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The Curse of Ham

by
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We all know that Christian behavior sometimes belies Christian belief. But what happens when Christian belief itself is used to justify and even promote bad behavior? Case in point: America's history of racial supremacy and its biblical foundations.

Black History Month seems like an appropriate time to explore this unholy alliance by revisiting one of the most beloved lies of all time, a humdinger mis-known as “the Curse of Ham.” The following exposé appears in a more condensed form in my new book, *White as Sin: A New Paradigm for Racial Healing*. I offer here, however, the whole sordid story.

The Curse of Ham is not what it purports to be and does not prove what it purports to prove. But it has proven to be a real curse, one that has bedeviled race relations for many centuries. Indeed, this is one of the longest-running fake news stories of all time, a popular proof text used to justify white supremacy in general and slavery in particular. Historian David Goldenberg calls it: “... the single greatest justification for Black slavery for more than a thousand years.... Just about everyone, especially in the antebellum South, understood that in this story God meant to curse black Africans with eternal slavery...”¹

This view, however, was by no means limited to the American South. John H. Hopkins, the first Episcopal Bishop of the Diocese of Vermont, wrote in 1864, the year before he became the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the United States: “The Almighty, foreseeing this total degradation of the [black] race, ordained them to servitude or slavery under the descendants

¹ David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 1. Goldenberg's excellent book covers the early history of the Curse, while two other quality treatments are helpful with later periods. See David M. Whitford, *The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era: The Bible and the Justifications for Slavery*, (Farnham, England: Burlington, VT; Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2009) and Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

of Shem or Japheth, doubtless because *he judged it to be their fittest condition* [italics his]. And all history proves how accurately the prediction has been accomplished, even to the present day.”² Pope Pius IX also indicated his adherence to this interpretation as late as 1873 in the following supplication: “Let us pray for the most wretched Ethiopians in Central Africa, that Almighty God may at length move the curse of Cham [Ham] from their hearts...”³

Not only in America, but in England, as well, this curse has lived up to its namesake. An 19th century article in London’s *Christian Observer* laments the stubborn recalcitrance of the Hamitic myth:

During the long controversy upon the slavery question which has agitated Christendom, no argument has been so much relied upon, and none more frequently adduced. It was employed in vindication of the lawfulness of the slave. When the slave trade was abolished, and philanthropists commenced their warfare against the system of slavery, the chief pro-slavery argument brought forward in support of that system was this text. The friends of the Negro race have had to meet it when asserted by statesmen in the Legislature, and they have had to contend against the earnest affirmation of it by learned divines.

And now, although both slavery and the slave trade are condemned by the general sentiment of the Christian world, yet the same interpretation is still given to this text, and the old opinion which was founded on it still gains credit and receives support. Its insidious influence relaxes the missionary zeal of even many pious persons, who can see no hope for Africa, nor discover any end to the slavery of its sons. It is found in books written by learned men; and it is repeated in lectures, speeches, sermons, and common conversation. So strong and tenacious is the hold which it has taken upon the mind of Christendom, that it seems almost impossible to uproot it. Indeed, it is an almost foregone conclusion, that the Negro race is an accursed race, weighed down, even to the present, beneath the burden of an ancestral malediction.⁴

² John Henry Hopkins, *A Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View of Slavery, from the Days of the Patriarch Abraham, to the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W.I. Pooley & Co., 1864), 7.

³ Pope Pius IX, “A Prayer to Implore the Conversion of the Descendants of Cham in Central Africa,” Oct. 2, 1873; collected by the Catholic Church: “Congregatio indulgentiarum et sacrarum reliquiarum” in *The Raccolta; or, Collection of Prayers and Good Works, to Which the Sovereign Pontiffs Have Attached Holy Indulgences*, ([Woodstock], Maryland: Woodstock College, 1878), 413.

⁴ Alexander Crummell, “The Negro Race Not under a Curse, An Examination of Genesis 9.25,” Reprinted with corrections and additions from the London “Christian Observer” of September, 1850. In Alexander Crummel, *The Future of Africa* (New York: C. Scribner, 1862), 327-328.

Of course, that was written more than a century and a half ago. Surely, by now, the idea of a biblical curse on black people must have lost its cachet. True, it is no longer touted by scholars, but anecdotal evidence suggests that its influence is still being felt. In recent conversations with two different well-educated and sincere Christians, one white and one black, both admitted that they had been taught and still believed (at least until they were exposed to this critique) that the Curse of Ham represented the proper interpretation of Genesis 9:20-27.

Just what is this curse, and how did it become so influential? Let's begin with the passage itself, which recounts the story of Noah after the flood:

Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard. When he drank some of its wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent. Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father naked and told his two brothers outside. But Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it across their shoulders; then they walked in backward and covered their father's naked body. Their faces were turned the other way so that they would not see their father naked.

When Noah awoke from his wine and found out what his youngest son had done to him, he said,

“Cursed be Canaan!
The lowest of slaves
will he be to his brothers.”

He also said,

“Praise be to the LORD, the God of Shem!
May Canaan be the slave of Shem.
May God extend Japheth's territory;
may Japheth live in the tents of Shem,
and may Canaan be the slave of Japheth.”

The outlines of the “Curse of Ham” interpretation of this passage, are as follows: 1) Ham sinned and received this curse of slavery from his father, Noah. 2) Ham was the progenitor of Black African peoples. 3) Therefore, blacks were doomed to bondage by virtue of this curse, and their enslavement represents the fulfillment of their divinely appointed destiny.

This “Curse of Ham” account is correct in identifying Ham as the guilty party and Noah as the one who spoke the curse to him. But the text also makes it abundantly clear that it was not Ham but his son, Canaan, who was the target of that malediction. His descendants, the Canaanites, settled along

the Mediterranean in the area of Palestine and *were not black*. They were eventually conquered by the incoming nation of Israel, and many of the survivors did, in fact, become slaves (Joshua 9:23, Judges 1:27-35)—a fact that seems to explain the prophetic relevance of the passage.

There is some indication that Canaan's father, Ham, settled in what would become Egypt (Psalms 78:51; 105:23, 27; 106:22). His four sons—Cush, Mizraim (Egypt), Put, and Canaan—settled in northeast Africa, Palestine, and perhaps on the Arabian Peninsula. The Cushites may have been the darkest-skinned of Ham's descendants, though even they might not be considered Black Africans in the modern racial sense.

But if the facts of the case are so clear, then whence this enduring myth? The Curse of Ham was by no means a novel interpretation cooked up by American Christian slaveholders, though they were undoubtedly some of its most avid supporters.⁵ In fact, this Ham-centric interpretation developed in the early centuries of the Christian era and then grew in popularity as the slave trade mushroomed. Goldenberg attributes its early appeal to four factors: “*explanation*—an attempt to make sense of the Bible; *error*—a mistaken recollection of the biblical text; *environment*—a social structure in which the Black had become identified as a slave; and *etymology*—a mistaken assumption that Ham meant “black, dark.””⁶

These same factors continued to influence Christian thinking during the era of American slavery and beyond. Let's consider them briefly in the order in which they are mentioned above. The passage does certainly leave one wishing for a fuller *explanation*, given the fact that Ham sinned but was not directly punished, while his youngest son, Canaan, who (apparently) had no role in the incident, was cursed. David Whitford, in his book, *The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era*, elaborates: “The reason that Genesis 9 plays such an important role in forming the myth of slavery is that it is fundamentally a ‘text of opportunity.’ Its centrality to the biblical story and its brevity invite the reader or interpreter to fill in or round out the story with their own opinion or understanding.”⁷ Not only do you have a seeming injustice with the curse falling on Canaan, but the punishment seems somewhat draconian for the offense, at least as it appears in the text. This has led to considerable speculation as to whether we are dealing with a euphemistic end run around an indelicate narrative.

⁵ Though this interpretation was widely accepted among Christian leaders and nearly universally so on a popular level, there were dissenters, even in the South. Eugene Genovese points out that “Thornwell [author of *A Southern Christian View of Slavery*] and Robert L. Dabney, among other prominent divines, regarded it with suspicion since neither the Bible nor science demonstrated that the blacks descended from Ham.”

⁶ David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*; 143.

⁷ David M. Whitford, *The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era: The Bible and the Justifications for Slavery* (Farnham, England: Burlington, VT; Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2009), 4.

The numerous interpretive explanations that grew up around this passage typically tried to involve Ham directly in the curse, since he was, in fact, the perpetrator of the original offense. “The most common exegesis, found in Qumran, rabbinic, and patristic writings, was that Canaan had been cursed because Ham had been previously blessed [Gen. 9:1], and therefore he could not be cursed.”⁸ Noah’s cursing of Canaan, it is supposed, is strictly a semantic subterfuge, a way of evading God’s earlier blessing in order to curse Ham by proxy.

This, however, is pure speculation and contradicts what the text explicitly says. Had Noah’s intent been to use Canaan as a proxy for cursing Ham, then all the detail about the subjugation of the Canaanite line to that of Shem and Japheth would make no sense, as the curse would have applied to all of Ham’s progeny.

The precise impact of *error* on the legacy of the Curse is a bit hard to calculate, but it nevertheless seems to have been a contributing factor. Perhaps because of Ham’s central role in the story, throughout history he has often been inadvertently identified as the target of the curse, even by writers, speakers, and scholars who knew and otherwise affirmed that Canaan was, in fact, the one cursed.⁹ This sort of error and the very repetition of the phrase “Curse of Ham” helped breathe life into the myth and served to reinforce the popular notion that the curse had really been originally pronounced on Ham.

The impact of *environment* to the growth of the Hamitic myth cannot be overestimated. In a 2003 interview for PBS, Tavis Smiley asked historian David Goldenberg: “Did these cultures choose to enslave Africans and then dig out this as a justification, or the other way around?” The answer: “This is exactly one of the conclusions I came to—which is, that the Curse of Ham grew out of an environment in which the Black was enslaved. It wasn’t the other way around.”¹⁰

Though most of slavery’s apologists were too pious to simply invent an interpretation out of whole cloth, this scriptural defense of slavery turned out to be just too handy a tool to resist, even if a straightforward reading of the biblical text offered no support for it. Abolitionist Theodore Weld wrote: “This prophecy of Noah is the *vade mecum* [handy reference manual] of slaveholders, and they never venture abroad without it. It is a pocket-piece for sudden occasion—a keepsake to dote

⁸ David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, 165.

⁹ David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*; 165-166 lists a series of examples.

¹⁰ <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1548811>, Dec. 15, 2003, npr91.smil

over—a charm to spell-bind opposition, and a magnet to attract "whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie."¹¹

The final piece of the puzzle that helps explain the rise of the Curse of Ham is a mistaken *etymology*. Some (mostly ancient) commentators speculated that the curse somehow altered Ham's genes, rendering his posterity black,¹² but the far more common view in the modern era was that Ham's very name signified that he was black. "Indeed, 'almost every Southern writer on the Ham myth' used the philological argument that Ham meant 'black,' 'dark,' and 'hot.'"¹³

A plethora of etymological suggestions for the name *Ham* have appeared over the centuries, but those that identified Ham with ancient root words signifying *black*, *dark*, and/or *hot* began to gain currency in England as early as 1660. Such African identifications were further popularized by Augustin Calmet, a French Benedictine, in his 1722 Bible Dictionary, which was later translated into English. It lists the etymological roots of *Ham* as "burnt, swarthy, or black."¹⁴ Bishop Thomas Newton, a British scholar who relied heavily on Calmet's work, became quite influential in America and helped to popularize this theory in the U.S in the latter half of the eighteenth century.¹⁵

Even if all these linguistic conjectures had been accurate they would not, of course, have demonstrated that the curse was on the entire Hamitic line (much less that it singled out sub-Saharan Africa), as the text plainly says otherwise. Nevertheless, in conjunction with the other factors mentioned above, this etymology seems to have been a kind of tipping point of plausibility for those in need of a self-serving justification. The assumption that Ham was black or otherwise

¹¹ Theodore Dwight Weld, *The Bible Against Slavery: An Inquiry into the Patriarchal and Mosaic Systems on the Subject of Human Rights*, 3rd ed. rev., (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1838), 46.

¹² David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: A Case of Rabbinic Racism?*, 7. I remember hearing this explanation mentioned in my youth, though I don't remember the source.

¹³ David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, 143.

¹⁴ Augustin Calmet, C. Taylor; *Calmet's Dictionary of the Holy Bible* (Boston, Crocker and Brewster, 1832), 476.

¹⁵ Newton's story is a fascinating one. He (incorrectly and possibly deceitfully) used Calmet as the source of a textual emendation that would have changed the biblical text of Gen. 9:25 to refer not to Canaan but to "Ham, the father of Canaan." Historian Stephen Haynes notes that in so doing he forged a useful weapon in the American struggle to justify the 'peculiar institution.'" Episcopal Bishop John Hopkins (quoted above) cited Newton extensively in his defense of the morality of slavery. See Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (Oxford, New York; Oxford University Press, 2002), 39. For a fuller account of Newton's scholarship as it relates to this issue, see David M. Whitford, *The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era: The Bible and the Justifications for Slavery*, (Farnham, England; Burlington, VT; Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2009), 142 ff.

associated with Africa¹⁶ gave just enough credence to the notion that he represented Black Africans rather than just the Canaanite line.

Modern linguistic research clearly demonstrates that these theories were based on faulty assumptions about which root words could conceivably have a phonetic association with *Ham*. Nevertheless, as Near Eastern scholar William F. Albright put it, “Plausible etymologies are wanting.”¹⁷ Prof. Joshua Blau, the former President of the Academy of the Hebrew Language, also concluded that *Ham* is of “uncertain etymology.”¹⁸ *Eerdman’s Dictionary of the Bible* concurs,¹⁹ as does Father John McKenzie in his *Dictionary of the Bible*.²⁰ Perhaps this lack of a demonstrable alternative has contributed to the enduring popular conception that Ham’s name is associated with blackness.

And so it was that an interpretive explanation, a linguistic error, a slave environment, and a mistaken etymology combined to create and perpetuate the Curse of Ham. But none of these, individually or collectively, are the secret ingredient that gave this myth its staying power. Goldenberg begins to get at the crux of the issue in this summary:

Of course, anyone could look in the Bible and see that the Curse of Ham was a chimera. But it didn’t matter how patently absurd was the argument from Scripture. When the Bible states that Canaan was cursed, it really means that Ham was cursed. And what was the proof? The fact that Blacks were enslaved, as Abbé Louis Fillion (d. 1927), onetime professor of exegesis at the Institut Catholique of Paris, explained. These arguments are, of course, irrational (Canaan means Ham) and circular (it must have been Black Ham that was cursed, because the Blacks are all enslaved), but that did not matter. The Curse of Ham myth legitimized and validated the social order by divine justification. No matter then how irrational or circular, the arguments were accepted because they supported society’s beliefs and practices, and with God’s approval.²¹

¹⁶ There were other less popular theories that tried to link Ham’s name to the Egyptian root *kmt*, as a proper name applied to Egypt itself. Goldenberg says of this etymology: “In regard to the *kmt* theory, scholars had earlier abandoned the suggestion that this Egyptian word is the origin of the name of Ham. This change of opinion can be seen in Hasting’s *Dictionary of the Bible*. The 1911 edition the entry “Ham” stated that Ham derives from *kmt*, while the revised edition of the dictionary (1963), explicitly rejects the possibility.” (David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*; 148)

¹⁷ “Reviewed work(s): Hebrew Union College Annual Journal of Biblical Literature,” Vol. 64, No. 2 (Jun., 1945), 294.

¹⁸ Joshua Blau, “On Polyphony in Biblical Hebrew,” (Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 6, 1982), 144-178.

¹⁹ David Noel Freedman, *Eerdman’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdman, 2000), 543.

²⁰ John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 333.

²¹ David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*; 177.

It seems amazing that Christians would so readily (and so clumsily) compromise the integrity of their own sacred Scriptures. They must have had some overwhelming and overriding motivation for doing so. What could that be? Certainly, those who had enslaved Africans and/or created a racialized social hierarchy had interests of money and power to protect. And that is not a trifling matter.

I think that Goldenberg gets a little closer to the fundamental issue, however, when he mentions society's beliefs. Because even before their enslavement of Black Africans and even before they had a racial hierarchy to protect, white society had already developed a mentality that led them to do those things. I call it racial haughtiness, a sin of supposed superiority over against a racial "other." How better to camouflage that sin than to paint it as divinely ordained?

For all of the reasons adduced above, Christians should reject the Curse of Ham, both as a valid interpretation and as a justification for white dominance. We must remember, however, that just because we abandon a particular rationale for our sin does not mean that we have abandoned the underlying sin as well. The real and more enduring curse is not the Hamitic myth but racial haughtiness itself.

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