Noah's Curse, by Stephen R. Haynes

reviewed by Laurie F Maffly-Kipp in the December 18, 2002 issue

Few biblical tales are more confounding than the legend of Noah and his sons. As narrated in Genesis 9, the ancient patriarch drinks too much, goes to bed naked and is discovered by Ham, one of his three sons. Ham goes off to tell his brothers, Shem and Japheth, who cover their father while averting their eyes. When Noah wakes up and discovers what has occurred he curses Ham's son, Canaan. The story raises many questions: What, exactly, is Ham's crime? Why does Noah curse Canaan instead of Ham? And, perhaps most important for later generations, just how does this story relate to contemporary peoples? Is Noah's curse still in effect?

Even more intriguing than the questions are the creative answers that interpreters have offered over the centuries, elaborations that reveal much more about these interpreters than about their biblical forebears. Stephen R. Haynes, a professor of religious studies at Rhodes College and a Presbyterian minister, is fascinated by those answers. In particular, he wants to track the interpretive chain that links Ham and Canaan to American racism, and even to the "father" of his own academic institution, Benjamin M. Palmer.

Moral urgency undergirds his quest: How and why have many white American Christians justified the oppression of African-Americans by invoking Noah's curse? How can Bible believers come to terms with their own past and its contradictory messages? What does it mean for the Presbyterian Church, and for higher education, that the founder of Rhodes College, a church-affiliated institution, was an outspoken advocate of slavery and based his prejudice on his interpretation of Genesis 9?

In a wide-ranging interdisciplinary study that examines literature from the classical period to the present, Haynes probes these concerns. First, he briefly surveys the history of Jewish and Christian interpretations of passages related to Noah, Ham and Nimrod (a descendent of Ham who was also implicated in racialized versions of the legend) through the Enlightenment, noting the wide range of opinions about Ham's violation and Noah's curse. In a second section, Haynes describes the 19th- and 20th-century crystallization of southern white opinion around the racial meaning of Noah's curse. Genesis 9 came to be used as a rationale for black enslavement: according to influential southern leaders, slavery was the curse visited on Canaan for the sin of his father (although spokespersons frequently finessed the question of what Ham had done to deserve Noah's wrath).

Not coincidentally, Haynes argues, white southerners, who had developed a cultural ethos that prized social order and male honor, read these traits into Genesis. Thus, Ham became a primary symbol of disorder (as did Nimrod, who was often cast as the rebellious architect of the Tower of Babel), and Noah emerged as the father who had been deeply dishonored by the insubordination of his son. By extension, these leaders reasoned, black disorder, which could shame the honor of southern white males, had to be held in check by means of enslavement--this was, after all, God's command communicated through Noah.

For Haynes, the life and writings of Benjamin Morgan Palmer (1818-1902) throw into sharp relief the ways in which the legend developed and changed over time. Palmer, a Presbyterian, was a prominent New Orleans clergyman, an educator and a celebrated orator. Noah and his progeny played prominent roles in his biblical imagination, and he invoked them often to explain the "natural" separation of the races and subordination of blacks. After the Civil War Palmer became "high priest" of the Lost Cause, and he continued to hold fast to his belief in racial separation as a divine mandate. He merely shifted the focus of his argument, emphasizing the rebelliousness of Nimrod rather than the subservience of Canaan, and focusing on Shem and Japheth as the heirs to God's promise, rather than on Ham as the reason for God's curse. But the basic story of human separation and

hierarchy played out in the same way, and continued to hold great power for Palmer's communal understanding.

Haynes's study provides a thorough and rich sense of the interpretive history of this scriptural story. If he occasionally psychologizes Palmer and other southern whites (suggesting, for example, that Palmer's fixation on Noah was related to his conflicted relationship with his own father), he also helpfully nuances his discussion by examining counternarratives of the legend. He considers stories told by antislavery activists, African-American ministers and others who sought to redeem Ham or otherwise change the dominant interpretations. Ironically, none of these important rejoinders challenged the basic premise that Ham was at fault and Noah was justified in his wrath. But they demonstrate how the Bible was used on all sides of debates over slavery and race in American history.

Haynes concludes by presenting a counterreading of his own. Setting aside his historical lenses, he tries to escape the seemingly unquestioned logic of blame and retribution that lies at the heart of this interpretive tradition. He argues instead that perhaps Ham was an innocent victim, a scapegoat that generations of Bible believers have used to justify their own desire for power and control. It is a provocative suggestion, one that Haynes hopes might both preserve scriptural authority and prevent another generation of Americans from using this text as an excuse for racial prejudice.