8

Race, Sex, and the Curse

When Myths Go Wrong

There is one section of the Noah story that is definitely left out of the Children's Bible. Evidently certain parts of scripture are considered too seamy for young readers. This particular story has long been exploited by those who focus on racism and sex in the Bible for a variety of unsavory purposes. Whether or not we like the passage, we cannot overlook the sordid side of the story if we wish to know the full scope of the Genesis flood tale. I am referring to the tale of Noah's naked drunkenness and his curse upon Ham's son Canaan.

Since many have offered definitive interpretations of this text, which actually presents many ambiguities, it is best to have the entire story before us, warts and all:

> Noah began acting like a man of the soil by planting a vineyard. He drank some of the wine and became drunk. Then he exposed himself inside the tent. Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father and told his two brothers who were outside. Shem and Japheth took a garment and, putting it on their shoulders, walked backward to cover the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned backward; they did not look at the nakedness of their father. When Noah woke up from his wine drinking, he realized what his youngest [or "littlest"] son had done to him. He exclaimed, "Canaan be damned! He will become the lowest of slaves to his brothers!" Then he said, "YHWH, the God of Shem, is blessed! May Canaan be a

> slave to them. May God enlarge Japheth. May he dwell in Shem's tent. Let Canaan be their slave!" (Genesis 9:20–27)

It is a strange tale, and unexpected behavior from a man who was earlier said to be a "righteous" soul (Genesis 6:9). What can this story mean?

Sexual Sleuthing and the Potency of Alcohol

A clever, if ultimately dissatisfying, reading is given to us by H. Hirsch Cohen in *The Drunkenness of Noah.* Cohen's is the sort of mind that revels in finding connections. He is very excited, for example, about his "discovery" that the volcanic explosion in the Aegean Sea at Thera around 1500 B.C.E. stands behind the biblical flood story. Of course, he has to backtrack somewhat when he realizes that the original Mesopotamian flood story and the related flood layers of Sir Leonard Woolley are far older than that. Not surprisingly, Cohen then "finds" two sets of historical events combined in the biblical tale.[1] He conveniently makes the connections, and the biblical story's essential background is revealed. Or so he thinks. When it comes to the drunkenness scene, Cohen offers some tantalizing insights based on connections he discerns.

Cohen wonders "why a man worthy enough to be saved from the waters of the flood should be portrayed later as lying naked in a drunken stupor."[2] Why, indeed? He engages in a bit of what he calls "philological sleuthing."[3] Taking his lead from erotic paintings and sexually suggestive poetry of the ancient world, especially Greece and Egypt, and from the biblical Song of Songs, Cohen observes that ancient cultures frequently linked wine, fire, and the male genitalia. Alcohol, he argues, was understood to contain those fiery procreative juices that were needed, especially by older people, to ensure successful sexual intercourse. Wine was for the ancients what Viagra has become for us.[4]

If Cohen is right, this bit of information changes dramatically how we read the Noah scene. Noah was not some postdiluvian delinquent, morally no better than those who perished in the flood. Rather, by quaffing his viticultural Viagra, Noah was hard at work trying to follow God's command "Be fruitful and multiply! Swarm throughout the world! Increase in it!" (Genesis 9:7). At age 600, Noah needed whatever help he could get to carry out those orders.[5] In Cohen's words, "Noah's determination to maintain his procreative ability at full strength resulted in drinking himself into a state of helpless intoxication."[6] With alcohol placed in its proper procreative perspective, Noah reclaims his image as an obedient servant of God. The story even has humorous overtones.

Essentially, then, for Cohen, Noah is to be seen as a good guy both at the beginning of the story and at the end.[7] Sounding like counsel for the defense, Cohen seeks to clear the name of Noah from centuries of libelous associations:

> Noah's intoxication resulted from his need to increase his procreative power and not from a weakness for alcohol or from any ignorance of the effects of alcohol. How ironic that he who hastened to obey the divine command calling for a replenishment of the earth's population should have to suffer the opprobrium attached to drunkenness. Noah deserves not censure but acclaim for having played so well the role of God's devoted servant."[8]

Sadly, however, the morally upright Noah became the undeserving victim of Ham's wiles. Here, too, Cohen thinks interpreters have failed to grasp the import of the story. Cohen tells us to stick closely to the text, which tells us that Ham was gazing at Noah and then boasted of it. Perhaps we need look no further than the act of gazing to discern the crime.

For Cohen, to look is to acquire. If Noah had artificially boosted his sexual powers and was engaged in the very act of sexual intercourse at the moment Ham barged in, then Ham through his gazing stole away the magical potency of Noah. If so, Ham left Noah's tent a very powerful man indeed, especially if Noah had drunk enough alcohol to stoke procreative fires that would enable him to fill the earth with great numbers of children. Ham's act of gazing was not simply some sordid act of voyeurism. His deed amounted to a usurpation of Noah's place in the divine scheme of things after the flood, for Ham robbed Noah of his procreative potential. The other sons, by contrast, refused to look and thereby avoided the taint of encroaching on the place of their father. Upon waking, Noah recognizes that something has gone terribly wrong, presumably having sensed, like Superman in the presence of kryptonite, that his vital energies had dissipated.[9] Strangely, though, he curses Ham's son Canaan and not the perpetrator himself. This leaves Cohen one last conundrum to crack.

According to Cohen, Ham's successful appropriation of Noah's procreative powers explains why Noah could not curse Ham. Having lost his potency, Noah could not retrieve it from Ham. Before it was too late, however, Noah cursed Ham's descendant Canaan so that any effort made by Ham to pass that potency on to his son would be thwarted by Noah's curse.[10] That curse, as Cohen notes, constitutes Noah's "only words in the entire flood story."[11] The significance of these words has been lost on generations of interpreters. If we adopt Cohen's understanding, we unlock the meaning of a number of details, including the true implication of this seemingly displaced curse.

Cohen's clever commentary seeks to make sense out of aspects of the story that have confounded generations of Bible readers. One cannot but feel, however, that Cohen uses so many keys in so many far-flung locks in an effort to open up the story that the essential meaning of the text has slipped through his fingers. The tale seems to have become a victim of too much free association of cultural ideas.

Cohen's primary mistake is to overlook the ways in which ancient flood stories typically usher their central characters into the realities of the post-flood world. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, the survivor of the flood is granted everlasting life, a reality that dogs Gilgamesh as he is thereby reminded of his own postdiluvian mortality.[12] Ovid's survivors, the husband and wife Deucalion and Pyrrha, heed the goddess's command to "scatter your great mother's bones" by tossing rocks that grew into statues that suddenly became human as the world moved on.[13] The biblical writer may simply be situating Noah amid the realities of the post-flood world, suggesting that Noah's pre-flood uprightness is no longer the guarantor of future survival. Rather, the rock on which a post-flood world will be built is God's promise never again to destroy the world—human sinfulness notwithstanding. To the Jewish exiles in Babylon for whom this story may well have been penned, this would have been a word of hope in a world of tragedy. Cohen's clever reconstruction obscures the obvious moral message of the text.

There are other ways to read this tale, proving that scholars are not the only ones eager to fill in the blanks in a text that resists easy explication. We may never discern this passage's true meaning, but by tangling with some outlandish theories, we will receive an education in how *not* to read a text. Interpreting the Bible, as we shall now see, can be a dangerous sport.

Noah, Racism, and African-American Enslavement: The "Curse of Ham"

If fools rush in where angels fear to tread, it is no surprise to find prejudiced commentators producing dubious theological certitudes from this odd episode in Noah's story. The worst offenders have given the passage a racist tinge. Afrikaners in South Africa made use of the Ham story to justify apartheid and resist democratic elections in that country.[14] However, perhaps most notorious is the use of this passage by slaveholders and preachers in the pre–Civil War Southern United States to justify the enslavement of African-Americans.

In tract after tract and book after book, pro-slavery writers in nineteenth-century America invoked this very passage to defend the view that African-American slavery was a legitimate product of the "curse of Ham." Ham was seen to be the ancestor of the Africans, and the curse of Noah was thought to have come to fruition in the institution of slavery. T. Stringfellow wrote in his *Scriptural and Statistical Views in Favor of Slavery* (1856), "God decreed this institution before it existed" and has "connected its *existence* with Prophetic tokens of special favor, to those who should be slave owners or masters."[15] Stringfellow sees nothing short of a divine mandate behind slavery in America: "The first recorded language which was ever uttered in relation to slavery, is the inspired language of Noah."[16] The Ham story plays a foundational role in pro-slavery thinking.

We already sense that by labeling it the "curse of Ham" rather than the "curse of Canaan," which in actuality it is, such interpreters operate with their own unique brand of literalism. They are neither exact nor loose literalists but "cheap literalists"; the basic features of the story are distorted such that even the name of the figure who is cursed is framed inaccurately. In their counterarguments abolitionists were fond of pointing out that pro-slavery interpreters could barely keep Ham and Canaan separate, much less properly interpret the rest of the passage. Sadly, the facts of the case do not deter the cheap literalist, whose agenda overrides the plain reading of the text. Cheap literalism is literalism of the most dangerous sort precisely because deadly institutions like slavery can be claimed to reflect God's revealed will for the world. Scripture is distorted for sinister purposes, a fact that is all the more disturbing when one realizes that such interpreters do not recognize the damage they are doing in the name of God. How did the pro-slavery argument work?

Pre–Civil War slavery advocates constructed their interpretation in a curious fashion.[17] Where we might have expected the Southern writers to accent the sexual side of the story, given their lurid prejudices about African sexual prowess, they instead focus on the question of Noah's paternal honor.[18] Rather than speculate on matters of rape or incest in relation to the text as other interpreters both past and present have done, the Southern reading tended to center on the dishonorable character of Ham's deed, his disrespectful treatment of his drunken father. That it was Noah who was drunk in the first place was beside the point for Southern writers; what mattered was that Ham acted with dishonor against his father. Stephen Haynes points to numerous examples of this sort of reading in his book *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of Slavery*. This selection from the tract *African Servitude* (1860) is typical:

> Noah became a husbandman, planted a vineyard, and partaking too freely of the fruit of the vine, exposed himself to shame. . . . A true spirit of filial regard, love, honor and obedience moved Shem and Japheth to protect their father; just the reverse of that which influenced their brother Ham to dishonor him. . . . In consequence of his [i.e., Ham's] lack of faith . . . the Judge of all the earth . . . determines that they shall be made subject to, or become servants to, the rest of the families of the earth.[19]

This statement brings together a trio of values that Haynes finds regularly in such writings: filial obedience, dishonor, and slavery. Here and in other texts, Haynes discerns evidence that pro-slavery writers conceived of slavery not simply as a necessary economic institution but one that was religiously justifiable as a punishment for violating the patriarchal ordering of God's world, whether at the time of Noah or on the plantations of their own day. The image of Noah as a planter who deserved respect resonated well with the social world of the nineteenth-century South. For example, in Samuel Davies Baldwin's book *Do-*

minion; or, the Unity and Trinity of the Human Race, Noah's utterance is treated as a "divine political constitution of the world."[20] In other words, the Bible was seen as the place "where agricultural life, the patriarchal family, and the imposition of slavery were believed to originate."[21]

Haynes shows us that by papering over the profligate behavior of the patriarch Noah, pro-slavery writers played fast and loose with the text, ignoring those story elements that inconvenienced their argument. We might, for example, say that the text is conscious of the patriarch's faults, in that the supposedly noble Noah is depicted as unthinkingly blurting out a curse while in an abject state of drunkenness. However, in the South of the nineteenth century, the emphasis fell on the question of honor. Haynes draws attention to the observation of fellow historian Kenneth Greenberg that in the South "when a man of honor is told that he smells, he does not draw a bath—he draws his pistol! The man of honor does not care if he stinks, but he does care that someone has accused him of stinking."[22] When the issue is framed in terms of honor, the focus is on the reaction of the one offended (the patriarch or plantation owner) and not on any circumstance that may have initially occasioned the altercation (the son or slave). African-Americans were caught in the crosshairs of the religion, economics, and social values of the South that ensnared them through a code of honor that found a kindred spirit in the Bible.

Haynes has unquestionably latched on to a key perspective, but some vital aspects of the social function of the Ham story in the South are downplayed in his discussion. Fortunately, Peterson's study of the Ham tale, *Ham and Japheth: The Mythic World of Whites in the Antebellum South,* clarifies the wider web of societal connections between the Ham myth and the nineteenth-century South. Peterson does not overlook the honor factor but casts his net more broadly.[23] His analysis deserves closer inspection.

Peterson observes that white Southerners, for all practical purposes, had donned the Puritan utopian mantle. He argues that Southern Christians were seeking to construct a commonwealth grounded in a literal reading of the Bible.[24] A central biblical text in that social project was the story of Noah's curse of Ham. Stringfellow, for example, kicks off his defense of slavery with a reading of the Ham story.[25] For Southerners, the tale justified not only slavery in general but black enslavement in particular. It placed a divine seal of approval on the social order, economic structures, and theological mind-set of the South. White Southerners saw themselves as the heirs of Noah's son Japheth, carrying out God's eternal plan by enslaving African-Americans (the descendants of Ham) in a land once dominated by the Indians (the descendants of Noah's son Shem).[26] As Peterson explains,

> The Southern versions of the Ham myth were rooted in the biblical story rather than controlled by it. In the Southern story, Ham and Japheth became archetypes, respectively, for the black and white

> races in America; the relationship between these two brothers in the myth both validated and provided a model for the whites' treatment of blacks in the antebellum South."[27]

Thus, not only was slavery as such seen to have biblical legitimation but, due to the long-held belief among biblical interpreters that Ham was connected to Africa, blacks were singled out as the race that could justifiably be enslaved. The Southern whites, of course, were the ones to do the enslaving.

This fantasy was deeply internalized. One writer portrayed an heir of Japheth instructing a descendant of Ham about this grand white destiny, while Ham's heir humbly submits to God's design for Japheth's descendants:

> Sons of Japhet and children of the white man, you know why we are here. We came not willingly, but we charge not our captivity to you. Yet here we are and we submit to our lot. It may have been for our sins or those of our fathers that we are torn from our native land; but better is it thus than that our race should have been cut off as cumberers of the earth. . . . A great mission you say, awaits you. In our hearts we can believe it true. And something whispers to us that we also, all fallen as we are, have a duty to perform in connexion therewith. We ask not to be admitted to your higher sphere. Would that we were worthy.[28]

The myth not only encodes white superiority but also imagines black acceptance of white domination as the black contribution in God's enduring plan for America.

So imbued were Southerners with this myth that they saw any efforts to disrupt the enslavement of African-Americans as serious breaches in the order that God had ordained for all time. The patriarchal plantation, with its honorable white family and its docile African slaves (prone as they were to "laziness, superstition, and crime" in the white mind) was seen as the logical outgrowth of a biblically centered Providence.[29] Drawing on their "literal" reading of scripture, Southern whites argued that to heed the reformist ideas of Northern abolitionists would be to deny the clear teachings of the Bible. Surely social chaos and theological confusion would ensue if the abolitionists had their way. They threatened to upset the economic applecart by encouraging African-Americans to flee servitude. Over and above that, however, they were flouting God's will. The claim that African-Americans not only were God's children but also democratically equal to whites was anathema to Southern whites. Democratic governance of this sort violated the hierarchy that God had imposed and that Southern white Christians were called to maintain. White Southerners might have wanted their slaves to be religious but certainly not to find in the Bible a justification for their liberation from enslavement.

Peterson shows that the Ham story reverberated throughout the entire fabric of the Southern political, economic, social, and religious order. Citing Clifford Geertz's work on the intimate role of religion in society, he effectively demonstrates that the story functioned as a racial myth that gave the South a "meaningful framework for orienting themselves to one another, to the world around them, and to themselves."[30]

Few in the South raised theological objections to placing the Ham story at the center of the Southern slavery program.[31] Curiously, others rejected the story on "scientific" grounds, arguing that blacks were a demonstrably inferior race with a *separate* genetic and environmental origin to that of whites.[32] This position was adopted, in part, to evade the biblical claim that all people are the descendants of Adam and Eve. Clearly, some feared that a literal reading of the Bible would commit Southerners to press for equality for African-Americans. Common descent might require equal rights and privileges for African-Americans. The theological rejoinder was that one could still adhere to the biblical belief in a common ancestry while also arguing that the Ham story secured a scriptural basis for the unequal treatment of African-Americans. After all, God himself had condemned blacks to servitude.

Whether on "scientific" grounds or through a literal reading of the Bible, most Southern white Christians arrived at the same conclusion: African-Americans were intellectual and social inferiors who could legitimately be enslaved. Peterson's study reveals the pervasive and persuasive character of the Ham myth in upholding the slavery enterprise. He shows the story to be multivalent in nineteenth-century Southern society. It is truly a myth gone wrong. While one must surely remain troubled by what the South did with this tale, we should be doubly disturbed to find that economic domination and social differentiation are encoded in the text itself. Southerners did not so much *abuse* the text as they *made use* of it, invoking the codes of domination that are contained in the story. The challenge today is to know what to do with a Bible that seems to authorize slavery.

How should we deal with a story that has so tainted America's past?

In *The 1993 Trial on the Curse of Ham,* Wayne Perryman offered an unusual and creative response to the persistence of the idea of the curse of Ham in the American psyche. Perryman, described as "an author, lecturer, newspaper publisher, former radio talk show host, minister, and a business employment relations consultant," has committed himself to overturning stereotypes regarding blacks in relation to the Bible.[33] He decided to bring the accursed Ham into a mock courtroom and put 300 years of white prejudice on trial.

The trial was held at the Friendship Baptist Church in Orange County, California, in the summer of 1993. As the trial opens, Perryman calls on several witnesses who offer a variety of interpretations of the Ham incident. These "witnesses" are in fact representative commentaries drawn from the typical

fundamentalist fare, each of which puts Ham at the center of some salacious crime. The most outrageous is the so-called *Self-Interpreting Bible* (1896). This commentary states that as a result of the Ham affair, "For about four thousand years past the bulk of the Africans have been abandoned of Heaven to the most gross ignorance, rigid slavery, stupid idolatry, and savage barbarity."[34] This "self-interpretation" tells us more about the interpreter than it ever will about the Bible.

With such biased witnesses before the court, Perryman feels the best defense lies in allowing Mr. Ham to speak for himself. Ham proceeds to exonerate himself by explaining that his son Canaan was the one who was cursed and that he himself had done no wrong. Ham performs his own exegesis on the Noah incident, contending that the writer, Moses, had left all the necessary clues to understand the nature of the misdeed that had been committed. By the use of the term "father's nakedness," Moses intended for us to understand that Ham's son Canaan had had sex with Noah's wife while Noah was drunk. That is why, says Ham, Canaan alone was cursed. Perryman provides us yet another twist on the reading of the text. While Perryman's reading may not do justice to the precise significance of the Hebrew text, he provides food for thought for the literalist who seeks to derive racist certainties from a text that can be understood in a myriad of ways.

During the course of the trial Ham also explains that he was simply born black and was not cursed to be black. In fact, he points out, when the Bible curses people, they turn snow-white (Numbers 12)! Perryman's reading turns the tables on the racism and slavery that others think they can justify from scripture. Perceptively, Perryman's Ham observes, "I believe slavery had more to do with the sins of the people who enslaved them, more than the sins of the slaves themselves."[35] Instead of blaming the victim, one must reflect upon the evils of slave owning and race baiting.

By placing history and scriptural interpretation in the docket, Perryman cleverly removes the Bible from the arsenal of those who would use the sacred text as a weapon of domination and injustice. Much like the medieval rabbis, Perryman shows us the necessity of moving inside the myth both to revitalize our understanding of the tradition and to deconstruct the manipulations made possible by a simplistic treatment of the text.

Cheap literalism will rarely be overcome by rational arguments about the text. Because the argument is operating at such a visceral level, perhaps only a mock trial or some other imaginative counter to such interpretations can make any real difference. Changes of thinking in this regard are usually matters of the heart and not simply of the text or of the intellect. Cheap literalism will probably not be overcome by better literalism or some other kind of rational analysis but through creative carnivalesque performances that jar loose the emotions and open one to the harsh injustices that slavery and oppression impose upon fellow human beings.

This is not to say that a better sort of literalism cannot be helpful. Fortunately, not all in the literalist crowd treat the story in a racist fashion.

D. G. Lindsay, for example, who insists on taking the flood tale "at face value," bucks dangerous trends in his own fundamentalist circles by judging "ridiculous" the attempt to justify the enslavement of African-Americans on the basis of the Bible. An exact literalist like Lindsay knows when the story is being hijacked. He understands that the Book is not being used in a theologically credible fashion. Because the exact literalist must argue that God has created us all from one set of parents, namely, Adam and Eve, the literalist also knows that any attempt to place one race above another violates the spirit and the letter of the tradition as received today.

Lindsay handles the story with kid gloves, not reading into it things that are not there. He joins the abolitionists of the nineteenth century in pointing out that the story is not about Noah's curse of Ham but about the curse of Ham's son Canaan.[36] How often do those who feign literalism, who are what we call "cheap literalists," employ the text for their own selfish ends? Lindsay is on to their game. He talks their language. Thus he can state in no uncertain terms, "There is no place in the Word that suggests that black people are black because they are under a curse of God, and thus, are subject to slavery."[37]

How much misery and pain has been perpetuated by the misuse of the Bible for purposes of racial hatred. It is unfortunate, therefore, that despite his antiracist strictures Lindsay counsels against "mixed marriages" because he thinks the cultural gap and struggles are too great.[38] This does a disservice to his otherwise clear condemnation of racism built on the Bible.[39]

Exact literalism can thus be of value, especially as a way to see through abuses of the scriptural text that are guided by hidden agendas. Yet Lindsay's own cultural blinders regarding interethnic marriage are a sign that we cannot expect the text to do all of the work. We need a way to put the text in dialogue with the issues of our time, rather than continuing to act as if the text were written for our day. The question of slavery is a case in point. Even if the story is about slavery, we need to ask what sort of slavery. In the biblical text, slavery tends to be governed by time limits; slaves are released after seven years of service (Exodus 21:2; Deuteronomy 15:12). If the Southern slave owners had practiced such a literalism, they might have been more cautious about finding a justification for perpetual servitude in Noah's curse.

Moreover, as the abolitionists knew and contemporary liberation theologians continue to remind us, the defining story of the Hebrew Bible is God's liberation of the Hebrew slaves from the tyranny of ancient Egypt. Abolitionist A. Barnes argues that any sensible reader of the Book of Exodus should conclude that God demands "immediate emancipation" for those who are enslaved, whether in ancient Egypt or nineteenth-century America.[40] In the Bible's scheme of things, the Exodus story trumps the Ham story in any century.

Ham's Handiwork and Homosexuality

A more contemporary spin on the Ham story has to do with the question of homosexuality. Randall Bailey seems quite correct, and Haynes concurs, that the very "ambiguity" of the story "leads the reader to resolve that something sexual has transpired."[41] Given the text's failure to specify Ham's transgression, we are compelled to ask what it was that happened between Ham and Noah in the tent that day. Lindsay, who is so careful in his literalism, assumes that Ham's sin was homosexuality. That assumption is supported, Lindsay claims, elsewhere in Genesis where we learn that Ham's son Canaan carried on the family tradition and settled in the land named after him, a land in which the immoral Sodom and Gomorrah continued Ham and Canaan's wicked legacy.[42] The homosexual interpretation is obvious to Lindsay for both the Ham and Sodom stories. How justified is the view that Noah's curse was provoked by a homosexual act and that this curse is still in force against homosexuality today?

The text is rather vague at the very point where the deed occurs. Noah is drunk, and Ham does something inappropriate that warrants the curse of a drunken hero. What did Ham do? Bailey seems right to conjecture that some sort of sexual act has taken place, but the text leaves us in the dark regarding the nature of that act. Whatever Ham did, Shem and Japheth were able quite quickly to remedy the situation. Perhaps we are to see in the story no more than what it says, namely, that Ham exposed (or even simply observed) Noah's private parts and that the other sons covered their father up. This would certainly qualify as a repellant act in the ancient Hebrew value system, but it is hardly the dire homosexual "misdeed" that fundamentalist interpreters see in the text. Who is really being literal here?

Nevertheless, the imputation of a homosexual act is prevalent among fundamentalists and even many biblical scholars. Regina Schwartz, hardly a fundamentalist, is confident that the Ham story is a statement against homosexuality, more specifically "homosexual incest, father-son incest, to be precise."[43] She goes on to give the text a Freudian flavor, suggesting that Ham's homosexual act was designed to displace the father. This evokes Freud's "slaying of the father" motif—a horrific primordial event that for Freud undergirds our collective religiosity.[44] By showing the disaster that results from Ham's deed, the text reinforces "the general biblical hysteria about homosexuality."[45]

This analysis begs many questions. Is incest now to be equated with homosexuality? Homosexuality today is hardly to be tied to parental incest desires. We may also ask if there truly is a general hysteria about homosexuality in the Bible. It is, after all, mentioned very infrequently, if at all (cf. Leviticus 18:22, 20:13; Deuteronomy 23:17). Can we be so precise about a text that is fraught with literary and cultural ambiguities?

Perhaps we should follow Lindsay's lead and bring in the Sodom and Gomorrah story. Unfortunately, similar confusion abounds over the interpretation of this tale later in Genesis (chap. 19). Fundamentalists and other commentators have said confidently that this text, too, concerns homosexuality.[46] Yet does it? The tale is no doubt a brutal one. Abraham's nephew Lot is visited by angelic messengers. He finds his house surrounded by townsmen who demand that he send the visitors out so that the men can "know" them, an obvious reference to rape. Lot offers up his daughters instead, but his offer is rejected. As the angry townsmen begin to storm Lot's house, the angelic messengers cast a spell that blinds them. The angels then warn Lot to flee the town with his family before God destroys the place.

As we read this story, perplexities stand in the way of a straightforward interpretation. Does the passage concern homosexuality or gang rape? Is gang rape between males a homosexual act? What we know about prison experiences might lead us to think otherwise.[47] Could the initial "homosexual" desire of the townsmen be appeased by "heterosexual" rape of Lot's daughters? Lot seemed to think so, which again might suggest that the story is about something other than homosexuality as such. Even if the text can be stretched to read as an ancient statement concerning homosexuality, it is hard to see what it implies with regard to modern committed adult homosexual relationships. While other texts in the Bible may bear on questions of homosexuality, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 is about violence and not homosexuality as such. The Ham story is even less clear.[48] That Ham has somehow violated the primacy of his father in the family seems clear (even if Regina Schwartz's Freudian analysis is a bit extreme). That Ham or the men of Sodom were "gay" hardly seems to be the point.

The lesson of the Ham and Sodom stories is that texts that emerge from ancient cultural contexts cannot automatically be applied to the present context without misconstruing the text. We are pressed to find a better way to put the ancient tales in dialogue with the modern world.

A Violent Bible and a Violent God

If it is not about homosexuality, then what sense are we to make of the story of Noah's drunkenness and the curse? Perhaps the violent character of the episode provides a clue. To curse someone was a highly charged act. Even if a sobered-up Noah later came to regret his words, the ancients thought the power of speech was such as to make the curse irrevocable. Yet what would motivate such rage?

Peter Gomes, author of *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*, points to rabbinic suggestions "that Ham had engaged in immoral sexual conduct on the Ark." Some rabbis believed that while other humans remained

celibate, Ham joined the dog and the raven as the only beings to have sexual relations aboard the ark, presumably with animals.[49] Others taught that after the flood Ham "had sodomized his drunken father; even that he had castrated Noah so that there could be no more heirs from his father's loins."[50] One rabbinic tradition has Canaan gazing first, and in so doing he becomes an accomplice to Ham's misdeeds.[51] In another, Canaan castrates Noah after binding a thread around his circumcised penis.[52] In this tradition, Ham merely looks on as Canaan does the dirty work but then goes outside to joke with his brothers about the incident, thereby dishonoring his father and neglecting his duties as a son. If any of these horrifying possibilities is implied by the story, the extreme harshness of Noah's response becomes more intelligible. Ham would represent uncontrolled libido at its worst. To make matters worse, so the Talmud tells us, such propensities were passed on by Canaan to his own sons as he groomed them to engage in theft, promiscuity, lying, and rebellion against their masters.[53] Just beneath the surface the text is rife with sexual deviance, violence, unrestrained lust, vengeance, and patriarchal fear.

Gomes strongly suggests that for the American slave era the story encodes the sort of sexual fears and vengeful attitudes that were harbored by Southerners against African-Americans.[54] Like corrupted computer software, the cultural code contained in the Genesis tale reinforced sexual insecurities and desires for revenge in a society that easily found authorization in the text for its repression of African-Americans. Gomes is correct that "it was Bible-reading, churchgoing Christians, chiefly Protestant and largely Baptist, who could and would lynch, castrate, and horribly mutilate errant black men on Saturday night, and pray and praise all day in Church on Sunday, without a hint of schizophrenia or even of guilt. How could they sustain such a culture for so long? The Bible told them so."[55]

Gomes's reading is provocative. While whites in the South may not have consciously used the Ham story to legitimize violence in the raw, Gomes is certainly justified in pointing out the dangers inherent in importing this stormy biblical text into the nineteenth-century Southern context. The net result of promoting this text in that later volatile context is that social violence was legitimized. Regardless of how much this violence was covered over with talk of honor, Christian destiny, or divine authorization, the fact is that the text itself aided and abetted social evil. Gomes is asking us to consider the extent to which the Bible encodes or even encourages vengeance, sexual conflict, and violence. As Regina Schwartz has shown, the pervasive current of violence in the Bible remains a stumbling block to the literalist application of ancient text to modern circumstances. The Bible allowed Lincoln to pronounce "forceful invocations of the Exodus" on behalf of slaves, even as "the South invoked the conquest [story in the Book of Joshua] in order to justify the perpetuation of slavery."[56] Schwartz's unease is warranted: "Clearly, the consequences of overlapping and confusing the exodus and conquest paradigms are deeply troubling."[57]

What are we to do when we find the Bible itself contributing to the ills besetting the world? While some take refuge in the image of the compassionate God who rescues Noah from the flood, others are disturbed that this same God wipes out the entire planet in a fit of anger, calls for the Israelites to annihilate the Canaanites, or, when that campaign of total conquest fails, authorizes the subjugation of those same peoples. The Ham story encapsulates this same set of dilemmas. This is not to say that the question cannot be resolved through deeper reflection, but the trajectory of violence in the Bible ought to be deeply troubling to all sensitive religionists. History—whether the history of the fallen Canaanites or of the African slaves—tells us that we cannot afford to ignore this aspect of the Bible. As Bailey observes, "The problem is, thus, not only with these supremacist ideologies. Our problem is also with the biblical text itself."[58] His call for a "subversive reading" of the Bible may be the best option for handling such passages. The warning is clear: if we remain with an eye-for-an-eye religion based on a violent Bible, we will be bereft of vision for the future. We need new eyes with which to read the Bible before it is too late.

All in the Family: The Incest Question

There is yet another possible angle for approaching the ancient text in its own context. Interpreters often try to make sense of the "nakedness" of Noah. Insight is provided by Leviticus 18:7–8: "Do not uncover your father's nakedness, that is, the nakedness of your mother. She is your mother. You shall not uncover her nakedness. Do not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife. She is the nakedness of your father." Likewise, Leviticus 20:11a concurs: "When a man lies with his father's wife, he uncovers the nakedness of his father."

These passages suggest that a reference to the uncovering of a father's nakedness is really a reference to sexual impropriety with one's own mother or stepmother (see also Deuteronomy 23:1 [English versions = 22:30], 27:20; Ezekiel 22:10). As F. W. Bassett explains in his insightful study "Noah's Nakedness and the Curse of Canaan: A Case of Incest?" the words in question are "used to describe not homosexual but heterosexual intercourse, even when it speaks of a man seeing another man's nakedness. 'To see a man's nakedness' means to have sexual relations with his wife."[59]

R. A. J. Gagnon, author of *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, who seems to want to find modern homosexual analogues in every nook and cranny of the Bible in search of ammunition to condemn modern practice, actually acknowledges that "father's nakedness" refers to *maternal* incest. Yet he inexplicably insists on reading the Ham passage as "incestuous, homosexual rape."[60]

If Bassett's interpretation that the phrase is an oblique reference to having sex with another man's wife is to be preferred to Gagnon's insistence on reading the drunkenness story as one of homosexual rape, then the story of Ham

refers specifically to Ham's violation of his own mother. He would have taken advantage of his father's drunkenness to have sex with his mother, asserting a claim to authority over the house of Noah. In terms of the rules in Leviticus 18 and 20, Ham's deed tops the list of the possible breaches of incest norms. Bassett argues that the later editors of Genesis were ignorant of the idiom and thought that Ham literally looked at a naked Noah. They then added the bit about Japheth and Shem covering up their father to make sense of a difficult text.[61]

The punishment prescribed in the Leviticus incest texts is harsh. Anyone guilty of violating the rules was guilty of defiling the land in the same manner as those whom God had previously driven out of the land. The Bible's way of saying this is vivid: "The land will vomit you out for defiling it, as it vomited out the nation that preceded you. For all who do any of these abhorrent things shall be cut off from their people" (Leviticus 18:28–29). Or, as Leviticus 20:11b says bluntly, "Both shall be put to death. Their bloodguilt is upon them." Against this backdrop, Noah's curse against Ham's son Canaan becomes intelligible, especially if, as Bailey contends, the Ham narrative, like the Leviticus passages, also stems from the Priestly writer's hands.[62] Ham had committed incest with his mother, and his son is numbered among those who are cut off from the people of God. Why the son? Perhaps because Canaan was the product of that incestuous union.[63]

The charge of incestuous conduct can carry nationalistic overtones in scripture, as in the tale of Lot's incestuous liaison with his daughters after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In this text, the male descendants of the union of the daughters with their father symbolize the peoples of Moab and Ammon (Genesis 19:30–38). Obviously this is meant as a slur on Israel's neighbors. The Noah story represents a sifting on both a personal and a national level. On the personal level, the flood tale separates out the just man from among the wicked of the earth, even in relation to his own heirs. On the national level, the story of the curse of Canaan reflects a broader sifting process. There are wicked people who remain after the flood, but the people of God are promised dominion over the sons of Canaan, children of incest. Later in Genesis those descendants of Canaan are named: "Sidon, his first-born, and Heth; and the Jebusites, the Amorites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, the Arkites, the Sinites, the Arvadites, the Zamarites, and the Hamathites" (Genesis 10:15–18). These are the peoples that the Israelites are later said to have driven out as they established their homeland under Joshua. The Israelites, in other words, are to displace those idolatrous and sexually perverse descendants of Canaan (as well as the sons of Lot's daughters). The scene with Noah foreshadows the conquest, offering a justification for Israelite national superiority over the Canaanites.

The trouble with this reading of the Ham story is that we cannot be certain that the incest categories of Leviticus ought to govern our reading of Genesis. The similarity in language may be coincidental, and we may be guilty of reading more into the story than was intended. After all, the final form of the text, as

even Bassett has to acknowledge, turns on Ham's merely gazing at the nakedness of his father. It seems that, for the final editor of the text at any rate, this would have been discreditable enough. If this reflects the original composition of the text and not a later addition, then perhaps the Southern interpretation as construed by Haynes is right in the end: the central issue at stake in the Ham story is parental and familial honor. This is the direction in which the later Qumranites took the story, although with a slightly different twist. Situating the event during the celebration of a religious festival, the writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls imagine that "Ham's offense constitutes an act of disrespect not only to his father, but also to the festival ordinances."[64] Perhaps the tale is more about honor and less about sex than we might initially think, at least at the final stage of the tradition, if not its point of origin.

Whether a tale of alcoholic stimulants, dishonor, enslavement, homosexuality, sexual perversity, incest, festival violations, voyeurism, or simple exposure of the father's flesh, the story of Noah's drunkenness and Ham's response has exercised the imagination of countless biblical interpreters. The mystery remains unsolved regardless of how ingenious interpreters are in discovering particular perversities and specific social evils in the text. The Bible often resists letting us read into the text theological views that we would like to have authorized by scripture. In the case of the Ham story, our study tells us more about the Bible's handlers than it does about the text itself. At the very least, our discussion of this text points out the folly of trying to take the Bible at "face value."

The lesson here is a negative one but no less important for its negativity. The mythographer Doty warns of the "danger of getting stuck in fundamentalisms that leave us trapped in dysfunctional mythostories."[65] In ancient times, the biblical text may have authorized the Israelite subjugation and enslavement of the Canaanites. In our own day we must beware of the easy assumption that we are among the superior crowd authorized to repress others in the name of God (Leviticus 25:39–46). Gomes throws down the gauntlet before the cheap literalist when he writes, "Since discerning what God, in the Bible, means for us to hear and to do is a matter of life and death, we must approach the interpretation of scripture as we do our own salvation, working it out in fear and trembling."[66]

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