The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era

The Bible and the Justifications for Slavery

David M. Whitford
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For Abigail
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# List of Abbreviations

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<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CR</strong></td>
<td><em>Corpus Reformatorum</em>. Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, G.m.b.H., 1834.</td>
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<td><strong>DNB</strong></td>
<td><em>Dictionary of National Biography</em>.</td>
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<td><strong>KJV</strong></td>
<td>King James Version. The Holy Bible.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>LXX</strong></td>
<td>The Septuagint. The Hebrew Bible in Greek.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Code</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>WADB</td>
<td><em>D. Martin Luthers Werke: Deutsche Bibel.</em></td>
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A Note on Texts and Translations

All translations in this volume are my own, though I naturally consulted English translations by others whenever possible. The English translations in Chapter 2, on Annius, for example, benefited greatly from reading Walter Stephens’s *Giants in Those Days*. Regarding spelling, I have silently updated *u*’s and *v*’s; *i*’s and *j*’s within Latin quotations in order to aid reading. Where authors or printers used abbreviations, I have added the elided letters, again to aid reading. Besides these small changes, I have not updated spelling.

Regarding names

Throughout this book I use the spelling for names the authors whom I am discussing used. Thus, early on in the book, one is most likely to read about Cham and later in the book about Ham. They are, of course, the same person. The change reflects the different ways people wrote the Hebrew name הָם (*ḥm*), which has a hard “ch” sound in Hebrew and was often transliterated with *ch* in both Latin and early modern English. The most commonly used names in this book are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contemporary Spelling</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ham</td>
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<td>Japheth</td>
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</tr>
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I have amassed a large number of debts while pursuing this project. Claflin University, through the Center for Teaching Excellence, provided me with a seed grant for the project. I wish to thank the Center and President Henry N. Tisdale for supporting my work while I was a professor of philosophy and religion there. The Association of Theological Schools made this project possible through their generous Lilly Scholar grant. United Theological Seminary gave me a sabbatical in the Fall of 2008 so that I could complete the writing of the project. I wish to thank President Wendy Edwards for encouraging this project.

Portions of Chapter 2 were presented at the Ohio State University in 2007 as the Inaugural Francis Lee Utley Lecture. I am grateful to the Center for Folklore Studies and the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies for the invitation to honor the work and memory of Professor Utley.

On a more personal level, I could not have completed this work without the aid of a number of helpful librarians. First among them is Brillie Scott, United’s intrepid ILL librarian, for managing to track down each and every one of my obscure requests with speed and good humor. I also wish to express my gratitude to M. Patrick Graham and the wonderful Kessler Collection at Pitts Library, Emory University. I would like to give a very special note of thanks to the entire staff of the Rare Books Department at Cambridge University Library. I could not have written this book without them. I think I also used nearly all of the college libraries at Cambridge and wish to thank the librarians of those excellent collections as well. First among them, however, is the Parker Library at Corpus Christi College. The chance to peruse a commentary possibly owned and used by Martin Bucer was a joy I shall not soon forget.

One of the greatest joys of being in the professoriate is the community of scholars. I have worked in other professions; I have never had such a supportive and edifying group of friends and colleagues. Though we are separated by geography, we are united in our pursuit of the mysteries of the past. I wish to thank these friends for their insightful comments on portions of this manuscript as it came to life. They made many helpful suggestions and caught more than one mistake. As always, any mistakes that remain are entirely my fault. So a deep thank you is owed to: Ward Holder, Bruce Gordon, Brad Smith, Kay Edwards, Raymond Waddington,
and Sarah Blair. Tom Dozeman listened to many of the ideas in the book and always had insightful comments. Thank you to you all.

Finally, to Laurel and Abby who showed interest in this topic and patience as it progressed. They remind me daily that teaching and writing are my passions but not my life. I have not abandoned them to hide in my study. Life is far too short for that.
Hомines non nasсuntur, sed figuntur.
Erasmus
This book began in a class on biblical literature taught at Claflin University in Orangeburg, South Carolina. Claflin is the oldest historically Black institution of higher education in the state of South Carolina. While teaching Genesis, I spent time on the Curse of Ham from Genesis 9. I asked students if they had heard of the Curse. Most had; a few had not, which means that even malevolent myths can die from neglect. But then, just as I was cheered by the image of this particular myth dying, I crashed back to earth with the revelation that some in my class still believed the myth. They believed that the myth did explain why their ancestors were enslaved. While they did not believe they were cursed any longer, they did think their ancestors were. When one of my students asked how Noah’s curse of Canaan became the Curse of Ham, I gave the answer I was taught in graduate school. It was an inadequate answer. It explained why the Curse was wrong; it did not explain how it came to be. This book, then, began as my search for a more adequate answer. I hope that the students in that class and other students in the future will find this a better response to the question. This book is dedicated to my daughter, Abigail, with a prayer that she will live in a world where the malicious myth of a cursed Ham will play an ever diminishing role in people’s lives even while we pledge not to forget what it meant.
Cursed be Chanaan, 
a servaunt of servaunts 
shall he be unto his brethren. 
He sayde moreover: 
blessed be the Lord God of Sem, 
and Chanaan shalbe his servaunt.

Genesis 9.25–6
Bishops’ Bible 1568

On the morning of 10 June 1964, Senator Robert C. Byrd, a former Kleagle of the West Virginia Ku Klux Klan, was concluding a fourteen-hour and thirteen-minute monologue on the floor of the United States Senate. His speech was part of a two-week-long filibuster of the United States Civil Rights Act. It was, and remains, the longest speech in the longest filibuster in the history of the Senate. Byrd had spoken all night and as the morning broke he turned to theology and the Bible. He was annoyed that ministers from across the country had filled his mailbox and jammed his phone lines in an attempt to “exert pressure” upon him to support the Act. He noted (incorrectly it should be added) that Virginia began importing slaves the same year that the King James Bible was published.¹ Though he noted that he was not an expert in Scripture, he said he had spent considerable time searching to find “the Scriptural basis upon which we are implored to enact the proposed legislation…” After concluding his search he declared, “I find none.” In fact, he found the exact opposite. Jesus’ parable of the ten virgins convinced him that one must discriminate between the wise and foolish: “If all men are created equal, how can five of the virgins have been wise and five foolish?” To prove his point even more emphatically, he read Genesis 9.18–27 into the Congressional Record.² To Byrd, Genesis

¹ He was correct in noting 1619 as the beginning of the slave trade; he was eight years off with reference to the KJV Bible. What exactly that had to do with his argument is unclear.
THE CURSE OF HAM IN THE EARLY MODERN ERA

9 meant that God had endorsed racial separation and discrimination. In using Genesis 9 to support segregation and the continuance of Jim Crow, Byrd was relying upon the so-called “Curse of Ham.” According to the mythology that developed around this story, Noah cursed his son Ham to perpetual slavery. Ham, according to Genesis 10, was the founding father of Africa. Thus, Africans are an accursed race predestined by God to inferiority and slavery. Robert Byrd, who remains in the US Senate in 2009, demonstrates that the “Curse of Ham” has been used to support racial segregation and discrimination in the United States within living memory. How did Byrd come to interpret Genesis 9 to require racial segregation? How did Southern slave states come to identify Genesis 9 as a support for slavery, and specifically black African slavery? In other words, how did the Curse of Ham come to be?

Genesis 9 is one of the most important chapters in the entire Bible. It is an etiological recapitulation of Genesis 1 and 2 that tells the story of Noah’s survival after the Great Flood. At the end of Genesis 8, the earth slowly dries after the floodwaters recede and God blesses the ground pledging never to destroy all living things again. As chapter 9 begins, Noah – the second Adam – and his family receive God’s blessing just as Adam did in Genesis 1.28. As with Adam and Eve, Noah and his family are commanded to “be fruitful and multiply” (v. 1). God then declares what animals and what parts of animals may be eaten for food (vv. 2–4). Murder is condemned (vv. 4–6). The commandment to multiply is reiterated as is the covenant never again to destroy the earth, which is sealed with the demonstration of the rainbow (vv. 7–17). The second half of the chapter (vv. 18–27) records the establishment of agriculture, the making of wine, Ham’s discovery of his father, and Noah’s curse. It is the last half of Genesis 9 that gives rise to the “Curse of Ham.”

The story begins when Noah plants the first postdiluvian vineyard. After harvesting the grapes, he makes the first wine. Perhaps ignorant of the power of wine – the text does not say – Noah gets drunk. In his inebriated state he passes out, lying “uncovered in his tent” (v. 21). Noah’s son, Ham, sees his inebriated and naked father and tells “his two brothers outside” (v. 22). His brothers cover their father by placing a cloak over him. In order not to further the old man’s shame, they walk backwards and look in the other direction while they cover him (see Figure 1.1).

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3 He would fail in his bid to prevent the Civil Rights Act from being passed. When he sat, the Senate invoked cloture and the bill went on to pass. On 2 July 1964, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Act into law. For more on the filibuster and the Act’s passage, see Taylor Branch, Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963–65 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), esp. 335–6.
At this point, the story takes a rather dramatic and unforeseen turn. Noah awakens from his stupor and “knew what his youngest son had done to him” (v. 24). His “youngest son” here means Ham, even though the text makes clear earlier that Ham is actually his middle child. The reason for this anomaly is the fact that different editors revised this text over the centuries. Until the modern era, however, all exegetes had to deal with this seeming inconsistency. Having figured out what has happened to him, Noah states:

“Cursed be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers.” He also said, “Blessed by the Lord my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave. May God make space for Japheth, and let him live in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave.” (vv. 25–6 NRSV)

Though Ham is not cursed and race is never mentioned in the text, it is this section of Genesis 9 that became one of the most persistent ideological and
theological defenses for African slavery and segregation. This text came to have its greatest impact in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the system of Transatlantic African slavery was created, yet it is precisely in this era of the Reformation that we know little about the text’s history, use, or interpretation. The importance of the link between slavery and its scriptural and theological justification in the American context is disputed, however. Eugene Genovese has argued that, while biblical warrant for slavery was important, Southern defenders did “not rest their case on it.” Stephen Haynes recently challenged Genovese’s analysis by arguing that the Curse of Ham played a central role in antebellum justifications for American slavery.

Examining the exegetical history of Genesis 9 before challenges to slavery became widespread will help clarify the extent to which slavery, race, and the Curse of Ham were intertwined. To properly understand the exegetical issues and history of Genesis 9, we must begin with the biblical text itself. Following an introduction to the textual issues, the methodology used throughout this book will be explained. Finally, I will argue that 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.

The Text

In the early modern era, a theologian or well-trained layperson had three options for reading the biblical text: one could read the original Hebrew, the Latin Vulgate, or one of the many newly minted vernacular translations. The Hebrew text was widely available throughout the early modern era. Most editions of the Hebrew Bible published in the early modern era derive from the 1525 second edition of the “Rabbinic Bible.”

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6 The second edition of the Rabbinic Bible was a complete revision of the less helpful first edition of 1516. The first edition contained a number of errors in the text. It was edited by Felix Pratensis and was published by Bomberg. For the revision, he hired Chayim as the new editor. The text for both editions is based on Joshua Salomon ben Israel Natan Soncino’s Masorah text published in parts — Prophets, Torah, Writings — in the 1480s. The Complutensian Polyglot represents another possible line of Masorah text. The sources the Complutensian editors used have not been fully identified. They may have consulted Soncino
The Rabbinic Bible was published by Daniel Bomberg in Venice. It was edited by Jacob ben Chayim and contained the Masorah Hebrew text, the Aramaic Targum in a column next to the Masorah, and the commentaries of David Kimhi and Abraham ben Ezra. The most important verse for the Curse of Ham is verse 25. The Rabbinic Bible Masorah text reads:

**אֵרָוָּר כַּנַּעַן עַם עַבד עַבְדוֹת יְהִי לְאָחִינָּהּ**

cursed be | Canaan | a slave | of slaves | he shall be | to his brothers

By repeating the word for servant (* bd*) the Hebrew intensifies the meaning of the noun. Canaan will not just be a servant but a servant of servants or a slave of slaves. The difficulty in capturing, even today, the sense of * bd* as servant or slave is not new. Translators have struggled with the idiom since antiquity. The Septuagint (first to third century BCE) translated the idiom as **παῖς οἰκέτης**. Though the most

but also probably used manuscript editions available to them as well. It was compiled before Bomberg's first edition and published afterwards. With the exception of vowel points and accent differences, the text of Genesis 9.18–27 is identical in all three versions. For a complete history of the Hebrew text in the Renaissance, see B. Pick, “History of the Printed Editions of the Old Testament, Together with a Description of the Rabbinic and Polyglot Bibles,” *Hebraica* 9, no. 1/2 (1892).

7 A less significant verse is 27, in which Noah declares that God will “enlarge Japheth.” The Hebrew יָפָה (yph) means either increase or entice. The Geneva Bible translates the phrase, “God shall persuade Japheth.” The KJV translated it, “God will enlarge Japheth.” Gary Taylor believes this difference can be explained by the influence of seventeenth-century English imperialism: “In 1611 a British king’s translators saw a prophecy of imperial expansion.” The problem with this interpretation is that all Latin versions of the Bible had translated the phrase, “dilatet Deus Iapheth,” i.e., “God increase Japheth.” The fourteenth-century Wycliffite Bible translated the phrase, “God sprede abrood Iaphet,” and Tyndale translated it, “God increase Japheth.” While the KJV does reflect its namesake’s agenda in a number of ways, British imperialism was not one of them. See Gary Taylor, *Buying Whiteness: Race, Culture, and Identity from Columbus to Hip-Hop* (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2005), 231. Compare, “the impress of Empire upon English literature in the early-modern period was minimal, and mostly critical where it was discernable at all...” David Armitage, “Literature and Empire,” in *The Origins of the British Empire*, ed. Nicholas Canny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 102.


9 Textual variants of the Septuagint in the early modern era will be discussed in Chapter 6.
common translation of *pais* is boy, a rarer translation is slave. Thus, the best modern translation of *pais oiketes* is “slave of a household slave.” In Andreas Cratander and Desiderius Erasmus’s early modern Latin translation of the Septuagint, the phrase was rendered *servus domesticus* (house slave), which largely eliminates the Hebrew intensification.

In the Christian West, the most common translation and version available to people was the Latin Vulgate. Translated early in the fifth century by St. Jerome, by the Renaissance many textual variants had slipped into the text. The variant reading of verse 25 is most likely a copyist’s attempt to bring the Latin into line with the Septuagint use of *pais*:

V1: Maledictus Chanaan, servus servorum erit fratribus suis.
V2: Maledictus puer Chanaan, servus servorum erit fratribus suis.

V1 is the more common text. It is found in most of the published versions of the Vulgate in the early modern era. The V1 text can be found, for example, in the Gutenberg Bible of 1452/53, the *Textus Biblia* of 1488 that included Nicholas of Lyra’s commentaries, and the Complutensian Polyglot Bible of 1517. The V2 variant appears in the 1501 Nuremberg *Biblia* and 1506 edition of the *Glossa Ordinaria*, or Great Gloss Bible, published in Basel. It also appeared in a few bibles published by Robert Estienne, the French royal printer and the greatest printer of bibles in the sixteenth century. The difference between the two is the insertion of the word *puer*. Like *pais*, *puer* can mean boy, servant-boy, or even slave. The word does not appear in the Hebrew text. Because the definition of *pais* as slave was rare and facility with Greek was limited in the medieval era, a transcriber may have misunderstood the word as boy. In an attempt to make the Vulgate and Septuagint agree, he might well have added boy to the sentence. Thus where the V1 text translates into English, “Cursed be Canaan, a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers,” the V2 text can mean “Cursed be the boy Canaan, a slave of slaves shall he be.” This explanation gains currency because *puer* also helps accommodate verse 25 to 24, where Noah knew what his “youngest son” had done to him.

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10 For example, Sebastian Münster does not include *pais* among the eight other Greek words he listed as a translation for *bd* or *servus*. See Sebastian Münster, *Dictionarium Trilingue* (Basel: Heinrich Petri, 1530), s.v. servus.

11 *Sacra Biblia Ad LXX Interpretum Eidem Diligentissime Tralata*, trans. Desiderius Erasmus and Andreas Cratander (Basel: Andreas Cratander, 1526), 4v.

12 *Biblia Cum Concordantissiis* (Nuremberg: Anton Koberger, 1501), a5v; *Textus Biblia: Glossa Ordinaria, Nicolai De Lyra Postilla … Prima Pars* (Basel: Froben, 1506), 56v.

13 For example, Estienne published the “Textus Receptus” edition of the New Testament used by the King James translators.
By this reasoning, the youngest son of verse 24 becomes the “boy Canaan” of verse 25. Wolfgang Musculus used just this explanation in the grammatical section of his 1565 commentary. He explains that *puer* is not found in the Hebrew but it was inserted into the text in order to make Canaan the son of Ham more intelligible in verse 25. The problems in verse 25 were not isolated occurrences of textual irregularities and by the Renaissance many had recognized the need to revise the Latin Bible.

In 1523, Andreas Osiander revised the Latin Old Testament through a comparison between the Vulgate and the Hebrew. It was not, technically, a new translation as much as a revision and correction. He left Genesis 9.25 untouched. The first completely new translation of the Old Testament into Latin took nearly 30 years to complete and almost 40 to be published. The Dominican Sancte Pagnini (1466–1541) began the translation sometime around 1493 and completed it before 1520. Pagnini attempted to render the Hebrew and Greek into Latin in as literal a rendering as possible. He also wanted to aid the pronunciation of names and rendered them with accents and a mixture of Latin and Hebrew script. He did not make major changes to Genesis 9. For example, he made a minor revision to verse 24 replacing Jerome’s “evigilans” with “expergefactus,” to translate ויקץ (*wyyqtz* – he is awaking). Both are fairly literal, the first connotes “waking” and the latter is the more transitive “to awaken.” His only change to verse 25 was to spell Canaan as “Chená.” In 1534, Sebastian Münster published the next major revision of the Old Testament Latin in his *Hebraica biblia latina*. Münster’s translation had the added advantage of sitting side-by-side with the Hebrew in opposing columns so that people

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15 *Biblia Sacra Utriusq[ue] Testamen[ti]* (Nuremberg: Peypus, 1523). The text was republished in 1527, this time in Cologne but with essentially the same title. In the 1527 edition, the word *puer* is highlighted with an asterisk. The marginal comment then explains that the word has been added to the Hebrew. *Biblia Sacra Utriusque Testamenti* (Cologne: Peter Quentel, 1527), 3r. According to Andreas Masch, the printer left Osiander’s name off the title to avoid complications in Catholic areas because of Osiander’s association with Luther. There is no explanation for who made the small emendations to the text. See Andreas Gottlieb Masch, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 5 vols. (Halle: Johann Gebaverus, 1783), III/1, 311.

16 Thomas Darlow and Horace Moule, *Historical Catalogue of the Printed Editions of Holy Scripture in the Library of the British and Foreign Bible Society*, 2 vols. (London: Bible House, 1903–11), 2/1: 925 no. 6108. Pagnini was prevented from publishing it first by the death of Pope Leo X in 1521 and then by the exclusivity rights given to the Complutensian Polyglot. This is the first bible that divided the Old Testament into verses. His versification, however, was replaced by the system devised by Robert Estienne, which guides all bibles to the present.

17 *Biblia*, trans. Sante Pagnini (Lugduni [Lyon]: Antoine du Ruy, 1528), 3v. It is most likely that Coverdale used this edition of the Latin Bible to translate his English edition.
could see exactly what he was translating and how. Like Pagnini, he tried to communicate proper pronunciation and he made minor changes in word choice in the verses around 25, but, in reference to the curse itself, the Latin was the same. In the 1530s, the Hebraist Leo Jud (1482–1542) began a translation of the Old Testament that would not only be true to the literal meaning of words, but would also embody the spirit and drama of the text. Jud translated the sentence “Execratus Chanaan, infimus servus sit fratrum suorum” as “Accursed be Canaan, the lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers.” In many ways, Jud’s translation is truest to the Hebrew. Robert Estienne adopted it for his 1545 *Biblia*. Jud’s Latin translation, however, never gained widespread acceptance. Protestants as a group moved away from Latin bibles in the sixteenth century to either original-language bibles or vernacular translations. As a Protestant, Jud’s translation was suspect and was not used in the 1590 Clementine revision of the Vulgate sponsored by the Vatican. They used the Pagnini translation as a guide and thus retained the more traditional and literal translation of “Maledictus Chanaan, servus servorum.” After 1590, the Clementine Vulgate came to dominate Latin editions of the Bible. It was even used by the Puritan Brian Walton for his 1657 London Polyglot.

Vernacular translators, too, had to grapple with the Hebrew idiom. In 1523, Martin Luther (1483–1546) translated verse 25 using a word that

19 *Biblia Sacrosancta* (Zurich: Froschauer, 1543), 4r. Jud died in June 1542. He had worked for more than a decade on the translation. His Zurich colleagues saw to it that his translation made it into print after he died.
20 In a still later attempt to arrive at a more accurate reading, Sébastien Châteillon opted to express the sentence, “Infelix Chanaan, servus servorum…” [Misfortunate Chanaan, servant of servants…]. Châteillon’s version was first published in 1534. That version is exceptionally rare. I was unable to consult it. I was able to compare the 1551 and 1556 editions, and they are identical. See *Biblia Interprete Sebastiano Castalione* (Basel: Johann Oporinus, 1551), A3r, *Biblia Interprete Sebastiano Castalione* (Basel: Johann Oporinus, 1556), b3r.
21 *Biblia Sacra Vulgatae Editionis Ad Concilii Tridentini* (Rome: Vatican, 1590), 8. It should be stated that Protestants as well as Catholics in the sixteenth century used Pagnini’s translation. For example, when John Calvin translated Genesis into Latin from the Hebrew for his 1554 commentary on Genesis he clearly consulted Pagnini’s translation and made only minor changes as he translated. In 1557, Robert Estienne used Pagnini for his largest annotated bible published to date. See *Biblia: Utriusque Testamenti De Quorum Nova Interpretatione* (Geneva: Robert Estienne, 1557), b1; John Calvin, *In Primum Mosis Librum Qui Genesis Vulgo Dicitur, Commentarius* ([Geneva]: Robert Estienne, 1554).
22 The London Polyglot – sometimes called the Walton Polyglot – was commissioned by Oliver Cromwell. It was not published until after Cromwell’s death and so carries a dedication to Charles II. It is the greatest and most comprehensive polyglot bible of the early modern era.
even then had connotations beyond simply cursing: “Verflucht sey Canaan und sey eyn knecht aller knecht unter seynen brudern.” One could translate this simply, “Cursed is Canaan and he is a slave of slaves to his brothers,” but the German carries with it a deeper connotation and would be closer to “Damned is Canaan…” In 1530, Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples (1450–1536) translated the Bible into French using the V2 Vulgate. His verse 25 reads, “Mauldict soit Chanaan serviteur: il sera serviteur des serviteurs de ses freres” [Cursed be servant Canaan: he will be a servant of servants to his brothers.”] Lefèvre’s translation is awkward, and in 1534 he revised the text. The awkward serviteur was removed and replaced with l’enfant (the child Canaan). By the time that Lefèvre’s revision appeared, Pierre-Robert Olivetan (1506–38) was already at work on a French edition from the original languages. Olivetan was a student of Lefèvre and part of the same community of scholars that included François Vatablus and John Calvin. He was commissioned to make the translation by French Protestants. All subsequent French translations would be based on either Lefèvre or Olivetan, with the majority using Olivetan. Olivetan’s version removed the puer insertion and reads, “Maudit soit Chanaan: il sera serviteur des serviteurs de ses freres.”

English translations show a remarkable consistency, especially in the sixteenth century. The early Wycliffite Bible of the fourteenth century did not use original languages and translated the V2 Latin into English as “Cursid child Chanaan: thrall of all thralls: he schall be to his brethren.” In medieval English, thrall was a synonym for serf or villein. It would have been a more recognizable word and had a closer connotation to slave than the word servant, which was more strictly associated with household work.

In the sixteenth century, all English translations used the Hebrew Masorah

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23 Das Alte Testament Deutsch. M. Luther, trans. Martin Luther (Wittenberg: Michael Lotter, 1523), 12v. The 1545 revision will change only the spelling of words.


25 “Mauldict soit lenfant Chanaan: il sera serviteur des serviteurs de ses freres.” The replacement of serviteur with enfant is surprising because, according to the title page of the second edition, Lefèvre used “Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin,” in the revision. For Genesis 9, see La Saincte Bible en Franc dys, trans. Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples, 2nd ed. (Antwerp: Martin Lempereur, 1534), A3v. Why he continued to translate puer is unclear.


28 See OED s.v. thrall; s.v. servant. A thrall or villein, for example, was often bound to the land; a servant need not be bound to the land.
as the basis for translation. Despite that, and perhaps demonstrating the continuing influence of the Vulgate even on new vernacular translations, all English translations of the early modern era used “servant of servants” to translate ʾbd ʾbdm. It was not until the Revised Standard Version in 1952 that the text appeared as “slave of slaves.” It is an interesting etymological turn to note that, while a large number of pro-slavery advocates would discuss translation and transcription errors related to the first half of verse 25, no one truly engaged in the translation question of ʾbd ʾbdm. Some Bible versions and commentators did add marginal notes clarifying that a “servant of servants” was, in the words of the Geneva Bible, “a most vile slave,” but no one sought to change the translation itself. The English word servant did not then nor does it today carry with it the sense of chattel slavery embodied in the American South. It has never had the weight of slave or even serf. What this demonstrates is that throughout the early modern era, when Genesis 9 collided with the question of slavery, it was almost always a question of identity not status. The status was largely understood; it was the identity of Ham or Canaan’s descendants that was most important.

Who exactly was cursed when Noah cursed Canaan? Was it just Canaan or was it all of his posterity? Some will argue that Ham himself was cursed. Were all of Ham’s descendants cursed? Whether Canaan or Ham, the question of slavery forced advocates on both sides of the divide to identify their descendants. In that work, they would not find much from the medieval era to harvest for contemporary consumption. In the medieval era, many argued that the descendants of the curse were the serfs in their midst; by the nineteenth century there was a large consensus that the cursed descendants were Africans. This book seeks to understand how that transfer took place. Using predominantly the methodology of “reception history,” the chapters below examine the residual medieval interpretations of Genesis 9, emerging motifs of interpretation, and finally interpretations that gained widespread currency and influence.

Reception History

There are a number of approaches from which the modern scholar can examine a biblical text. Historical criticism asks questions about the origin and original audience in which a particular text was written and heard. Where and when was the text written? Why might it have been written

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29 The only early modern exception was Rheims-Douai. Rheims-Douai used the Clementine Latin. While the New Testament was published in the sixteenth century, the Old Testament did not appear until 1610.
and how might the first people to hear the text have understood it? Who is the most likely author for the text? In other words, scholars seek the text’s *Sitz im Leben*. The biblical historical critic will often seek the aid of an archeologist – many scholars are both – to help answer these questions. The historical critic helps the modern reader understand the oral origins of Genesis. The oral stories that form the first expressions of Genesis date from as far back as 1800 BCE. The Deluge story is part of a whole group of similar stories that can be found in the Ancient Near East, such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. According to Gerhard von Rad, the postdiluvian story of Noah’s curse was written sometime after the Hebrew people occupied the Land of Canaan in the tenth century. According to von Rad, in the story of the curse, the Hebrew people saw “aetiological the true reason for the defeat of Canaan before the invading Israelites.”

To the historical critic, the curse of Noah is a *post hoc* device that explains or gives warrant to an already accomplished historical event. Historical criticism can thus help the modern reader understand why a particular text came into being. It cannot explain how it was interpreted or received over time.

The textual critic will approach a particular pericope looking for the original version of the quotation. The textual critic compares ancient versions of a text looking for changes – what has moved, what has been elided, what has been added. The textual critic attempts to assess the significance of changes, and when they happened, and ultimately restore the text to its original state. Textual criticism began in earnest in the Renaissance. Many of the writers and exegetes discussed in this book considered themselves to be textual critics even if they did not use the term. As we saw above, the removal of *puer* from later Latin translations is an example of early textual criticism. We will discuss textual criticism in this book only to the extent that it impacts how early modern people interacted with the biblical text and the arguments they made about the pristine text of Genesis 9.

Literary and form critics ask what type of genre does the text seem to be – is it, for example, a letter, a prophecy, or a narrative? Each type of genre has its own rules and history. In the early modern era, Genesis 9 was sometimes understood as both poetry and prophecy. The poetic nature of the text led some to argue that the text of Genesis 9.25 violated the rules of poetic meter and thus had to be reconstructed. In this way, form criticism can lead one to textual criticism conclusions. Finally, a modern scholar might also look at a particular text and ask how it was edited and redacted. What were its original sources, how were they compiled to create a holistic narrative? A contemporary redaction critique helps explain why Canaan

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suddenly appears in a text that up until that point has been only about Ham. The story of Noah’s curse is the combination of two stories, one that focuses on viniculture and the origins of agriculture and another that explains the origins of different types of people. The combination of these two stories explains the clumsy addition of “the father of Canaan” to Ham’s name and also helps explain why Canaan is cursed and not Ham. At the time of the redaction, the Hebrews (descendants of Shem) had recently been involved in ethnic warfare with the Canaanites.

All of these approaches to the Bible are presentist in their orientation, meaning that they are aimed at arriving at the best understanding of an ancient text for use or understanding today. None of these approaches helps the historian understand how people who have lived in the time between the original audience and the modern audience understood the text. To the historian, two approaches are available. The first approach, the history of exegesis, is the work of intellectual history. The historian of exegesis tracks the ways in which a particular text has been explained and understood across time and region. The other option open to the historian is reception history. Reception history is methodologically dependant upon exegetical history, for it requires that one know what exegetical traditions were available, but then it asks a further question. It asks how people in the past received or used the text.

This book uses the tools of the exegetical historian to enable reception history. We are not interested in tracing the history of an interpretative line simply to find its origin. We are interested in how people in the early modern era understood Noah’s curse of Canaan – how they used it, how they changed it, and how it changed them. Reception history has its origins in the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and his understanding of *Wirkungsgeschichte*. It is the history of a text’s use and influence.31 I have adopted Ulrich Luz’s revision of Gadamer’s methodology for this work. Luz is clearly dependant upon Gadamer but goes beyond Gadamer in recognizing that the Bible, like other religious texts, makes particular claims to authority that makes its use and effect unique and powerful. Because biblical texts claim to contain revelations from God to humanity, they do not “have a simple fixed meaning, which would be identical to their original meaning; they have the power to create new meanings for and with new people in new situations.”32 In what follows, we seek to understand how the dramatically changing and shrinking world of the sixteenth century gave rise to new meanings and interpretations of Noah’s curse of Canaan.

Thus, we are not interested in tracking down the origins of a particular interpretation in order to lay blame for the Transatlantic Slave Trade. There is more than enough blame to go around for the slave trade. However, it is a fundamental belief of this book that it is absurd to find a single quotation from a medieval or classical source and lay the blame for what happened centuries later on that particular author. Reception history demands that influence be demonstrated. For a belief to have influence it has to have followers. Those followers have to have promulgated that belief system in some literary or oral format. A solitary quote, no matter how incendiary, does not make a school of thought. For example, since Winthrop Jordan’s *White over Black*, modern scholarship has linked the idea that Ham castrated Noah to Jewish literature.\(^{33}\) The connection between Noah’s castration and Ham’s descendants’ sinfulness and cursed nature is thus laid at the feet of early medieval Jewish commentators.

Jordan assumed the connection between ancient Jewish sources and early modern perspectives.\(^{34}\) Jordan’s assumption has had an unintended negative effect on Jewish/African-American relations.\(^{35}\) This is unfortunate because, as we shall see in Chapter 2, Annius of Viterbo in 1498 presented a version of Ham’s castration of Noah that is based not in Jewish rabbinical literature but in Greek mythology. Jordan proves a valuable reminder that the reception historian must ask not only whether someone in the past had a particular belief about a text, but also how widely that position was known or, in the case of the Jewish Midrash, could be known.

This is not a book, then, about the original meaning of Genesis or the Bible. It is a book about how people in the early modern era read, interpreted, understood, and applied Genesis 9 to their lives and to the changing world around them. For this reason, when a source is examined, the sixteenth-century version will be consulted. Richard Muller has demonstrated convincingly that modern editors subtly distort the texts that they edit in order to make them more “accessible” to the modern

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\(^{33}\) Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill, NC: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg, Va., 1968), 36: “According to the Scriptural account Ham’s offense was that he had ‘looked upon the nakedness of his father.’ To the post-Freudian ear this suggests castration. To early Jewish commentators it suggested not merely castration but other sexual offenses as well.”

\(^{34}\) Annius is not mentioned in the book at all.

If a work was not widely available in the sixteenth century that will be explained. Because we are interested in the way texts were received, we will of course look to the places one might expect to find discussions on Genesis – to sermons, exegetical works, and theological treatises – but we will also look beyond these resources. The myth of the Curse of Ham had a larger literary circulation and can be found in places as diverse as art and sculpture, plays, fiction, polemics, and travel narratives. In our journey through the early modern era we will touch on all these sources. The one thing these various texts have in common is their diversity. Multiple interpretations of a single pericope – or even line of text – compete with each other for dominance. The reason this is possible is because the text of Genesis 9 is both pivotally important to the nature and organization of postdiluvian life and relatively brief. For these two reasons, it is a text full of possibilities or opportunities for the exegete or the polemicist.

Myth, Race, and a Text of Opportunity

Genesis 9 is a text of opportunity. It gives an account of the origins and explanations of human existence and diversity. It explains the existence of sin after the Deluge and how humanity learned to till the earth. It clarifies what may be eaten, when, and by whom. Despite all these achievements, the text has a number of significant blanks that invite the reader and interpreter to fill in the spaces with their own opinion or understanding. How did Noah not know that wine would get him intoxicated? Why when he passed out did he fall in a manner that left him exposed? What did Ham do in the tent? What did Ham say to his brothers? Some will argue that Ham mocked his father for being drunk, but that does not appear in the text and one could just as easily argue that he reverently told his brothers so that they could help him cover him. How did Noah “know what had been done to him”? He might reasonably have figured out that someone covered him, but how did he know Ham had told his brothers of Noah’s drunkenness?

The text answers none of these questions. The reader is left to fill in the blanks.


37 One further caveat should be made here at the beginning; we will focus our attention on printed materials. The myth’s potency depends upon propagation and dissemination, and in the early modern era this meant print.
Some answers seem rather quaint in their practicality. For example, Peter Comestor offered the solution that Noah was exposed because underwear had not yet been invented. Other answers are stunning in their imaginativeness. Jacob Boehme, for example, argued for what might be called the “second Fall of the penis.” According to Boehme, the penis was not intended to be an original part of the human body. It came into use because of Adam’s Fall. It was “hung upon him [Adam] to propagate in a bestial nature and kinde; thereupon also this bestial Tree viz. the fleshly spirit of vanity, came to be propagated all along from this property.” When the Deluge destroyed sinful humanity, the penis – while still remaining a part of the male body – returned to non-sinful use. However, when Ham mocked his father’s exposed genitals, in other words mocked his own origin (“mocked its Ens”), he reintroduced the fallen nature of the penis to the human condition. As a mark of this fallen nature, and because of Ham’s sin, God required Abraham “be circumcised on this member, to shew that this member was not given to Adam in the Beginning, and that it should be againe cut off from the Image of God, and not inherit the Kingdome of God; upon which Cause and reason also the Soules spirit is ashamed to uncover it.” Whether one is discussing the origins of underwear or circumcision, however, one has clearly left the realm of exegesis – that is, the act of examining what a text means – and entered the arena of myth building.

It is, of course, a long journey from the need for underwear to an African cursed to chattel slavery. This book seeks to understand how the myth of a cursed African was forged and then wielded in the early modern era to justify the continued enslavement of millions of Africans. It is the story of how small disparate slices of biblical exegesis, sermons, popular works of history and fiction, propaganda, necessity, and greed combined to form a deadly myth of African inferiority and condemnation to slavery.

The need for slaves did not give rise to the myth. Not even the beginning of the slave trade itself demanded a myth of legitimacy. It was only when that legitimacy itself was undermined that the Curse of Ham rose to the level of utility. To be of real utility, however, it had to have cultural currency. This book is an attempt to understand how that currency was established so that when it was needed, it could be called upon. The Curse myth turns out to be a kind of Frankenstein creation of pieces stolen from this

38 Peter Comestor, Scholasticia Historia Magistri Petri Comestoris (Strasburg: Husner, 1500), b4v.
39 Jacob [Behm] Boehme, Mysterium Magnum, or an Exposition of the First Book of Moses Called Genesis, trans. Anon. (London: Lodowick Lloyd, 1656), 210. Mysterium Magnum was first published in German in 1623. It was translated into English in 1655. This citation is to the second printing of the English translation.
medieval exegete, that classical author, with a good dose of newly made pieces added to the mix. To truly appreciate the nature of this Frankenstein, it will be necessary to look at both classical and medieval materials on Genesis 9. According to David Brion Davis, the study of American slavery and the origins of its justifying and reifying myths has suffered from an over-localization. The study of American slavery has been dominated by historians who study America. The European cultural matrices that helped form the American Weltanschauung regarding slavery and Africa have not been examined sufficiently.40 To better understand the place of “racial slavery in the evolution of the Western and modern worlds,” Davis makes a number of recommendations. Primary among them is a better appreciation of the “place of slavery in the Bible and its interpretations.”41 This study seeks to ameliorate this problem.

Despite the importance of Genesis 9, there are only two books that explore the exegetical and social history of the Curse of Ham myth. The first, David Goldenberg’s The Curse of Ham (2003), explores the Ancient Near Eastern and classical understandings of the Genesis text, while Stephen Haynes’s Noah’s Curse (2002) looks primarily at the use of the myth in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It cannot be assumed that there is a continuity of interpretation from the fourth to the eighteenth centuries; left out is the important bridge between these eras and the examination of the effects that the developing slave trade had on the narrative. This book seeks to fill an important gap in our understanding of how people in the late medieval and early modern eras understood and explained Genesis 9.

The analysis begins with a wide scope on the Western interpretation of Genesis; sources from across Europe and across theological divides are considered. As the study progresses, the focus narrows first to England and English-language works and then to American works. This is purposeful. First, an exhaustive examination of the Curse in all its manifestations would be impossible in a single lifetime of study, let alone a single monograph. The geographical and textual worlds of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were expanding exponentially, and the sources would overwhelm an attempt at comprehensive analysis. More importantly, however, as an American who was raised in the North and taught in the American South, I have seen firsthand the different ways in which Americans look at the Bible and the history of slavery. In this study, I have sought to understand one aspect of that divide: the construction of the American myth of a “Curse of Ham.”

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The journey to the American myth of a cursed Ham begins in the medieval era. Noah’s curse had been used for more than a millennium to explain the origins of slavery and serfdom. Chapter 2 seeks to understand how that interpretive framework was understood in the medieval era. It also investigates the degree to which medieval people associated Noah’s curse with either Africans or black-skinned people. In Chapter 3 the analysis moves into the Renaissance and examines the story of Noah and his sons as told by the Dominican friar and papal theologian Annius of Viterbo. Annius’s description of Noah and Ham was a part of one of the best-selling books of the sixteenth century and had wide appeal across geographic and religious boundaries. Annius demonstrates that one cannot assume that there was only one view of Noah and Ham in the early modern era. Nearly every royal genealogy written in the sixteenth century claimed Ham as an ancestor. In the early modern era, Ham was more than simply a serf or a slave; he was also a god and a king. Chapter 4 remains in the sixteenth century and examines how preachers and commentators used Genesis 9 to answer contemporary social, theological, and even political questions. As they did so, they largely ignored the question of slavery but helped reify the Curse of Ham by removing the presence of Canaan from homiletical and exegetical narratives.

Chapter 5 analyzes the origins of a “Curse matrix” that narrowed the focus of Noah’s malediction onto Africans. The matrix involved skin color, sexual behavior, and religion. All three aspects are examined. This era also sees the origins of a true (albeit only partially successful) critique of African slavery. An explanation for its failure is provided in Chapter 6 where the most sustained argument for the elimination of Canaan from the story of Genesis 9 is examined. Many of the men and women discussed in this book did not see themselves as creating a myth of African servitude. Nor did many of them see themselves as justifying the African slave trade. And yet, as they answered other questions, they each contributed to the myth’s lexicon. Over time, that lexicon enabled the myth to become a reality.
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