The Curse of Canaan, Not Ham

For hundreds of years, the Curse of Ham theory was seen as the legitimate way to interpret the events described in Genesis 9, and used to justify the Atlantic slave trade of Africans to the New World. The Curse of Ham theory being that Noah’s son, Ham, and his descendants, Africans, were to serve Shem and Japheth as slaves, granting religious legitimacy to the Atlantic Slave Trade. However, through relatively basic analysis of Biblical scripture as well as a modern lens, it is not only apparent, but inconceivable that this theory has any clout to it.

Firstly, it is necessary to look at what the Bible actually says about the matter, and from there one can draw some basic conclusions, starting in Genesis 9:20-27. Shortly after the flood, Noah got drunk and lay naked in his tent, where he was found by Ham. We are told Ham “saw his father’s nakedness” which is somewhat ambiguous because simply seeing his father’s nakedness likely wouldn’t warrant a curse. However, the footnote comes in handy in this case, explaining that the sin here was that Ham broadcast his father’s nakedness rather than cover it, which is why the curse was spoken. Additionally, within Hebrew culture at the time, nakedness or seeing someone naked was seen as extremely disrespectful, so within that cultural framework it is easy to see why Ham intruding on his father would be an issue. Contrastingly, Ham’s

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brothers, Shem and Japheth, decide to cover their father in his moment of embarrassment which is where the fundamental divide between Ham and his brothers begins, as well as the division of the curse and its multiple effects. Upon awakening, Noah administers the curse saying, “Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers. . . May Canaan be the slave of Shem. May God extend the territory of Japheth; may Japheth live in the tents of Shem, and may Canaan be his slave”⁴. Over the years, this phrase has caused a great deal of confusion and led to different interpretations, some good, and some bad.

The most atrocious and unfortunately most famous interpretation is that the phrase “The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers” is meant to justify the Atlantic slave trade of Africans to the New World. This is so because it is traditionally accepted that from Ham came the dark-skinned people of Africa, from Japheth the people of Europe, and from Shem the people of Asia (including and more specifically Asia Minor). Though this theory had been used to justify slavery long before the slave trade, this association gained traction in its modern form in the late 1600s and was used for hundreds of years after⁵. There are two principal reasons this theory was so quick to catch on: during the Age of Discovery and prior to colonization, Europeans rarely had the opportunity to interact with Africans, let alone other non-European cultures. Another contributing factor was the strength of the Catholic church and its influence during the Medieval Era. These two factors simultaneously created a strong, fairly homogenized religious force in Europe while at the same time a relatively inwardly focused society, that is, one that did not interact with other cultures very much (as was the case throughout the world at this time). The

⁴ Hoerber, Concordia Bible: NIV, 20.
preceding considered, it is fair to say that Europeans’ strong religious background informed their worldview significantly, particularly at this time. As a result, some of the only pieces of background information many Europeans knew about Africans was that they were descended from Ham, and that they had dark skin. Thus it is not hard to see why Europeans associated dark skin with the curse, especially when large scale interactions between Europeans and Africans began to increase in number as Western colonization started.

The Curse of Ham theory was able to exist so long because the curse had three main parts that fed into and justified one another, all while giving Europeans a complex which enabled their actions: 1) dark skin was a sign of the curse; 2) the supposed hypersexuality of Africans was a result of the curse; and 3) this pagan immorality could only be cured by Christianity administered by Europeans through slavery. One popular view that helped establish the first of these points was that it was thought that Noah and his sons were born white and that the black skin was a marker of his indebtedness to his brothers. Secondly, the association between Africans and hypersexuality was largely influenced by a medieval Italian scholar named Annius of Viterbo. His writings in his book *Antiquitatum Variarum* indicate Ham as wild and sexually corrupt, passing this behavior down to his African ancestors. The most famous excerpt from Annius reads,

“Cham publicly corrupted the race of mortals... that there should be sexual intercourse as before the flood, with mothers, sisters, daughters, other men, beasts, or anything else one pleases...”

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7 Whitford, *Calvinist Heritage*, 27.

8 Ibid., 28.
Among those who followed Cham in this teaching were the Egyptians. . . they have retained the ancient custom of intercourse between brothers and sisters.⁹

The name Cham being a variation of Ham, Annius refers to Ham as a corrupter of humans whose sexual sin, which was thought at the time to have occurred during his intrusion on his drunken father, was inherited by his ancestors: Africans, and particularly Egyptians. This was likely thought due to the tradition of Egyptian royalty to maintain the purity of their bloodlines by intermarrying. Despite this, as far as once can tell, there isn’t any indication Ham’s sin was sexual in nature, therefore the root of Annius’ assumption that Africans are inherently lustful is without reason.

There are, of course, several glaring problems with this traditional interpretation. Firstly, the largest, most obvious issue with this is that the curse was on Canaan, not Ham, which pro-slavery arguers and defenders of the so-called Curse of Ham theory completely ignored¹⁰. Some speculate that because Ham was the one who sinned, Ham and the curse were tied together. As a result we often still refer to the curse as the “Curse of Ham” which just goes to show how ingrained this association is. This point as it stands wouldn’t have much merit if it weren’t for the fact that Canaan (again, the recipient of the curse) never went to Africa¹¹. Canaan settled in what is now referred to as Palestine, his descendants becoming known as the Canaanites. Considering this information, as well as the history of the Palestine region and that one of its ancient names was Canaan, it is difficult to understand how easily Curse of Ham theorists overlooked this relatively straight-forward information. Ultimately, it is true that some of Ham’s descendants did go to Africa; though that is of little direct importance to the narrative

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⁹ Annius of Viterbo, *Antiquitatum Variarum*, 1498, Berosus Book III.  
and the curse because it was his son Canaan that received the curse. What matters here is that: 1) the curse was on Canaan; and 2) Canaan did not go to Africa, became the ancestor of Canaanites, who were what we would recognize as a Middle Eastern people, not African.

The second major contradiction to Curse of Ham theory is that the Bible makes no reference to race or black skin whatsoever. The entirety of Genesis 9 says absolutely nothing about skin color, or anything that could even be misinterpreted as racial\textsuperscript{12}. One of the very foundations of the Curse of Ham theory is based upon the idea that the African race is destined to serve as slaves for the rest of humanity. One would think that for one of the biggest elements of the misinterpretation of the curse, skin color would have to have some Biblical source or at least be mentioned, yet this is not the case.

Since the structural faults of the Curse of Ham theory have been dealt with, it is well to recognize the moral faults as well. One of the most basic tenets of Christianity spoken by Jesus himself is to “Love thy neighbor as thyself”\textsuperscript{13}. It is strange how pointedly this relatively obvious principle was ignored by proponents of slavery. Obviously, enslaving other people is not in line with loving thy neighbor as thyself. In addition, the Atlantic slave trade, on an acutely basic level (although one could argue for more) defies two of the Ten Commandments: you shall not murder; and you shall not steal. As Christians, and more specifically Lutherans, in his explanations of the commandments Luther states that we are not to hurt or harm our neighbor but “help and support him in every physical need”\textsuperscript{14}. During the Atlantic trips back and forth from Africa, numbers exceeding one third of African slaves died just on the voyage to America due to

\textsuperscript{12} Braun, Mark. Book of Genesis.
\textsuperscript{13} Hoerber, \textit{Concordia Bible: NIV}, 1527.
cramped conditions and disease. This is to say nothing of the mistreatment and cruelty they received once they reached their destination. Slaves were often beaten, mistreated, killed, and in some cases raped. As far as stealing, Luther says, “We should. . . not take our neighbor’s money or possessions, or get them in any dishonest way, but help him to improve and protect his possessions and income”\textsuperscript{15}. Slave owners directly violated this by profiting from their slaves’ labor, that is taking all of the the fruits of the slaves labor without consent from the slave, as well as violating their right to live freely. They were treated as property, perhaps the greatest violation of natural rights possible.

Since the Curse of Ham theory and its traditional message has fell out of popular view due to increased societal awareness of racial issues as well as the array of problems the theory has to begin with, other theories have sprung up to explain what exactly was meant by the curse in Genesis 9. Since the curse was on Canaan, it is best to start there. Canaan’s descendants became the Canaanites; a loosely-defined ethnic group of people that inhabited Palestine until the arrival of the Israelites during the time of Moses and Joshua. Many theorists believe that the Curse of Canaan refers to the conquest of Canaan by the Israelites described in the book of Joshua\textsuperscript{16}. In Joshua 9, the Gibeonites, a people living in the land of Canaan were enslaved and performed labor for the Israelite community\textsuperscript{17}. Denise Kettering, in her review of \textit{The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era: The Bible and Justification for Slavery}, writes, “The tale itself--related in Genesis 9:20-27-- most likely reflects conditions in the tenth century B.C.E.,

\textsuperscript{15}Luther's Small Catechism.
\textsuperscript{16}Hoerber, \textit{Concordia Bible: NIV}, 20.
\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., 303.
specifically the enslavement and debasement of ‘Canaanites’ by the Israelite monarchy\(^{18}\). This interpretation of the Curse of Canaan narrative makes much more sense due to the fact that it is talking about the curse as it appears in Genesis 9; spoken on Canaan, and not his father. There are no major issues with this interpretation, it says nothing about race, and neither does the original curse. These things considered, this is likely the best contemporary interpretation of the events related in Genesis 9 because it has no significant contradictions and remains consistent and literal throughout.

Ultimately, it is best to analyze the Curse of Canaan within the context of the Old Testament, where evidence suggests that it is fulfilled with the enslavement of the Canaanites upon the arrival of the Israelites in Canaan. The Curse of Ham theory, being literarily unsupported, historically/chronologically unsupported, morally inconsistent with Christian doctrine, as well as racist, can be dismissed in favor of contemporary theories involving Canaan and his descendants: the Canaanites, and their enslavement by Israel in the tenth century BC. Unlike the Curse of Ham theory, this argument has biblical, chronological, and doctrinal support. As far as the debate as to whether the Bible is at fault or condones slavery that commonly accompanies discussions about the curse, there is no evidence for this. The Bible is the inspired word of God; the tendency of humans to corrupt, misinterpret, and twist it for selfish purposes is nothing new which is no fault of the Bible. Among other lessons Christians can learn from the Curse of Canaan is to grow in the Word; that is, to understand and interpret it in accordance to the rest of God’s Word, and to keep others from bending it for nefarious purposes, as humans often do.

Works Cited

Annius of Viterbo, *Antiquitatum Variarum*, 1498, Berosus Book III.


Read the Book of Genesis online. Study Scripture verses with full summary, commentary, concordances, historical background and more to help you study the Bible. Although these patriarchs settled in Canaan, their original homeland was Mesopotamia. The closest ancient literary parallels to Ge 1-38 also come from Mesopotamia. Enuma elish, the story of the god Marduk’s rise to supremacy in the Babylonian pantheon, is similar in some respects (though thoroughly mythical and polytheistic) to the Ge 1 creation account. In fact, the latter features the same basic motif of creation-rebellion-flood as the Biblical account. Clay tablets found in 1974 at the ancient (c. 2500-2300 B.C.) site of Ebla (modern Tell Mardikh in northern Syria) may also contain some intriguing parallels. The curse of Ham (actually placed upon Ham's son Canaan) occurs in the Book of Genesis, imposed by the patriarch Noah. It occurs in the context of Noah's drunkenness and is provoked by a shameful act perpetrated by Noah's son Ham, who "saw the nakedness of his father". The exact nature of Ham's transgression and the reason Noah cursed Canaan when Ham had sinned have been debated for over 2,000 years. And Ham the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his brothers outside. But Shem and Japeth took a garment, and laid it on both their shoulders, and went backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness (Genesis 9:22,23). Ham looked upon his father's nakedness but Shem and Japeth did not. Instead they covered it. Noah awoke from his drunkenness, realized what Ham had done and then proceeded to curse Canaan. Why did Noah curse Canaan? Was not Ham the one that committed the sin? Furthermore, what was the sin of Ham that caused Noah to curse the descendants of Ham? Why was the punishment so severe? Sin Of Ham. FAIR Answers Wiki Table of Contents. Gospel Topics: "Today, the Church disavows the theories advanced in the past that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor or curse, or that it reflects actions in a premortal life". Gospel Topics: "Even after 1852, at least two black Mormons continued to hold the priesthood". Question: What are the "curse of Cain" and the "curse of Ham"? Question: When did a biblical curse become associated with the "Hamites"?