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The Curse of Canaan and the American Negro

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THIS SURVEY OF PAST INTERPRETATIONS OF GEN. 9:25-27 SUPPLIES A HELPFUL PERSPECTIVE from which to understand how the notion of white supremacy and Negro slavery in America were persistently justified on the basis of "the curse of Canaan." The article grew out of a course in black history which the author recently taught while a student at Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Ill.

One of the darkest spots on the record of race relations within Christianity has been the use of the "curse of Ham" to justify the American institution of slavery and corresponding deprecatory views about black people. Many present-day difficulties in relating the white church to its black counterpart stem from the proslavery, prowhite supremacy interpretations which various commentators have attached to Gen. 9:25-27. Many American churches once preached a gospel which declared the Negro to be essentially inferior to the white man and slavery to be a divine decree. It is no wonder, then, that those churches still have problems welcoming and entertaining the Negro on the basis of spiritual equality.¹ In fact, recent sociological studies indicate that many white Christians still adhere to these beliefs despite official denominational pronouncements to the contrary.² As sad as

it may be, the fact remains that 11 o'clock Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour of American life.³

Against this background an inquiry into the interpretations attached to the "curse of Ham" becomes important so that one can determine whether the church has been the victim of social pressure or faulty exegesis or both.

Two basic meanings have been derived from this passage. According to John Lange,

The application of the curse to Ham was early made by commentators, but its enormous extension to the whole continent of Africa belongs to quite modern time. This latter seems almost wholly due to certain

and Ellen Siegelman, *Prejudice: U. S. A.* (New York: Praeger, 1969); Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark, *Religion and Society in Tension* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1965); Jeffrey K. Hadden, *The Gathering Storm in the Churches* (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1969).

³ Martin Luther King Jr., "The Un-Christian Christian," in *The White Problem in America*, ed. staff of *Ebony* magazine (Chicago: Johnson, 1965), p. 65. See Carl M. Zorn, "Evangelical Integration of Color," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XVIII (1947), 430-38.

¹ Kyle Haselden, *The Racial Problem in Christian Perspective* (New York: Harper Torch Books, 1959), p. 27.

² See Rodney Stark and Charles Y. Glock, *American Piety: The Nature of Religious Commitment* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968); Charles Y. Glock

historic phenomena that have presented themselves in America.⁴

Apparently this prophecy was thought to have been fulfilled twice: once when the Canaanites were subjugated by Israel and again when Negroes were subjected to American slave owners. This inquiry will examine both interpretations — first, writers who based some defense of slavery on this passage, and second, writers who refuted the assumption that American slavery was a secondary fulfillment of the "curse of Ham."

I

According to Curt Rylaarsdam, "modern notions of race did not exist in the biblical world."⁵ There were also no connotations of racial inferiority or superiority attached to the institution of slavery, for both the Greeks and the Romans practised it along nonracial lines. Usually their custom was to enslave those whom they conquered.⁶ The Hebrews bought and used other Hebrews as slaves. Exactly when slavery became a matter of racial discrimination is difficult to determine, though it is known that the ancient Arabs regarded black people as born to slavery.⁷ Generally speaking,

⁴ John Peter Lange, *Genesis* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915), p. 340.

⁵ *Ebony* (March 1969), p. 118, quoted in Joseph G. Koranda, *Aftermath of Misinterpretation: The Misunderstanding of Genesis 9:25-27 and Its Contribution to White Racism* (unpubl. B. D. thesis, Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Ill., 1969), p. 5.

⁶ Koranda, p. 8.

⁷ David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1966), p. 451. Davis says that this position was apparently deduced from a statement in the Babylonian Talmud to the effect that "Negroes . . . were the children of Ham, who, according to varying legends, was cursed with blackness."

however, it was not until the 13th century that definite racial overtones began to be associated with slavery. Davis cites the following statement by Andre Horn, Chamberlain of London:

To keep a man of free ancestry as a slave was a personal trespass. Yet, 'serfage' in the case of a black man is a subjugation issuing from so high an antiquity that no free stock can be found within human memory. And this serfage, according to some, comes from the curse which Noah pronounced against Canaan, the son of his son Ham, and against his issue.⁸

During the 15th century Negro slave trade began in earnest. It was conducted first by the Portuguese, then by the Spaniards, then by the English. By the time of the Reformation the institution of Negro slavery had developed to the point that many people assumed with Bartolmea Coepolla "that slavery was sanctioned not just by the civil law and *jus gentium* but also by natural and divine law as well."⁹ Coepolla found the divine-law origin in Adam's sin, the natural-law sanction in Noah's curse, and the justification of *jus gentium* in war.

Luther faced this problem as he lectured on Genesis. He seems to have been a leading proponent of the interpretation that it was actually Ham who was cursed by Noah. Further, in his *Commentary on Genesis* he says that the punishment was not carried out directly on Ham, but was deferred to later generations.¹⁰ Yet it would be unfair, as some have done, to

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹⁰ Martin Luther, *Commentary on Genesis*, trans. J. T. Mueller (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1958), pp. 175—76.

deduce from this that Luther was the father of the interpretation which sent millions of blacks into slavery, for Luther does not necessarily associate the curse with race. It is true that he does claim that one of Ham's sons, Cush, was a Negro—a statement which some have cited to prove that Luther had in mind Negro slavery. The evidence to support this conclusion, however, is too weak to justify it. The most that can be inferred is that one quarter of Ham's descendants were black. Furthermore, in his *Lectures on Genesis* Luther prefers to interpret the curse in the sense of an eternal rather than a temporal punishment.¹¹

As slave trade increased, some white people devised better arguments to salve their consciences. Richard Jobson, a trader, suggested that

the Enormous size of the Virile Member among the "Negroes" was an infallible proof that they are sprung from Canaan, who, for uncovering his father's nakedness, had a curse laid upon that part.¹²

In America it was Josiah Priest who offered the most eloquent defense of slavery as a result of the curse of Ham in a book entitled *Bible Defense of Slavery*. Priest advanced the rather unique theory that Ham was born black, albeit from the same woman who bore Shem and Japheth! Said Priest:

God, who made all things, and endowed all animated nature with the strange and unexplained power of propagation, superintended the formation of two of the sons of Noah, in the womb of their mother,

¹¹ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, Vol. 2 of *Luther's Works* (American Edition), trans. George V. Schick (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960), p. 176.

¹² Davis, p. 40.

in an extraordinary and supernatural manner, giving to these two children such forms of bodies, constitution of natures, and complexion of skin, as suited his will. Japheth he caused to be born white, differing from the red color of his parents, while he caused Ham to be born black, a color still further removed from the red hue of his parents than was white.¹³

His conclusion was based on the argument that the word "Ham" in the language of Noah signified anything that had become "black." Furthermore, Priest cited the Hebrew tradition of naming things according to their appearance and nature, noting that the word "Ham" was already prophetic of Ham's character and fortunes in life. He also suggested that the word pointed to

- (1) heat or violence of temper, exceedingly prone to acts of ferocity and cruelty, even cannibalism, [and]
- (2) deceit, dishonesty, treachery, low-mindedness, and malice.¹⁴

Of course the English translation's "cursed Canaan" rather than "cursed Ham" posed a textual problem for Priest. He concluded, however, that the Arabic copy of Genesis read "cursed Ham" and that this was the more accurate reading.¹⁵

Ham did not become cursed to slavery because of this one act, according to Priest, but he was born to be a slave. Priest favored the translation "cursed Ham" instead of "cursed be Ham" in order to emphasize that Ham had always been a bad person.¹⁶ He also claimed that

¹³ Josiah Priest, *Bible Defense of Slavery* (Glasgow, Ky.: W. S. Brown, 1853 [republished by the Negro History Press, Detroit, 1969?]), p. 33.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 92—93.

the appointment of this race of men to servitude and slavery was a judicial act of God, or, in other words, was a divine judgment . . . and that we are not mistaken in concluding that the negro race, as a people, are judicially given over to a state of peculiar liability of being enslaved by the other races.¹⁷

Priest held that the fulfillment of this curse was found in the subjection of Africans by the inhabitants of America (descendants of Japheth) with God's permission and blessing.¹⁸ Just how important this theological foundation for the doctrine of the racial superiority of the white race was to Priest can be seen in this remark:

The servitude of the race of Ham, to the latest era of mankind, is necessary to the veracity of God Himself, as by it is fulfilled one of the oldest of the decrees of the Scriptures, namely, that of Noah, which placed the race as servants under other races.¹⁹

What Priest was really saying was that the truthfulness or infallibility of God's prophetic statements, as contained in Scripture, hinged upon the acceptance of Negro slavery as the necessary fulfillment of the curse of Ham. This had the effect of placing the truthfulness of God's self-revelation on the same level as acceptance of Negro slavery and white supremacy. Thus the institution of Negro slavery was justified!

C. F. W. Walther apparently sided with those who saw Negro slavery as a fulfillment of divine judgment, although he did not cite Gen. 9:25-27 to support his position. He argued that Scripture teaches

nothing against the institution of slavery but contains much to support it, for example, the command that slaves should be obedient to their masters.²⁰

After the Civil War and the abolition of slavery per se, more subtle arguments were found to lend continuing support to the so-called curse of Ham. C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch noted that

Noah's curse rested upon the whole race; that is, the Hamitic race, even though it was Canaan who was cursed. This assumption is based on the fact that Ham did not receive a blessing from Noah as his two brothers did.²¹

Keil also maintained that, by implication, Ham's whole family relationship was cursed by the absence of any blessing. He claimed that history supports this supposition, since

the Canaanite tribes were exterminated or scattered and subjected to the lowest forms of slavery, and the remainder of the Hamitic tribes either shared the same fate, or still sigh, like the Negro, for example,

²⁰ Walther's position is best illustrated by the following quotation from *Lehre und Wehre*, IX (February 1863), 34. "Having set forth this *status controversiae* [that slavery per se is not sinful], we therefore maintain that abolitionism, which holds and declares slavery as an essentially sinful relationship and every master of a slave thereby as a malefactor and therefore wants to abolish the former under all circumstances, is a child of unbelief and its unfolding — rationalism, deistic philanthropism, pantheism, materialism, atheism, and a brother of modern socialism, Jacobinism, and communism."

²¹ C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. I: *The Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1949), pp. 157—58. They further maintain that "in the sin of Ham, 'there lies the great stain of the whole Hamitic race, whose chief characteristic is sexual sin, and the curse which Noah pronounced upon this sin still rests upon their race.'"

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 289.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 393.

and other African tribes, beneath the yoke of the most crushing slavery.²²

P. E. Kretzmann in his *Popular Commentary on the Bible* also took this position, associating the enslaving of Africans by the white race with Noah's cursing of Ham.²³

William Dallman pointed to American Negro slavery as an example of fulfilled prophecy:

The plain meaning of Noah's words is that the descendants of Canaan should be slaves, those of Shem should be a blessing, those of Japheth should rule. Has this prophecy been fulfilled? The Negro is the leading living descendant of Ham and Canaan, and history shows that the Negro has been the slave of the world. Even today the slave-trader of Africa cracks his whip over the quivering flesh of his human victim. . . . Japheth shall enlarge his borders. And is he not doing it? Europe belongs to the Caucasian, North and South America, Australia, the isles of the sea, almost all Asia, and now he is slicing up the continent of Africa. What shore does not echo to the conquering tread of the lordly white man?²⁴

Arthur Pink's commentary on Genesis also supported this position:

By tracing the history of Ham's other sons, it becomes evident that the scope of Noah's prophecy reached beyond Canaan. . . . The whole of Africa was peopled by the descendants of Ham, and for many centuries the greater part of that continent lay under the dominion of the Romans, Saracens,

²² *Ibid.*, p. 157.

²³ P. E. Kretzmann, *Popular Commentary on the Bible*, Vol. I: *The Old Testament* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1923), p. 23.

²⁴ William Dallman, *Why Do I Believe the Bible Is God's Word?* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1937), p. 11.

and Turks. And, as is well known, the Negroes who were for so long slaves of Europeans and Americans, also claim Ham as their progenitor.²⁵

Similar positions were espoused by Basil Atkinson,²⁶ W. H. G. Thomas,²⁷ Joseph Exell,²⁸ W. G. Blaikie,²⁹ and Ferdinand Rupprecht.³⁰

²⁵ Arthur Pink, *Gleanings in Genesis* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1922), p. 126.

²⁶ Basil F. C. Atkinson, *The Pocket Commentary of the Bible: Genesis* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1957), p. 97. Atkinson notes that "on a wider scale it has been true throughout history, that the races and peoples descended from Ham or Canaan have been those who have often been exploited and regarded as inferior."

²⁷ W. H. G. Thomas, *Genesis: A Devotional Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1953), p. 97. Thomas says that "the servitude of Canaan here foretold was subsequently seen in history. The land of Canaan was subjugated by Israel, and the Canaanites became the servants of the Semitic race. In a still wider sense the descendants of Ham in Africa have for centuries been the slaves of the Japhethic races."

²⁸ Joseph S. Exell, *The Bible Illustrator: Genesis*, I (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1954), 405. Exell says that Africa "is peopled by the children of Ham, who have lived and still live in the most degraded state of subjugation. To all this may be added that the inhabitants of Africa seemed to be marked out as objects of slavery by European nations. Though these things are far from excusing the conduct of their oppressors, yet they establish the fact, and prove the fulfillment of prophecy."

²⁹ W. G. Blaikie, *A Manual of Bible History* (London: T. Nelson & Sons, 1907), pp. 41—42. Blaikie suggests that "though the curse of Ham was formally pronounced upon Canaan alone, it has been reflected more or less on the other branches of his family. The black-skinned African became a synonym for weakness and degradation."

³⁰ Ferdinand Rupprecht, *Bible History References* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1926), p. 23. Here Rupprecht traces the fulfillment of the curse down to the present day in the following manner: "Ham's descendants first be-

Each of these commentators, whether intentionally or unintentionally, raised the issue of Negro slavery from the area of interpretive judgment to the area of validation for the trustworthiness of Scripture itself. It is most unfortunate that many of the commentaries which supported Negro enslavement as an example of the fulfillment of prophecy also equated acceptance of this interpretation with acceptance of the veracity of Scripture itself. Christians were thus forced to consider the question of the reliability of Scripture instead of focusing their attention on the real problem—the validity of the interpretation itself.

Edward Koehler's "Annotated Catechism" says the fact that "the wicked descendants of Ham bear a curse" is an illustration of the truth that God visits the sins of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of them that hate Him.³¹ While the appeal to Scripture is based on a different passage, the implications to be drawn from its usage are the same: the trustworthiness of Scripture seems to be dependent on the acceptance of Negro slavery as the fulfillment of the curse of Ham.

Before focusing attention on those interpretations that do not support Negro slavery, we must note that there is still at least one church body which officially en-

came the servants of Shem's descendants, then of the descendants of Japheth in Africa, until the time that they were brought to this country and kept alive as slaves."

³¹ Edward W. A. Koehler, *A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism* (River Forest, Ill.: Koehler Publishing Co., 1946), p. 101. See also F. W. C. Jesse, *Catechetical Preparations* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1919—1921).

dorses the proslavery interpretation of the curse. According to William Whalen,

The Mormon interpretation of the curse of Canaan . . . together with unauthorized, but widely accepted statements by Mormon leaders in years past, has led to the view among many Mormon adherents that birth into any other race than white is the result of inferior performance in pre-earth life.³²

This interpretation of the curse on the Negro race has led Mormons to ban Negroes from their priesthood, a ban which was reaffirmed on Jan. 9, 1970, by the late David O. McKay.³³

II

Church fathers like St. Jerome and St. Augustine do not defend the association of the curse of Ham with Negro enslavement.³⁴ In the 15th century, *after* slave trade had begun, being consigned to slavery and being a member of the black race began to be virtually equated with each other. During the medieval period itself, slavery was justified on the basis of war; those who lost wars were assumed to be good slave material. With the beginning of the "holy wars," Christians and Muslims alike added a second justification for slavery, namely, that heathen people would make good mission material. Since both Christians and Muslims regarded each other as heathen, many people on both sides found themselves in slavery as a result of

³² William J. Whalen, *The Latter-Day Saints in the Modern World* (New York: John Day Co., 1964), p. 255.

³³ "Mormons Reaffirm Church's Ban on Negroes in Priesthood," *New York Times* (Jan. 9, 1970), p. 14.

³⁴ Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), p. 18.

"holy" wars. This unique "missionary outreach" was also applied to Negroes, who were for the most part heathen.

Jordan notes in his book *White Over Black* that "when the story of Ham's curse did become relatively common in the 17th century, it was utilized almost entirely as an explanation of color rather than as justification for Negro slavery."³⁵ Yet somehow, when slavery was transferred to America, this emphasis was changed and increasingly the institution of slavery, the curse of Ham, and the destiny of the Negro in America were inextricably bound up with one another. One indication of this occurs in the writings of an Englishman, Morgan Godwyn, who in the 1680s felt compelled to speak and write against the idea that the institution of Negro slavery was the fulfillment of the curse of Ham.³⁶

In 1671 William Edmundson argued that physical slavery and Christian liberty were incompatible. He wrote that

the perpetual bondage was an oppression on the mind which could not be judged by God's curse on the children of Canaan. Even if it could be shown that Africans were the descendants of Ham, had not Christ removed the "wall of partition" that separated people?³⁷

In a similar vein Elihu Coleman wrote against slavery in 1715 and stated that Negro slavery was *not* the fulfillment of the curse of Canaan but, as other pamphlets argued, that the curse was merely a refuge for those who wanted to maintain the doctrine of white supremacy.³⁸

W. D. Weatherford suggests that this

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Davis, p. 340.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 307.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 316.

interpretation might have grown out of the tension between the church's inability to interfere with the political institution of slavery and its desire, however, to serve the slave:

It, of course, called for a very literal interpretation to twist this story into the curse of God upon Canaan. But that very literal interpretation was in accord with the strict religious thought of the time; hence the story seemed to justify slavery.³⁹

James Bushwell suggests that the supporters of slavery considered that it was designed by God to be perpetuated through all time, and intended to cement and compact the whole human family, to establish the system of mutual relation and dependency and to sustain the *great* chain of subordination essential to the divine, as well as human governments.⁴⁰

The real background for this interpretation, however, lay in the ancient assumption that it was permissible to enslave the heathen. Those who used this argument then viewed slavery as the natural result of the sin of the enslaved. Bushwell further suggests that the real problem was that

the defenders of slavery saw only the existing culture of Bible times reflected in its pages and assumed that since slavery was included, the institution thus received divine sanction.⁴¹

Charles Everett Tilson has suggested that those who used Gen. 9:25-27 to support Negro slavery and segregation made five basic assumptions:

³⁹ W. D. Weatherford, *American Churches and the Negro* (Boston: Christopher Publishing House, 1957), p. 284.

⁴⁰ James O. Bushwell, *Slavery, Segregation and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964), p. 17.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 33.

- (1) that God pronounced the curse;
- (2) that the curse was biologically transferable;
- (3) that Ham was the original victim of the curse;
- (4) that the children of the original victim of the curse were slaves;
- (5) that the original victim of the curse was a member of the Negro race.⁴²

Tilson refutes these assumptions, arguing:

- (1) Noah pronounced the curse, not God.
- (2) The curse was not biologically transferable.
- (3) The text, as it stands, places the curse on Canaan, not on Ham, meaning that three-fourths of Ham's descendants have no reason to regard themselves as heirs of Canaan's curse.
- (4) There is no historical proof for the assumption that the children of the original victim of the curse were slaves.
- (5) It cannot be proven that the descendants of Ham were members of the Negro race.⁴³

In his *Commentary on Genesis* John Lange supports the position taken by Tilson. He says, "We must also bear in mind, that the relation of servant in this case denotes no absolute relation in the curse, or any developed slave relation."⁴⁴ He further states that the argument that Ham was cursed instead of Canaan lacks suffi-

cient textual support and must therefore be rejected. The application of the curse to the continent of Africa is of recent development and suggests that the idea of the curse of Ham

has developed, not to defend slavery, but rather from the desire to give a worldly, political importance to the Scriptural predictions, especially the early ones, thus magnifying the Scriptures, as they [proslavery people] suppose, and furnishing remarkable evidence for the truth of revelation.⁴⁵

Lange finally concludes that there is no valid Scriptural basis for applying this curse to the Negro race in our day.

H. C. Leupold likewise argues that the Scriptures clearly apply the curse to Canaan and not to Ham.⁴⁶ Canaan alone is cursed, he says, leaving the other three fourths of the Hamitic race untouched. Leupold also suggests that the verb would more properly be rendered "cursed *is* Canaan" rather than "cursed *be* Canaan" to convey more accurately the intended meaning.⁴⁷

Albert Barnes in his *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery* also rejects the application of the curse to Ham in place of Canaan, for "if a Hebrew had ever thought of employing Genesis 9:25-27 to justify slavery, it would not have been applied by him to the African (Ham), but to the Canaanite."⁴⁸ The following writ-

⁴² Charles Everett Tilson, *Segregation and the Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1958), p. 23.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-26. See also John Theodore Mueller, "Has the Bible Placed a Curse upon the Negro Race," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XV (1944), 346, and J. Ernest Shufelt, "Noah's Curse and Blessing," *ibid.*, XVII (1946), 737-42.

⁴⁴ Lange, p. 337.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 340.

⁴⁶ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1955), p. 348.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 350.

⁴⁸ Albert Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery* (Philadelphia: Parry and M'Millan, 1857 [republished by the Negro History Press, Detroit, 1969]), p. 207.

ers concur: Franz Delitzsch,⁴⁹ August Dillman,⁵⁰ Darek Kidner,⁵¹ and Andrew Schulze.⁵²

Charles Carroll's rejection of the proslavery interpretation of the curse is based on entirely different reasons. In his *The Negro, A Beast . . . or . . . In the Image of God* Carroll holds that the theory that

the Negro is the son of Ham was conceived in, and has been handed down to us from the dark ages of ignorance, superstition and crime and because the church gave it to us, the devotees of Enlightened Christianity accepted it as "both sound and sacred."⁵³

⁴⁹ Franz Delitzsch, *New Commentary on Genesis*, I (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1899), 294—95. Delitzsch holds that the curse fell on Canaan and not on Ham and finds its fulfillment when Israel conquered the Canaanites (Josh. 9:23, 1 Kings 9:20). He sees no valid way in which this curse can be used to support the claims of the proslavery advocates.

⁵⁰ August Dillman, *Genesis* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1897), pp. 307—8. Dillman concludes that "the slavery of the Negro races cannot be justified from this passage, all the less because the Negro peoples in the strict sense are not derived from Ham at all."

⁵¹ Darek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (London: Tyndale Press 1967), p. 104. Kidner notes that "since the curse is confined to one branch within the family of Ham, those who reckon the Hamitic peoples in general to be doomed to inferiority have therefore misread the Old Testament as well as the New. It is likely, too, that the subjugation of the Canaanites to Israel fulfilled the oracle sufficiently."

⁵² Andrew Schulze, *My Neighbor of Another Color* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1941), p. 46. Schulze categorically denies that there is any curse on the Negro race, saying that "the curse of Canaan does not apply to the Negro any more than it does to the Caucasians."

⁵³ Charles Carroll, *The Negro, A Beast . . . or . . . In The Image of God* (St. Louis: American Book & Bible House, 1900), p. 75.

Carroll also says that acceptance of that position would require Christians to believe that Noah had the power to call down such a curse when Scriptures do not say that he did. Furthermore, such a position would require belief in a God who, though just, merciful, and loving, would at the same time approve of the desire of drunken Noah to visit so dire a punishment on Canaan.⁵⁴ Carroll's final argument does not come from the Scriptures, however, but from science:

All scientific investigation of the subject proves the Negro to be an ape . . . he simply stands at the head of the ape family. When God's plan of creation, and the drift of Bible history are properly understood, it will be found that the teaching of Scripture upon this, as upon every other subject, harmonize with those of science.⁵⁵

Carroll's final point shows the obvious influence of Darwinism as applied to theories about the reasons for Negro inferiority. Even though he attempted to correct the misinterpretations which had come down to his day, Carroll attempted to justify segregation and white supremacy on the basis of the same presuppositions that his predecessors had utilized.

III

At this point a few conclusions can be drawn. In the first place it should be obvious that those who have used Gen. 9: 25-27 to justify Negro slavery and white supremacy have been guilty of seriously misinterpreting the text, primarily on the basis of a need to justify a relationship which white men should have known was wrong. In order to put their fears to rest,

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

men wrote pages and pages about Negro slavery as an institution of God, resulting from the curse of Ham, and about the happiness of the Negro as a slave. This line of interpretation reached the height of absurdity when the notion was advanced that people so enslaved could then be Christianized. While it is true that many masters did baptize their slaves, little or no attempt was made by the majority of slaveholders to teach their slaves any Christianity beyond the injunction, "Slaves, be obedient to your masters." Furthermore, this religious facade vanished altogether in the late 1670s as state after state passed stringent laws forbidding the religious instruction of slaves.⁵⁶

In the second place it seems fairly obvious that those who relied on Gen. 9: 25-27 to justify Negro slavery in America were victims of a bad historical perspective, one which saw slavery reflected in the pages of the Bible, but which failed at the same time to see how it developed or what it implied. As we have indicated, the association of racial inferiority, slavery, and the curse of Ham is of fairly recent historical origin and is out of harmony both with the practice of ancient peoples and with the interpretations which they placed on this passage. Furthermore, to suggest that the text should be read "cursed Ham" instead of "cursed Canaan," as Priest and others have done, violates basic hermeneutical principles. If one accepts the Hebrew text as it stands, it is impossible to countenance the cursing of all Hamitic peoples. Priest's theory that Ham was born black must also be rejected because it lacks Scriptural support.

In the third place there is an inherent

danger in equating acceptance of these theories and interpretations with acceptance of the trustworthiness of Scripture, as some commentators have done by implication. This approach to Scripture forces men either to read too much into Scripture or to reject it altogether. It is the opinion of this writer that many commentators on Genesis 9 failed to allow the Bible to speak to them on its own terms. Rather than trying to see how the Bible's historical situation applied to their day, these men attempted to justify the excesses of their day by reading their historical situation back into the pages of the Bible.

It is certainly true that the curse uttered by Noah was applicable in Biblical times to Israel's conquest of Canaan, but the application to modern days does not have sufficient Scriptural basis to warrant its acceptance. Again, to say that Negroes claim Ham as their progenitor and to use this as some kind of evidence for their slavery appears to be nothing else than the white man's attempt to put words which he wants to hear into the mouth of the black man. It is highly doubtful that intelligent blacks ever accepted this theory and even more doubtful that any would accept it today. As W. E. B. DuBois has put it, "The biblical story of the 'curse of Canaan' has been the basis of an astonishing literature which has today only a psychological interest."⁵⁷

Finally, it must be said that Carroll was just as guilty as Priest of reading his own presuppositions into the Bible. Darwin's theory of evolution and the Biblical teaching on the origin of the world do not

⁵⁶ Bushwell, pp. 37—38.

⁵⁷ W. E. B. DuBois, *The Negro* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1915), p. 20.

harmonize, no matter how either one is twisted. Carroll's solution to the question of the origin of the Negro race cannot be harmonized with Scriptural teachings about God's creation of man. To single out one race and relegate it to second-class status flaunts everything Scripture teaches about the fatherhood of God. Hence, Carroll's theories must also be dismissed.

Our conclusions can be summarized as follows:

1. The curse was pronounced by Noah and not by God and therefore could not have been a judicial act of God.
2. The curse applied only to Canaan and his descendants and therefore three-

fourths of the descendants of Ham are exempt from the curse.

3. The curse involves no implications of racial inferiority and therefore rules out the racial interpretations placed on it to justify American Negro slavery and racial segregation.
4. The curse was applicable to the historical situation after Canaan was conquered by Israel.
5. The curse cannot in any valid way be used to justify either American Negro slavery or the continued existence of de facto segregation in American churches and in American society at large.

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