Bible Defence of Slavery – Origin of races

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. Presented below is a condensed version of the book's first two chapters, in which Priest weaves together information drawn from Bible commentaries and other reference sources to produce an account of how God created different races. Priest's idea that the first white and black individuals became such miraculously (rather than through change over generations) was idiosyncratic even in his day. However, embedded in Priest's reading of the Bible are generalizations about race that were widely espoused among white Americans in the 19th century.*

How often do we hear questions like the following: From whence came the Ethiopian, or black man? Who was his father? Did he spring from Adam or some other race? Can it be that from one and the same source, the white, black, and red portions of mankind proceeded, with all the hues and shades of complexion which mark the human race?

[...W]e hope to answer the above queries and show the reader the true origin of the negro race, as well as that of the others, the white and red—there having been, in reality, but these three on the earth, as the yellow and the brown, with all the other shades, are but derived from an amalgamation of the three others [...]

Here it is proper to inquire: What, then, was the complexion of the two first of the human race, Adam and Eve, and the antediluvian world, their offspring?

In relation to this extremely curious, as well as interesting, subject, we shall refer first to a very ancient and a very learned historian, namely Flavius Josephus, who says in his work on the *Antiquities of the Jews* [...]: "God took dust from the ground, and formed man, and inserted in him a spirit and a soul. This man was called *Adam*, which, in the Hebrew tongue, signifies one that is *red*, because he was formed of red earth [...]"

Thus this Jewish historian, as well as the genius of the Hebrew language, furnishes us with a clue [...] leading to the right conclusion on this subject: namely, that Adam, with all the antediluvian race, were red, or a copper-colored people. [...]

Now, as the Jews are red, or a dark copper-colored race, in their pure and unamalgamated condition aids in proving that Adam was also of the same complexion, because Seth, an immediate son of Adam and Eve, was the direct progenitor of the Hebrew, or Jewish, people [...]

Most people in Christian countries have imbibed the opinion that Adam, Eve, the antediluvians, the Jews, the old prophets and patriarchs, were all white men, most assuredly; but this is a mistake, as is evident from the foregoing. Adam, therefore, in his primitive condition, before he had fallen and covered his limbs with clothing, was a glorious personage to look upon—being of a bright ruddy red [...] Thus, when he moved in the groves of Paradise, he glowed in the sun's

rays like some celestial being [...] Such was Eve, also, his heaven-made bride, though less in stature and more delicately shaped. From her head [...] there fell a silken shower, the black and glossy tresses of her hair [...]

Such were the first man and woman of the human race, but [they] were somewhat changed by the entrance of sin, which not only affected the hearts and natures of Adam and Eve and their race, but tinged the beauty of their complexion, changing it from a bright florid red to the dark hue of common copper, and awfully agreed with the still darker passions of their fallen souls, who, in this image, brought forth their progeny red in complexion and beclouded in mind.

> Thus God ordained, and this was surely right,
> that the first man should not be black nor white
> but of a copper hue, a gloomy red,
> halfway between the two, our primal head.

* * *

Having thus ascertained, as we believe, the color of the first human beings, the question naturally arises here, how there came into existence other persons of our race with different complexions, such as a jet black and the snowy white, vastly varying from the original red.

[...T]o suppose that complexions so far removed in likeness as are black and white [could] have been produced by climate, location, manner of living, or any such thing, as many have believed [...], is now given up as an error by the philosophy of the age. [...] If, then, the three standing original, radical, and primeval complexions of the human race—red, black, and white—were not produced by climate nor other natural circumstances, how, then, were they produced? [...]

God, who made all things and endowed all animated nature with the strange and unexplained power of propagation, superintended the formation of two of the sons of Noah in the womb of their mother in an extraordinary and supernatural manner, giving to these two children such forms of bodies, constitutions of natures, and complexions of skin as suited his will. Those two sons were Japheth and Ham. Japheth he caused to be born white, differing from the color of his parents, while he caused Ham to be born black, a color still further removed from the red hue of his parents [...] It was, therefore, by the miraculous intervention of the divine power that the black and white man have been produced, equally as much as was the creation of the color of the first man, the Creator giving him a complexion, arbitrarily, that pleased the divine will.

This solution of the mystery of the origin of the negro's color we trust will be acceptable, as there appears, in the wide field of conjecture and investigation, no other paths that lead to light but this. The mind, therefore, seems hemmed in and driven to this conclusion by the arm of resistless necessity, referring the cause of the negro's color to the arbitrary will and wisdom of God rather than to the feebler and ineffectual power of contingencies.

[...T]he word *Ham* in the language of Noah, which was the pure and most ancient Hebrew, signified anything that had become black; it was the word for *black* [...I]n proof of this affirmation, see Adam Clark's comment on the meaning of the word *Ham*, Gen. 10:1, who there says that *Ham* signified that which was black. [...]

But in addition to what is already said respecting the Hebrew word *Ham*, we may remark that it was, in some sense, also prophetic of Ham's character and fortunes in his own life and the fortunes of his race, as the word not only signified *black* in its literal sense but pointed out the very disposition of his mind. The word, doubtless, has more meanings than we are now acquainted with—two of which, however, beside the first, we find are heat or violence of temper, exceedingly prone to acts of ferocity and cruelty involving murder, war, butcheries, and even cannibalism, including beastly lusts and lasciviousness in its worst feature, going beyond the force of these passions as possessed in common by the other races of men. Second, the word signifies deceit, dishonesty, treachery, low-mindedness, and malice.

What a group of horrors are here couched in the word *Ham*, all agreeing, in a most surprising manner, with the color of Ham's skin, as well as with his real character as a man during his own life, as well as with that of his race even now. [...]

As a philosopher and a prophet, Noah foresaw, in the ruin of the earth by water, that its mild, healthy, and pristine climates would undergo a horrid change, and, of necessity, inhabitants of different characters, constitutions, and complexions would be wanted to people it; on which account he bore patiently, for the sake of the divine purposes, the misfortune of the strange and monstrous production of his wife in the birth of Ham, the first negro. For this reason, God produced the two new races. [...]

The word *Japheth* is a Hebrew word and was given as a name to one of the sons of Noah, which also had its prophetic meaning and pointed out the fortunes of Japheth's race, which was to consist of great enterprise, enlargement, and renown in the world; one who was to excel and even to rule over the races of his two brothers—which, as we shall show in due order, has been wonderfully fulfilled. But there is another meaning in the word *Japheth* which is of immense importance to the doctrine set forth in this work, viz., that Japheth was born a white man [...]

This peculiar meaning is found in the translation of the word *Japheth* by the Rev. James Creighton, A.B., a most accomplished Hebraist, in his *Dictionary of the Scripture Proper Names*, p. 162. This great linguist states that one of the meanings of the word *Japheth* is fair, or white, which cannot be said of black, as black is not fair. From this translation, we learn that Japheth was a fair white man, on whose face and form there was stamped, in the eye of his father, the sure sign of great intellectual endowments, betokening renown, enlargement, and rule among men; wherefore he could give him no other name than the important word *Japheth*, or the fair and ruddy white son, his fortunes remaining to be fulfilled in the course of time, while his father, acted upon by the great beauty of this child, gave him his name and blessed him as the progenitor of a race who were to fill the world with their glory and numbers—as is now the fact before the eyes of all men, for the white man and the white woman are paramount in all the improvements of the earth. [...]

> Thus now from Adam's blood, in heaven's sight,
> two other bloods were made, as black and white,
> from whom, as from two springs, two torrents roll,
> of tribes and nations, to the final goal.

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), 15-46 (chaps. 1-2), https://hdl.handle.net/2027/chi.22511048. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. Spelling, punctuation, typography (italics, small caps, and multiple font sizes), and the formatting of a biblical citation modernized. A misspelling, two grammatical infelicities, and an inaccurately reproduced book title corrected. A missing quotation mark inserted. Capital letters at the beginning of poetic lines converted to lowercase for readability.

The use of lowercase for *negro* and for colors used as racial labels (*white, black, red*) reproduces the usage of the source publication. Divine pronouns, which are inconsistently capitalized in the source, are consistently presented here in lowercase. The words *heaven* and *divine* have been converted to lowercase as well, but the capitalization of *Paradise* (referring to Eden) replicates the source.

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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