in the land of Egypt and in the surrounding countries. And these are the black slaves, the sons of Ham.⁴¹

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Lloyd A. Thompson, *Romans and Blacks* (New York: Routledge, 1989) 97.

³⁸ Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity*, 186.

³⁹ Goldenberg, *Curse of Ham*, 170.

⁴⁰ Marcus Nathan Adler, *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela: Critical Text, Translation and Commentary* (London: Oxford University Press, 1907) xiii.

⁴¹ Ibid, 96-97.

Interpretive motifs noted earlier are combined in Benjamin's diary with new attributes. The people he describes as uncivilized are black Africans—"sons of Ham"—who he contends are made to serve as slaves. Note also his observation that they are said to be incestuous ("they sleep with their sisters")⁴² and to run after food like animals. These additional elements seem intended to demean Africans further, perhaps to provide additional justification for their enslavement.

Benjamin of Tudela was a man of means whose education would have included midrashic interpretations of the Hebrew Bible, such as those from *Genesis Rabbah* noted above. That his diary has survived suggests his voice achieved a level of respect in Jewish communities. Although as Goldenberg points out, the source of his assessment of Africans is impossible to know, given these sentiments also appear in contemporaneous Christian and Islamic sources.⁴³

To claim, as Goldenberg does, that Benjamin's work does not really count as an indicator of rabbinic tradition may be technically correct. Nevertheless, his words confirm much of the outlook demonstrated in these interpretive motifs within a Jewish context, one that reached the level of respect commensurate with a text that survived from the twelfth century.

Benjamin's outlook on Africans is mirrored in the Islamic tradition. The historian Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406 CE) wrote, "Negroes have little that is (essentially) human and possess attributes that are quite similar to those of dumb animals."⁴⁴ Further, he claimed, "Negroes are the children of Ham, the son of Noah . . . and they were singled out to be black as a result of Noah's curse, which produced Ham's color and the slavery God inflicted upon his descendants."⁴⁵

Note that Ibn Khaldun connects the curse with skin pigmentation and slavery to Ham's descendants, mirroring the exegetical motifs shown above. As Islam spread over North Africa, these sentiments were applied to the burgeoning practice of enslaving indigenous peoples. Even though Shariah law forbade

⁴² The Hebrew word Benjamin uses is *sakab* (סָכַב; "to sleep/have sex with,") a meaning also found in biblical Hebrew.

⁴³ Goldenberg, "The Curse of Ham: A Case of Rabbinic Racism?" 30-31. Goldenberg does not quote Tudela directly as I have done here. He simply summarizes the diary's "mention of Africans' animal-like behavior, nakedness, low intelligence, and promiscuity." Curiously, Goldenberg omits Tudela's description of incestuous behavior and the very clear connection he makes between "black slaves and the sons of Ham." Tudela's diary constitutes a clear example of connecting the curse of Ham to black people and slavery, something Goldenberg says never happens in Judaism. *Ibid.*, 33. Goldenberg is reacting to accusations that make the Talmud the source for Western Civilization's racism. Of course, he is correct that such positions are laughable. Yet his defense would be better served by frankly admitting to the few places where Jewish tradition does mirror the prevailing notions of black denigration.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) 37.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Goldenberg, "The Curse of Ham, A Case of Rabbinic Racism?" 34.

the enslavement of free Muslims, sub-Saharan Africans were viewed as fair game for the fourteenth-century Muslim slave trade.⁴⁶

Not long after, Christians began to formulate explicit notions of race that could be used to justify the enslavement of Africans. Alessandro Valignano (1539–1606), a Jesuit from Naples, wrote extensively on the differences between lighter-skinned peoples in Japan and China and darker-skinned peoples in Africa and India.

In his assessment, Valignano claimed “negro people” are intellectually inferior and incapable of living Christian lives; they are “a race born to serve,” left in a reprobate state by the hidden judgment of God.⁴⁷ Although Valignano does not explicitly mention the curse of Ham, his references to divine judgment and eternal servitude evoke the ancient interpretive traditions that crystalized around the biblical legend.

NOAH’S CURSE, SLAVERY, AND RACISM IN AMERICA

The notion of Ham’s curse was a central pillar of slaveholding culture in the antebellum American South. Theodore Weld, the nineteenth-century crusading abolitionist, called the curse Noah uttered in Gen 9:25 the vade mecum (foundational guide) of all slaveholders in the United States.⁴⁸

Noah’s three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, were taken to signify a three-fold division of humanity into white, red, and black races.⁴⁹ Additionally, Noah himself had become what Leonard Allen and Richard Hughes call the prototype for the patriarchal structure of plantation life.⁵⁰

Sermons grounding slavery in Noah’s curse abounded. In 1842, Methodist Alexander McCain stated they were “the words of God himself and by them was slavery ordained. This was an early arrangement of the Almighty, to be perpetuated through all time.”⁵¹

However, what was perpetuated by McCain was, in fact, the not-so-early association of Ham with dark skin and Africa by ancient exegetes, as can be seen in an 1837 sermon delivered by preacher and slaveholder Samuel Dunwoody:

⁴⁶ Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) 53.

⁴⁷ Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 34.

⁴⁸ H. Sheldon Smith, *In His Image, But . . . Racism in Southern Religion, 1780–1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1972) 130.

⁴⁹ The idea that Noah’s three sons stand for the three races of humanity is already found in the writings of Alcuin of York (732–804 CE). See Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah’s Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 5.

⁵⁰ Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen, *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630–1875* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 198–199.

⁵¹ Cited in H. Sheldon Smith, *In His Image*, 130.

It is generally believed that Africans or Negroes are the descendants of Ham; and it is by all means probable that the very name Ham, which signifies burnt or black, was given to him prophetically on account of the countries that his posterity were destined to inhabit. The Judicial curse of Noah on the posterity of Ham, seems yet to rest upon them.⁵²

Slavery advocates, such as Benjamin Palmer, a University of Georgia alumnus and ordained Presbyterian minister who was instrumental in founding Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee, recycled the Ham's curse myth to undergird the vicious system of enslaving fellow human beings. On June 13, 1861, in the early days of the Civil War, Palmer preached:

Upon Ham was pronounced the doom of perpetual servitude—proclaimed with double emphasis as it is twice repeated that he shall be the servant of Japheth and the servant of Shem. Accordingly, history records not a single example of any member of this group lifting itself, by any process of self-development above the savage condition. From first to last, their mental and moral characteristics, together with the guidance of Providence, have marked them for servitude.⁵³

Even after the Civil War, Parker continued to use the curse to justify segregation. At an 1872 lecture at Lee University, Palmer asserted the separation of the races is based “upon the declared policy of the Divine Administration from the days of Noah until now.”⁵⁴

In the twentieth century, the cursing of Ham and his descendants continued to be invoked to justify racial inequality. Cyrus Scofield, one of Dwight L. Moody's young lieutenants, was an important voice in the Christian fundamentalist movement of the early twentieth century.⁵⁵ His annotated *Scofield Reference Bible*, published in 1917, became the backbone of American fundamentalism and reached an audience of millions.⁵⁶

In his notes to Genesis 9, Scofield stated the elements of the Noahic covenant include:

a prophetic declaration . . . that from Ham will descend an inferior and servile posterity (Gen 9. 24, 25),” as well a further “prophetic declaration . . . that from Japheth will descend the ‘enlarged’ races (Gen 9. 27). Government, sci-

⁵² Quoted in Smith, *In His Image*, 130-131.

⁵³ Quoted in Hughes and Allen, *Illusions of Innocence*, 199.

⁵⁴ Haynes, *Noah's Curse*, 137.

⁵⁵ George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) 37.

⁵⁶ W. N. Kerr, “Scofield, Cyrus Ingerson,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (ed. Walter A. Elwell, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 988.

ence, and art, speaking broadly, are and have been Japhetic, so that history is the indisputable record of the exact fulfilment of these declarations.⁵⁷

The 1967 edition of the Scofield Bible (reprinted in 1988) preserves the wording of the second comment above, although the first has been edited to remove the words “inferior and servile posterity.” The new editors apparently also believed government, art, and science were primarily the enterprises of European peoples. Given the Scofield Bible’s wide distribution throughout the English-speaking world, one cannot discount the significance its notes have had on the persistence of the curse-of-Ham legacy.⁵⁸

CONCLUSION

Just a few years ago, at a church of about 400 members located near Emmanuel Christian Seminary near Johnson City, Tennessee, where I serve as professor of OT, a local pastor gained notoriety for a sermon espousing the importance of racial purity. A video of the sermon posted on the Internet went viral and made the local news.

When I had first encountered the “curse of Ham” tradition several years earlier, I assumed it was nothing more than the ruminations of a madman or a bizarre white-supremacist doctrine. Yet I have discovered not only do its roots extend back millennia, but it has appeared in more mainstream manifestations in my own lifetime. The video of the local pastor arguing for keeping the races separate prompted my investigation into this tradition.

These past few years have witnessed a growing concern over race issues in America, and I am convinced this can be good and healthy. Christians and all people of faith must become more aware of how faith traditions have shaped the way people think about the world.

Racism, white supremacy, and white privilege continue to be a problem, and studies that aim to explain their origins and what animates and sustains them are appearing more frequently. The ideologies that feed them no doubt have numerous roots yet to be fully discerned.

In *Stand Your Ground*, Kelly Brown Douglas seeks to explain white supremacy through a lens of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism rooted in Tacitus’s admiration of the Germanic tribes that resided along the Roman Empire’s

⁵⁷ C. I. Scofield, *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1917) 16.

⁵⁸ Other readily available twentieth-century sources argue with lofty erudition the preposterous notion that Noah was white. See, for example, John C. Whitcomb, Jr., and Henry M. Morris, *The Genesis Flood* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1965). On pages 44-46 these authors assume Noah is white and devote much effort to figuring out which son is responsible for introducing African and Asian features into humanity’s gene pool.

northern edge.⁵⁹ She claims this exceptionalism is foundational to the ideas of Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin.

No doubt deep-seated tribal traditions continue to influence the lives of modern peoples worldwide. However, Douglas's analysis relies heavily on factors that seem rather tangential. The Bible has played a much larger role in shaping American culture than Tacitus' writings. And as influential as Jefferson and Franklin have been, neither rivals the power the Bible and its interpretive tradition have wielded over vast numbers of people in the United States.

Equally misleading is David Whitford's book, *The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era*. Whitford claims popular medieval literature played a greater role in formulating black denigration and justification for African slavery among Christians and Jews than did biblical interpretation and other religious texts.⁶⁰

Although he provides a number of interesting sources for all sorts of misguided appropriations of Ham's/Canaan's curse in medieval literature, to claim these secular texts were the more proximate cause behind the justification of African slavery seems overstated. Whitford's conclusions also have the look of an uncritical apologia for Christian and Jewish writers, removing any sort of culpability that might lie with these authors.

While biblical interpretive tradition in general and its depiction of the story of Ham's curse in particular are not the only engines that drove slavery and white supremacy in this country, they are clearly foundational. Any analysis of the relationship between biblical authority and racial politics must include the kinds of observations outlined in this paper.

Christians must be at the forefront of this discussion, honestly assessing the ways in which Scripture has been distorted in defense of the horrific treatment of fellow human beings. Many churches even today likely harbor a few members who have been taught the racist interpretive traditions analyzed here. When these traditions surface within Christian communities, church leaders and Bible study teachers need to know how to respond.

This article contends the curse described in Genesis 9:20-27 was originally placed on Ham but later shifted to Canaan in order to explain and perhaps justify the enslavement of Canaanite peoples. In any event, the original story was never meant to justify race slavery of African peoples in ancient times or in later centuries.

Was the original curse of Ham meant merely to foster the political/cultural elevation of Shem and Japheth over Ham or perhaps symbolize a political/cultural putdown of Egypt and, to a lesser degree, Cush and Put—peoples with a

⁵⁹ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (New York: Orbis, 2015) 4-47.

⁶⁰ David M. Whitford, *The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2009) 19-39.

long legacy of Israelite oppression? Whatever its original significance, this text should never be used to defend claims of racial differences or to support the denigration of anyone today.

This article is designed to equip those who encounter such distorted exegesis to correct it lovingly and guide others to a proper understanding. An honest assessment of biblical interpretive traditions, such as those involving the curse of Genesis 9:20-27, can provide an opening for communities to discuss racism, its causes, and potential cures.⁶¹ SCJ

⁶¹ This paper was first presented as a plenary session at the 2017 SCJ Conference held on April 7-8 at Johnson University Tennessee.