

## EARLY ISLAMIC EXEGESIS ON THE SO-CALLED "HAMITIC MYTH"

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Much ink has been spilled recently on claims and counter-claims associating the so-called "curse of Ham" with an ideology of racism. The ideology in question is based on what has come to be known as the "Hamitic Myth," according to which a rationalizing divine authority for the enslavement of black Africans may be found in racist interpretations of the biblical Curse of Canaan. The textual root of the discussion lies in the short but enigmatic narrative found in Genesis 9.

The sons of Noah who came out of the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth – Ham being the father of Canaan. These three were the sons of Noah, and from these the whole world branched out. Noah, the tiller of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. He drank of the wine and became drunk, and he uncovered himself within his tent. Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside. But Shem and Japheth took a cloth, placed it against both their backs and, walking backward, they covered their father's nakedness; their faces were turned the other way, so that they did not see their father's nakedness. When Noah woke up from his wine and learned what his youngest son and done to him, he said, "Cursed be Canaan; the lowest of slaves shall be to his brothers." And he said, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem; let Canaan be a slave to them. May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be a slave to them."<sup>1</sup>

This is indeed a baffling text, and for a number of reasons that extend beyond the scope of this discussion. For the purposes of this essay, however, four issues seem to stand out. One is Ham's guilt for seeing his father's nakedness, another is the repeated insistence of the text that Ham is the father of Canaan; the third is the fact that Canaan rather than Ham is cursed, seemingly for the guilt of his father, and the fourth is the statement, made three times in these verses, that Canaan will be a slave to his brothers (verse 25) and to the Shemites (26-27) and Japhethites (27)<sup>2</sup>. A considerable amount of exegesis in Jewish and Christian tradition from ancient times to the present has been devoted to these and other issues raised by

\* This essay was written and completed before the release of D. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press 1994).

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 9:18-27, Jewish Publication Society new translation.

<sup>2</sup> *Lamô* may simply refer back to "his brothers" of verse 25.

this text. In the last twenty or thirty years, and particularly in the 1990's, both scholarly and popular articles of varying quality have been written on these exegetical responses to the Genesis core with the goal of determining their possible impact on racism in medieval and modern times.

In the 1990's the subject evolved into a public debate centered around early Jewish interpretations of the text. The claim was made, as expressed by Steven L. McKenzie, as follows: "Because some of Ham's descendants, notably Cush, are black (See Gen.10:6-14), the 'curse of Ham' has been interpreted as black (Negroid) skin color and features in order to legitimate slavery and oppression of people of African origin. This interpretation occurs first in the Talmud and has persisted in certain circles."<sup>3</sup> According to the general argument, rabbinic exegesis on the Genesis passage given above became the core ideology from which later Christian and Muslim interpreters constructed racist doctrines wherein was rationalized divine authority for the enslavement of Africans by white Europeans<sup>4</sup>.

Two articles published in 1996-1997<sup>5</sup>, both based in part on the important earlier work of Ephraim Isaac<sup>6</sup>, uncover the fallacies of this argument. Working independently, David Aaron and David Goldenberg examine the rabbinic sources that are cited as serving as the basis of the ideology in detail. By unpacking the complex hermeneutics surrounding the characterizations of Ham and his sons, they show how the theory of a Jewish "Hamitic Myth" is a misconstruction of rabbinic thinking based mostly on misreadings and misunderstanding of rabbinic literature in translation. At about the same time, Benjamin Braude traced the history of exegesis on the topic in medieval and early modern sources, demonstrating the intertextual complexity and fluidity among the medieval and early modern sources treating the issue<sup>7</sup>. He concludes that early Jewish exegesis could have had

<sup>3</sup> "Ham/Canaan, Cursing of," in *The Oxford Companion to the Hebrew Bible* (1993), p. 268.

<sup>4</sup> This argument is put forth also by Edith Sanders, "The Hamitic Hypothesis: Its Origins and Functions in Time Perspective," *Journal of African History* 10/4 (1969), pp. 521-532; J. R. Willis, "The Ideology of Enslavement in Islam," in F. R. Willis (Ed.), *Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa*. (London: Frank Cass 1983); The Nation of Islam (no author), *The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews*, (Boston: Historical Research Dept. of the Nation of Islam 1991); Tony Martin, *The Jewish Onslaught: Despatches from the Wellesley Battlefield*, (Dover, MA: Majority Press 1993); David Brion Davis, "The Slave Trade and the Jews," *New York Review of Books* 41/21 (1994), pp. 14-16.

<sup>5</sup> David H. Aaron, "Early Rabbinic Exegesis on Noah's Son Ham and the So-Called 'Hamitic Myth,'" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LXIII/4 (1996), pp. 721-759; David Goldenberg, "The Curse of Ham: A Case of Rabbinic Racism?" in Jack Salzman and Cornel West (eds.), *Struggles in the Promised Land: Toward a History of Black-Jewish Relations in the United States*, (NY: Oxford University Press 1997), pp. 21-51.

<sup>6</sup> Isaac Ephraim, "Genesis, Judaism, and the Sons of Ham," in Willis (ed.), *Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa*.

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin Braude, "The Sons of Noah and the Construction of Ethnic and Geographical Identities in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods," *William and Mary Quarterly* 54:1 (1997), pp. 103-142.

little or no impact on later ideological developments, which evolved in direct response to changes in contemporary science (and pseudo-science), technology, economics and politics.

David Goldenberg traces the historical path of interpretation in the following general sequence. At the core is the brief biblical narrative culminating in Genesis 9:25, which is an etiologic Israelite myth that justifies a negative attitude toward and the eventual domination of the Canaanite peoples among whom the ancient Israelites lived. As far as can be ascertained, Canaanites were neither black nor of African heritage, nor were they perceived as such by Israelites, and the biblical text includes no reference to skin color or other physical characteristics. In fact, racially and ethnically, Canaanites seem to have been as close to the Israelites as a non-Israelite could get. In the next level, rabbinic interpretive enhancements of the narrative associate Ham or his offspring with physical characteristics including, possibly, dark skin and other traits of sub-Saharan African peoples. At this level, the legend served as one of many kinds of etiologic myths found among many different peoples that explain why certain peoples are different from those creating the etiologies. In the case of the rabbinic legend, the differences are formulated as divine punishment for a specific sin, but the rabbinic explanation differs from the curse of Genesis 9:25 in that it refers to Ham and not Canaan, the punishment refers to a change in physical characteristics and not slavery, and the punishment occurs as fated or divinely determined without Noah having any part in it. This is a myth that explains "somatic norm preference," as Goldenberg puts it, and not racism. Whereas the punishment of slavery is a result of the Genesis curse and involves only on Canaan and his line, the change in skin color is associated with Ham's other son, Kush, is independent of the curse, and is not associated with slavery. There is no association, according to Goldenberg, between black skin color and slavery at the biblical or rabbinic level. That association would come only later with the Islamic and then later Christian interpretive layers, when the curse of slavery and blackness are joined together in order to provide authoritative justification for enslaving Africans under Muslim and Christian slavers. The recent accusations against the Jews as the originators of this association are therefore a result of misreadings of a complicated rabbinic literature. The misreadings stem largely from the reliance on poor translations into European languages, but they are not without a little interest in scapegoating.

Aaron and Goldenberg's results are convincing in relation to the early Jewish interpretive literature, and they both acknowledge the need to extend the examination into Christian and Islamic literature, where very little work has been devoted to traditions on the subject<sup>8</sup>. This essay will begin to

<sup>8</sup> See, however, Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Inquiry*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1990).

fill that gap by examining early Islamic renderings and interpretations of the story. It may at first appear odd that Islam has responded to the narrative at all, since it does not appear in the Qur'ān. In fact, the name, Ham, is never mentioned in the qur'anic renderings of the story of Noah, and it is quite likely that he is never referred to there, even indirectly. The tale nevertheless entered Islamic civilization because of its importance among neighboring Jews and Christians who place it within the framework of their own Scripture. Because of the many deep parallels between Islamic and Judeo-Christian Scriptures, it was not uncommon for tales and issues found in the Bible but not in the Qur'ān to enter into the regular religious discourse of Islam.<sup>9</sup> The tale of the curse of Canaan and the punishment of Ham became of enough importance that dozens of writers included it in their universal histories, collections of stories of the ancient prophets, and even occasionally in Qur'ān commentaries.

Among the earliest written records of the story is that of the early ninth century Ibn Hishām in his *Kitāb al-tijān fi mulūk ḥimyar*<sup>10</sup>. The Ibn Hishām material is given on the authority of Wabb b. Munabbih, a Yemenite convert to Islam who died in 728 or 732<sup>11</sup>. Conceptually but not literally, the beginning of this version follows earlier Jewish interpretive literature suggesting that Ham's sin was a result of having sexual relations in the Ark during the time of the Flood<sup>12</sup>.

Noah said to his sons:....and keep away from the women. Noah made a place of seclusion for the women and placed ashes<sup>13</sup> outside. Ham came to his wife at night and had sexual relations with her. In the morning, Noah saw the tracks in the ashes and said: Who came to the women? They answered: We don't know who came. Ham hid [his deed] from [his father]. So Noah said: O God!

<sup>9</sup> Reuven Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis*, (Albany, NY: SUNY press 1990).

<sup>10</sup> Ibn Hishām, *Kitāb al-tijān fi mulūk ḥimyar*, (Ṣan'ā', Yemen: Center for Yemenite Study and Research 1979).

<sup>11</sup> There is yet no consensus whether Wabb was a Christian or a Jew before his conversion, but he is clearly a source for much biblical tradition that entered early Islamic religious discourse.

<sup>12</sup> Genesis Rabba Ch. 36:7; Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 108b; Tanhuma Noah 15, etc. (these sources are discussed in detail by Aaron and Goldenberg). The reason, usually not given explicitly, is that proper conduct during a period when the world was being destroyed by a flood should reflect mourning, during which sexual relations are forbidden (Aaron, 740). Tanhuma (Noah 15) states explicitly that Canaan, the son who would bear the curse, was conceived in the Ark.

<sup>13</sup> *Ramād* (Hebrew *remeš*, is cognate with the related Arabic *r.m.ḏ*). The Hebrew word employed to denote the blackening of Ham's face in Genesis Rabba 36:7 is *ḥfūḥum*, a word that is intimately related to blackened ashes or charcoal, rather than the more common color descriptive, *shahōr*. While Aaron notes the paranomasia between the name, Ham and the descriptive, *ḥfūḥum*, the use of ashes in this early Arabic narrative increases the possibility of an intertextual link between the two tellings, even if no surviving Jewish telling of the story includes that particular motif (Cf. Aaron 745-748).

(*Ja-qāla Nūḥ Allāhumma!*) Blacken the face and the face of the descendants of whoever disobeyed and had sexual relations with his wife! Ham's wife gave birth to a black boy. He named him Kūsh and knew that the curse/prayer (*al-dā'wa*) had reached Him...<sup>14</sup>.

Here we have an innovation from most of the rabbinic material. In most of the early rabbinic passages, the changes in Ham's or his progeny's physical characteristics do not result from any action of Noah<sup>15</sup>. They are, rather (and as has been pointed out by Aaron and Goldenberg), a case of *middāḥ k'neged middāḥ*: "measure for measure," something that occurs according to some fateful or divine logic but not through the intervention of human beings. This is most obvious and even explained explicitly in the Tanhuma passage: "And with regard to Ham, because he saw the nakedness of his father with his eyes they became reddened, because he told about it with his mouth his lips became twisted, because he turned his head [to see his naked father] the hair of his head and face became singed, and because he did not cover his father's nakedness he went naked with his foreskin extended. This is because the recompense meted out by the Holy One blessed be He is meted out measure for measure."<sup>16</sup> In the Ibn Hishām text, on the other hand, Noah prays that God intervene by blackening Ham's and his descendants' faces. Is this a curse? Or is this a case where Noah is trying to determine the guilty party through divine intervention? The text itself is not absolutely clear, and although the term, *dā'wa*, usually carries the force of "prayer," it can also mean "curse." The thrust of the narrative suggests that the former definition is operative in this instance. Just as Noah scattered black ashes on the ground to find any one disobedient, so should the guilty party's face be blackened and thus revealed. Noah called upon God to reveal the guilty party by blackening his features. While this can certainly be considered a curse of blackness, the form of the act is reminiscent of sympathetic magic invoked to determine and simultaneously punish the guilty party.

Noah called upon God to blacken the faces of both Ham and his descendants, something that would suggest a permanent punishment or curse. Yet the narrative ends with the comment that Noah learned that his prayer was efficacious and that Ham was the perpetrator from the blackness of Ham's baby son's face. It does not suggest that Ham's face was blackened – only

<sup>14</sup> P. 32. Arabic *dā'ā*, which generally means to pray, in this case means to invoke God against the perpetrators of the crime.

<sup>15</sup> The exception is Genesis Rabba 36:7: "Rabbi Huna said in the name of Rabbi Yosef, '[Noah said] You prevented me from doing something in the dark [that is, intercourse]; therefore, that man will be ugly and dark.'"

<sup>16</sup> Tanhuma, Noah 13.

his son, Kush<sup>17</sup>, suggesting that Noah's intent was merely to identify the guilty party.

This passage continues further on with a genealogy of Ham. It appears, according to this genealogy, that not all of Ham's descendants are dark-skinned. From the black Kush derives Ḥabasha, to be sure, known to Muslim geographers and travelers as an area in which black Africans lived, but Ham has another son named Mārī, from whom derives Kan'an and Barbar whom Muslims did not characterize as dark-skinned. Ham also fathers four other sons, Qibt, Sind, Qawl, and 'Āmūr, representing peoples whom were characterized by the geographers with various hues of skin color.

Later on in the narrative (p. 38), it becomes clear that Ham's descendants rule over the descendants of Ham's brother, Japheth, and even levy over them the *kharāj* tax. This clearly signifies the political superiority of Ham's descendants; it certainly does not suggest slavery. In fact, a descendant of Ham is said to have been the first human to accumulate the power necessary to demand the *kharāj*: "Al-Qawṭ [ibn Ham] was the first of Noah's children to levy the *kharāj* over the land." To conclude Ibn Hishām's rendering of the legend, we note how the physical change occurring to Ham and his descendants (or perhaps only to his descendants through Kūsh) as a result of his illicit sexual relations in the Ark seems to demonstrate an awareness of Noah's curse of Canaan as depicted in the Bible and Midrash. Canaan, however, is not mentioned, nor is it clear that the narrative has much concern for establishing a divine curse over any of Ham's progeny.

Another early Islamic source for this story is the *Kitāb al-jabaqāt al-kabīr* of Ibn Sa'd (d.845). In the early part of his work, Ibn Sa'd incorporates a great deal of material with parallels with Jewish legendary lore, but there is no mention of any sin or curse associated with Ham. Ibn Sa'd cites a few authorities regarding Ham's progeny. On the authority of the Prophet (Muhammad), Ham is the father of the Ethiopians (*al-ḥabash*). On the authority of Ibn al-Musayyib, Ham fathered the blacks (*al-sūdān*), the Berbers, and the Copts<sup>18</sup>. According to Ibn Sa'd, "The children of Ham settled in the south (*fī l-janūb*) where the west winds blow, a place called *Dārūm*. God gave them less tawny and white [complexions], populated their cities and their skies, and kept the plague (*al-ūn*) away from them."<sup>19</sup> The use of the term, *dārūm*, clearly indicates an association with Jewish tradition since it means "south" in Hebrew<sup>20</sup> while it conveys no meaning of that sort in

<sup>17</sup> The name, Kush, in the Bible can represent Egypt as a whole and upper Egypt, where the people have always been much darker in skin color than in Lower Egypt. Jeremiah 13:23 suggests an association between Kush and a skin color different from that of Israelites, though not necessarily darker.

<sup>18</sup> Ibn Sa'd, *Kitāb al-jabaqāt al-kabīr*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir 'Aṭā, (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmiyya 1997), p. 18.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>20</sup> Ezekiel 42:16-19.

Arabic, nor was it understood by Ibn Sa'd as a geographical term but rather as a place name.

It appears strange that Ibn Sa'd knows of no curse associated with either Canaan or Ham, both characters of whom he knew. Stranger still, Ibn Sa'd has Noah invoking God to bring certain specific types of recompense to a number of others traveling on the Ark: "...[Ibn Sa'd] said: Noah prayed (*dā'a*) that the lion be stricken with fever<sup>21</sup>, sociability for the dove (*al-ḥamāma*), and difficulty of sustenance for the crow...."<sup>22</sup> None of these animals are mentioned in the preceding narrative, although in an earlier rendering of the story of Cain and Abel (*Hābil wa-Qābil*), a crow teaches Cain how to bury his brother by scratching in the ground to bury its own dead<sup>23</sup>.

Ibn Qutayba (d.889) includes Noah in his universal history, *Kitāb al-ma'ārif*<sup>24</sup>, and cites the Torah as the authority for the narrative he provides (*wa-fī l-tawrā*):

...Ham the father of Canaan saw his father's genitals and told his brothers about it. So Shem and Japheth took a robe and threw it over their shoulders, walking backwards, concealing their father's genitals as they faced backwards. When Noah awoke from his stupor and knew what his youngest son had done to him, he said: "cursed be the father of Canaan, a slave of slaves to his brothers" (*mal'īn abīl Kan'an 'abd li-aklawayhi*)<sup>25</sup>. He said: "blessed is Shem. May God enlarge Japheth and he be free in the dwellings of Shem. May the father of Canaan be a slave to both of them."

In this rendering, Noah very clearly curses only Ham, the father of Canaan, and prophesizes Ham's future status of becoming a slave to his brothers. This is interesting for a number of reasons. The first is that the author claims to cite the Torah (not uncommon among Muslim commentators of this and earlier periods), and his narrative does indeed parallel the Genesis story quite closely. On the other hand, it differs critically from the Genesis version in that Ham and not Canaan is the recipient of the curse. In his citing the "Torah" as the source of this tradition, could he be referring directly to the Genesis text, or could he be referring to "Torah" as the rabbi of his generation did, to Jewish exegetical tradition as a whole? It is clear that the rabbis had difficulty with the Genesis telling in which Ham was obviously the guilty party while only his son Canaan was cursed, and

<sup>21</sup> *wa-dā'a Nūḥun 'alā l-usadi an tulqā 'alayhi l-ḥummā*. Note the assonance of *ḥummā* with the name, *Ḥām*, and the Jewish play on words of Ham's curse of being *ḥam meḥum*. Note also the assonance between *Hām* and the dove, *al-ḥamāma*.

<sup>22</sup> p. 18. The Arabic text has *wa-lī l-ḥamāmat bi-l-ūnsi wa-lī l-ghurābi bi-shaqā' l-mā'ishati*. There is no mention of any of these animals in the preceding narrative.

<sup>23</sup> p. 14. Cf. Qur'an 5:27-31.

<sup>24</sup> Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-ma'ārif*, (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, 1407/1987), p. 15-16.

<sup>25</sup> This parallels the fourth century rendering of Aphrahat the Syrian (Sidney Griffith, unpublished paper, "The Sons of Noah in Eastern Christian Tradition," delivered at the Middle East Studies Association and American Academy of Religion/Society for Biblical Literature joint session, "The Sons of Noah in Jewish, Christian and Muslim Traditions," San Francisco, 1997).

they suggest a number of solutions to the problem<sup>26</sup>. Ibn Qutayba may have been influenced here as much by rabbinic as by biblical material. The second point of interest in this version is that it seems to provide an early rendering of the ideal-typical "Curse of Ham." It is Ham who is cursed – not Canaan. It is Ham who will be the slave of his brothers. The third point of interest is that nowhere in this tradition is Ham associated with blackness, nor can it be extrapolated, for no genealogies are provided here for any of Noah's sons.

Ibn Qutayba provides a second tradition on the authority of Wahb b. Munabbih:

Ham b. Noah was a white man, handsome of face and form. God altered his color and the color of his progeny on account of the curse (*da'wa*) of his father. He went away and his children followed him. They settled along the coast of the sea and God gave them to increase. They are the blacks (*al-ḥumū 'l-sūdān*). Their food is fish, and they sharpen their teeth until they are like needles because of the fish upon which they are dependent. Some of his children settled in the Maghreb. Ham begat Kūsh b. Ham and Kan'an b. Ham and Fūt b. Ham. As for Fūt, he came to settle in the land of India. Its people are from his descendants. As for Kūsh and Kan'an, the various types from the Sūdān, Nubia, al-Zanj, al-Qurrān, al-Zaghāwa, Abyssinia, Copts, and Berbers come from his children<sup>27</sup>.

This tradition is cited independently of the previous one, but it follows it in Ibn Qutayba's collection and in fact does provide a certain continuity. Noah is presumed to have invoked God's curse of Ham, and this curse is directly associated with black skin color. It is not tied directly to the biblical story but it nevertheless presumes knowledge of it.

Why would Ibn Qutayba have strung these two independent traditions together? It is likely that he did so in order to associate Noah's curse of Ham in the earlier narrative with the divine sanction of altering Ham's skin color in this narrative. If this were the case, then Ibn Qutayba's desire to do so would reflect a general perception among the people of his day of that association, but at the same time suggest that no authoritative traditions were available to him that could confirm this. Like many pious seekers of knowledge and collectors of tradition, I suspect that Ibn Qutayba did not purposefully alter the traditions available to him, but his job as redactor allowed him to create a full narrative that essentially achieved the same purpose by joining together two separate renderings that would provide a "proof text" for what may have already been "common knowledge": Ham's curse included both slavery and blackness.

<sup>26</sup> Genesis Rabbah 36:7.

<sup>27</sup> All of these references aside from Qur'ān are clear references to Africa, and usually to black Africa (see Yāqūt [Beirut] 4:461-2).

Al-Ya'qūbī (d.891-2) does not provide an authority for his rendering of the tale.<sup>28</sup>

When Noah went out from the Ark, he locked it up and gave the key to his son Shem. He then sowed and planted a vineyard and the earth was fruitful. When Noah was sleeping one day, his garment slipped off him and Ham saw his father's private parts (*saw'atalu*). He laughed, and this was told to his brothers Shem and Japheth, so they took a garment, brought it to him with their faces turned away from him (*wa-wijūhuhum maṣrifatun 'anhu*), and threw the garment over him. When Noah awoke from his sleep and knew what happened, he cursed Canaan b. Ham (*da'ā 'alā Kan'an b. Hām*) but he did not curse Ham (*wa-lā yad'u 'alā Hām*). Among his descendants were the Copts, Abyssinians (*al-Ḥabash*), and Indians (*al-Hind*). Canaan was the first of the descendants of Noah to return to the arts of the children of Cain (*Qābil*). He engaged in entertainment, music, melodies, drums, musical instruments, and cymbals<sup>29</sup>. He obeyed Satan [by engaging] in amusement and trivialities.

Ya'qūbī's rendering here appears to correct the "curse of Ham" association that we observed in Ibn Qutayba by noting specifically that Noah did not curse Ham. Noah's "curse" was directed to Canaan only, in accordance with the Genesis telling, but it is associated with what Ya'qūbī considers the frivolous and unseemly behavior of engaging in music and other entertainment. Ham is indeed depicted here as the father of black or dark-skinned peoples (Copts, Abyssinians and Indians), but no curse is associated with any of them.

When we arrive to Ṭabarī (d.923), the great collector of narrative lore, the traditions expand exponentially and the relationships between them become more complex. For example, in a tradition attributed to al-Ḥārith...Ibn 'Abbās, "[Noah] carried with him onto the Ark the body of Adam and made it a barrier between the women and the men."<sup>30</sup> This comment is made immediately after the tradition quotes the Qur'ān: "So he took along, as God commanded (Q.11:40), 'pairs, two of each kind.'

Some three pages later, among a collection of traditions organized around the question of how many people accompanied Noah on the Ark, Ṭabarī cites a tradition attributed to al-Qāsim...Ibn Jurayj: "I was told that Noah brought along his three sons, the three wives of his sons, and the wife of Noah, totaling eight including the wives. The names of his sons were Yāfith, Hām, and Sām. Now Ham assaulted his wife [sexually] in the Ark,

<sup>28</sup> Ahmad b. Abī Ya'qūb, *Ta'rikh*. ed. M.T. Houtsma (titled *Historiae*) (Leiden: Brill 1969), pp. 12-13.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Genesis 4:21-22.

<sup>30</sup> I, 192: *wa-ḥamala ma'ahu jasada Ādama fa-j'alahu ḥajjīzan bayna 'l-nisā'i wa-'l-rijālī*. Much earlier on in his work, around a discussion of Adam and Eve's death, Ṭabarī mentions that Noah would dig up their bodies at a future time so that they would not be desecrated during the Flood. Their bodies would then be reburied after the flood waters had receded (I, 163).

so Noah prayed that his seed be altered and he [Ham] produced the blacks."<sup>31</sup>

In still another collection of traditions organized around when in the Islamic year calendar the Flood occurred and when the survivors descended from the Ark, Ṭabarī cites a tradition on the authority of "one of the people of the Torah" (*ba'd al-tawrāt*): "There was no propagating [on the Ark?]. Children were born to Noah only after the Flood and after Noah's leaving the Ark."<sup>32</sup>

Ṭabarī cites many traditions confirming the association of Ham's offspring with people of color, but there is no obvious consistency among them. According to al-Ḥārith... Ibn 'Abbās: "Born to Noah was Shem whose children were white and mixed (*wa-fī waldihī bayāḍun wa-udma-tun*); Ham whose children were black with a little bit of whiteness (*wa-fī waldihī sawāḍun wa-bayāḍun*); and Japheth whose children were light reddish brown (*al-sluḡra wa-l-ḥamara*)."<sup>33</sup> This tradition also states that "the Arabs" called one of Noah's sons, mentioned but unnamed in the Qur'ān<sup>34</sup> but to whom is generally referred in Qur'ānic exegesis as Yam, Canaan. It continues with a passage that is vocalized differently in two different editions. In the Leiden edition<sup>35</sup> it is rendered *wa-innamā hānu 'ammunā yām*, and translated by Rosenthal, "He occurs in the saying: Our paternal uncle Yam — he was balmy."<sup>36</sup> In the Beirut edition<sup>37</sup>, the vocalization is *wa-innamā hānu 'ammunā yām*, thereby rendering something like "Thus is the Arab saying: But Yam was destroyed."<sup>38</sup>

More traditions associate the three brothers with geographical areas or ethnic peoples known to the Arabs, but without great consistency. It will be of interest to note one tradition claiming that not only did Ham's son Kush father blacks, but so did Ham's son Canaan<sup>39</sup>:

Muḥammad b. Sahl b. 'Askar... Wabb b. Munabbih: It is said that Shem b. Noah is the father of the Arabs, Persians, and Byzantines; Ham is the father of the Blacks; and Japheth the father of the Turks and Gog and Magog<sup>40</sup> who are cousins of the Turks...<sup>41</sup> The wife of Ham b. Noah was Naḥlab bt. Mārīb, b.

<sup>31</sup> I, 195-6: *Fa-asāba Ḥamun 'mrā tahū fī-l-safnatī fa-da'a Nūḥun an tuḡhayyara nuḡḡuhū fa-jā 'a bi-l-sūdān*.

<sup>32</sup> I, 198.

<sup>33</sup> I, 190.

<sup>34</sup> Q. 11:42-47.

<sup>35</sup> *Annales*, ed. M. J. De Goeje, 1879-81, repr. Brill 1964, p. 199.

<sup>36</sup> *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. I (Albany: SUNY, 1989), p. 368.

<sup>37</sup> *Dār al-kutub al-ilmīyya*, n.d., p. 119, but probably a reprint of the Cairo, *Dār al-nu'arīf* edition.

<sup>38</sup> I am grateful to Professor Mohamed al-Hawari of 'Eyn Shams University for directing me to the Cairo edition. This of course refers to the death of Noah's son, unnamed in the Qur'ān but sometimes referred to as Yam in the exegetical literature (Qur'ān 11:42-43).

<sup>39</sup> Ṭabarī I, 211-212.

<sup>40</sup> See Gen. 10:2; Q. 21:96.

<sup>41</sup> A few lines later, it is said that the Slavs also derive from Japheth, as did other biblical characters known from the Genesis genealogies.

al-Darmasīl b. Maḥwīl b. Khanūkh b. Qayn b. Adam. She bore him three offspring: Kūsh b. Ham b. Noah; Qūt (Put) b. Ham; and Kan'ān b. Ham. Kūsh married Qarnabīl bt. Batāwīl b. Tiras b. Japheth. They claim that she bore for him the Abyssinians (*al-Ḥabash*), the Sinds (*al-Sind*), and the Indians (*al-Hind*). Qūt married Bakht, another daughter of Batāwīl..., and it is said that she bore him the Copts (*al-qubṭ*), the Copts of Egypt (*qubṭ miṣr*). Canaan married Arsal, another daughter of Batāwīl..., and she bore him the Blacks (*al-asāwīḍ*), Nubians (*nūba*), Fazzān, Blacks (*zanj*), *Zaghāwa*, and all the various peoples of the Sudan (*al-sūdān*)<sup>42</sup>.

Once Ṭabarī cites this tradition establishing the black color of some of Ham's offspring, he adds a statement that he attributes to Ibn Ḥumayd... Ibn Ishāq "in the ḥadīth" (*fī-l-ḥadīth*): "The people of the Torah claim that this happened (i.e. that Ham's progeny are black) because of a curse that Noah made against his son Ham. This is because while Noah was sleeping his genitals became uncovered and Ham saw them but did not cover them. Shem and Japheth saw them [too], but they both threw a garment over him and hid his genitals. When he awoke from his sleep, he knew what Ham, Shem, and Japheth had done. He said: "Cursed is Canaan b. Ham (*ma'īn Kan'ān b. Ḥām*). They will be slaves to his brothers! (*'abīdan yukūnūna li-ikhwatihī*)" He then said: May my Lord God bless Shem, and may Ham be a slave to his brothers (*wa-yakūnū Ḥamun 'abda ikhwatihī*). May God be gracious to Japheth<sup>43</sup>, and may he settle in the dwelling places of Shem, and may Ham be their slave (*wa-yakūnū Ḥamun 'abdan lahum*)."

This tradition parallels that of Ibn Qutayba mentioned previously and attributed to "the Torah" in which Ham rather than Canaan is cursed by Noah with a future of slavery. In the tradition found in Ṭabarī, it is not "the Torah" but the "people of the Torah" (*ahl al-tawrā*) who make this claim. Here, as in the Genesis telling, Canaan (cited quite purposefully as Canaan son of Ham) is cursed, but the pronoun to which is applied the punishment of slavery is in the plural, clearly referring to both Canaan and Ham. Ham is then cited specifically in the following sentence as becoming a slave to his brethren.

This tradition, like some of those cited earlier, seems to derive from a *milieu* in which it was assumed that both Canaan and Ham were punished. Such a *milieu*, as we have observed above, originated long before the emergence of Islam among the rabbis of the Midrash. The rabbis, however, were careful to separate between the curse of slavery that Genesis 9:25 applied only to Canaan, and their own sense of fairness in suggesting that divine justice required applying "tit for tat" (*middah k'neged middah*) in relation to the sinful acts of Ham. It appears that the rabbinic separation of the "curse of Canaan" from the "punishment of Ham" became lost in the proc-

<sup>42</sup> Yāqūt lists the *Fazzān* as North Africans living between today's Egypt and Libya and the *Zaghāwa* as living south of today's Morocco (3:142, 4:260).



ess of transition from the religious tradition of Judaism to the religious tradition of Islam<sup>44</sup>.

In his own words, Ṭabarī states that others besides Ibn Ishāq consider Noah to have prayed for Ham's color to be changed and for his descendants to become slaves to the children of Shem and Japheth<sup>45</sup>. It seems that by the time of Ṭabarī, such an association was widespread. However, it had not reached such a level of acceptance that he would mention in his Qur'ān commentary, for according to my reading of Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr* on the Qur'ānic passages on the Noah story, nowhere does he mention it. In fact, I have only located two brief references to Ham in his great Commentary. The first, in reference to Q.11:40: So when Our command came to pass and the oven bubbled forth, We said: Take on [board] two of every pair, simply lists Ham as one of those brought onto the Ark<sup>46</sup>. In the second, Ṭabarī notes in reference to Q.37:77: And We made his descendants the survivors, that Islamic tradition and learned Muslim scholars associate Ham with blackness:

[Revelation] is saying: We made the progeny of Noah the ones who survived on earth after the destruction of his [Noah's] people. This is because all people after the destruction of Noah's generation] (*ba'da mahlakati Nūh*) until today are the progeny of Noah. The Persians ('*Ajam*) and the Arabs are the children of Shem b. Noah. The Turks, Slavs, and Khazars are the children of Japheth b. Noah. The blacks (*al-sūdān*) are the children of Ham b. Noah. Thus say the traditions (*wa-bidhālika jā'ati 'l-āḥādīn*) and the learned scholars (*wa-qāḥatī 'l-ulanā'u*)<sup>47</sup>.

In his Commentary, Ṭabarī accepts the general consensus claiming Ham as the progenitor of peoples of color, but he does not associate him with the curse of slavery. According to what we know of Ṭabarī's method, he included many more questionable traditions in his History than he did in his Commentary. He practiced a kind of self-censorship in his Commentary when he considered traditions questionable or possibly unsound. With regard to the so-called "curse of Ham," therefore, Ṭabarī gives very little information. Neither the "curse" of Ham nor Canaan is referenced, nor is Ham's association with slavery that is well known from other Islamic sources. Despite the obvious penetration of the legend into Islamic thinking by the early tenth century, at least to a scholar such as Ṭabarī, it had not become important or certain enough to incorporate into an official Qur'ān commentary.

<sup>44</sup> *wa-yuqrīhu Allāhu Yafīh*. Note the thematic parallels with Genesis 9:25-37.

<sup>45</sup> For a study of that transitional process, see Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis*. (NY Albany: SUNY Press 1990).

<sup>46</sup> I, 215.

<sup>47</sup> *Jāmi' al-hayān 'an ta'wīl āy al-qur'ān*, (Beirut: Dār al-fikr 1984/1405), XII, 36. XXIII, 67.

In fact, we find little reference to the legend in the *genre* of commentary in general. The body of Islamic literature that includes the legend is that which provides the least amount of censorship, that being the universal histories and "Stories of the Prophets" literature, the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*.

## CONCLUSION

At issue throughout the ongoing argument is the question of how people read text. Those who blame the Jews accuse the ancient rabbis of purposefully misreading the biblical story in order to establish a divine justification for institutionalizing the degradation of color. Goldenberg accuses these accusers of misreading the Jewish material because of faulty translations, but with not a little influence of tendentious, perhaps anti-Semitic, assumptions. Medieval Muslims and early modern Christians, in turn, are accused of purposefully manipulating traditional religious legends in order to justify the enslavement of other human beings. At the core of the argument is the question as to whether the manipulation of texts is a purposeful act. Specific to the case in question, do people purposefully misread sacred texts in order to find an excuse to do something that is known inherently to be unethical, thereby providing divine justification for acknowledged evil through the purposeful manipulation of sacred text?

With regard to the specific narrative in question in early rabbinic and Islamic exegesis, at least, I do not think so. The ancient scholars who treat the legend do not consciously seem to manipulate the texts of the traditions to which they have access. At most, separate traditions are sometimes strung together to form a longer narrative that conflates issues kept separate when the individual traditions are not joined. It is possible that such conflation also occurred while the traditions were in more fluid oral form as they passed from Jewish to Islamic contexts. It seems unlikely to me that there occurred conscious manipulation, nor, do I believe, would it be natural to do so.

In the case of slavery, for example, it was considered a normal part of the social order for thousands of years and among scores if not hundreds of human societies. When one people succeeded in conquering another, the winners typically won material wealth in the form of moveable goods, arable land and other unmoveable property, social prestige, women, and human labor in a variety of forms that in the English language is always lumped together and termed slavery. Whether or not we believe this kind of behavior is ethical today, such was the expected way of life. I do not believe that the ethics of this reality were questioned except in the most rare of cases. Overwhelmingly, there would seem to be no need to justify these kinds of servitude. They were the norm. Why should an excuse be necessary for them?

From the perspective of the Genesis text, the problem was, rather, that of avoiding intermarriage with the Canaanites, who were ethnically, linguistically, culturally and even in many ways, religiously nearly indistinguishable from the Israelites<sup>48</sup>. Genesis often provides etiological explanations for the similarities of neighboring peoples from which the biblical writers wanted to distinguish Israel in order to retain its subtly unique form of social-religious life. In situations where neighboring peoples' similarities were threatening to the Israelites because of the danger of assimilation, the etiological explanations of these peoples carried a strong negative connotation. Thus, for example, were the Moabites and Ammonites, neighboring peoples who were ethnically and linguistically quite similar to the Israelites, deemed descendants of an incestuous relationship that made all of their offspring bastards<sup>49</sup>. The Canaanites, from whom the Israelites derived, among whom the Israelites lived for centuries, and whom the Israelites eventually overwhelmed culturally, are depicted at the end of Genesis 9 along with many other Deuteronomistic sections of the Bible in strongly negative terms in order to discourage intermarriage and assimilation with them. Slavery *per se* was not a problem to be explained. The task of Genesis 9:25 was to portray Canaan, the progenitor of the problem Canaanites, in a strongly negative light in order to minimize Israelite attraction to them and their culture. The position of slaves is inferior. The Canaanites are therefore portrayed as slaves.

As Goldenberg has pointed out, two issues are at work in our Noah story. One is slavery. The other is physical "otherness." Readings found in the great religious traditions commonly explain observable phenomena through the reading of sacred text. People have always been curious to know the etiology of common phenomena, and many *genres* of folk literature attempt to explain origins, such as why the leopard has its spots, why women menstruate, etc. When a trait appears to a culture or society to be contrary to whatever may be defined as "the norm" in that society, it is typical to explain it as the result of a single historical occurrence, often with a negative connotation, that then became standardized in a kind of Lamarckian process. In the Arabic world, this process sometimes appears in folklore and literary texts in the so-called *awwal* literature. Such seems to be the origin of the changes in physical characteristics associated with Ham. The rabbis of the Talmud and Midrash felt uncomfortable with the lack of retribution to Ham for "seeing his father's nakedness" and reporting it to his brothers. They also noted that, according to their understanding of the biblical genealogies, some of the progeny of Ham were peoples of color. As Middle Easterners

<sup>48</sup> Niels Peter Lemche, "Israel, History of (Pre-Monarchic Period), *Anchor Bible* (1992), 537-539, William Dever, "Israel, History of (Archaeology and the 'Conquest'), p. 555.

<sup>49</sup> Genesis 19:30-38.

themselves, the rabbis were certainly darker than most native European peoples of today, but they also noted how some of Ham's offspring were peoples of sub-Saharan Africa or East India. They therefore combined the need for retribution with darker skin color and other physical characteristics, coming up with a solution to an ethical problem at the same time that they distinguished between themselves and the Other.

I do not believe that the biblical, rabbinic or early Islamic stories examined here reflect any diabolical intent by Israelites, Jews or Muslims to establish an authoritative paradigm to justify degradation. Neither do I assume that the tellers, compilers, and readers of these stories held our own world view condemning the enslavement of other humans, thereby requiring an apologetic or excuse in order to justify an act that we assume is universally deemed unethical. It is a mistake to assume that our values must have been accepted by ancient or medieval peoples, who, feeling guilty at their involvement in slavery, therefore felt the need to devise an excuse for their evil behavior. This may have indeed occurred in the early modern period, but I cannot accept it as a possibility in the pre-modern world.

The two separate issues of slavery and different physical characteristics were naturally conflated because of the confusing material at the end of Genesis nine, followed immediately thereafter by the "table of nations" in Genesis ten and the attempts of the rabbinic interpretations to explain them. The early rabbinic interpretations kept the two issues of slavery and physical characteristics separate. As the explanatory narratives crossed cultures and languages, however, the subtleties maintained in one culture did not remain in the new, with the result that the two issues of slavery of Canaan and "otherness" of Ham were conflated. This phenomenon of conflating motifs through intertextual transmission is common. *Our* misreading suggests that it was done purposefully in order to justify an unethical act, but this is *our* misreading of the folk-literatures of ancient peoples living in times and conditions radically different from our own.

In the case of our narrative, it seems to me that the agenda of the ancient authors was more in line with trying to understand the relationship of *texts* claimed sacred by competing religious civilizations, and the relationship of *peoples* based on accepted hierarchies. Underlying any comparison in these ancient times was the un-selfconscious given that the Other is inferior, whether that Other is text, theology, or people. This view of "otherness" can be demonstrated virtually universally in world folklore.

Thus is the problem of the "curse of Ham" a non-issue in the ancient world. It becomes an issue only when values that conflict with that of enslaving the Other begin to evolve. When and how this occurred is outside my area of expertise, but I suspect that it can be placed in the West roughly with the transition from the Medieval to the early Modern periods.



Having said that the "curse of Ham" is a non-issue in the ancient world, I do not suggest that it is a non-issue today. We must be vigilant in condemning those who *do* consciously manipulate the readings of sacred texts in their attempts to justify what today should be universally condemned as unethical, such as the desire, for any reason, to scapegoat any people, religion or race, or to perpetuate any negative notion of otherness.

# REMNANTS OF ḤABĪB IBN BAHRĪZ'S ARABIC TRANSLATION OF NICOMACHUS OF GERASA'S INTRODUCTION TO ARITHMETIC

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The cultural Renaissance in tenth-century Baghdad, so admirably studied by Joel Kraemer<sup>1</sup>, was preceded by a *naissance*, the birth in the same town of the Greek-Arabic cultural symbiosis, whose momentous impact on the history of civilization only now gradually begins to be duly appreciated. In this note we wish to describe a link in the fascinating history of the reception of Greek science within Arabic culture in the early ninth century, the process that laid the foundation for the Renaissance a century later<sup>2</sup>. We will attend to a single text, but the vicissitudes of its transmission well illustrate the complexity of this cross-cultural process.

Nicomachus of Gerasa wrote his *Introduction to Arithmetic* in Greek toward the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E.<sup>3</sup>. It was translated into Arabic twice. Here we will focus on the first among them, due to Ḥabīb Ibn Bahrīz, who translated the work from Syriac into Arabic in the early ninth century; only very occasionally will we add some comparative observations concerning the second translation made by Thābit Ibn Qurra (826-901) directly from the Greek<sup>4</sup>. All what we know about Ḥabīb Ibn Bahrīz's translation is derived from a distant descendant, a Hebrew version (1317) we owe to the well-known translator, mathematician, and poet Qalonymos ben Qalonymos. The long and complex history of this text presented a great number of riddles, which baffled even the great Moritz Steinschneider<sup>5</sup>. In a recent

<sup>1</sup> Joel Kraemer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam. The Cultural revival During the Buyid Age*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill 1986); idem, *Philosophy in the Renaissance of Islam. Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī and His Circle*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill 1986).

<sup>2</sup> This process has been described in an enlightening study in Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, (London: Routledge 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Text in Richard Hoche (ed.), *Introductionis arithmeticae Libri II*, (Leipzig: Teubner 1866); English translation in Nicomachus of Gerasa, *Introduction to Arithmetic*. Translated into English by Martin Luther D'Ooge, with Studies in Greek Arithmetic by Frank Eggleston Robbins and Louis Charles Karpinski, (New York: MacMillan 1926). See pp. 71-87 on Nicomachus' life and works.

<sup>4</sup> *Thābit b. Qurra's arabische Übersetzung der Arithmetike Eisagoge des Nikomachos von Gerasa*, ed. by Wilhelm Kutsch, (Beirut: Imprimerie catholique 1958).

<sup>5</sup> Moritz Steinschneider, *Die Hebraeischen Übersetzungen des Mittelalters und die Juden als Dolmetscher*, (Berlin: Kommissionsverlag des Bibliographischen Bureau 1893; rpt. Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt 1956), pp. 516-519; idem, "Miscellen. 26," *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 38 (1893), pp. 68-77.

# ADAPTATIONS AND INNOVATIONS

Studies on the Interaction between Jewish  
and Islamic Thought and Literature  
from the Early Middle Ages  
to the Late Twentieth Century,  
Dedicated to Professor Joel L. Kraemer

EDITED BY

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