

Race, The Curse of Ham and the Hamitic Theory

Guys: Here my spiel on the Hamitic theory (as well as the stuff about the Curse of Ham) I referred to in class. Make sure you read this stuff with diligence because you should consider it as an extension of my class lectures.

When Europeans first stumbled across the architectural and artistic expressions of the wondrous achievements of Africans of antiquity (e.g., the Pyramids, the Zimbabwe Ruins, etc.) a dominant view that emerged among them to explain their origins, as I explained in class, was that they were the handiwork of a race of people from outside Africa.¹ As Edith Sanders (1969) explains, while tracing the origins of this particular Western myth: “[t]he Hamitic hypothesis is well-known to students of Africa. It states that everything of value ever found in Africa was brought there by the Hamites, allegedly a branch of the Caucasian race.” However, she further explains, “[o]n closer examination of the history of the idea, there emerges a previous elaborate Hamitic theory, in which the Hamites are believed to be Negroes.” In other words, as she observes, “[I]t becomes clear then that the hypothesis is symptomatic of the nature of race relations, that it has changed its content if not its nomenclature through time, and that it has become a problem of epistemology” (p. 521). Not surprisingly, her carefully reasoned exegesis unveils a wicked tale of the lengths to which Westerners have gone to deny an entire continent part of its history; all for the purpose of constructing a racist ideology that could permit the rape of a continent without causing so much as a twinge in the consciences of even the most ardent of Christians. In fact, with great convenience, the myth actually begins in the Christian cosmological realm. The necessity to describe the origins and role of this myth here (albeit briefly) stems, of course, from its pervasive influence on Western attitudes toward the darker peoples of the world ever since the rise of Christianity in the West, generally, and more specifically, its subterranean influence on how Western colonial policies on education (as well as in other areas of human endeavor) in Africa were shaped and implemented—as will be shown in the pages to come. Furthermore, there is also the fact of its continuing lingering presence even to this day, in various permutations at the subconscious and conscious levels, in the psyche of most Westerners when they confront Africa—symptomatic of which, to give just one example, is the virulent attack on Bernal by the Eurocentrists (mentioned earlier).

Now, as just noted and bizarre though this may appear, the Hamites make their entry into the Western racist discourse initially as a degenerate and accursed race, not as an exemplary, high achieving race (relative to black people) that they were eventually transformed into. Those familiar with the Bible will recall that in it there are two versions of Noah, the righteous and blameless patriarch who is saved from the Great Flood by a prior warning from God that involves the construction of an ark by Noah (Genesis 6: 11–9: 19); and the drunken Noah of Genesis 9: 20–9: 27 who inflicts a curse on one of his three sons, Ham. It is the latter version that is of relevance here. Here is how the story goes in the King James version of the Bible:

20. And Noah began to be an husbandman, and he planted a vineyard: 21. And he drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was uncovered within his tent. 22. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren without. 23. And Shem and Japheth took a garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father's nakedness. 24. And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him. 25. And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. 26. And he said, Blessed be the LORD God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. 27. God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant.

1. For a discussion of the politics behind the anthropological explanations of the origins of the Zimbabwe Ruins (Great Zimbabwe) see Kuklick (1991) who describes the depth of ridiculousness to which they had sunk—exemplified by a decree by the white minority government of Ian Smith that government employees who publicly disseminated the now long established fact (e.g., through carbon dating) that the Zimbabwe Ruins were of indigenous (African) provenance and not some mythical foreign race would lose their jobs.

Thus was born the Biblical curse of Ham (which in reality was a curse on his son Canaan).² Initially, in the period of Latin Christianity of the Middle Ages, the curse of Ham was used as a justification for the existence of slavery in a generic sense, that is without reference to skin color. Considering that slavery during this period encompassed all manner of European ethnicities and was not restricted to people of African descent alone, this is not surprising. However, by the time one arrives in the seventeenth-century when the enslavement of Africans is now well underway in the Americas, the curse of Ham becomes the justification for this enslavement; that is Ham and his progeny have been transformed into an accursed black people ordained by God to be slaves of white people (the progeny of Japheth) in perpetuity. (Aside: placed hierarchically in between these two groups were the progeny of Shem, namely, Jews and Asians.) Before reaching this point, however, first there had to be a connection made between the color black and the curse of Ham. The problem is best described by Goldenberg (2003: 195):

To biblical Israel, Kush was the land at the furthest southern reach of the earth, whose inhabitants were militarily powerful, tall, and good-looking. These are the dominant images of the black African in the Bible, and they correspond to similar images in Greco-Roman culture. I found no indications of a negative sentiment toward Blacks in the Bible. Aside from its use in a proverb (found also among the Egyptians and the Greeks), skin color is never mentioned in descriptions of biblical Kushites. That is the most significant perception, or lack of perception, in the biblical image of the black African. Color did not matter.

So, the question is how did color enter into the curse? Here, there is some disagreement. Goldenberg suggests that the linkage takes place through two principal exegetical changes: the erroneous etymological understanding of the word Ham as referring, in root, to the color black (which also spawns another serious exegetical error, the replacement of Canaan with Ham in the curse); and the exegetical seepage of blackness into the story of the curse (which originally, he observes, was colorless) as it was retold, beginning, perhaps, in the third or fourth-century C.E. with Syriac Christians via a work titled the *Cave of Treasures*, and then further taken up by the Arab Muslims in the seventh-century following their conquest of North Africa (and the two, in turn, later influencing the Jewish exegetical treatment of the story). Goldenberg further observes that the *Cave of Treasures* in its various recensions down the centuries extends the curse to not just Kushites, but all blacks defined to include, for example, the Egyptian Copts, East Indians and Ethiopians (that is they are all descendents, according to the *Cave of Treasures*, of Ham). Hence, Goldenberg quotes one version as reading “When Noah awoke...he cursed him and said: ‘Cursed be Ham and may he be slave to his brothers’...and he became a slave, he and his lineage, namely the Egyptians, the Abyssinians, and the Indians. Indeed, Ham lost all sense of shame and he became black and was called shameless all the days of his life forever” (p. 173).

On the other hand, taking the lead from Graves and Patai (1966)—as for example Sanders (1969) does—the connection, it is suggested, occurs via the agency of Jewish oral traditions (*midrashim*), specifically those contained in one of the two Talmuds, the Babylonian Talmud (*Talmud Bavli*)—the other Talmud is the Palestinian Talmud (*Talmud Yerushalmi*). The Talmuds were a compilation of *midrashim*, which for centuries had been transmitted orally, put together by Jewish scholars in their academies in Palestine and in Babylonia. Although the *Talmud Bavli* was compiled in fifth-century C.E., it did not make its appearance in Europe until probably sixth-century C.E. Now, the *midrash* relevant here was concocted, according to the gloss by Graves and Patai (1966: 122), in order to justify the enslavement of the Canaanites by the Israelites; and here is how it goes (reproduced from the version compiled by Graves and Patai 1966: 121):

(d) Some say that at the height of his drunkenness he uncovered himself, whereupon Canaan, Ham’s little son, entered the tent, mischievously looped a stout cord about his grandfather’s genitals, drew it tight, and [enfeebled] him.... (e) Others say that Ham himself [enfeebled] Noah who, awakening from his drunken sleep and understanding what had been done to him, cried: “Now I cannot beget the fourth son whose children I would have ordered to serve you and your brothers! Therefore it must be Canaan, your first-born whom they enslave....Canaan’s children shall be born ugly and black! Moreover, because you twisted your head around to see my nakedness, your grandchildren’s

2. It may be noted here that it is the ancestors of Canaan, the Canaanites, who are conquered by the Israelites giving rise to that well-known passage in the Bible (Joshua 9: 21) “And the princes said unto them, Let them live; but let them be hewers of wood and drawers of water unto all the congregation; as the princes had promised them” (emphasis added). The Canaanites living in the city of Gibeon saved themselves from the possibility of being massacred by Joshua (for no other reason beyond the fact that their land had now been promised by God to the Israelites) by pretending to be foreigners from outside the Land of Canaan and entering into a peace truce with Joshua. However, upon discovering this deception, Joshua cursed the Gibeonites relegating them forever to become “hewers of wood and drawers of water” in the service of the Israelites.

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 their race are called Negroes, their forefather Canaan commanded them to love theft and fornication, to be banded together in hatred of their masters and never to tell the truth.

Anyhow, regardless of whether it was early Eastern Christians, or Jews or Muslims who were responsible for corrupting the biblical story along two axes, replacing Canaan with Ham and rendering Ham black, this much is incontrovertible: Medieval Christians in the West would in time adopt it as their very own because it would allow them to develop an ideology of exploitation and oppression of black peoples, especially beginning in the fifteenth-century onward, without violating their religious sensibilities.

Notice then that through this mythological trickery two basic elements of Christian cosmology are retained: that one, all human beings are descended from a common ancestor (Adam whose line of descent includes Noah) and that, two, not all human beings are equal. Hence, the peoples of the European peninsula (the conventional use of the term continent in relation to Europe is an ideologically driven misnomer as a quick glance at a world atlas will confirm) on one hand, and the peoples of the African and Asian continents on the other, stand in a racial hierarchical relationship of master/ servant/ slave. Since this was a Biblical determined order, it followed then that no Christian need lose sleep over the morality of exploiting and enslaving other human beings.

Now the question that one must ask here is, When do the descendants of Ham, while still residing in Africa, rejoin the family of Europeans as a subgroup of Caucasians? It occurs during the period of the beginnings of the colonization of Africa. There are two factors that account for this development: the emergence of scientific explanations of race during the era of the Enlightenment when theological explanations began to give way to scientific explanations of the natural world; and the arrival of Napoleon's Army in Egypt in 1798, accompanied by French scientists who would go on to establish the new discipline of Egyptology. The former factor established the possibility of polygenesis as an alternative to the biblical theory of monogenesis (all human beings were descendants of Adam); that is not all human beings have a common ancestor, but that some had emerged separately as a subspecies of humankind. The latter factor's role turns on the startling discovery by the French scientists that the Egyptian civilization, that is the civilization of black people, was the precursor of the Western civilization. Now, this finding met with considerable opposition in the West since for some it flew in the face of the prevalent racist notions that dialectically justified and drew succor from the ongoing Atlantic slave trade, while for others it stood in opposition to the biblical notion of black people as accursed descendants of Ham. The resolution of the problem of determining who were the ancient Egyptians, therefore, was resolved by turning to a polygenetic explanation. Specifically, following a rereading of the Bible the notion emerged that the Egyptians were the descendants of that other son of Ham, Mizraim, who it was argued had not been cursed as Canaan had been. By isolating Canaan from his brothers, Mizraim and Cush, it was possible to suggest that only the descendants of Canaan had been cursed, and not those of Mizraim and Cush.

The ancient Egyptians therefore were not a black people, it was argued, but a Caucasian subgroup, the Hamites. To provide scientific support for this view, Western scientists in the nineteenth-century, especially those working in the United States (perhaps spurred on by the need to justify slavery in the face of rising abolitionist sentiments), emerged with the bogus “science of craniometry,” that purported to prove on the basis of the measurement of human skulls a hierarchy of intelligence among different groups of people (blacks with supposedly the smallest crania, and hence the smallest brain, falling to the very bottom).³ On the basis of this bogus science it was quickly established that the ancient Egyptians were not black Africans, but Hamites. However, it is important to point out here that the Hamites were not completely shorn off of their early inferior status as descendants of the accursed Ham. Rather they were considered to be an inferior subgroup of the Caucasian group, but superior to black peoples. (In other words, a new internal hierarchy was established among the descendants of Jephth where the Teutonic Anglo-Saxons were at the very top and the Hamites at the very bottom and eastern and southern Europeans—Slavs, Italians, Portuguese,

3. The literature on the historical origins of the ideology of racism in the West is fairly extensive. As an entry-point into this literature the following select sources will prove to be, for present purposes, more than adequate: Bieder (1986); Davies, Nandy, and Sardar (1993); Drescher (1992); Frederickson (2002); Gould (1971); Hannaford (1996); Huemer (1998); Jackson and Weidman (2004); Jordan (1968); Kovel (1988); Libby, Spickard, and Ditto (2005); Niro (2003); Pieterse (1992); Reilly, Kaufman, and Bodino (2003); Shipman (1994); Smedley (1993); Stanton (1960); and Wolpoff and Caspari (1997). Note that although Jordan, and Libby, Spickard, and Ditto are very specific to the U.S. context, they are included here because of their treatment of an important element in the formation of Western racist ideologies not given as much attention in the literature as it deserves: the role of sexuality.

Greeks, etc.—somewhere in the middle.) Thus was born the infamous Hamitic theory that was used to explain any expression of the grandeur of African history that Europeans came across. Hamites were Africans, but they were Caucasian in origin—they came from outside Africa.⁴

4. For more on the Christian cosmological and “scientific” roots of Western racist discourse, see also the sources mentioned in the preceding note.