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Three Thousand Years of Biblical Interpretation with Reference to Black Peoples

Introduction

In the land of Palestine, known also from antiquity as the Holy Land, stand two mountains, which are not far apart and which face each other. In between lies a valley. By the ancient Hebrews, one mountain, called Gerizim, was referred to as the "Mount of Blessing." The other, called Ebal, was referred to as the "Mount of Cursing." Using a figure of speech, with reference to the Bible, we may compare the Bible to the valley between the two mountains, and ask a question: "To which of these mountains does the Bible—or rather, interpretations of the Bible,—belong?" To the "Mount of Blessing" or to the "Mount of Cursing?"

Granted that the Bible, along with interpretations of it, have proved to be and continue to be sources of blessings to millions of people. It is also true that these have been and continue to be sources of some of the greatest curses humankind has known. Upon the basis of the Bible and interpretations of it Orthodox Jew has killed Orthodox Jew; Orthodox Jew has killed Christian Jew; Gentile has murdered Jew; Christian has murdered Christian. In no instance, however, have the Bible and interpretations of it led to such murder, whether physical, psychological, social, or spiritual, as in the case of Black peoples. As will be noted, such murder goes back to ancient times, and is still being committed today.

This lecture has as its purpose to review the history of the Bible and its interpretation with reference to Black peoples, from the very beginnings of the Bible itself, as collections of literature at various times, to the Bible as it exists today primarily in English translation, and as it is still interpreted today. Hence the title of the lecture is "Three Thousand Years of Biblical Interpretation with Reference to Black Peoples."

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Foundational for a treatment of the subject is knowledge of the history of the Bible and its canonization: knowledge of the fact that, according to critical historical-literary study, what now constitutes the Bible came into existence, in stages, across more than twelve hundred years; and that canonization consisted of a series of processes that occurred, say, roughly from 600 B.C. to 400 A.D. Following the collection of literature into what may be referred to as the sacred Scriptures at any given stage along the way, and canonization at any given stage, came translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, first into Greek; then creation of Christian New Testament writings in Greek; followed by translation into Latin, English and other such languages as now exist.

Once there was a Bible, at whatever stage at a given time, interpretation began. Thus there appears in what is now the Bible *inner* or *intra* Biblical interpretation.¹ This type of interpretation was succeeded by interpretation of the complete Bible, first of the Hebrew Scriptures, then of the Christian Scriptures consisting of the Hebrew Scriptures plus Christian writings regarded as Scripture.

Interpretation as a process, begun within the Bible itself, continued and continues in all literature related to the Bible, that is, extra-Biblical literature, which must include translations of originals inasmuch as all translation is by its very nature also interpretation.

Bodies of extra-Biblical literature, arranged in a more or less chronological order, include the following: the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek, the Septuagint (250-100 B.C.); the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament (150 B.C.-150 A.D.); the Qumran Writings (150 B.C.-150 A.D.); the writings of Philo and Josephus (25 B.C.-100 A.D.); the New Testament books (50-100 A.D.); early rabbinical interpretations such as are found in the early Midrashim, Haggadah, and the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds, plus Targums (200-600 A.D.); New Testament Apocryphal and Pseudepigraphal writings, primarily of the second and third centuries A.D.; Targums, 200 A.D., and later); Islamic Literature (625 A.D. and later); Jewish and Christian interpretations of the Middle Ages (600-1400 A.D.); and for our purposes, primarily Christian interpretations of modern times, including interpretations by Black peoples (1400-1987).

Discussion of so vast a body of literatures must of necessities be limited to a very broad outline at best. With respect to filling in the outline, all that the lecturer can hope for is akin to that hope expressed by a Black Biblical scholar of nearly a hundred years ago, Bishop Benjamin T. Tanner, in the Dedication of his monograph, *The Color Of*

¹ For a discussion of *inner* or *intra* Biblical interpretation, one may consult James L. Kugel and Rowan A. Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986).

Solomon—What?:

To the rising scholars of the colored race, the writer dedicates the monograph with the hope that the subject which it discusses, and others akin to it, will receive such treatment at their hands as will vindicate the colored races of the earth and save them from the delusion: "The leading race in all history has been the white race."²

The Biblical Text and Intra-Biblical Interpretation

Preliminary to a consideration of interpretation within the Bible, with reference to Black peoples, must come a prior consideration of the presence of Black peoples, or of peoples whom the Biblical writers regarded as Black, in the Biblical text itself. Such a presence is determinable by the use of words or terms employed to designate *black* when applied to persons and peoples—in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. Relevant words and terms are *Shahar*, in Hebrew, meaning black, and used twice denoting skin or complexion, apart from occurrences associated with color caused by disease; *Hum*, in Hebrew of doubtful meaning, and limited to Genesis, chapter 30;³ *Kedar*, in Hebrew, meaning black, and occurring some twelve times; *Cush*, and related words such as Cushite, in Hebrew, which occurs some fifty times, and bearing a color notion through most typical visual features; *Hoshek*, in Hebrew, which refers to darkness; *Ethiopia*, *melas*, *niger*, and related terms in Greek; and Ethiopia and Niger in Latin—all of which have to do with black color.

The Greek and Latin terms are used to translate the Hebrew word *Cush* and related terms in the Old Testament; the Latin term *niger* is used to translate the corresponding word in the New Testament. In treating the identification of Black persons and peoples the use of words is limited to include primarily *Cush* and related terms in the Old Testament (disregarding *Kedar*, *Ham*, and even *Phinehas*, which for now over a hundred years has been stated to mean "the Negro"); and *Ethiopia* and *Niger* in the New Testament.

Of some fifty occurrences of the word *Cush* and related terms in the Old Testament, half refer to individual persons or peoples. In the main, the references are factual statements. Of these the vast majority are judgments of God upon the Cushites (Ethiopians) similar to or identical with God's judgments upon other peoples, and without pejorative connotation based upon color. With such an opinion as the forestated those of Black Biblical scholars are in agreement. Thus, in writing about the Biblical text with reference to color, Robert A. Bennett states, "Blacks in

² Benjamin Tucker Tanner, *The Color of Solomon—What?* (Philadelphia: African Methodist Episcopal Book Concern, 1895).

³ See Athalya Brenner, *Colour Terms In The Old Testament*, Journal For The Study of The Old Testament, Supplement Series, no. 21 (Sheffield, England: Department of Biblical Studies, The University of Sheffield, 1982), 57, 63, 95.

the Bible are mentioned favorably and become a symbol of God's love for all people."⁴ Similarly, the Reverend Jacob A. Dyer in his booklet, *The Ethiopian in the Bible*, writes:

I know of a certain author who has produced some excellent works. However, after reading a number of his books, I observed that his black and Jewish characters were never honorable. Whatever part they played, there was something about them that one could not admire. If his books were historical, it could be contended that he had recorded the facts as he found them; but as a literary composer, the characters he produced simply reflect his own attitude towards certain groups. Neither in the Old Testament nor in the New does the literature which constitutes the Bible reflect any such attitude towards non-whites or persons of black or dark complexion.⁵

An exception to the opinions just stated may or may not appear in the Song of Songs, Chapter 1:5, with reference to the appearance of the maiden: whether she is black *and* beautiful, or black *but* beautiful. Again, despite the opinions, there are at least two instances of texts within the Old Testament that reveal themselves as being cases of intra-Biblical interpretation. These are the explanatory glosses with reference to Ham's being the father of Canaan (Genesis 9:18, 22) and the explanatory comment at Numbers 12:1 with regard to Moses' having married a Cushite wife.

If, (as it appears now or will appear later), the word *Ham* did not mean *black* at the time the Noah story was written, and if the term *Hum* was not replaced by the term *Shahar* which is employed in the area of color terms only during the exilic and post-exilic periods, as argued by Athalya Brenner in her book *Colour Terms in the Old Testament*, then Ham as the father of Canaan would mean nothing with regard to the color of the Canaanites.⁶ This would come later, as will be seen, when we deal with interpretations of the rabbis, beginning in the second century A.D. where a different interpretation of the gloss "Ham the father of Canaan" is called for. And, to be sure, modern historical-literary scholars do have their interpretations, as did the scholars who preceded them, in deriving *ham* from *hamas* or a similar word and interpreting it to mean *black*.⁷

Two things may be said about the gloss at Numbers 12:1. It appears out of context, and the problem appears to be related to Aaron's and Miriam's status as prophets over against the status of Moses. Secondly, as has been observed by others, whatever the bone of contention among the siblings, God disapproved of the behavior of Aaron and Miriam and

⁴ Robert Avon Bennett, *God's Work Of Liberation* (Wilton, Conn.: Morehouse Barlow Co., 1976), 78f.

⁵ Jacob A. Dyer, *The Ethiopian in The Bible* (New York: Vantage Press, 1974), 62.

⁶ Brenner, 57.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 227. See also 58-64, notes 19, 20, 21 and 22.

took sides with Moses.⁸

Interpretation in the Septuagint

From intra-Biblical interpretation the next step is to interpretation of the Bible as it existed at the time of its first translation. The earliest translation of the original Biblical text is that of the Septuagint, from Hebrew-Aramaic into Greek. As has been stated, every translation is an interpretation. Necessary then is it to investigate how the translators dealt with the matter of black color. Two passages will suffice: Genesis 9:25, which has to do with the "curse of Canaan", and Song of Songs 1:5, which has to do with the color of the maiden. With respect to the curse of Canaan it has often been observed that one manuscript of the Septuagint has "cursed be *Ham*." References to this one instance have been made by writers in modern times, some of whom argue that such a translation is proof that the original Hebrew text intended to place the curse on Ham rather than upon Canaan.⁹ The latter assume, of course, that *Ham* in the original Hebrew meant *black*. What this one manuscript may show at best is a move in the so-called Intertestamental Period towards a curse-on-Ham position in some circles, or by a translator or scribe, even though *ham* may not necessarily at the time refer to blackness.

The conjunction in Song of Songs 1:5 may be translated as either *and* or *but*, in both Hebrew and Greek. Translated *and*, it is complimentary; translated *but*, it is pejorative. According to the intensive investigations of Frank M. Snowden, Jr., early commentators translated the conjunction *and*, as it appears in the Septuagint.¹⁰

Interpretation in the O.T. Apocrypha-Pseudepigrapha—and Qumran Writings

A study of the Old Testament Apocryphal and Pseudepigraphal writings, and those of Qumran, reveals an absence of interpretations of the Biblical text with reference to Black peoples. All in all, there are thirteen references to Ethiopia or Ethiopians in the Apocrypha-Pseudepigrapha: six with reference to geographical locations; four with reference to historical events, without comment; two in the form of prophetic judgments;

⁸ For example, see Frank M. Snowden, Jr., *Blacks In Antiquity: Ethiopians In The Greco-Roman Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belnap Press, 1970), 202.

⁹ For example, Jack P. Lewis, *A Study Of The Interpretation Of Noah And The Flood In Jewish And Christian Literature* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968), 119, and Arthur C. Custance, *Noah's Three Sons* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 25.

¹⁰ Snowden, 198.

and one with reference to the Ethiopians as a stout-hearted people. Thus, there is one complimentary passage, but it does not refer to a text in the Bible.

A prominent Biblical scholar investigated these books with an apparent purpose of detecting any that might refer to Negroes, especially. At first, he appears to have had a suspicion that one passage in Jubilees, called the "Little Genesis", might be relevant, but concluded that the passage in question, Chapter 10:29-34, which reveals the story of Noah's curse of Canaan does not connect the curse to the Negro race.¹¹ A question is inherent in his conclusion, however, for much depends upon the identity of Negroes in a given person's mind.

Upon the basis of a check of Biblical references in the Qumran literature, using the list of Scriptural references compiled by Theodore H. Gaster, there are no interpretations of pertinent Biblical texts referring to Black persons or peoples.¹²

Interpretation in Philo and Josephus

Once more, as in the instance of his study of the Old Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, Jack P. Lewis asserts that neither Philo nor Josephus interprets the Old Testament passages here under consideration in a way derogatory of Black people.¹³ Further, it may be observed, neither writer interprets "Ham" to mean *Black*. For them the interpretation is "hot" or "heat." Philo's treatment of the Ham/Canaan story is allegorical.

In dealing with Ham's descendants Josephus singles out Cush in his *Antiquities Of The Jews* and writes: "time has not at all hurt the name of Cush; for the Ethiopians, over whom he reigned, are even at this day, both by themselves and by all men in Asia, called Cushites."¹⁴

In other parts of his *Antiquities*, which is a rewriting of the Old Testament history, Josephus recounts a story of Moses' marriage to an Ethiopian princess, an account that does not appear in the Bible, but will appear somewhat differently in later Jewish writings. Without interpretative comments he reproduces the account of the Cushite in II Samuel 18; that of the Queen of Sheba whom he identifies as Queen of Egypt and Ethiopia; and those accounts of other Cushites—Zerah, Taharka, Ebed-Melech—in a matter of fact manner, without interpreta-

¹¹ Lewis, 31.

¹² Theodore H. Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scriptures In English Translation* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Anchor Books, 1956), 343ff.

¹³ Lewis, 73ff.; 179.

¹⁴ Flavius Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews*, 6.2, trans. William Whiston in *The Works of Flavius Josephus* (Hartford, Conn.: S. S. Scranton Co., 1903), 40.

tive comment.¹⁵

Anticipating the rabbinical interpretations of the Noah story that will later appear in Genesis Rabbah of the Midrashim, and in the Babylonian Talmud, shortly after the time of Josephus, it might be well to give another excerpt from Josephus, one dealing with Noah's curse: ". . . but for Ham, he did not curse him, by reason of his nearness in blood, but cursed his posterity; and when the rest of them escaped that curse, God inflicted it on the children of Canaan."¹⁶

Interpretation in the New Testament

During the lifetime of Josephus the books that comprise the New Testament were being written. Of the twenty-seven books that constitute the canon, only one, the book of Acts, Chapters 8:26-39 and 13:1, contains references to Black persons and peoples. Both passages are reports of matters of fact, without interpretative comment with respect to color.

Ancient Rabbinical Interpretation

Ancient rabbinical literature abounds with interpretations of the Old Testament both with respect to peoples and persons who are considered black in the Biblical text and those who are regarded as, or said to be black by the rabbis. The interpretations that concern us appear in the collection of midrashim known as Midrash Rabbah-Genesis, dated variously 200-400 A.D., and the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin, dated as early as 500 A.D., but as in the case of Midrash Rabbah-Genesis, containing material much older. Additionally there are Targums, dating from uncertain provenance but by some dated in final form from the fourth and fifth centuries A.D.¹⁷

Apart from the Targums, classical locations of interpretations with reference to Black persons and peoples are Midrash Rabbah-Genesis XXXVI: 7-8; Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 108b; and Midrash Rabbah-Genesis XXII: 5-6. The first of these has a curse to fall on Ham, not directly but through Ham's fourth son, Canaan, who will be ugly and dark-skinned (the degree of color being dependent upon the translator of the original). The second asserts that Ham came forth from the Ark *black*, having been turned that color because, contrary to prohibitions he, along with the dog and the raven, had copulated while aboard the Ark. The third locus deals not with a curse nor mark upon Cain but with his rejected sacrifice (Genesis 4:5).

As translated, Midrash Rabbah-Genesis reads in part:

¹⁵ Ibid, 225-308, passim.

¹⁶ Ibid, 41.

¹⁷ See Fred G. Bratton, *A History Of The Bible* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), 236.

R. Huna said in R. Joseph's name: (Noah declared), "you have prevented me from begetting a fourth son, therefore I curse your fourth son." R. Huna also said in R. Joseph's name: you have prevented me from doing something in the dark (cohabitation), therefore your seed will be ugly and dark-skinned." R. Hiyya said: "Ham and the dog copulated in the Ark, therefore Ham came forth black-skinned while the dog publicly exposes its copulation. . . ."¹⁸

It is to be noted that Graves and Patai, in their book *Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis*, relate the passage in Sanhedrin 108b to other sources such as *Tanhuma Noah* 13,15, and produce the following additional narrative:

Moreover, because you twisted your head around to see my nakedness, your grandchildren's hair shall be twisted into kinks, and their eyes red; again, because your lips jested at my misfortune, theirs shall swell; and because you neglected my nakedness, they shall go naked, and their male members shall be shamefully elongated. Men of this race are called Negroes.¹⁹

Midrash Rabbah, Genesis XXII: 6, translated, reads:

And Cain was very wroth [*wayyihar*] and his countenance fell: [His face] became like a fireband [with the editorial note, *Blackened*].²⁰

Upon these statements will hang later interpretations of the Bible with reference to Black persons and peoples among Jews, then Muslims, then Christians; and through them they will be spread around the world as a deadly poison. Thereafter all the children, not only of Canaan, but also of Ham, will be considered to be black: Cushites (Ethiopians); Mitzraimites (Egyptians); Phutities; and Canaanites.

Interpretation in New Testament Apocrypha an Pseudepigrapha

As in the case of the New Testament itself, so is there no interpretation of Biblical texts with reference to Black persons and peoples in the New Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha.²¹ However, it is to be noted that some of these writings, dated as early as the second and third centuries A.D. by some authorities, do contain statements pejorative in

¹⁸ *Midrash Rabbah, Genesis*, eds. Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, foreword by Rabbi Dr. Isidore Epstein (London: The Soncino Press, 1939), chap. xxxvi, 7-8, 293.

¹⁹ Robert Graves and Raphael Patai, *Hebrew Myths: The Book Of Genesis* (New York: Greenwich House, 1983), 121. *Tanhuma Noah* 13f. is also cited in C. G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, eds. and trans., *A Rabbinic Anthology* (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1938; repr., New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 56.

²⁰ *Midrash Rabbah, Genesis*, 184.

²¹ The source here used is Edgar Hennecke, comp., *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. W. Schneemelcher, English trans. R. McL. Wilson, vol. 1, *Gospels and Related Writings*; vol. 2, *Writings Relating To The Apostles, Apocalypses And Related Subjects* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963, 1965).

nature with respect to Ethiopians. The books in question and relevant passages are: Acts of Peter, 305; Acts of Andrew, 400; and Acts of Thomas, 475, and 478.

Interpretation in Church Fathers

As Jack P. Lewis notes: "Though there are many parallels in the interpretation of the flood between the rabbis and the church fathers, it is in the spiritual interpretation that they went their separate ways."²² However, with Irenaeus (185 A.D.) we begin to see the influence of the Septuagint, and of the rabbinical interpretation upon Gentile Christians wherein the curse of Canaan is transformed into a curse upon Ham, although with no reference as yet to color.²³ Origen, Jerome, Augustine, and others down to the seventh century interpret the Old Testament references to Black persons and peoples frequently but in an allegorical and typological manner.²⁴ Although Ham is not yet black, Origen does associate Ethiopians with Ham.²⁵ And Jerome, who shows in his letters a dreadful aversion to black Ethiopians,²⁶ translates, for the first time according to Frank M. Snowden, Jr., the conjunction in Song of Songs 1:5 as *but* rather than as *and*.²⁷

Origen, it is said, set the pattern for Patristic interpretation, so we cite some of his interpretations by way of example, as they are treated by Snowden in his book *Blacks in Antiquity*. Snowden calls attention to the fact that early Christian writers, when commenting upon a given Scriptural passage involving Ethiopians, developed a type of exegesis which collated several familiar references to Ethiopians. And, with reference to Origen, he writes as follows:

Origen says that several passages suggest themselves to him as being in accordance with 'I am black and beautiful.' In this connection Origen first cites with brief comment and then presents a detailed exegesis of the following: (1) Moses' marriage to the Ethiopian woman; (2) the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon; (3) "Ethiopia shall stretch out her hand to God;" (4) "from beyond the rivers of Ethiopia will I receive my dispersed ones; they shall bring me sacrifice"; (5) the Ethiopian eunuch Abdimelech.²⁸

Snowden then proceeds to give Origen's detailed allegorical exegesis of

²² Lewis, 156.

²³ *Ibid.*, 119.

²⁴ See Lewis for *typological* interpretation and Snowden for *allegorical* interpretation.

²⁵ Snowden, 202.

²⁶ For Jerome's attitude, see Jean Devisse and Michel Mollat, *The Image of The Black In Western Art*, vol. 2, trans. William G. Ryan (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1979) 256, 299, note 1.

²⁷ Snowden, 198.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 201.

the passages. And, in describing part of the Song of Solomon 1:5, he notes that Origen makes, among others, the following points which appear in similar or modified form in commenting on the words of the Bride to the young maidens of Jerusalem: (1) the Bride who speaks represents the Church gathered from among the Gentiles; (2) her body, black externally, lacks neither natural beauty nor that acquired by practice; (3) the daughters of an earthly Jerusalem, upon seeing the Church of the Gentiles, despise her because she cannot boast the noble blood of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; (4) the Bride's reply is that she is black and that though she cannot point to descent from illustrious men, she is nevertheless beautiful, for in her is the image of God and she has received her beauty from the word of God; (5) she is black by reason of her lowly origin but is beautiful through penitence and faith; (6) the daughters of Jerusalem in reproaching her on account of her blackness should not forget what Mary (Miriam) suffered when she spoke against Moses because he had married a black Ethiopian woman.²⁹

Over against Origen and others who followed an allegorical and typological method in treating the Black peoples in the Old Testament—members of the "Alexandrian School" of interpretation—stand the members of the "Antiochan School" who employed a literal method of exegesis. It is interesting to view the manner in which a member of this school deals with the same passage, not only in order to see Biblical interpretation but also how some people in that period regarded *the Egyptians* with respect to color, just as St. Augustine refers to the Ethiopians as black in his commentary on the Psalms. For an example I take Theodore of Mopsuestia whom Robert M. Grant calls the greatest interpreter of the school of Antioch. Grant discusses Theodore's dealing with the Song of Songs as follows:

Theodore's analysis of the Song of Songs is interesting. . . . Its historical occasion is the wedding of Solomon with the daughter of Pharaoh. At this point in his discussion a certain sense of decorum overcomes Theodore, and he insists that the wedding took place not for pleasure, but for the political stability of Israel. Moreover, since the princess *was black* and therefore not especially attractive to the court of Solomon, he built a palace for her and composed this song—so that she would not be irritated and so that enmity would not arise between him and Pharaoh.³⁰

Interpretation in Targums

Martin McNamara in his book *Targum and Testament* takes note that Pseudo-Jonathan on Numbers 12:1 explains that Moses was constrained against his will to marry the Ethiopian woman and that he later

²⁹ Ibid, 199.

³⁰ Robert M. Grant, *The Bible In The Church: A Short History of Interpretation* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1948), 77f.

divorced her. Further, McNamara observes that Targum Onkelos paraphrases "Cushite" as 'beautiful'; and that other texts of the Palestinian Targum retain the word "Cushite" but go on to explain at length that she was not a Cushite ethnically speaking, but merely *like* a Cushite in complexion!³¹ Henry S. Noerdlinger in his *Moses and Egypt* explains that the depiction of Moses' wife as white in the movie "Ten Commandments" was based upon rabbinic traditions, as reported in L. Ginzberg's *Legends Of The Jews* (VI: 90). According to the rabbinic tradition referred to, "Ethiopian", with reference to Moses' wife, means that she distinguished herself from others by her beauty and virtue, just as an Ethiopian distinguishes himself from others by his physical appearance.³² In his book *Ethiopia and The Bible*, Edward Ullendorff makes reference to an ancient Gematria employed by the Targum which renders Cushite woman as beautiful woman, and in so doing calls attention to Rashi.³³

Interpretation in Muslim Writings

Although no curse of Ham or Canaan by which the one or the other was turned back appears in the Koran, Muslim interpreters borrowed heavily from the Jews, and added some of their own. In this connection Bernard Lewis writes that a common explanation of the slave status of the black man among Muslims is that the ancestor of the dark-skinned people was Ham the son of Noah who (according to Muslim legend) was damned black for his sin. The curse of blackness, and with it that of slavery, passed to all black peoples who are his descendants.³⁴ In agreement with Lewis' observation on Ham's blackness among Muslims is the *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam* which alludes to Midrash Rabbah-Genesis.³⁵

Jewish-Christian Interpretation During the Middle Ages

Jewish interpretation continued throughout the Middle Ages in the form of Midrashim, targumim, and commentaries, all dealing with a

³¹ Martin McNamara, *Targum and Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972), 72.

³² Henry S. Noerdlinger, *Moses and Egypt* (Los Angeles: University of Southern California Press, 1956), 70.

³³ Edward Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and The Bible*, The Schweich Lectures (1967) (London: Published for The British Academy by Oxford University Press, 1968), 8.

³⁴ Bernard Lewis, *Race And Color In Islam* (New York: Harper & Row, Torchbooks, 1971), 66f. The very same statement appears in Graham W. Irwin, *Africans Abroad* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 128. Lewis depends heavily upon Gustave E. von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam: A Study In Cultural Orientation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1946).

³⁵ *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam*, 1974 ed., s.v. "Nuh."

curse on a black Ham or Canaan, with Black Biblical characters, and with those made black by the earlier interpretations in Midrashim and Talmuds. By way of example, a Midrash on the Song of Solomon, dated by W.O.E. Oesterley and G.H. Box around 750 A.D., but containing very early material, interprets verse 1:5 allegorically thus: "I appear black in my deeds, but comely in those of my fathers. The congregation of Israel says, I appear black unto myself, but comely in the eyes of my Creator."³⁶

Further, in the Midrashic collection known as *The Book of Yasher* one finds, as presented by the translator-editor, the following account of Moses' marriage to an Ethiopian princess—an account much like that given by Josephus:

So Moses took the city by his wisdom, and the children of Cush set him on the throne . . . And they . . . gave him Queen Adonijah the Cushite . . . to wife. But Moses feared the Lord . . . and he went not in unto her . . . For Moses remembered how Abraham had made Eliezer his servant swear, saying: "Take not a wife of the daughters of Canaan, nor shalt thou make marriages with any of the children of Ham. . . ."³⁷

Saadya Gaon (892-942) translated the Hebrew Bible into Arabic, and in so doing made Noah's curse rest upon Ham rather than upon Canaan. This act added fuel to the fire that had been started with the same translation in the one manuscript of the Septuagint.³⁸

Greatest of all the Medieval Jewish commentators was Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac of Troyes, better known as Rashi (1040-1105). In his treatment of Noah's curse he refers to the interpretation given in Midrash Rabbah-Genesis and other works prior to his time.

Hugo Fuchs notes that Rashi makes use of Targum Onkelos and of oral interpretations in his commentary on the Torah.³⁹ And with specific reference to Rashi's interpretation on Moses' Cushite wife, D.S. Margolioux, who calls Rashi's interpretation "frivolous", notes that it is

³⁶ W. O. E. Oesterley and G. H. Box, *A Short Survey of The Literature of Rabbinical and Medieval Judaism* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1920; repr., New York: Burt Franklin, 1973), 76.

³⁷ Ben Zion Halper, ed. and trans., *Post-Biblical Hebrew Literature: An Anthology* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1921), 132ff.

³⁸ For references to Ham as the accursed one in an Arabic Bible, see Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible*, with a commentary and critical notes, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, n.d.), 38; Josiah Priest, *Slavery As It Relates To The Negro, Or African Race* (Albany, New York: C. van Benthuysen and Co., 1843; repr., Albany, New York: Arno Press, Inc., 1977), 77ff.; and Custance, 25.

³⁹ *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1954 ed., s.v. "Rashi," by Hugo Fuchs. H. Wheeler Robinson, ed., *The Bible In Its Ancient and English Versions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940; repr., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954) 147, notes that Lyra made a literal translation of Rashi's commentary that preserved the Rabbinical tradition of the Middle Ages into modern times.

as old as Targum Onkelos.⁴⁰

Commenting on Rashi's influence upon the Christian world, Isadore Epstein writes: "Nicholas de Lyra (1265-1349), who is an important link between the Middle Ages and the Reformation, quotes Rashi constantly in his *Commentaries*, which, in turn, was one of the main sources used by Luther in his translation; and many of Rashi's interpretations entered into the King James version of the Bible."⁴¹

According to Louis Ginzberg, there is no evidence for the direct use of rabbinic literature by the Christian world before the twelfth century,⁴² and this is the very time of Rashi.

At least by the twelfth century in Europe, Cain is depicted with Negroid features in art as well as in literature.⁴³ Such a depiction may well go back to as early as Beowulf who makes mention of Cain's monstrous descendants. Quite interestingly, Cain's black color is attributed to more than the occasion of his sacrifice as in Genesis Rabbah. It comes to be attributed additionally to a curse because of his murder of Abel, and to the mark or sign that God placed upon him for his protection. Whatever the time and whatever the cause of Cain's being turned black, Cain as black became associated with Black peoples in the minds of Europeans as well as Jews and the association is in the minds of Europeans and their descendants world-wide today.

Despite the anti-blackness among Jews and Gentile Europeans with which we have dealt, it must be recognized that for a time and in different parts of Europe the Ethiopian received favorably regard. The most that can be done in this lecture to support this view is to refer to the three-volume work by Jean Devisse and Michel Mollat, *The Image Of The Black In Western Art*, and Joseph R. Washington, Jr's recent book, *Anti-Blackness In English Religion*.⁴⁴

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, the anti-black influence of Jewish interpretation on that of Gentile Christian Europeans may be noted in the writings of Sir John Mandeville who in 1336 refashioned the story of Ham. Although he views Ham as the accursed one he regards him as the mightiest and richest of Noah's three sons.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ *A Dictionary of The Bible*, 1911 ed., vol. 1, s.v. "Ethiopian Woman."

⁴¹ Isadore Epstein, *Judaism: A Historical Presentation* (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books Inc., 1959) 269.

⁴² Louis Ginzberg, *On Jewish Law and Lore* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1955), 67.

⁴³ See Ruth Mellinkoff, *The Mark of Cain* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981), 76ff.

⁴⁴ Joseph R. Washington, Jr., *Anti-Blackness In English Religion: 1500-1800* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1984). See note 26.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 42f.

Interpretation in Modern Times

The fifteenth century, which saw the importation of West African Blacks into Europe in ever increasing numbers, marks the real beginning of the application of the Ham-Canaan-Cain accounts to Black peoples, as interpreted by the Jews. One of the first to make such application was Gomes Eannes Zurara, chronicler for Prince Henry the Navigator. Confusing Cain with Noah's cursed son, in his history on the discovery of Guinea, Zurara wrote:

You must note that these Blacks were Moors like the others, but were their slaves, in accordance with ancient custom, which I believe to have been because of the curse which, after the Deluge, Noah laid upon his son Cain [sic], cursing him in this way: that his race should be subject to all other races of the world.⁴⁶

From this time forward, notes Ronald Sanders, in his book, *Lost Tribes And Promised Lands*, Noah's curse will serve as a standard excuse for Black slavery among Europeans as it had for Moslems.⁴⁷

A view aberrant from those that held Blacks to be offspring of Ham-Canaan-Cain entered the picture with Paracelsus (1520), who expressed the opinion that Negroes and some others had a separate origin from those who had descended from Adam. This opinion would be adopted and elaborated upon by many who would come later.⁴⁸

Returning to the curse of Ham/Canaan in the various and proliferating interpretations given to it, positive and negative, note may be taken of a sixteenth century writer on the subject, George Best (1577). Relying upon Jewish interpretations well known by his time, and adding something new of his own, Best wrote concerning Ham and his descendants:

God would a sonne should be born whose name was *Chus*, who not onely it selfe, but all his posteritie after him should bee so blacke and loathsome, that it might remaine a spectacle of disobedience to all the worlde. And of this blacke and cursed *Cush* came all these blacke Moores, which are in Africa. . . .⁴⁹

Winthrop D. Jordan notes that Ham's curse became common in the seventeenth century as an explanation of the Negro's color rather than as a support for slavery.⁵⁰ And David Brion Davis observes a probable increasing tendency around 1676 for Americans to identify Negroes with

⁴⁶ Quoted in Ronald Sanders, *Lost Tribes and Promised Lands* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1978), 62.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁴⁸ For aberrant views of Paracelsus and others, see Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of An Idea In America* (Dallas, Texas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1963; New York: Schocken Books, 1963), 15.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Washington, 114; Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward The Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 41; Sanders, 224 and in other publications.

⁵⁰ Jordan, 18.

the children of Ham.⁵¹ This tendency, however, was contrary to the views of Sir Thomas Browne (1605-1682) and many others who attributed the color to natural causes. Jordan regards Browne as the bridge between Medieval and modern times with respect to the Negro's color;⁵² and from his time onwards the matter will be discussed and debated until at last Ham's-Canaan's curse, with or without the questionable *curse, mark* or *sacrifice* of Cain, will be used to justify Black slavery, and still later, segregation.

While still in the seventeenth century, it must be noted that the aberrant view of Paracelsus in 1520 was developed further by Isaac de la Pey  re. This author in 1655 wrote that the natives of Africa, Asia, and the New World were descendants from a Pre-Adamite race. According to him, it was from this race that Cain had chosen a wife, a view that will later be expanded upon until that wife comes to be designated a Negro woman.⁵³

During the whole of the 1700's, as has been anticipated, debate continued with respect to Ham and Canaan, as well as with respect to Cain as black. In the year 1700 Judge Samuel Sewall in his famous work *The Selling Of Joseph* argued against an opponent that the curse on Canaan had been fulfilled in the enslavement of the Gibeonites.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, according to David Brion Davis, by 1733 there was an increasing tendency to identify Negroes not only as children of Ham but also of Cain.⁵⁵

Elihu Coleman (1699-1789) pointed out that Negroes could not be the posterity of Cain because all his descendants had perished in the flood, as others after him will continue to do, while still others, of an opposite mind, will develop views that will link Ham even with a daughter of Cain.⁵⁶ The wide currency of views with regard to Cain and blackness, again whether based upon his sacrifice, murder of Abel, or mark, may be observed as they existed at the end of the eighteenth century and the early years of the nineteenth in the writings of Phyllis Wheatley and David Walker, respectively. In her poem "On Being Brought From Africa To

⁵¹ David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery In Western Culture* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1966), 316f.

⁵² Jordan, 15ff.

⁵³ Information concerning Pey  re and his views is obtainable from encyclopedias and from popular writings such as those of Gossett, 15; Sabine Baring-Gould, *Legends of The Patriarchs and Prophets* (New York: Hurst & Co., n.d.), 26 f.; Don Cameron Allen, *The Legend of Noah* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1963), 86f.

⁵⁴ See Davis, 316ff.; Louis Ruchames, ed., *Racial Thought In America*, vol. 1, *From The Puritans to Abraham Lincoln: A Documentary History* (Amhurst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1969; New York: Gossett and Dunlap, 1970), 46ff.

⁵⁵ Davis.

⁵⁶ Ruchames, 89ff.

America" Phyllis writes:

'Twas mercy brought me from my
Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to under-
stand
That there's a God, that there's a
Savior too;
Once I redemption neither sought
nor knew.
Some view our sable race with
scornful eye,
'Their color is a diabolic die.'
Remember, Christians, Negroes,
black as Cain,
May be refined, and join th'
angelic train.⁵⁷

On the other hand, David Walker in his *Appeal* lambasts Whites for calling Black people the seed of Cain, informing them that he has read his Bible too without finding such a reference there. Not finding it in his Bible, Walker turns the tables and accuses White people of being those who are Cain's seed.⁵⁸

As has been anticipated, once more, the nineteenth century saw continuing debates, especially about the Ham-Canaan curse, but with increasing fury as pro-slavery and anti-slavery writers contested with each other. In a general way we may here cite several of the numerous views and counter-views that were propounded:⁵⁹ 1) the old curse of Ham-Canaan doctrine with no reference to the achievements of Hamites as presented in Genesis, chapter 10; 2) a curse of Canaan view that held only Canaan was cursed, and with attention paid to the sons of Ham as founders of ancient civilizations in African and Asia; 3) a new view that Ham had been *born black*, was later cursed outright, and that all his descendants partake of the curse; 4) a view that Cain, Ham, and Canaan were all tied together, making for a three-fold curse on Black peoples; 5) a new view that there was and is no curse upon Ham and his descendants, and that Canaan instead of having been black was white; 6) a resurrected Pre-Adamite view that forged a link with a theory of polygenesis and removed the Negro from the Adamic-Noahite human family and declared him a beast; 7) a view that held Negroes to be descendants of

⁵⁷ Quoted in Alan Lomax and Raoul Abdul, eds., *3000 Years Of Black Poetry* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1970), 205.

⁵⁸ David Walker, *Walker's Appeal In Four Articles* (1829), repr., with a new preface by William Loren Katz (New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1969), 71ff.

⁵⁹ T. Peterson, "The Myth of Ham Among White Antebellum Southerners," (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1975); 146, isolates four versions of the Ham Myth among Southern White Americans.

Adam-Noah, accepted Genesis, chapter 10, as referring to Black folk, and took note that Jesus was a colored man; 8) a multiple view that combined the whole or parts of several anti-Negro views; 9) a new and increasingly accepted view—a new Hamite doctrine, contributed to and accepted by the rising critical historical-literary study of the Bible, that removed Blacks from the Bible altogether. According to this last view, Ham and all his descendants were white.⁶⁰

All the afore-listed views, plus still others, continued on into the twentieth century with greater or lesser strength, varying according to different groups. And although the anti-Negro views might not have been as loudly voiced during the present century until 1954 and afterwards, they were hardly asleep. They were only dozing. The attention paid especially to the curse of Ham during the intervening years, even among mainline White denominations, was great, indeed!

As is quite well known, the Supreme Court decision of 1954, relative to separate and equal education, stabbed fully awake the anti-Negro Cain-Ham-Canaan views. On the other hand, it stirred into action advocates of the new Hamite doctrine. These latter, more or less sympathetic towards Blacks, did battle with protagonists for the old view.

Only in passing can we observe that after 1954, pro-segregationists revived every pro-slavery argument based upon Ham-Canaan-Cain in support of segregation. Such arguments continue today among some sects, some television ministries, and among such groups as the Ku Klux Klan.

On the other hand, some mainline White denominations have produced literature in refutation particularly of the Ham-Canaan doctrine. And several individual authors wrote similar books on the subject of segregation and the Bible. Such are the books *Segregation And The Bible* by Everett Tilson,⁶¹ and *Segregation And Scripture* by J. Oliver Buswell III.⁶² Both the denominational literature and the books were written from the position of the new Hamite doctrine which, as we have seen does not view Blacks (Negroes) as having been among the peoples of the Biblical world; and thus not subjects in the Biblical accounts about Cain, Ham, Canaan, or any other Biblical character.

To be noted also is the fact that in 1978 the Mormon Church admitted Blacks to the priesthood, thus removing, apparently, Negroes from a

⁶⁰ For a statement of this view, see William F. Albright, "The Old Testament World," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, George Arthur Buttrick, Commentary Editor (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1952), vol. 1, 233-277. See also Paul Heinisch, *History of The Old Testament*, trans. William G. Heidt (Collegetown, Minn.: The Order of St. Benedict, Inc., 1952), 52.

⁶¹ Everett Tilson, *Segregation and The Bible* (New York: Abingdon press., 1958).

⁶² J. Oliver Buswell, *Segregation and Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964).

curse on Cain-Ham-Canaan?

In recent years a new and unique interpretation has been presented by a Canadian scholar, Arthur C. Custance. He regards the Genesis Table of Nations as historically trustworthy, and tradition-wise believes that Noah's three sons represent the three racial groups that make up the world's peoples. To the Shemites he assigns Hebrews, Arabs, Babylonians, Assyrians, etc.; to the Japhethites, those whom he calls Caucasoids; and to the Hamites he assigns the Mongoloid and Negroid peoples. He then suggests that the curse that was pronounced upon Canaan or upon Ham should be interpreted to mean a servant "par excellence," i.e., the servants would perform a great service to their brethren.⁶³

Biblical Interpretation by Black Peoples

Up to this point reference has been made to only two Black popular interpreters. We turn now to view the subject as dealt with by Black peoples themselves. With respect to written documents one may go back to the year 1742 and the person of Jacob Elisa Capitein (1717-1742), then to Jupiter Hammond in 1760, and then continue in an unbroken line to the present.⁶⁴

In his booklet, *The Redemption Of Africa and Black Religion*, St. Clair Drake paints a beautiful picture of early Black Biblical interpretation by both literate and illiterate preachers, and by those whom he calls folk theologians. Ignoring Capitein, who aped the White pro-slavery advocates, Drake says that preachers and theologians were able to counter-attack White anti-Black interpretation by invalidating Noah's curse. They insisted that the curse had been wiped out with the coming of Christ, or by arguing that God is the father of all men and that all men are brothers. Further, they were able to point to the Black peoples in the Bible (using the Genesis Table of Nations), and to individual Black characters in the Bible, and glory in a great past history.⁶⁵

True as Mr. Drake's picture may appear on the surface, it does not represent the painting in its entirety. The literature from 1742 to the present, as well as oral responses, reveals responses and interpretations relative to the curse of Ham-Canaan if not with respect to a curse upon

⁶³ Custance, 120, 149.

⁶⁴ Accounts of Capitein may be found in Henri Gregoire, *An Enquiry Concerning the Intellectual and Moral Faculties and Literature of Negroes*, trans. D. B. Warden (Brooklyn, New York: Thomas Kirk, 1810; repr., College Park, Maryland: McGrath Publishing Co., 1967), 196-202; J.C. de Graft-Johnson, *African Glory* (New York: Walker & Co., 1954), 158ff.; and Johannes Verkuyl, *Break Down The Walls*, ed. and trans. Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973), 31f.

⁶⁵ St. Clair Drake, *The Redemption of Africa and Black Redemption* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1970), 48.

Cain. These responses and interpretations range all the way from unquestioning acceptance, to ignorance about it, through uncertainty, to scornful rejection.

With such a general preliminary observation having been made, I shall deal first with Black reaction to, if not Black interpretation of, a curse upon Cain. Of Phyllis Wheatley's acceptance of it and David Walker's rejection note already has been taken. Forty-five years after David Walker, in 1874, William Wells Brown wrote that Cain's curse as related to color was nothing more than speculation that falls to the ground when we trace back the genealogy of Noah, finding that he descended not from Cain but from Seth.⁶⁶ Nothing more appears about Cain in the writings of Black authors until the year 1883. In that year George Washington Williams published his *History Of The Negro Race from 1619 to 1880* in which he expresses the opinion that even among White people it had died out as an explanation of the Negro's color.⁶⁷ Indeed, it does appear to have died out among Black people in America even if it had not among Whites. By 1883 the Mormons had crystallized the curse or mark upon Cain as referring to Black peoples as a doctrine. Later Black writers have referred to it only in passing.

Joel A Rogers in his book, *Sex and Race*, published in 1944, reports, contrary to the view of the rabbis that Cain's face had turned black, that Black West Africans taught that Cain was originally black, but that when he killed Abel and God shouted at him in the garden he turned white from fright.⁶⁸ Over against this view, Marcus Garvey classified White people as descendants of Cain and Black people as the children of Abel.⁶⁹ James Baldwin, speaking for at least some Black people, states that just as we knew Blacks were in the eyes of White people cursed descendants of Ham, so *for us* White people were the descendants of Cain.⁷⁰ Olin P. Moyd makes reference to this report by Baldwin in his book, *Redemption in Black Theology*, published in 1979.⁷¹ And between Baldwin and Moyd, George D. Kelsey, in dealing with the White racist

⁶⁶ William Wells Brown, *The Rising Son* (Boston: A. G. Brown & Co., 1874; repr., New York: Negro Universities Press, 1970), 46-47.

⁶⁷ George Washington Williams, *History of The Negro Race In America From 1619 to 1880* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1883; repr., New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1968), vol. 1, 19.

⁶⁸ Joel A. Rogers, *Sex and Race*, 5th ed. (New York: Helga M. Rogers, 1944, 1972), vol. 3, 317.

⁶⁹ Amy Jacques-Garvey, ed., *Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*, with a new preface by William Loren Katz (New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1969), 412.

⁷⁰ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1962), 59.

⁷¹ Olin P. Moyd, *Redemption in Black Theology* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1979), 154ff.

views of the late Reverend Dr. G. G. Gillespie who had included the mark of Cain in comments about Negroes, made reference to it, 1965.⁷² Finally, Latta R. Thomas (1976) quotes David Walker's statement,⁷³ and Carl F. Ellis, Jr. refers to the mark of Cain as a myth.⁷⁴

A discussion of Black interpretations of the Ham-Canaan curse might well continue with the observation that up to a generation ago Black writers boasted proudly of Negroes' being the children of Ham.⁷⁵ They either by-passed, hid, or ignored the curse and emphasized, usually, as Drake points out, the glorious record of the children of Ham as set forth in the tenth chapter of Genesis. Additionally, great emphasis was placed upon Psalm 68 with its assertion that Ethiopia would stretch forth her hands to God.⁷⁶ And Drake's observation has been applicable especially down to 1900.

In reviewing publications by Black writers from 1837 to 1902, one notes that, with few exceptions, every Black writer dealt with a glorious, ancient Black history, based upon the Bible which was viewed as factual. Thus so spoke and wrote the Reverend H. Easton in 1837; James W.C. Pennington in 1841; R.B. Lewis in 1844; Henry H. Garnett in 1848; Martin R. Delany in 1852; Alexander Crumwell in 1862; William Wells Brown in 1863; Edward W. Blyden in 1857 and 1871; William Wells Brown again in 1874; George Washington Williams in 1883; Edward A. Johnson in 1891; Rufus L. Perry in 1893; Benjamin T. Tanner in 1902; and J. J. Pipkin in 1902. All these were Afro-Americans; all were traditionalists in their view of the Bible. Interestingly enough, the works of Perry and Tanner were written partly to refute the new Hamite doctrine that removed Blacks from the Bible.⁷⁷

For some Africans who lived in the period just surveyed in America, interpretation of the old Hamite doctrine was not so healthfully handled. Claude Wauthier reports that as early as 1870, at the first Vatican Council, a group of missionary bishops produced a document asking the Pope to release the Negro race from the curse which, it seems, comes from Ham.⁷⁸

Shortly after 1902, and continuing to the present, there are to be

⁷² George D. Kelsey, *Racism and The Christian Understanding of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), 26.

⁷³ Latta R. Thomas, *Biblical Faith and the Black Man* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1976), 49.

⁷⁴ Carl F. Ellis, *Beyond Liberation* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: Inter Varsity Press, 1983), 41.

⁷⁵ The number of Black writers who did so is legion.

⁷⁶ See Drake, and Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1972), 166ff.

⁷⁷ Speeches and books by the authors named are quite easily obtainable.

⁷⁸ Claude Wauthier, *The Literature & Thought of Modern Africa*, trans. Shirley Kay (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1967), 209.

found Black writers of Black history based upon the Bible. Most of these have been traditionalist and fundamentalist, unacquainted with or unaccepting of modern historical-literary Biblical studies. On the other hand, there has arisen an increasing number of Black Biblical scholars who are trained in critical exegetical methods, and who are interpreting the Bible from a Black perspective, and giving instructions to others on how to interpret the Bible through the use of critical methodologies. Among such scholars are Bishop Alfred G. Dunstan, Jr., The Reverend Jacob Dyer, Dr. Robert A. Bennett, and The Reverend Latta Thomas. This last author urges Blacks to hold on to the Biblical faith despite such interpretations as those that insist upon a curse upon Ham.⁷⁹

In Africa, the late Cheikh Anta Diop presented a non-traditional and critical treatment of the "Ham Legend" in this book *The African Origin Of Civilization: Myth or Reality*.⁸⁰ And E. Mveng of Cameroun treats what he calls the "Myth of Ham" in an article entitled "The Bible And Black Africa."⁸¹

Not to be excluded in a lecture of this kind is an aberrant type of Black Biblical interpretation that has existed for some two generations and is increasing among several groups. This type goes beyond Black identification of Black peoples with the Biblical Hamites and claims that Black peoples are to be identified with the ancient Jews; or with the ancient Hebrews-Israelites, as different from Jews of modern times. For these the Old Testament especially is a collection of writings by and about Black peoples.⁸²

Conclusion

Thus we come to the end of our general survey of three thousand years of Biblical interpretation with reference to Black peoples. The survey has shown that the most probable original text of the Hebrew was free of

⁷⁹ The authors listed are as follows: Alfred G. Dunstan, Jr., *The Black Man In The Old Testament And Its World* (Philadelphia: Dorrance & Co., 1974); Dyer; Robert A. Bennett, "Biblical Hermeneutics and The Black Preacher," *The Journal of The Interdenominational Theological Center*, 1 (Spring 1974): 38-53; Thomas.

⁸⁰ Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality?* ed. and trans. Mercer Cook (New York: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1974), 245ff.

⁸¹ E. Mveng, "La Bible Et L'Afrique Noire", *Proceedings of The Jerusalem Congress On Black Africa And The Bible, April 14-30, 1972*, eds. E. Mveng and R. J. Z. Werblowsky, (n. p.).

⁸² Among those that identify with the Biblical Jews are Black Jewish groups such as Church of The Living God; Church of God and Saints of Christ; Commandment Keepers Congregation, alternately known as Royal Order of Ethiopian Jews; and the Black Christian Nationalist movement of the Reverend Albert C. Cleague, Jr. Identifying with the Hebrews-Israelites as distinct from Jews is the Original Hebrew Israelite Nation of Jerusalem. A rather voluminous body of literature concerning these groups now exists.

pejorative statements with respect to peoples regarded as black by the original authors; and that, with one or two possible exceptions, the same holds true of inner-Biblical interpretation. Further, it has revealed that apart from extra-Biblical interpretations by the ancient rabbis and others like them, whose interpretations appear in Midrashim, Talmuds, haggadah, and targumim, there are no curses upon Cain, Ham, Canaan whereby they were cursed with blackness. Again, it has noted that early Gentile Christians failed to adopt the anti-Black interpretations of the Jews, while the Muslims did; and that later, Gentile Christians, particularly in Europe, adopted the interpretations and applied them to Black peoples whom they met in increasing numbers. And so it has continued unto this day. On the other hand, the survey has gone on to reveal that Black peoples, at times ambivalent, in the main have managed to invalidate the White interpretations of the old anti-Black Hamite doctrine; and at points have challenged the new Hamite view that removes Blacks from the Bible.

Two concluding observations may be attempted. Inasmuch as a curse of blackness whether upon Cain, or Ham, or Canaan does not appear in the Biblical text, those who take the Bible, including the Old Testament to be the Word of God, norm for faith and practice, would appear to be engaging in blasphemy when they substitute interpretations. Secondly, according to numerous Jewish scholars, many White Gentile Christians during modern times, and an increasing number of enlightened Black Biblical scholars, the interpretations of the ancient Jewish rabbis are to be classified as legends and myths. Thus, legend and myth have been made to serve as actual historical fact to the damnation of Black peoples, except where Black peoples have believed and acted otherwise.