



## AFRICAN HERITAGE SUNDAY

### LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

**Sunday, February 3, 2008**

**Frank Thomas, Guest Lectionary Commentator**

Pastor, Mississippi Blvd. Christian Church, Memphis, TN

**Lection – Genesis 9:18-28** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 18) The sons of Noah who went out of the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Ham was the father of Canaan. (v. 19) These three were the sons of Noah; and from these the whole earth was peopled. (v. 20) Noah, a man of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. (v. 21) He drank some of the wine and became drunk, and he lay uncovered in his tent. (v. 22) And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. (v. 23) Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and walked backwards and covered the nakedness of their father; their

faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness. (v. 24) When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, (v. 25) he said, 'Cursed be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers.' (v. 26) He also said, 'Blessed by the Lord my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave. (v. 27) May God make space for Japheth, and let him live in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave.' (v. 28) After the flood Noah lived for three hundred and fifty years.

## **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

Since their arrival in the Americas, persons of African descent have had to fight vehemently against the negative stereotypes of Africa as a backward continent and its descendants as backwards, lazy, and less intellectually capable than others. Such stereotyping served as one of the underpinnings for apartheid in South Africa, slavery, Jim and Jane Crow segregation, redlining, and disparate treatment by justice systems in Africa and America. Perhaps even sadder has been the harm done to the psyche of Africans and African Americans who, after being told in books, movies, and in all other arenas of life that they were substandard in all respects, have in too many instances believed the propaganda and doubted the beauty and greatness of their motherland, their people, and themselves. This moment on the lectionary calendar is designed to discuss scripture that has been used to degrade Africa and persons of African descent, and to show how erroneous retelling of Biblical stories can damage the self-esteem of a group. This moment has also been placed on the calendar to help enhance the self-esteem of persons of African descent, which is one of the primary purposes of all good preaching that is done by African Americans. I am in agreement with Reverend Gardner Taylor and Dr. Henry Mitchell on this point: good black preaching does at least this one thing.<sup>1</sup>

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Genesis 9:18-28**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

This moment on the calendar is designed to say to African American Christians everywhere, fear not the rituals of your ancestors. Despise not the beginnings of your people. Lift up celebration of Africa as more than a Sunday on which African head garb and Kente cloth is to be worn and African-sounding songs are to be sung. I tell persons going to Africa for the first time, let your visit to Africa be about more than seeing the animals and sites; instead embrace the presence of our people, our sisters, our brothers, our Africa. I regularly visit Africa and host African pastors when they come to the United States. In each church I have pastored, I have made sure that the church was involved in efforts in Africa. This is our homeland and it is my job to make sure that the congregations I serve understand our connection to Africa and to make them proud of that connection. I gained a love for Africa from my father in the ministry who also has a love for Africa.

Additionally, throughout my life I have watched African Americans fight against racist depictions of Africa and African Americans. Such racist depictions served to justify historical and contemporary hatred and oppression of Africans and those of African

descent. One such depiction was the “Ham Doctrine,” a theological misinterpretation and erroneous fabrication loosely based upon Genesis 9:18-27. Historically, African American preachers preached against the suppositions of the Ham Doctrine, and in doing so brought humanity, dignity, and self-esteem to African American people. I have tried to do the same.

## **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

The narrative of the “Cursing of Canaan” (Gen. 9:18-27) constitutes a link between the story of the flood, (Gen. 6-9) and what some have called the Table of Nations (Gen. 10). Perhaps it should more aptly be called the table that shows how the sons of Noah dispersed, and how Nimrod (Noah’s grandson and the person who had the Tower of Babel built) rose to power. The Genesis 9 narrative has a number of textual inconsistencies that several scholars account for by suggesting that this text is a “splinter from a more substantial tale,” or possibly that two stories have been merged.<sup>2</sup> The text has many unanswered questions such as: if it was Ham who committed the offense, why was the curse of servitude against Canaan? How do we explain Japheth’s alliance with Shem? If Canaan was cursed because his father saw his grandfather naked and acted inappropriately, how did the curse come to be placed upon Africans and persons who were brought from Africa to the Americas as slaves? Also, there is not one medieval source that connects Ham, and blacks and sex (and since Noah and his family are such an important part of the early writings and art concerning the Bible, it is highly unlikely that there was not one earlier surviving source) that would show this connection.

While we could long debate these important questions with the expertise of biblical scholars,<sup>3</sup> what is apparent is that the pericope functions to justify the “subject status of the Canaanites in relations to the descendents of Shem.”<sup>4</sup> The pericope functions to justify the theft of Canaanite land.

The Jewish Publication Society’s (JPS) nine-volume commentary of the Hebrew Bible identifies Noah as “a cultural hero who introduced viticulture and who fell victim to his progeny’s depravity.”<sup>5</sup> JPS argues that behind the text is a historical situation that resulted in the Canaanites becoming subjugated to both Japheth and Shem:

The most plausible theory links the present narrative with the events connected with the invasion by the sea people of the west Mediterranean littoral. These people first attacked Egypt ca. 1220 BCE, during the reign of Ramses III. It was as a result of these invasions that the Philistines and others from the Aegean area arrived and settled on the coast of Canaan. This happened about the same time that the Israelites were invading Canaan from the east. The Canaanites found themselves assailed from east and west, and their civilization, in the region that was to become the Land of Israel, totally collapsed.<sup>6</sup>

Following JPS, the major thrust of the “Curse of Canaan” narrative is to introduce and justify the subjugation of the Canaanites based upon the Israelites’ conception of their moral depravity (the Canaanites).

The actual text in Genesis 9:18-19 records that after the flood, from the three sons of Noah (Shem, Ham, and Japheth) came the entire population of the earth. Notice also in verse 18, the text explicitly points out that Ham was the father of Canaan, indicative of the chief preoccupation of the text with the Canaanites. Verse 20 points out Noah planted a vineyard and became drunk and “lay uncovered in his tent.” Most scholars agree that “uncovered in his tent” means that his genitals were exposed. In verse 22, it says Ham saw his father’s nakedness. There are many interpretations as to the exact nature of the offense by Ham. Some argue that Ham made fun of his father’s nakedness, while others argue that Ham had sexual relations with his father. There is even an interpretation that Ham castrated his father. The only reasonable conclusion is that the exact nature of the offense is lost with the details of the text. What is clear is that there was an offense committed.

In verse 23, Shem and Japheth do not participate in the offense, but walked in backwards with their faces turned away and covered their father’s nakedness. In verses 24-25, when Noah arose and found out what Ham had done to him, he cursed Canaan saying, “the lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers.” In verse 26, Noah blesses Shem and asks God to make space for Japheth and let Japheth “live in the tents of Shem.” And finally, in verse 27, the text reiterates again that Canaan is to be the slave to Shem and Japheth.

Interestingly, Martin Luther, who was much closer to the time of the text, though still far removed from it, had a much different take on Ham, Shem and Japheth. In Luther’s works on Genesis, he is confused as to how it can be that:

“Ham is cursed in some way by his father but he takes possession of the largest part of the world and establishes extensive kingdoms,” while his brothers, though blessed, are actually less well off.<sup>7</sup>

Historian and religion scholar Benjamin Braude writes:

“The tradition that made Ham so masterful a figure grew out of medieval attention to Ham’s grandson through Cush (the lone black or Ethiopian among his offspring, according to most interpretations), Nimrod, the first King. Nimrod was, after Noah himself, the most imperial figure, literally and figuratively, in the ancient and medieval imaging of the Bible.

Ham’s power was not only a reflection of his grandson’s might but also gained in his own right. Ham was the master magician, the Zoroaster of the ancients. He was also identified with a god of the ancient Egyptians, Saturn.”<sup>8</sup>

Though this passage had become “fodder for racist discourse,” race was not originally an essential element of the text.<sup>9</sup> According to Rodney Sadler and numerous other Old Testament scholars, this text is about “othering,” which is, “a legitimate psychological malady which leads people to isolate and alienate entire groups of people based upon perceived group differences.”<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, as we well know, most often the most

powerful write history and get to write “others” in and out and get to define, redefine, and wrongly define “others.” Historically, this text was used to justify the enslavement and the racism necessary for the slave trade in African people known at the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. From the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, this racist theory was widely held and supported, but was largely abandoned by reputable scholars from the late 1950s to the 1970s. Thank God we are now a people who can think, write, and speak openly for ourselves. We can tell the real story of Ham and Canaan, and of our ancestors and our motherland, Africa. Long live our homeland, Africa, oh Africa.

### **Challenge**

The “Curse of Canaan” narrative and its appropriation as the “Ham Doctrine” clearly illustrate the use of biblical texts and traditions for “othering,” that is, as a tool for the hatred and subjugation of other people as well as the racism that is necessary to justify the oppression. If people are of a different race, sex, ethnicity, religious background, or sexual preference, under no circumstances are we to speak for God and use the Bible to oppress them. We celebrate the best of our African American history and heritage as a “non-othering people.”

### **Descriptive Details**

The descriptive details of this passage include:

**Images:** Noah as the first “man of the soil who planted a vineyard” (v. 20); Noah drunk (v. 21); nakedness as Noah “lay uncovered in his tent” (v.21); Shem and Japheth “walking backward and covering the nakedness of their father” (v. 23); and

**Sounds:** Noah cursing his son and his grandchild (v. 25).

### **III. Other Sermonic Information**

In the minds of those who enslaved Africans, the Ham Doctrine provided prime biblical justification that Africans were an inferior, deviant, and oversexed people, which is why Ham ran in and looked at Noah and why he failed to refrain from sexual intercourse with his (Ham’s) wife on the ark after Noah called for a period of continence. In the minds of enslavers, those of African ancestry were meant to be beasts of burden and the ox and cattle of the world. In America, those of African descent were not intelligent and only three-fifths of a person.

African American preachers have combated the Ham Doctrine for several hundred years, including preachers and activists such as David Walker, Nat Turner, Bishop Henry McNeil Turner, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman. One of the prime ways they fought the “Curse of Canaan” text is with Psalm 68:31: “Princes shall come out of Egypt and Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hand.”

## Notes

1. Thomas, Emil, and Henry H. Mitchell. Preaching for Black Self-Esteem. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994. This belief has been repeated to the author in informal conversations he has had with Henry Mitchell and Gardner C. Taylor.
2. Brenner, Athalya. Genesis The Feminist Companion to the Bible. Feminist companion to the Bible (Second series), 1. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998, p. 89.
3. Sadler, Rodney Steven. Can a Cushite Change His Skin? An Examination of Race, Ethnicity, and Othering in the Hebrew Bible. New York: T&T Clark International, 2005. p. 26; Copher, Charles B. "The Black Presence in the Old Testament." Stony The Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation. Ed. Cain Hope Felder, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991. pp. 146-65; Felder, Cain Hope. "Race, Racism, and Biblical Narratives." Stony The Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation. Ed. Cain Hope Felder. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991. pp. 127-145.
4. Alter, Robert. Genesis. New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1996. p. 40.
5. For information on textual inconsistencies, see Sarna, Nahum M. The JPS Torah Commentary Series: Genesis. Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989. p. 63.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
7. Luther, Martin, and Jaroslav Jan Pelikan. Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 6-14. Luther's Works, v. 2. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Pub. House, 1960.
8. Braude, Benjamin. "The Sons of Noah and the Construction of Ethnic and Geographical Identities in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods." *William and Mary Quarterly* LIV (January 1997): 103–142.
9. Sadler, Rodney Steven. Can a Cushite Change His Skin? An Examination of Race, Ethnicity, and Othering in the Hebrew Bible. p. 27.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

## Bibliography

1. Evans, William McKee. From the Land of Canaan to the Land of Guinea: The Strange Odyssey of the Sons of Ham. Washington, D.C.: American Historical Review 85 (February 1980): 15–43.
2. Goldenberg, David M. The Curse of Ham Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003.
3. Haynes, Stephen R. Noah's Curse The Biblical Justification of American Slavery. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
4. Peterson, Thomas Virgil. Ham and Japheth: The Mythic World of Whites in the Antebellum South. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1978.