



## *Bible Defence of Slavery – Curse of Ham* Josiah Priest (1851)

*Josiah Priest was a white American from New York. He began his career as a leatherworker, but he remade himself into a writer of popular history. Among his works was Bible Defence of Slavery, a book which went through several editions—and two different titles—from the 1840s to the 1860s. In the excerpts presented here, Priest gives his version of an argument commonly used by white American Protestants in the antebellum period to legitimate enslaving Africans: that Africans are descended from Noah’s son Ham, whose descendants were cursed by God to be slaves. In Priest’s imagining of the biblical story on which this argument is based, Noah and his wife were red-skinned, like all human beings up to that time, but God miraculously caused Noah’s wife to give birth to sons of three different colors: Shem, who was red; Japheth, who was white; and Ham, who was black.*

[W]e will return to the chief matter in hand, and this is the case of Ham and his people. In order to do this, we shall find it necessary to return again to the dwelling of Noah and his plantation at the time when, as yet, his sons and their families had not gone from thence in quest of new places of settlement. In doing this, we will not forget the vineyard which Noah planted, first of all, after the resting of the ark and his removal out of it down the mountain Ararat, from which, in its season, he gathered the grapes and, pressing out the juice of the same, drank and became inebriated, or inclined to sleep—as we disallow of his being wickedly drunk at all.

That he was thus affected is not much to be wondered at, as Noah was, at the time of this occurrence, more than six hundred years old [...] Now, during the effect of the wine, which doubtless was in its unfermented condition, like the new juice of apples, Noah fell asleep, as any old man would have done after drinking so invigorating a draught. This took place in his tent, when, during the sleep, from some involuntary motion of his limbs, his robe, mantle, or garment, which it appears was but loosely cast about him, became deranged and fell from his person while [he was] in a recumbent and unconscious condition, there alone in his repose.

Why, or on what account, Ham came to intrude on the sacredness of his father’s rest is not known; but so it was. At this juncture, the two other sons of Noah, Japheth and Shem, were not far off; for when Ham had been within the tent and had seen the condition of his father, he was noticed by them to rush out in a state of very great excitement, yelling and exploding with laughter. But as soon as the fit had somewhat abated, Shem and Japheth made inquiry respecting the cause of so much mirth and uproar, when they were seized with a fearful consternation of mind; and finding a garment of sufficient size, they extended it between their persons and went backward into the tent, when they spread it over their father and retired in silence. (See Gen. 9:23.)

The delicate and thoughtful manner in which the two brothers treated their father on this distressing occasion is sufficient evidence of their views of the awful conduct of Ham, showing that they considered what he had done was a crime of the deepest dye—a transaction which, if perpetrated at the present time, would mark the actor as a character of the basest and lowest kind.

But if the two brothers, Shem and Japheth, were shocked at the behavior of Ham, what were the

feelings of his father when he came to know the fact? From what followed, we learn that the patriarch was deeply grieved on account of the reckless impiety of Ham, as well as offended on his own personal behalf; for on calling this son before him, Noah said, by the spirit of prophecy, words too terrible to fall from a parent's lips without a reason entirely irresistible. The words which he pronounced—and was moved thereto by the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Ghost—contained in them a curse, a dreadful curse, which covered not only the person and fortunes of Ham, but those of his whole posterity also, to the very end of time for aught that appears to the contrary.

For an account of this appalling anathema, see Genesis 9:24-27, as follows: “And Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his younger son had done unto him: and he said, Cursed be Canaan (Ham); a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. And he said, Blessed be the Lord God of Shem; and Canaan (Ham) shall be his servant. God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan (Ham) shall be his servant.”

But lest the reader should become perplexed respecting the application of this anathema, on account of the text above referred to being, in the English, “cursed *Canaan*,” instead of “cursed *Ham*,” as it should have been translated, we state that the Arabic copy of the book of Genesis, which is a language of equal authority with the Hebrew and originally the very same, reads “cursed Ham”—the father of Canaan—“a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.”

In this sense it has ever been understood by all commentators, in every age, on the sacred writings. [...] Ham is the man who is denounced, with his posterity, who were to become the slaves of the posterities of the two other races and among themselves—for the text says they should be the “servants of servants,” as well as the servants of the hired servants of the other races, as is the fact in all countries and has ever been thus.

It is not our opinion that for this one act of Ham, that dreadful curse fell upon him and his race. It was not for that one act alone, but on account of his whole character and nature (which one act was, however, in awful keeping with his previous life) that the curse of slavery was entailed on his race.

That the character of Ham's life, up to the time when he committed that unchaste, unfilial, and unholy deed, had been but a continued scene of sin and outrage is strongly intimated in the words made use of by Noah, when he denounced him and said “cursed Ham,” not “cursed *be* Ham,” as the English translators have rendered it, supplying the word *be*, as if he had not been thus prior to that time. The word *be* is not in the original, nor is it needed in the English translation.

The words *cursed Ham* therefore signify, in the Hebrew, that he had been always a bad person, even from childhood; for let it not be forgotten that Ham, at the very time he did that act, was more than a hundred years old. All the powers of his mind were as matured then as they ever could be; the deed, therefore, was but a trait of the gigantic negro's general life and character. Had Ham, on discovering the condition of his patriarchal father in his sleep, retired abashed and sorrowful and had kept the thing to himself, or had related what had taken place with downcast eyes and real mortification, it would have been the evidence of the good intentions and pious state of his heart and temperament of mind, as well as, in a degree, would have argued well in

relation to his former character. The curse, therefore, against Ham and his race was not sent out on the account of that one sin only. But as the deed was heinous and withal was in unison with his whole life, character, and constitutional make prior to that deed, the curse, which had slumbered long, was let loose upon him and his posterity as a general thing, placing them under the ban of slavery, on account of his and their foreseen characters.

Noah did not and could not, as a holy and good man, have pronounced that curse in a vindictive and furious manner upon Ham. No, this he did not do; it was very far from being thus. When the great patriarch was moved upon by the Holy Ghost to speak as he did on that occasion, we have no doubt but he did it with real pain and sorrow of heart; and yet it must be done, as it was dictated by the influence of the Eternal's mandate.

Might we be allowed to imagine the state of Noah's feelings on that occasion, and also to give words to those feelings, they would be as follows: "O Ham, my son, it is not for this one deed alone which you have just committed that I have, by God's command, thus condemned you and your race; but the Lord has shown me that all your descendants will, more or less, be like you, their father. On which account it is determined, by the Creator, that you and your people are to occupy the lowest condition of all the families among mankind, and even be enslaved as brute beasts, going down in the scale of human society beyond and below the ordinary exigencies of mortal existence arising out of war, revolutions, and conflicts; for you will and must be, both in times of peace and war, a despised, a degraded, and an oppressed race." [...]

Thus we believe that sufficient evidence appears from the scriptures of the judicial appointment of that people to servitude [...] God does never sanction sin, nor call for the commission of moral evil to forward any of his purposes; wherefore we come to the conclusion that it is not sinful to enslave the negro race, providing it is done in a tender, fatherly, and thoughtful manner, having the fear of God before our eyes, in a transaction of the kind, doing no violence to the bodies or minds of such persons as slaves or servants, beyond proper and necessary correction.

This is as easily accomplished as is the government of a family, in the ordinary sense of the word, or the good men of old could not have done it, as they most assuredly did, upon which we shall treat in due order. It is the *abuses* of the institution of negro slavery which have recently, by the divine providence, aroused the sympathies of men, but not the principle itself, as God cannot resist his own determinations. [...]

Thus Ham, the sooty monarch of his race,  
adjudged of heaven to fill a servant's place,  
sits regal on his throne, in frowning ire,  
the king of slaves, their patriarch and sire,  
whose state of servitude can never cease  
till the end of time shall bring the grand release.

**Source:** Josiah Priest, *Bible Defence of Slavery; To Which Is Added, a Faithful Exposition of That System of Pseudo Philanthropy, or Fanaticism, Yclept Modern Abolitionism [...]* (Glasgow, KY: W. S. Brown, 1851), 89-105 (chap. 5), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/chi.22511048>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. A long sentence broken up. Grammatical infelicities corrected. Spelling, punctuation, typography (italics, small caps, and multiple font sizes), and the formatting of biblical citations modernized. A missing pair of quotation marks inserted. An *oh* converted to vocative *O*. An elided vowel spelled out in the poetry. Capital letters at the beginning of poetic lines converted to lowercase for readability.

The use of lowercase for *negro* reproduces the usage of the source publication. Some religious terms capitalized in the source (not always consistently) have been converted here to lowercase for the sake of modernization and readability: *patriarch*, *scriptures*, *heaven*, and *divine providence*.

These edited excerpts from Priest's book are intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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