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Black and Slave: the Origins and History of the Curse of Ham

The idea that blackness and slavery were inescapably joined and that the Bible thus consigned blacks to everlasting servitude had its most notorious manifestation in antebellum America, where it provided biblical validation for sustaining the slave system.

See Also: [Black and Slave](#) (De Gruyter, 2017).

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August 2017

Genesis 9: 20-25 tells the story of how a drunken Noah accidentally exposed himself, his son Ham sinfully looked at him, and as punishment Noah cursed Ham's son Canaan with servitude ("A servant of servants he shall be to his brothers"). Over time, this story was understood to say that black skin was part of the curse, the so-called "Curse of Ham." The idea that blackness and slavery were inescapably joined and that the Bible thus consigned blacks to everlasting servitude had its most notorious manifestation in antebellum America, where it provided biblical validation for sustaining the slave system. My work over the past two decades has been an attempt to unravel this misinterpretation and its applications through time and place.

Almost fifteen years ago I wrote a book examining biblical views of the black African seeking to understand how this biblical interpretation developed (Goldenberg, [Curse of Ham](#)). I have now completed a different book on the Curse of Ham, this time examining the etiological origins of the Curse, showing how a myth explaining the origin of black skin morphed into the exegetical

justification for black slavery (Goldenberg, *Black and Slave*). What follows is a summary of some of the key arguments of the two books.

The Bible says nothing about skin color in the story of Noah, but this feature was somehow woven into the biblical text. An indication of the prominence this feature held in the minds of many can be seen in Fidel Castro's recollection of the story as taught to him as a youth:

Noah cultivated a vineyard, grapes, produced wine and drank a little too much. One of his sons mocked him, and Noah cursed him and condemned him to be black [*negro*]. It is one of the things in the Bible that I think someday the Church should change, because it seems that being black is a punishment from God (Castro, 75-76).

Castro's version is not by any means exceptional. The introduction of black skin color into Noah's curse has a long history. Since, according to the Bible, the curse was one of slavery, the joining of skin color to Noah's curse of slavery had a profound effect, for it served to justify black slavery for many centuries. In 1848, the American anti-slavery minister John G. Fee wrote that Ham was made black "by the curse of the Almighty," and he succinctly described that effect, which was commonly believed in his time: "God designed the Negroes to be slaves" (Fee, *Sinfulness of Slaveholding*, 16; *Anti-Slavery Manual*, 19). And not only in his time. The belief in the Curse of Ham continued well into the 20th century. James Baldwin, the African-American writer, wrote: "I knew that, according to many Christians, I was a descendant of Ham, who had been cursed, and that I was therefore predestined to be a slave" (Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 45-46). Just recently the Southern Baptist Convention, meeting in Phoenix on June 13-14 felt it necessary to pass a resolution that "Whereas, the roots of White supremacy within a 'Christian context' is based on the so-called 'curse of Ham' theory.... which provided the theological

justification for slavery and segregation. The SBC officially renounces the “curse of Ham” theory in this Resolution” (<https://www.colorlines.com/articles/read-resolution-white-supremacy-caused-drama-southern-baptist-convention-annual-meeting>).

It didn’t matter whether one supported the institution of black slavery or not, or whether one was black or not; everyone seemed to believe in the truth of Ham’s blackness. As Edward Blyden, a Black scholar, clergyman, and statesman, wrote in 1869: “It is not to be doubted that from the earliest ages the black complexion of some of the descendants of Noah was known. Ham, it would seem, was of a complexion darker than that of his brothers” (Blyden, 75). In a study of the mythic world of the antebellum South vis-à-vis blacks, Thomas Peterson showed that the notion of blacks as “the children of Ham” was a well-entrenched belief: “White southern Christians overwhelmingly thought that Ham was the aboriginal black man” (Peterson, 42, 45-47, 149; quotation from 102). Why should that be the case? Even putting aside for the moment the fact that according to the Bible it was Canaan, not Ham, who was cursed, why was Ham identified with black Africa? Why the persistent, centuries-long identification of Ham with the black African?

According to biblical genealogy one of Ham’s four sons was Kush, a name long associated with the area in Africa south of Egypt in both ancient Near Eastern literature and the Bible (e.g., Ezekiel 29:10). Consider the famous line from Jeremiah (13:23), “Can the Kushite change his skin?” referring to the dark-skinned African. Also reflecting this association is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, in which the term Kush(ite) was rendered as *Ethiopia(n)*, the traditional etymology of which is ‘burnt face,’ i.e., dark skinned. But is Kush’s African location

enough of a reason to consider Ham a black African? After all, Kush wasn't Ham's only son. Egypt, Put and Canaan were also sons of Ham. Furthermore there is general scholarly agreement that most, if not all, of Kush's descendants listed in the biblical Table of Nations in Gen 10:7 (and 1 Chronicles 1:9) correspond to names of peoples who inhabited areas not in Africa, but in the southern and southwestern parts of the Arabian peninsula.

No doubt the most powerful reason for assuming Ham's blackness lies in etymology. The name Ham was understood to be related to the Hebrew word for 'black' or 'brown,' and thus indicated associations with the black African. James A. Sloan, a Presbyterian minister, put it this way in 1857: "Ham's name means 'Black' There must, then, have been some peculiarity of color in the skin of Ham, which caused his father to give him the name which he received" (Sloan, 60). A second etymological quirk deepened the identity of Ham as a black man, for the Hebrew name Ham also meant 'hot,' or so it was believed. And weren't the blacks situated in the hot countries of Africa? These arguments from etymology are commonly cited in the literature of that time. Indeed, "almost every Southern writer on the Ham myth" used the philological argument that Ham meant 'black,' 'dark,' and 'hot' (Peterson, 43).

If these etymological assumptions are correct it may indeed imply that the ancient Israelites saw a connection between black Africans and slavery. But recent research has shown conclusively that there is no etymological relationship between the name Ham and the meanings 'black,' 'dark,' and 'hot.' Nevertheless, by the early centuries of the Common Era, it was believed that

there was, that the name Ham was related etymologically to the Hebrew root having those meanings. (Goldenberg, *Curse of Ham*, 141-156)

Etymology, then, as incorrect as it was, thus provided fertile ground for the later development of the Curse of Ham idea associating black skin with slavery. Exegesis does not occur in an historical vacuum, and it is no wonder that the Curse of Ham was used to justify the existing phenomenon of black slavery. But there is more to the story than etymology and historical context.

Formally the Curse is an origins myth ('etiology') explaining the existence of black slavery. The examples quoted above from the American South combine two separate etiologies, one of black skin and one of slavery: with Noah's curse of slavery the one cursed turned black. But not always are the two etiologies combined. We can see this in the earliest evidence of an explicit link between blacks and slavery in the context of the Noah story. This is found in the Syriac Christian work known as the *Cave of Treasures*, dating in its present form from the 6th-7th century at the latest, but originally going back to the 3rd or 4th century. Expanding on the biblical story, the work explains that Canaan's "descendants were reduced to slavery, and they are the Egyptians, the Mysiens (*musaye*), the Kushites, the Indians, and the abominable ones (*musraye*)" (Ri, 62-63). The ones cursed with slavery are dark-skinned peoples, a point made clear in the Arabic version (around 750 CE) of the work, which expands Canaan's descendants to include all blacks:

[Noah] was angry with Ham and said, “Let Canaan be cursed, and let him be a slave to his brothers.... [Noah] increased in his curse of Canaan. Therefore his sons became slaves. They are the Copts, the Kushites, the Indians, the Musin (*mūsīn*), and all the other blacks (*sūdān*).

Similarly, in the later Ethiopic version: “.... they are the Egyptians, the Kuerbawiens, the Indians, the Mosirawiens, the Ethiopians, and all those whose skin color is black” (Goldenberg, *Black and Slave*, 76-78).

What is notable here is that although we see for the first time the explicit association of blackness with servitude in the context of the Noah story, black skin does not originate in the story. Rather, blacks are assumed to be the ones descended from Canaan who was cursed with slavery. A link between Canaan and blacks (independent of any connection to the story of Noah and contrary to the Bible’s genealogy) is found commonly in Islamic literature attributed to authorities from the early 7th century onward, and has antecedents even earlier in ancient Near Eastern sources (Goldenberg, *Black and Slave*, 78-81). But, again, what is of concern here is that the black-slave connection as part of Noah’s curse does not include the genesis of blackness in the curse.

So how did the etiology of black skin enter the picture? In a world of lighter-skinned people the skin color of the black African required an explanation. In ancient Greece one explanation told that Phaethon, son of the god Helios brought the sun chariot too close to the earth. “It was then, as men think, that the peoples of Aethiopia became black-skinned” (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

2.235-236; Strabo 15.1.24). Another Greek etiological myth accounted for the dark skin of Egyptians as well as Ethiopians. Zeus disguised himself by becoming black and seduced Io, from which union the black Africans and Egyptians descended (Goldenberg, *Curse of Ham*, 109).

Such mythic explanations are common across time and place. A story of the Creek (Muscogee) Indians of Southeastern United States tells that three people bathed in a pond. The first emerged completely clean and he was the ancestor of white people. The second came out darker because the water was by now a bit dirty. From him came the Native Americans. By the time the third person got to the pond the water was quite dirty and the person emerged black. He became the ancestor of the Africans (Swanton, 74-75).

In many of these etiologies the origin of the unusual skin color is the result of some ancestral sin or misbehavior, thus implying a negative value judgment of that color. The Greek myth attributes dark skin to Phaethon's arrogance in assuming that he could control the chariot of the sun; he couldn't and lost control over Africa, thus darkening the Africans. Nor did black African etiologies of light-skinned people express a different attitude. Veronika Görög-Karady studied the various skin-color etiologies of the Vili in the Congo and concluded: "The texts thus manifest a fundamental ethnocentrism.... The black constitutes the prototype of humanity from which all the 'races' have issued.... The thematic nucleus of the majority of these Vili texts consists of a fault or misdeed imputed to the ancestor or one of the ancestors and to which the deviation of humanity issues directly [...] The racial differentiation flows directly from the nature of the crime.... The transformation of skin color appears as the punishment for an evil action.... All these texts affirm the culpability and justified mythic damnation of the white ancestor" (Görög-

Karady, 2:82-83, 88-89). Or, as Lawrence Levine wrote concerning skin color etiologies told by African-American slaves, “Black slaves, then, possessed their own form of racial ethnocentrism and were capable of viewing the white race as a degenerate form of the black” (Levine, 85). In both light-skinned and dark-skinned societies, ethnocentric-driven folktales saw the origin of ‘non-normal’ skin color in divine punishment for disobedience. Only the colors are reversed. These value judgments are ethnocentric expressions of conformism to the dominant aesthetic taste, what social scientists call “somatic norm preference,” that is, a bias for the society’s normal pigmentation.

In biblically-centered societies it would not be surprising to find skin-color etiologies constructed around characters or events found in the Bible. A medieval example of a dark-skin etiology using biblical characters is found in the Christian *Vienna Genesis*, an anonymous, 11th- or early 12th-century German poetic paraphrase of Genesis. Adam’s offspring through the line of Cain, we are told, disobeyed Adam’s command to avoid certain plants, and as a consequence some of their descendants

completely lost their beautiful coloring; they became black and disgusting, and unlike any people.... [They] displayed on their bodies what the forebears had earned by their misdeeds. As the fathers had been inwardly, so the children were outwardly (Friedman, 93; Goldenberg, *Black and Slave*, 33).

A Jewish etiology on the origin of black skin is found in a rabbinic source redacted before the mid-6th century, in the name of authorities of the 3rd-4th centuries. God prohibited Noah’s

family and all the creatures in the ark from engaging in sex during the flood, but Noah's son Ham, the dog, and the raven transgressed the prohibition and had sexual relations with their respective partners. Playing on the assumed etymology of Ham, the story claims that Ham turned black as punishment for his sin (Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 108b; Goldenberg, *Curse of Ham*, 102-107, 186-187). In addition to the Jewish source, this sex-in-the-ark story is commonly found in Muslim sources, and in, at least, one Christian source from the East (Isho'dad). We also find it in Christian literature from the West beginning in the 13th century.

Another group of etiologies of blackness found in the Near East is more closely set within the narrative framework of the biblical story of Noah's curse, except that the curse is not one of slavery, as in the Bible, but of black skin. This etiology of black skin as punishment for looking at Noah's nakedness is found with various elaborations across the Muslim East from an early period to modern times. Sometimes the story is incorporated into a larger narrative framework and sometimes merely alluded to. The core of them all is Noah's cursing of Ham with blackness as punishment for looking at his father's nakedness.

The earliest to record this account of black origins is attributed to Ibn Mas'ūd (d. 653), a companion of Muḥammad, the prophet of Islam, as quoted by Ibn Ḥakim (d. 1014/15). As is common in the Muslim versions, Noah, considered a prophet in Islam, does not get drunk, since drinking alcohol is prohibited in Islam. In Ibn Mas'ūd's version Noah's nakedness is due to his taking a bath.

Noah was bathing and saw his son [Ham] looking at him and said to him, ‘Are you watching me bathe? May God change your color!’ And he is the ancestor of the *sūdān* [i.e., blacks]. (Hunwick and Harrak, 30-31).

The etiological tradition of black skin deriving from Noah’s curse of Ham was common in the Muslim world. And it continued well into modern times. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Finnish sociologist and anthropologist Edward Westermarck recorded a modern-day Moroccan proverb: “The negroes are wicked people. They have become black in consequence of the curse which Sīdan Nōḥ (Noah) pronounced upon his son Ham, their ancestor” (Westermarck, 131).

In these black-skin stories there is no mention of slavery. In other words, we do not yet see a Curse of Ham combining blackness and slavery. However, with the Muslim conquests in Africa and the consequent increase of black slaves in the Near East, the story of Noah takes a new turn. The one cursed with slavery is no longer merely said to be the ancestor of blacks, as in the Syriac *Cave of Treasures*. Black skin is now said to be part of Noah’s curse. This expansion of the biblical narrative is found across a range of Islamic literature, most commonly in histories, but also in the Tales of the Prophets (*qisas al-anbiyā*) genre. In the Tales of the Prophets, it appears in al-Kisā’ī’s version. Kisā’ī, whose identity and dates are uncertain, records the tradition anonymously (“it is said”):

[A] gust of wind uncovered Noah's genitals; Ham laughed.... When Noah awoke he asked, "What was the laughter?... Do you laugh at your father's genitals?... "May God change your complexion and may your face turn black!" And that very instant his face did turn black.... "May He make bondswomen and slaves of Ham's progeny until the Day of Resurrection!" (Eisenberg, 1923, 99; (Thackston, 1978, 105).

The Muslim tradition of a dual curse of blackness and slavery was widespread over many centuries and continued even into modern times (Goldenberg, *Black and Slave*, 89-94).

It is not difficult to imagine why the hermeneutic development of a dual curse occurred when and where it did. Exegetical manipulation does not happen in an historical vacuum. It is not coincidental that precisely at the time when the dual curse begins to make an appearance we can trace a dramatic increase in the enslavement of black Africans. Black slavery can be documented as far back as the third millennium BCE and well into the first several centuries of the Common Era. After the Muslim conquests in Africa in the mid-7th century, the appearance of black slaves and the black slave trade increased exponentially. Indicative is the exportation of the Zanj to Muslim lands. The word 'Zanj' is apparently related to 'Azania,' the name given to the stretch of the East African coast from the horn of Africa in the north to the island of Zanzibar (whose first element is similarly related to 'Zanj') in the south. Thousands of Zanj inhabitants were enslaved by the Muslim rulers and shipped to Iraq to work in the salt marshes of the Tigris-Euphrates delta. In the 8th century the Abbasid caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd observed that the number of black slaves in Baghdad was countless. We hear about the Zanj when they arose in the first of three

rebellions in 689, although we don't know when they were initially shipped to Iraq. (Goldenberg, *Black and Slave*, 96)

The use of forced African labor for large-scale projects is reported for later periods as well, in agricultural projects and as laborers in quarries and the gold mines of the Sahara. Timothy Power mentions several cases documenting the Arab slave trade out of East Africa during the 7th-9th centuries, often to maintain slave armies, which “created a massive increase in the demand for African slaves” (Power, 92, 95, 135-138, 141-142, 146, 157-158).

There is no question that the Islamic conquest of parts of Africa, beginning with Egypt in 640/1, brought in its wake a continuous and large supply of slaves. In these early centuries of Islam, “*al-Nūba* became almost synonymous with ‘black slaves,’ because of the vast number of slaves bought from *Bilād al-Sūdān* [i.e., the country of the blacks], which includes *Bilād al-Nūba*” (Hasan, 8). Military conquest was followed by development of a black slave trade, thus instituting the commercialization of African slavery on a regular basis.

A particular feature of Islamic law encouraged these developments, for Islam prohibited taking slaves from Muslim lands. As a result, as more and more African lands fell under the banner of Islam, holy wars were pushed further to the frontiers and slaves were taken from non-Muslim areas. Since there was a continual need to replenish the “incessant demand for slaves,” in the words of Claude Meillassoux, and since sub-Saharan Africa was not yet Muslim, “black Africa

[became] an important source of slaves for the Islamic world” (Meillassoux, 349n21; Lovejoy, 15-16).

The Arab development of the African slave trade occurred also in North and West Africa in addition to areas south of Egypt. In a recent well-researched study, John Wright discussed the Arab slave-trade across Africa over time, beginning with the 7th-century conquests and the trans-Saharan trade routes. “For the medieval Islamic world, inner Africa became almost synonymous with, and a legitimate source of slaves. Existing practices of enslavement, slavery and slave-dealing all tended to expand in the Sudan under the stimulus of this external, and seemingly insatiable, demand as they were later to respond in West Africa to the demands of the Atlantic trade” (Wright, 17-18). Wright notes that as more African states became Islamized, the slave raiding moved further south to pagan territories. In addition, pockets of pagan Africans within the Dar al-Islam were also raided, and “some pagan peoples were deliberately not converted to Islam simply to maintain their eligibility for enslavement” (Wright, 21-22). The ongoing enslavement of black Africans in the Muslim world explains why the Arabic word for slave, *ʿabd*, eventually came to mean ‘black African,’ whether slave or not (Lewis, 112).

Certainly, the historical-social context of black slavery was influential in the development of the dual Curse of Ham. Context allows for creation of the new. But how is the new created? What were the building blocks from which the dual Curse was fashioned? The dual Curse consists of a curse of slavery and a curse of black skin pronounced by Noah as punishment for Ham’s crime.

The curse of slavery is, of course, found in the Bible, and Noah's curse of blackness apparently derived from the common Muslim black-skin etiologies mentioned above.

An indication that this is so is seen by a consideration of the differences between the Muslim and Jewish/Christian versions of the Curse of Ham. The Muslim writers all put the dual curse on Ham, while the Jewish and Christian authors generally see Canaan as the one who was cursed, even if Ham was also affected by the curse on Canaan. It seems that the Christian and Jewish Canaan-based Curse drew on the ancient Near Eastern genealogy linking Canaan with blacks while the Muslim Ham-based Curse derived from the earlier Muslim etiologies of black skin as Ham's punishment for looking at Noah's nakedness. The Muslim conquests in Africa with the resulting increase in African enslavement transformed the black-skin etiologies into etiologies of black slavery in the form of a dual curse, in which black skin was believed to be part of Noah's curse of slavery (Goldenberg, *Black and Slave*, 199-200).

In sum, the new dual-curse interpretation of the Noah story seems to have evolved out of the earlier Muslim dark-skin etiologies. With the conquests in Africa and the increase in black slavery, those etiologies were now joined to the story of Noah's curse of slavery. The close connection between the two etiologies is shown by the shared idea of a curse of blackness and by the common character of Ham, who received the curse.

It is important to realize the nature of a dual curse. As opposed to seeing blacks as the descendants of the one cursed with slavery, as in the Syriac *Cave of Treasures* (“... and his descendants were reduced to slavery, and they are the Egyptians, the Kushites, the Indians, and the Musraye”), a dual curse more profoundly and more insidiously ties blackness to servitude, for dark skin is now either a result of the curse of slavery or occurs with it as part of the curse. Dark skin is no longer merely associated with slavery. It has now become an intentional marker of servitude. The divine approval for the social order of black slavery is no longer implicit; it has become explicit in a most visibly forceful way (“May God change your complexion and may your face turn black!”). This change in the nature of the Curse is a result of the conquest of Africa, the increasing enslavement of blacks, and the consequent disparagement of dark skin.

The same evolution of the dual Curse of Ham occurred in the Christian West. From the East, the Curse of Ham made its way to the West by means of the Muslim cultural and commercial influences on Christian Europe. It appeared first in the 12th century in the Iberian Peninsula, and from there spread elsewhere in Europe (Goldenberg, *Black and Slave*, 105-120). But these instances of the Curse were not of the dual curse variety. They were said to affect blacks but they were not considered to be the origin of black skin. That changed in the 16th century when we begin to see a new development, the dual form of the Curse, in which blackness is joined with servitude. The preponderance of this form of the Curse continued in Europe, and even in Africa via Christian missionaries (Goldenberg, *Black and Slave*, 121-135, 139-145).

In the West the Curse of Ham in general, and the dual curse in particular, became well-accepted components of Christian biblical interpretation, and, hence, world-view. And just as the dual curse was a product of the development of black slavery in the Muslim East, so too in the Christian West the dual curse coincided with the expansion of black slavery, and for the same reasons: it more profoundly connected slavery with black skin as the very marker of servitude, the visible sign of the blacks' degradation, and in the process deprecating black skin itself. Not surprisingly this usage coincided with and reflected the development of black slavery and the consequent disparagement of the black African. Denigration of the black is reflected in and strengthened by the dual curse, in which black skin was seen as the intentional mark of servitude (Goldenberg, *Black and Slave*, 136-139).

From Europe the Curse of Ham came to British colonial America, where it was used to justify black slavery as early as 1700 and continued well into the 20th century. As in Europe, in America too the dual-curse version was common, and as in Europe the popularity of the dual curse was a reflection of the increasing debasement of black skin. There is, however, a significant difference between Europe and America. The percentage of those resorting to the Curse to justify black slavery as opposed to explaining the origin of dark skin is much greater in America than in Europe. The role of black slavery in America, and the importance of biblical justifications for it, are clearly reflected in these differences (Goldenberg, *Black and Slave*, 146-159).

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