



The Great Question Answered; Or, Is Slavery a Sin in Itself (Per Se)?

James A. Sloan (1857)

The author of this book, James A. Sloan, was a white Presbyterian minister in Mississippi. More specifically, he was a minister for the Associate Reformed Synod of the South, a small denomination with roots in the Covenanters and Seceders movements (Scottish Presbyterians who, in the 1600s and 1700s, dissented from Scotland's state church). Although Sloan himself was a rather marginal figure on the American cultural landscape, this selection from his book exemplifies an apologetic strategy that became common among pro-slavery American Christians during the antebellum era: citing the biblical story of the curse of Ham to legitimate the enslavement of Africans.

We are now prepared to enter on and investigate the origin of slavery, or the subordination of one portion of the human family to that of another. Whatever may be said about all men being *created* free and equal [...], still, not only the Bible but even stubborn facts show a different order of things. Admitting, which we do freely, that at first men were equal by birth and had an equal claim to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” yet the question comes up: Has this original equality continued? Or, in other words, has not God, the author of all things, made some important changes? And are not these changes manifest from his word and the facts which transpire under his providential government? [...]

We pass over the history of our race during the period that transpired before the flood and come down to the re-peopling of the world after that great event in the history of man. [...] The sacred writer informs us that after the flood, “Noah began to be a husbandman, and he planted a vineyard, and drank of the wine, and was drunken; he was uncovered within his tent”; that whilst he lay in this unseemly condition, from the stupefying effects of the wine of which he had too freely drunken, “Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father”; but instead of concealing the matter, as both decency and respect for his father should have directed, his bad disposition led him to give vent to his sinful feelings, and, wishing his other brothers to have a part of his unseemly enjoyment, he “told it to his two brethren without.” Shem and Japheth did not enter into this improper and sinful sport of their brother, but took means to hide the shame of their father, and adopted a plan to accomplish that end, which manifested the greatest respect for their parent and, at the same time, the feelings of refined delicacy toward their erring father. “And Shem and Japheth took a garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father’s nakedness.” Noah remained in his tent until the narcotic and intoxicating effects of the wine passed off. “He then awoke from his wine and knew what his younger son had done unto him, and he said, ‘Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.’ And he said, ‘Blessed be the Lord God of Shem, and Canaan shall be his servant. God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant’” (Gen. 9:20-27).

These verses evidently contain the true and authentic record of the origin of the subjection of the children and posterity of Ham to the rule of his two other brothers and their descendants. Here also is the destruction of the favorite theory that all men are born free and equal. It is also plain

that Noah was inspired by the Holy Spirit on this occasion to point out the will of God in relation to the destiny of his sons. He could not have known of the indecent and sinful conduct of his son Ham from any other source. It was not done in a fit of anger; but the future blessedness and elevation of Shem and Japheth's posterity is declared also, in so plain terms that all history confirms the solemn and divine utterances of the man of God. It could not have been the result of anger, for his parental feelings would have prevented him from degrading Ham's children for all time to come. The declaration of Noah was not merely prophetic, that is, *foretelling* what would be the condition of Ham's posterity; but it was the announcement of a judicial decree of Jehovah against Ham and his posterity *as a punishment for his sins. Slavery, then, is the result, consequence, or, more properly, the judicial punishment of Ham's sin*—not a sin *in itself* (per se), but the punishment of sin.

[...] God often degrades, or rather subjects, one class of human beings to the rule or authority of another class as a punishment for their disobedience to his law. Thus, although man and woman were originally created equal, yet in consequence of the woman's being "first in the transgression" of God's law and tempting [the man] to sin, she has been subjected to man's authority, and the whole sex is inferior. [...] However, then, men, under the influence of their enthusiastic feelings, may extol and laud the equality of all men, still they are not equal. They were created equal, but sin has entered and destroyed that equality. This inequality *is not sin in itself*, but the *result* or *punishment of sin*. Whatever, then, may have been the equality of Noah's three sons at first, it is certain that in consequence of the sin of Ham, he and his posterity are rendered *inferior* to Shem and Japheth and their posterity by the judicial sentence of Jehovah.

Ham's conduct really deserved death. "Honor thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee" (Ex. 20:12). Such is the express law of God, and passages bearing on this point are found scattered throughout both the Old and New Testaments. God pronounced a CURSE on the child that dishonors his parents: "Cursed be he that setteth lightly his father or his mother; and all the people shall say, 'Amen'" (Deut. 27:16). Such children forfeited their claim to life, and disrespect to parents was, by the same law, a capital crime (see Deut. 21:18-21). So that, according to the law of God, Ham deserved death for his unfilial and impious conduct. But the great Lawgiver saw fit, in his good pleasure, not to destroy Ham with immediate death but to set a *mark of degradation* on him, as he had done with the first murderer, Cain, that all coming generations might know and respect the laws of God. Slavery was, properly, a *commutation*, or a change of punishment. Death was the real punishment of the crime; but Jehovah, for reasons satisfactory to himself, changed it to a degrading state of continued servitude. This curse of slavery evidently was a judicial act, and Noah pronounced it by the dictation of the Holy Spirit.

[...T]he application of this curse to all the descendants of Ham is founded on the fact that all Ham's posterity are either *black* or dark-colored and thus bear upon their countenance the mark of *inferiority* which God put upon the progenitor. [...] *Black, restrained, despised, bowed down* are the words used [in the scriptures] to express the condition and place of Ham's children. Bearing the mark of degradation on their skin, they are *restrained* from being on an equality with their more favored brethren; they are often *despised* and prevented from intermarrying or mingling with the white and red races; and finally, they are *bowed down* to the authority of their superiors without successful resistance.

To many, these things may appear very singular and strange. Be it so. We have only followed out what seems to be the teachings of the Bible on this strange but deeply interesting subject. [...] God, by his decree and in consequence of [Ham's] sin, has degraded Ham's posterity. The sentence, "a servant of servants shall he be to his brethren," has been fully exemplified in the past history of the three divisions of the human family.

Source: Jas. A. Sloan, *The Great Question Answered; Or, Is Slavery a Sin in Itself (Per Se?) Answered According to the Teaching of the Scriptures* (Memphis: Hutton, Gallaway & Co., 1857), 64-81, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/loc.ark:/13960/t5x63ms9v>. Public domain.

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