

Was the “Curse of Ham” a Curse on the Black Race?

MANY religious leaders have said, Yes.” Clergymen Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset and David Brown, in their Bible commentary, assert: “Cursed be Canaan [Genesis 9:25]—this doom has been fulfilled in . . . the slavery of the Africans, the descendants of Ham.”—Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Whole Bible.

It is claimed that not only the slavery of blacks was in fulfillment of this Biblical curse, but their black skin color is too. Thus many whites have been led to assume that blacks are inferior, and that God meant for them to be the servants of whites. Many blacks became embittered by the treatment that they received as a result of this religious interpretation. One observes:

“It was in the summer of 1951 when I, as an inquisitive seven-year-old, sat on the steps of the First Baptist Church in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, and cried. I had tried diligently to rub off the blackness of my flesh, because my white girl companions had remarked about its offensiveness. The rubbing with Ajax cleanser left only a reddened, puffy spot that ached, almost as much as my childish heart, when I began to ponder why a God of love would make a person black, unless he really did not love me.

“I had heard that it was due to a curse put on our race by God. But I still didn’t know or understand what we had done to God that merited such punishment. And I think, in reflection, that deep in my heart I had always harbored a private grudge against God for making me black and putting me into a white world.

“In the crushing disturbances of my playmates’ taunts and racial epithets, such as: ‘If you’re White, you’re all right, if you’re Brown, stick around, if you’re Black, get back,’ a marked condition ensued, wherein I began to seethe, particularly at white girls my own age.”

What about this Biblical curse? Are people black due to a curse that God placed on some ancestor of theirs? And did blacks suffer centuries of slavery in fulfillment of this curse? Does the Bible really teach such things? Let us see. The Bible account in question reads:

“[Noah] 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 . . . 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.”—Gen. 9:21-27, Authorized Version.

It has been claimed that this Biblical curse singles out blacks for perpetual servitude. In fact, in 1838 the antislavery crusader Theodore Weld wrote in a popular tract: The “prophecy of Noah [quoted above] is the vade mecum [constant companion] of slaveholders, and they never venture abroad without it.”—The Bible Against Slavery, page 66.

But, first of all, please note that nothing is said in this Bible account about anyone’s being cursed with blackness of skin. And note, too, that it is Canaan, not his father Ham, who was cursed. Canaan was not black skinned, nor were his descendants who settled in the land that became known as Palestine. (Gen. 10:15-19) The Canaanites were, in time, subjugated by the Israelites, descendants of Shem, and later by Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome, descendants of Japheth. This subjugation of the Canaanites fulfilled the prophetic curse on their ancestor Canaan. The curse thus had nothing to do with the black race.

From where, then, did the black race come? From Ham’s other sons, Cush and probably also Put, whose descendants settled in Africa. But, as we have seen, the Bible says absolutely nothing about the black descendants of these men being cursed! Yet it was incorrectly assumed that they were. When did church commentators begin applying the curse to Ham?

A churchman of about 1,500 years ago, Ambrosiaster, applied it thus, saying: “Due to folly Ham, who foolishly ridiculed the nakedness of his father, was declared a slave.” And John F. Maxwell observes in his recent book *Slavery and the Catholic Church*: “This disastrous example of fundamentalist exegesis [explanation] continued to be used for 1,400 years and led to the widely held view that African Negroes were cursed by God.”

Even up to a hundred years ago the Catholic Church held the view that blacks were cursed by God. Maxwell explains that this view “apparently survived until 1873 when Pope Pius IX attached an indulgence to a prayer for the ‘wretched

Ethiopians in Central Africa that almighty God may at length remove the curse of Cham [Ham] from their hearts.”

Yet even before Christendom’s beginning over 1,500 years ago, yes, possibly even prior to Jesus Christ’s life on earth, Jewish rabbis taught a story about the origin of black skin. The Encyclopædia Judaica claims: “Ham’s descendant (Cush) Is black skinned as a punishment for Ham’s having had sexual intercourse in the ark.”

Similar “stories” have been manufactured in modern times. Defenders of slavery, such as John Fletcher of Louisiana, for example, taught that the sin that prompted the curse by Noah was racial intermarriage. He claimed that Cain was smitten with a black skin for killing his brother Abel, and that Ham had sinned by marrying into the race of Cain. It is noteworthy, too, that Nathan Lord, president of Dartmouth College during the last century, also attributed Noah’s curse upon Canaan partly to Ham’s “forbidden intermarriage with the previously wicked and accursed race of Cain.”

But such teachings have no foundation whatsoever in the Bible. And there were persons in past centuries who showed that the curse uttered by Noah was wrongly being applied to blacks. For example, back in June 1700 Judge Samuel Sewall of Boston explained: “For Canaan is the person cursed three times over, without the mentioning of Cham [Ham]. . . . Whereas the Blackmores [Black race] are not descended of Canaan, but of Cush.”

Also, in 1762 a John Woolman published a treatise in which he argued that the application of this Biblical curse in such a way as to justify enslaving people and depriving them of their natural rights “is a supposition too gross to be admitted into the mind of any person who sincerely desires to be governed by solid principles.”

What great harm has resulted from the misapplication by churchmen of this Biblical curse! The slavery of African blacks, and their mistreatment since the days of slavery, can in no way be justified by the Bible. The truth is, blacks are not, and never were, cursed by God!

Who “decided” that Blacks were cursed?

The origin of the theory that the “Curse of Ham” resulted in the black race being supposedly “cursed” with black skin and that the blacks were to be made perpetual slaves to the white race actually came from the Jewish Talmud – the

“holiest” book of Judaism. It was the Jewish rabbis who promoted this racist idea.

“A number of early Jewish writers have interpreted the Biblical narrative of Ham in a racial way. The Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 108b states "Our Rabbis taught: Three copulated in the ark, and they were all punished — the dog, the raven, and Ham. The dog was doomed to be tied, the raven expectorates [his seed into his mate's mouth], and Ham was smitten in his skin." {Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 108b} The nature of Ham's "smitten" skin is unexplained, but later commentaries described this as a darkening of skin. A later note to the text states that the "smitten" skin referred to the blackness of descendants, and a later comment by rabbis in the [Bereshit Rabbah](#) asserts that Ham himself emerged from the ark black-skinned.[6][7] The [Zohar](#) states that Ham's son Canaan "darkened the faces of mankind".[8]” Wikipedia – Online Encyclopedia

References:

6. Solors, Werner, *Neither Black nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature*, 1997, Oxford University Press, p. 87

7.[The Midrash: The Bereshith or Genesis Rabba](#)

8.Solors, p. 87