Dear Study Group,

This is from a sermon I preached awhile ago. Here are the questions we’ll talk about this Tuesday.

Questions for Study Group

1. Have you heard of the sin of Ham? If so, when?

2. Have you heard of black people being cursed by God?

3. Do you have any experience with apartheid in South Africa?

4. Why do you think Christians thought slavery was ok?

5. Other comments you have.

The Sin of Ham

In the old testament, the Hebrew Bible, Ham is the name of one of Noah’s sons, not preserved pork. The other sons are Shem and Japheth. Listen for the word of God as it is found in Genesis 9:18-29.

18 The sons of Noah who went forth from the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Ham was the father of Canaan. 19 These three were the sons of Noah; and from these the whole earth was peopled.

20 Noah was the first tiller of the soil. He planted a vineyard; 21 and he drank of the wine, and became drunk, and lay uncovered in his tent. 22 And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. 23 Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it upon both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness.

24 When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, 25 he said, "Cursed be Canaan; a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers." 26 He also said, "Blessed by the LORD my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave. 27 God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave."

28 After the flood Noah lived three hundred and fifty years. 29 All the days of Noah were nine hundred and fifty years; and he died.

If Noah planted a vineyard, wouldn’t he have to wait years for the vines to grow, and years for the wine to ferment?

What did Ham do wrong? Is it his fault that he saw his father naked? Maybe he should have covered up his father, instead of gossiping to his brothers about it. As soon as they heard what happened, they covered him up.

If Ham did do something wrong, why didn’t Noah curse him instead of Ham’s son Canaan? Maybe because Noah was hungover, angry, and not thinking at all clearly. Maybe this is a story about why Ham’s people were treated badly. Maybe because in that culture, punishing one member of a family meant punishing all. Maybe this is a story about how ancient peoples became distributed around the earth. Maybe this is the story that warns of the dangers of drinking too much wine—the result is drunkenness and cursing. The book of Joshua uses this story to justify the Israelites conquest of the Canaanites.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Noah received mercy and grace from God; how come, if he found favor in the Lord’s sight, he didn’t extend mercy himself? Why is God silent about this curse Noah put on his own son? I don’t know. Maybe this story describes what happened, rather than what should happen; it is a warning we should heed, rather than a model we should follow.

The best I can say is that there’s something else going on in this story that we don’t know. And when we humans don’t know the answer, we can get really creative and just make stuff up.

In medieval Europe, the so-named “Curse of Ham” became a justification for serfdom[[2]](#footnote-2). Serfs were peasants who worked for a lord, in return for a place to live and a place to farm. Think “Pillars of the Earth”, “Cadfael” or maybe “Monty Python and the Holy Grail.”

If you want to oppress a group of people, you can assume they were descended from Ham, and so deserve to serve you, the descendants of Japheth and Shem. That way you can justify your oppression.

Later, this scripture became a convenient justification for enslaving Africans in Europe and the Americas.

Here’s how the thinking goes: Noah cursed Canaan, son of Ham, and said he would be a slave to his brothers Shem and Japheth. According to the genealogy in Genesis 10, Ham’s descendants include the people of the lands of Cush, Egypt[[3]](#footnote-3), Put, and Canaan. The first three are regions in Africa: Ethiopia, Egypt, and Libya, where many inhabitants have black skin. Therefore, people from Africa, that is, people with black skin, are cursed to serve white people, who are obviously the descendants of Japheth and Shem, the sons of Noah who were blessed.

Even though it was Noah, not God, who cursed Canaan, many people believed the story meant that there was a divine sanction for slavery of Africans. It is known as “the sin of Ham.”

Parts of Africa were Christian before the Roman empire was Christian. In that first century African Christian tradition, the theology of the “sin of Ham” was called a false teaching.[[4]](#footnote-4) But that false teaching wasn’t considered false elsewhere. It became a justification for apartheid in South Africa. It was still around in the United States after slavery was abolished.

This is a letter to the editor that appeared in a newspaper in 1946.

*SIR: I have heard at different times speeches over the radio concerning racial equality and I am somewhat alarmed over the situation. I am not intending to cast stones at any one, but as our law is supposed to be founded on the Bible and I love the souls of all people [sic]. Let’s read Gen. 9:18 through 27 and get God’s holy word concerning Ham’s race, meaning dark colored people. According to Bible scholars, for his sins committed against his father, his son Canaan was to be servant and not ruler and not even equal to his brother’s people. I hope that you dear ones that read this will realize that God’s word is the same today and never will change. A Christian Woman.[[5]](#footnote-5)*

In 1964, “Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia read the text of the Noah story and curse into the Congressional Record as part of a filibuster against the Civil Rights Act…, saying, ‘Noah saw fit to discriminate against Ham’s descendants.’”[[6]](#footnote-6) The Mormons taught that Africans were under the curse of Ham until 1978, when the LDS president received a revelation that extended the priesthood to all males, even the non-whites. Even today, white supremacists quote Genesis 9.

1. Leviticus 18:1 and following may indicate that the Israelites suspected Canaanites of “uncovering nakedness.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Honorius Augustodunen proposed a caste system in 1100 or so. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Psalm 78:41; 105:23,27; 106:22 used in parallelism with Egypt [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A modern [Amharic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amharic) commentary on Genesis notes the 19th century and earlier European theory that blacks were subject to whites as a result of the "curse of Ham", but calls this a false teaching unsupported by the text of the Bible, emphatically pointing out that Noah's curse fell not upon all descendants of Ham, but only on the descendants of Canaan, and asserting that it was fulfilled when Canaan was occupied by both Semites (Israel) and [Japhetites](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japhetite" \o "Japhetite) (ancient Philistines). The commentary further notes that Canaanites ceased to exist politically after the Third Punic War (149 BC), and that their current descendants are thus unknown and scattered among all peoples. Wikipedia, “The Sin of Ham.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bennett, Carl D. “Speak as the People Speak,” Source: *Christian Century,* 63 no 41 O 9 1946, p 1212-1214. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Adams*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)