

Noah gets drunk. Then he curses Ham.

How on earth did this odd little biblical tale get twisted into a justification for chattel slavery?

by [Matthew Schlimm](#) in the [September 2025](#) issue

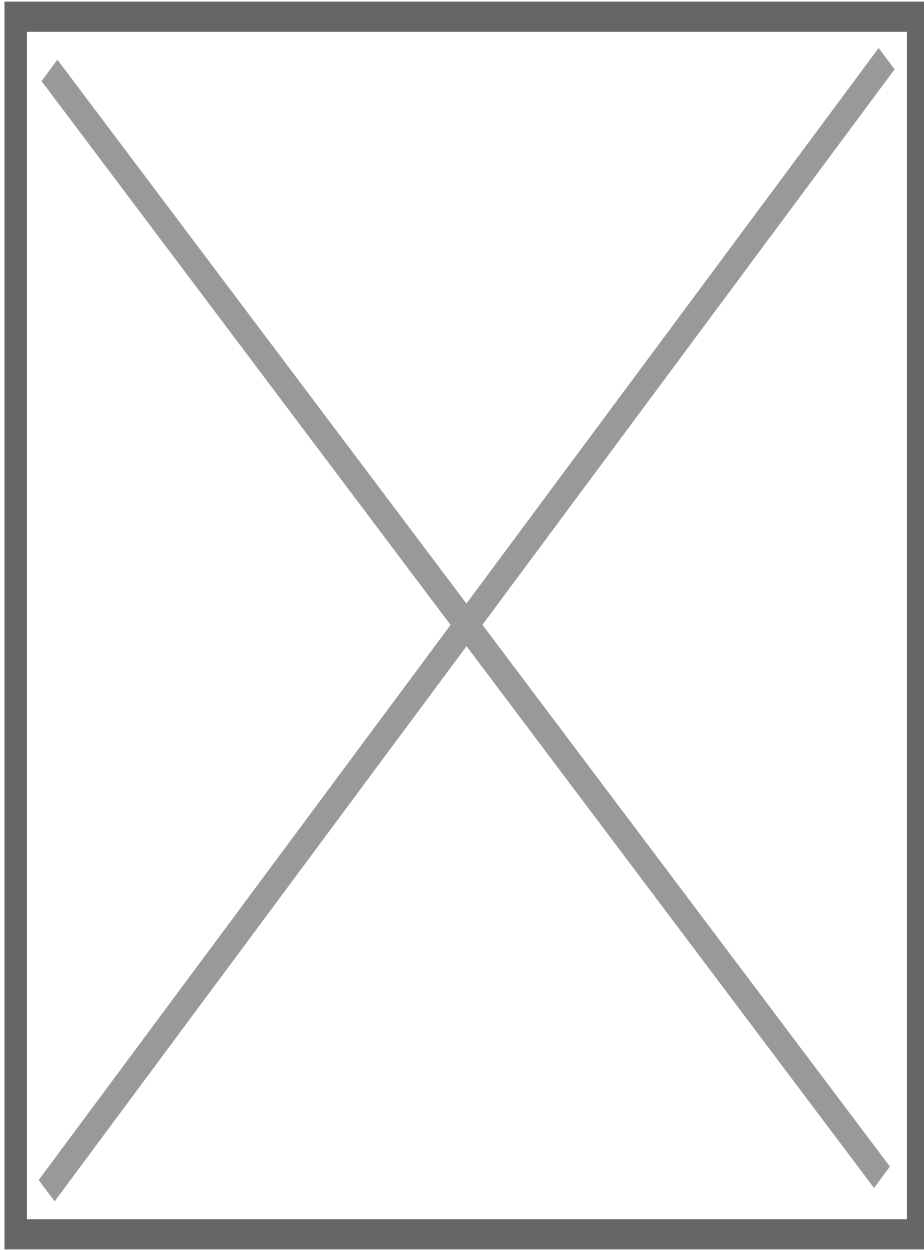


Illustration by Øivind Hovland

In *The Curse of Ham*, scholar David M. Goldenberg argues that “the single greatest justification for Black slavery for more than a thousand years” came from the pages of the Bible itself. Strikingly, he’s not thinking of New Testament passages that command enslaved people to obey their masters. Nor does he talk about

allowances for slavery buried deep in biblical law. What Goldenberg has in mind is the Bible's last story about Noah.

It's an oddball of a story. The supposedly righteous Noah plants a vineyard, drinks way too much, and ends up naked and passed out in his tent (Gen. 9:20–21). Mount Ararat, it appears, isn't too far from Topsy Town. Many interpreters have wondered if Noah, more than a little traumatized from the floating bodies and worldwide destruction, needs something to ease the pain of survivor's guilt.

What happens next has confused readers for centuries. The text reads, "Ham, Canaan's father, saw his father naked and told his two brothers who were outside. Shem and Japheth took a robe, threw it over their shoulders, walked backward, and covered their naked father without looking at him because they turned away" (Gen. 9:22–23, CEB). Once Noah wakes up, he curses Ham's son Canaan to slavery, blesses the Lord, and speaks of Japheth dwelling in Shem's tents. Then Noah dies (Gen. 9:24–29).

The story is baffling. Noah's supposed to be the most innocent person in his generation, but here he's drunk and, for some reason, naked. Did the flood do nothing to wash the earth clean of its wickedness? To make matters worse, Noah curses the wrong person, blasting Canaan, who has done nothing in the story. With these oddities, readers might have simply overlooked this story like so many other confusing biblical stories.

One key factor, however, prevented the story from slipping into oblivion. A particular interpretation of it was used to confirm the Bible as miraculously, supernaturally true. This involved an understanding of biblical prophecy that became especially popular in colonial America: that the Bible's prophecies reached fulfillment not just in ancient times but also in recent times. At the dawn of globalization, this way of reading the Bible allowed commentators to give what they saw as a compelling account of the peoples of the world, as if Ham, Japheth, and Shem were not just sons of Noah but also representatives of the newly understood category of race. This transformed the story from a source of embarrassment into a fulcrum for exalting the Bible's sacred status—and a justification for chattel slavery.

This interpretation gained widespread traction with its take on Noah's words after he wakes up. Reminding readers that Noah's three sons—and their offspring—inhabited the entire world (Gen. 9:18–19; 10:32), this interpretation claimed that Shem represented Asians, Ham and Canaan represented Africans, and Japheth represented Europeans. The actual biblical account doesn't quite support this. Japheth's son Madai, for example, is much more connected with Asia and modern-day Iran than with Europe (Gen. 10:2). For people wanting proof of the Bible's truth and a justification for their own actions, nevertheless, Genesis 9:25–27 provided a powerful prediction about the future: "[Noah] said, 'Cursed be Canaan: the lowest servant he will be for his brothers.' He also said, 'Bless the Lord, the God of Shem; Canaan will be his servant. May God give space to Japheth; he will live in Shem's tents, and Canaan will be his servant'" (CEB).

On the stage of world history, much of the last 500 years is the story of Europe (Japheth) enlarging its borders, turning to Israel (the prototypical descendant of Shem) for its religion while enslaving the people of Africa (Ham, Canaan's father).

Seeing Noah's curse as fulfilled by chattel slavery might seem like a stretch for many of us. For White people in 19th-century America, however, doubting this understanding of Noah's words seemed like doubting the heart of Christianity. During the Civil War, a Massachusetts pastor named Increase Tarbox made this point explicitly, saying, "There are thousands of men in our land, who, if you venture to disturb their faith in these old traditions [like Noah's curse justifying Black enslavement], will start back instinctively as if you were trying to unsettle the foundations of everlasting truth."

This interpretation of Genesis 9 spread so widely that it repeatedly filled the halls of Congress for the purposes of justifying the enslavement of Black people. “This very African race are the descendants of Canaan,” claimed South Carolina senator William Smith on the Senate floor in 1818, adding that they “are still expiating in bondage the curse upon themselves and their progenitors.” About 20 years later, James Henry Hammond (who would become the governor of South Carolina) told his colleagues in the House of Representatives, “The doom of Ham has been branded on the form and features of his African descendants.” A year before war began, Mississippi senator Jefferson Davis addressed the Senate, claiming that Ham “doomed his descendants to perpetual slavery.” After Davis became president of the Confederacy, his vice president, Alexander H. Stephens, referred to Noah’s curse when describing the new government: “Its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery, subordination to the superior race, is his natural and normal condition. . . . The negro by nature, or by the curse against Canaan, is fitted for that condition which he occupies in our current system.” And this interpretation did not abate with the end of chattel slavery in the United States. In 1964, West Virginia senator Robert C. Byrd read Genesis 9:18–27 while filibustering the Civil Rights Act.

It’s easy to condemn politicians—but they were hardly alone in using Genesis 9 to justify slavery. In the middle of the 19th century, the presidents of Mercer University and Dartmouth College cited the curse of Ham to defend enslaving others. Mark Twain and Harriet Beecher Stowe created characters who found in Noah’s curse a reason for slavery. Pastors and church authorities—Baptist, Methodist, Episcopalian, Catholic, Mormon, and others—joined together to defend slavery with Noah’s words. As the founder of the Southern Presbyterian Church put it:

Upon Ham was pronounced the doom of perpetual servitude—proclaimed with double emphasis, as it is twice repeated that he shall be the servant of Japhet and the servant of Shem. Accordingly, history records not a single example of any member of this group lifting itself, by any process of self-development, above the savage condition. From first to last, their mental and moral characteristics, together with the guidance of Providence, have marked them for servitude.

Long after the end of the Civil War, these sorts of sentiments continued. The best-selling *Scofield Reference Bible*—in a section that has been slightly revised to dampen its overt racism—interpreted Noah’s words as follows:

A prophetic declaration is made that from Ham will descend an inferior and servile posterity. . . . A prophetic declaration is made that Shem will have a peculiar relation to Jehovah.

. . . A prophetic declaration is made that from Japheth will descend the “enlarged” races. . . . Government, science, and art, speaking broadly, are and have been Japhetic, so that history is the indisputable record of the exact fulfilment of these declarations.

This interpretation of Genesis 9 spread so widely and deeply that even enslaved people and formerly enslaved people believed it. Thus, when a formerly enslaved woman named Lizzie Grant was interviewed in the 1930s, she said, “You know, son, we have been servants to the rest of the world ever since old Noah’s son laughed at his father’s nakedness and God turned his flesh black and told him for that act his [people] would always carry a curse, and that they would be servants of the people as long as this old world in its present form remained.” Around the same time, another formerly enslaved person named Gus Rogers paraphrased Genesis 9 as follows: “Noah told the one who laughed, ‘Your children will be hewers of wood and drawers of water for the other two children, and they will be known by their hair and their skin being dark.’ So, Miss, there we are, and that is the way God meant us to be.” James Baldwin noted this long-standing tradition when he wrote, in the 1960s, “I

knew that, according to many Christians, I was a descendant of Ham, who had been cursed, and that I was therefore predestined to be a slave.” *Black and Slave*, another book by David M. Goldenberg, provides more than 100 quotations from individuals in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries who found in Noah’s curse a rationale for enslaving people of African descent.

Amid a sea of proslavery readings, the Black church in America offered a variety of alternate interpretations. Perhaps the most common response was to note that Canaan—the person actually cursed by Noah—has only marginal connections with Africa. Although other sons of Ham connect with Ethiopia (Cush), Egypt (Mizraim), and Libya (Put), the Canaanites clearly relate geographically more to the Middle East than to Africa.

Another essential counter-reading of Genesis 9 challenged the very idea that we should look to the contemporary moment for fulfillment of Noah’s words. These people noted that Noah’s prediction had already been fulfilled in biblical times. Texts like Genesis 14 and Judges 1 talk of Ham’s descendants serving Shem’s, and they describe the very distant past.

Then there are the many interpreters who point to Noah’s drunkenness itself as a reason not to take his curse too seriously. As a biblical scholar, this is the sort of argument that I favor. When Noah opens his mouth to curse Canaan, he is either drunk or extremely hungover. Common experience tells us that these are the words of someone not at his best.

We find this response already before the Civil War. James W. C. Pennington is the first known African American educated at Yale. In 1841, he observed the effect of wine on Noah, asking, “Is the spirit of wine the spirit of God?”

Fourteen years later, Samuel Ringgold Ward—a Black abolitionist whom Frederick Douglass called “vastly superior . . . to any of us”—said that Noah’s words “are but the words of a newly awakened drunken man. There was about as much inspiration in these words, as there might have been in anything said by Lot on two very disgraceful nights in his existence.” (The reference to Lot here evokes Genesis 19:30–38, in which Lot becomes so inebriated that he sleeps with his daughters.) Around the same time, the *Anglo-African* magazine echoed Ward: “Noah was no prophet, and had no right, after a drunken carousal, to curse anything, except the wine that had fuddled him.”

After the war, George Washington Williams continued this line of interpretation. Shortly after serving as the first African American in Ohio’s legislature, Williams called Noah’s curse both “the bitter expression of a drunken and humiliated parent lacking divine authority” and “the denunciations of an irritated father just awaking from his drunkenness.”

One of the more poignant accounts of Noah’s drunken cursing comes from the Harlem Renaissance. Zora Neale Hurston’s 1927 one-act play *The First One* reenacts the day Noah drunkenly and unwittingly utters his curse. Horror sweeps across the cast as Noah speaks and then Ham and Canaan emerge with black skin. Mrs. Noah shrieks in horror: “Noah! Arise! Thou art no lord of the Earth, but a drunkard. Thou hast cursed my son. Oh water, Shem! Japheth! Cold water to drive out the wine. Noah! (*She sobs.*) Thou must awaken and unsay thy curse. Thou must!”

Ham’s wife hears what happened and cries out, “But Noah is drunk—surely Jehovah hears not a drunken curse. Noah would not curse Ham if he knew. . . . (*She rushes upon Noah and shakes him violently.*) Oh, wake thou (*She shrieks*) and uncurse thy curse.”

Even Noah himself—who needs to be told what he did while drunk—cries out to God, “Record not my curses on my beloved Ham.” Noah longs to see a rainbow again, which he believes will serve as confirmation that God

will undo the curse. But the sign never appears. Noah asks, “To the mountain—do ye see colors appear?” His wife replies, “None but what our hearts paint for us—ah, false hope.” Noah, unable to bear the guilt of his curse, sends Ham and his family away into exile. The curtain falls with Noah’s wife sobbing continually and calling out to God.

Like Hurston, Martin Luther King Jr. cannot separate Noah’s curse from his drunkenness. He expresses amazement that the story of Noah’s curse has played such a large role in claiming that African Americans are inferior. In a 1957 speech, King said that he would expect those making such claims to “interpret . . . a little better, because [the Bible] tells us that before Noah pronounced the curse, he was drunk, and when he did pronounce it he had a hangover.” The crowd responded with laughter. King continued, “Although God can work in divers[e] ways and divers[e] manners, I don’t think He will entrust anything that important to a man with a hangover.” Again, laughter erupted before King concluded, “And it states very clearly that Noah pronounced the curse, not God.”

More recently, Talbert W. Swan II, a bishop in the Church of God in Christ, writes, “Despite the description of Noah as a ‘blameless’ man, the fact remains that he was in a drunken state [when cursing] and that the text gives no indication that he was acting as an agent for God.”

Biblical scholar Rodney Sadler continues this interpretive tradition, writing, “It is often overlooked that [God] never uttered or authorized the curse against Ham; an inebriated Noah did. It is surprising how much harm to African Americans and ‘race’ relations has been caused by the attribution of theological significance to the recorded ramblings of a human being in the throes of intoxication.”

Aubrey Buster, an Old Testament colleague of mine who teaches at Wheaton College, recently remarked that young people no longer wonder if the Bible is true. They wonder if it’s good. Given the way that the Bible has been used by enslavers and their allies, they have every reason to question the Bible’s goodness. But one of the most remarkable features of Christianity in America is that the Bible has been a powerful weapon not only for oppressors, but also for the oppressed.

The Talmud exhorts readers to do the following with the Torah: “Turn it. Turn it again. Everything is in it. Look into it. Become gray and old with it. Don’t move away from it. You have no better portion than it.” These words, which have guided Jewish people throughout centuries of persecution, also happen to describe what African Americans did in the face of overwhelming odds. They kept returning to the Bible. They viewed it from different angles. And they found in it the strength not just to survive but also to overcome the hatred spread in the name of God by their oppressors.