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## THE CURSE OF HAM: A CASE OF RABBINIC RACISM?

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In 1604 Fray Prudencio de Sandoval had this to say about the Jew and the Black:

Who can deny that in the descendants of the Jews there persists and endures the evil inclination of their ancient ingratitude and lack of understanding, just as in the Negroes [there persists] the inseparable quality of their blackness.<sup>1</sup>

His linking of Jew and Black was not unusual. Indeed, the explicit and implicit comparison of these two peoples is found throughout western literature over many centuries. Leslie Fiedler may have been right when he said, “Surely the Negro cannot relish...this improbable and unwanted yoking any more than the Jew.” Nevertheless, yoked they are, at least in the minds of the rest of the world. At various times and in various places, both peoples were said to be genetically diseased, physically and intellectually inferior, cursed by God, oversexed, more animal than human, ugly, smelly, and, of course, associated with the devil. From Jerome and Augustine, who saw biblical Ham as typologically the Jew while biologically the Black, to the 1930’s American graffito “A nigger is a Jew turned inside out,” these two peoples have been typecast as reflections of one another, and as substitutes for one another in society’s categorization of the Other. Voltaire put it succinctly: “One regards the Jews the same way as one regards the Negroes, as a species of inferior humanity.”<sup>2</sup>

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The publication of this essay is due in no small measure to three people. Prof. Bernard Lewis provided me inspiration and opportunity. My debt and gratitude to him is profound. Both Lewis and Prof. David Brion Davis read various drafts of the essay and offered valuable suggestions. My thanks are due to them as also to Prof. Benny Kraut for thoroughgoing stylistic improvements. To avoid confusion, in this essay I use “Black” in upper case to mean one who is from sub-Saharan Africa.

<sup>1</sup> As quoted in Y.H. Yerushalmi, *Assimilation and Racial Anti-Semitism: The Iberian and the German Models* (New York, 1982), p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> “Negro and Jew: Encounter in America,” *The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler* (New York, 1971) 1:460. Augustine, *Contra Faustum* 12.23, *Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum* (Vienna, 1866- ) 25:351 “**The middle son [Ham] is the people of the Jews**” **who rejected Christ (Noah) and therefore will be slaves**. Jerome, *Dialogus contra Luceferianos* 22 (*Patrologiae cursus completus ... series Latina*, ed. J.P.

This introductory backdrop highlights the Black-Jewish tension of our times. How ironic that these peoples, seen as mirror images of one another, have become modern-day antagonists. And, as we see again and again, the spring-taut tension of Black-Jewish relations has not left the academic world untouched.

Indeed, the most recent and pernicious attack against Judaism is now being mounted by several academics who base their assault on a purported scholarly reading of ancient and medieval rabbinic literature. Their claim: these texts reflect an invidious racism against Blacks, subsequently adopted by Christianity and Islam, which played itself out on the stage of history. In short, the source of anti-Black prejudice in western civilization, it is alleged, is found in rabbinic literature.

However, an examination of the literature shows that the claim has nothing to stand on. Not one of the individuals who allege ancient rabbinic racism is an expert in rabbinic literature or in ancient Jewish history. In fact, an examination of the modern “scholarship” paints a sorry picture of the academy, for it shows how academics and others venture into cultural fields they do not understand, deal with concepts, language, and literature they do not comprehend, and how they nevertheless readily devise theories, or repeat those of others, which are baseless and false.

### **The Claim: Judaism is the Source of Anti-Black Racism**

The proposition that ancient Jewish society invented anti-Black racism was first stated about thirty years ago and has been increasingly repeated in scholarly and nonscholarly works of all sorts. It should be noted at the outset that the authors of these

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Migne (Paris, 1844-55) 23:185. **The graffito is recorded in** Nathan Hurvitz, “Blacks and Jews in American Folklore,” *Western Folklore* 33 (1974): 307. Voltaire in his *Essai sur les mœurs* as quoted by Poliakov, “Racism in Europe,” *Caste and Race: Comparative Approaches*, ed. A. de Rueck and J. Knight (Boston, 1967), p. 224n.

In 1853 *La Civiltà Cattolica*, the Jesuit journal “constitutionally connected to the Vatican” which “has played a role as a link between the pope and the Catholic world,” wrote of “the Curse of Ham” which “still afflicts this race, the descendants of the ancient Jews still bear the mark of the wrath of God carved on their forehead” (*La Civiltà Cattolica* 1 (1853) 616, quoted by José David Lebovitch Dahl, “The Role of the Roman Catholic Church in the Formation of Modern Anti-Semitism,” *Modern Judaism* 23.2 (2003) 182. The reference to a mark of God on the forehead is unclear to me, since Ham did not receive any mark of God but Cain did (Genesis 4:15), and, in fact, some years later the same journal compared the Jews to Cain and spoke of how the Jews “raise with arrogance against the Vatican their forehead signed by the indelible mark of the deicide”: *La Civiltà Cattolica* 2 (1861) 159, quoted by Lebovitch Dahl, p. 182.

claims do not fall into a single class. They are neither all Black nor are they all non-Jewish. The idea, in fact, seems to have originated -- at least in its modern version -- with the 1963 publications of three authors, one a Jew, two not, none of them Black. Thomas Gossett's *Race: The History of an Idea in America* claimed that two legends, which the author found in the *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1904), depict the origin of black skin as a curse of God, thus exhibiting "the most famous example of racism among Jews." Raphael Patai, an anthropologist, and Robert Graves, a novelist, published *Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis*, containing selections of rabbinic expositions on and about the Genesis myths. The authors wove together various strands of rabbinic traditions, inserting an editorial remark here and there, tendentiously creating (it is their own creation) a picture of Noah cursing his grandson Canaan and his descendants by endowing them with the following characteristics: black skin, negroid features, eternal slavery, hatred of their masters, and a love of theft, fornication, and lying.<sup>3</sup>

A few years later, in an article in the *Journal of African History*, Edith Sanders drew on these earlier works and implied a close link between modern racism and the rabbinic legends, which "endowed [the Negroes] with both certain physiognomical attributes and an undesirable character." Sanders' arguments are adopted in toto, although without attribution, by Joseph Harris who characterizes the rabbinic legends as embodying "a most decisive derogatory racial tradition."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Gossett, p. 5; Graves-Patai, p. 121. Already in the 1940's, J.A. Rogers (*Sex and Race* [New York, 1940-44] 3:316-317, and later in *Nature Knows No Color-Line* [New York, 1952], pp. 9-10) noted that the idea of a curse of blackness on Ham "originates in the Talmud, Midrash, and other rabbinical writings." Rogers, however, was more interested in documenting this myth than he was in seeing in it the origin of racism in Western civilization. Somewhat earlier Raoul Allier, Dean of the Faculté libre de théologie protestante of Paris, condemned the rabbis: "Christian missionaries ... must take the initiative to protest without delay the thesis [of blackness as curse], born in the ghetto, of the feverish and sadistic imagination of some rabbis" (*Une Énigme troublante: la race nègre et la malédiction de Cham*. Les Cahiers Missionnaires no. 16 [Paris, 1930], pp. 16-19, 32), but Allier's work, in any case, seems to have been unknown to those who followed, at least in this country. (Allier was known to, and used by Albert Perbal, "La Race nègre et la malédiction de Cham," *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa* 10 [1940]: 156-177, and Martin Steins, *Das Bild des Schwarzen in der europäischen Kolonialliteratur 1870-1918* [Frankfurt a/M, 1972]).

<sup>4</sup> Edith Sanders, "Hamitic Hypothesis," *Journal of African History* 10 (1969): 521-532; the article has been reprinted in *Problems in African History: The Precolonial Centuries*, ed. R.O. Collins et al. (New York, 1993), pp. 9-19. Harris, *Africans and Their History* (New York, 1972) pp. 14-15. Sanders and Graves-Patai are well critiqued by Ephraim Isaac, "Genesis, Judaism and the 'Sons of Ham,'" *Slavery and Abolition* 1 (1980): 3-17; reprinted in *Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa*, ed. John R. Willis (London, 1985) 1:75-91.

The American historian Winthrop Jordan took the charge one step further in his work, *White over Black* (1968). Accepting the idea (Jordan read Gossett) that the rabbis saw the origin of black skin in a curse, Jordan claimed that the image of the lustful Negro in 16th-17th century England also had its origin in rabbinic literature. From England, both ideas -- blackness as curse and oversexed Negro -- wound their way through the thoughts of European writers until they made their harmful appearance in the New World.<sup>5</sup>

Without Jordan's contribution, the theory of rabbinic racism might have died on the dusty shelves of university libraries. But *White over Black* was an otherwise important work -- in fact, one of the most influential in Black historiography -- and made a strong impact on the scholarship that followed. So much so, that the theory is now often repeated in scholarly works dealing with topics as diverse as British ideas about Africans' educability, the mythic world of the antebellum South, the French and Portuguese encounter with Africa, and color prejudice in English religion.<sup>6</sup> Rabbinic racism became an accepted fact in the canon of literature pertaining to Africans and race prejudice. Similarly, Jordan's sexual interpretation has influenced others who speak of a rabbinic "stereotype, defining black people as unable to control their sexual impulses."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Winthrop Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1968), pp. 18, 35-37. Jordan's familiarity with Gossett's work is seen on p. 604 ("Essay on Sources").

<sup>6</sup> Charles Lyons, *To Wash an Aethiop White: British Ideas about Black African Educability, 1530-1960* (New York, 1975), p. 12; Thomas Peterson, *Ham and Japheth: The Mythic World of Whites in the Antebellum South* (Metuchen, NJ and London, 1978), p. 70; William Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans: White Responses to Blacks, 1530-1880* (Bloomington, IN, 1980), p. 10; A.C. de C.M. Saunders, *A Social History of Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal, 1441-1555* (Cambridge UK, 1982), pp. 18, 190n18; Joseph R. Washington, *Anti-Blackness in English Religion 1500-1800* (New York, 1984), pp. 1, 10-15, 18, 42 and 52-53.

<sup>7</sup> St. Claire Drake, *Black Folk Here and There*, volume 2 (Los Angeles, 1990), pp. 22-23. Joseph Washington (*Anti-Blackness in English Religion*, p. 10) makes a similar claim. On the impact of *White over Black*, see August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *Black History and the Historical Profession, 1915-1980* (Urbana, 1986), p. 123. **Jordan's influence ranges beyond academe. His interpretation of the Zohar is quoted in works on black theology to show early Jewish antipathy to Blacks; see, e.g., G.S. Wilmore, "The Black Messiah: Revising the Color Symbolism of Western Christology," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 2 (Fall, 1974), p. 8.** Jordan is even quoted, incorrectly, to prove that Ham's blackness begins with the Bible (H.L. Feingold, *Zion in America: The Jewish Experience from Colonial Times to the Present* [New York, 1974],

The most recent full-scale discussion of “the highly pejorative images of Blacks in the Babylonian Talmud” is to be found in a work by the late Black anthropologist St. Clair Drake, *Black Folk Here and There*. The publication blurb for the book says it all: “St. Clair Drake brilliantly uncovers the genesis of cultural and phenotype denigration of dark-skinned peoples in the talmudic Judaic tradition....” This is reminiscent of the pronouncement of another academic, John Ralph Willis, who recently declared (drawing on the work of Sanders) that although the idea of blackness as curse “had its genesis in the Old Testament, its forcing bed was the Babylonian Talmud.”<sup>8</sup>

Much of the accumulating wisdom of scholarship today seems to agree: rabbinic Judaism has “its own special mix of unflattering allusions to the color and character of dark-skinned Africans,” it “associates darkness of hue with sin, slavery, and savagery,” and it is where one finds a “growth of Jewish lore demeaning the Negro.”<sup>9</sup> In its “depth of anti-Blackness,” rabbinic Judaism “suggests how repugnant blacks were to the chosen people,” and how the Jews viewed Blacks “as the people devoid of ultimate worth and redeeming social human value.”<sup>10</sup>

This attack on rabbinic Judaism has spread beyond the university campus. Black biblical interpreters, theologians, and religious leaders, drawing on Jordan, Graves-Patai, and others, repeat the accusation. Charles B. Copher writes of “the Babylonian Talmud, Midrashim, and legends [where] the reactions are wholly anti-Black,” and Cain Hope Felder, whose work is generally balanced, refers to the “curse of Ham...which rabbis of the early Talmudic periods...used to denigrate Black people.”<sup>11</sup> And now the Nation of

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p. 86). *The Bible says nothing about Ham turning black, contrary to J. Kovel, White Racism: A Psychohistory* (New York, 1970), p. 63.

<sup>8</sup> St. Clair Drake, *Black Folk Here and There* 2:2, 17-30, 74 and 117. John Ralph Willis, ed., *Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa* 1:8.

<sup>9</sup> Harold Brackman in his Ph.D. dissertation (UCLA, 1977), *The Ebb and Flow of Conflict: A History of Black-Jewish Relations Through 1900*, pp. 6, 73, 79.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Washington, *Anti-Blackness in English Religion*, pp. 11 and 15.

<sup>11</sup> Copher, “Blacks and Jews in Historical Interaction: The Biblical/African Experience,” *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 3 (1975): 16; reprinted in *African Presence in Early Asia* (New Brunswick, NJ; rev. ed., 1988) p. 185. A few years ago *The Washington Post* (September 14, 1991; p. B6) ran a story on Black biblicalists and biblical interpretation. The writer reported that “some blacks believe the Bible was intentionally interpreted in this manner to perpetuate racist ideologies.” This is immediately followed by a rehashing of the rabbinic racism claims by Charles Copher. Cain Hope Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race Class, and Family* (New York,

Islam and Tony Martin, the controversial professor of Africana Studies at Wellesley College, have carried the attack to center stage of the public arena: “The Hamitic Myth (that is, the association of the African with the supposed curse of Noah), was invented by Jewish talmudic scholars.... It provided the moral pretext upon which the entire [African slave] trade grew and flourished.”<sup>12</sup>

Basing their arguments on translations, anthologies, and encyclopedia articles, these writers -- drawing on one another, derivative and repetitive as they are, not one of them an expert in rabbinic literature -- have created a modern American intellectual tradition. The tradition, however, disappears upon inspection. Academic tools are being manipulated, and ancient sources exploited, to serve purposes foreign to a real search for truth. And the sorriest aspect of this sordid drama is that most of those repeating the canards are innocent bystanders.

While the arguments of these authors are repeated from one book to the next, the tone undergoes sharp change. The objective language of Jordan and Gossett is gradually replaced by the voice of vehement attack in the works of some who follow them. There is clearly more at stake here than pure scholarship. It is, however, the argument and not the tone that is the subject of this essay.

The charge of ancient Jewish racism consists of three parts: (a) rabbinic statements project an anti-Black sentiment; (b) such sentiment is pervasive in rabbinic literature (Talmud and Midrash) and reflects a “talmudic view” of Blacks; and (c) this

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1989), p. 38. See also W.D. McKissic and A.T. Evans, *Beyond Roots II: If Anybody Ask You Who I Am. A Deeper Look at Blacks in the Bible* (Wenonah NJ, 1994), pp. 21-22. This book, a popular work in the Black Christian world, concludes on the basis of the work of Copher and others, that the rabbinic texts are “erroneously inconsiderate.”

<sup>12</sup> Tony Martin, *The Jewish Onslaught* (Dover, Mass, 1993), p. 33. Martin relied on the Nation of Islam’s racist publication *The Secret Relationship between Blacks and Jews* (Boston, 1991), p. 203: “It is also the [Jewish] misinterpretation of the Old Testament which offered the holy justification for oppression on purely racial grounds.” The NOI continues to push this line in their other racist writings: “This ‘curse’ was the absolute basis for the Europeans’ choice of dark-skinned Africans for chattel slavery.... When the Jews invented it and promoted it to the world they sentenced the Black Race to a holocaust the likes of which no people have ever suffered.” (*Philadelphia Blacks and Jews News*, Spring 1994, reprinted in R. Rockaway, “*The Jews Cannot Defeat Me*”: *The Anti-Jewish Campaign of Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam* [Tel Aviv, 1995], p. 42, and found on the website [blacksandjews.com](http://blacksandjews.com), under “Jews and the Black Holocaust”). Farrakhan has charged the Jews with inventing the “myth of the curse of Ham.” Quoted in Harold Brackman, *Ministry of Lies* (New York, 1994), p. 115, from a speech given on February 3, 1994.

view is the source of racism in western civilization. I shall deal with each of these claims in turn.

**“Rabbinic Statements Project an Anti-Black Sentiment”** The charge of “rabbinic racism” rests upon a total of five statements. Two of these occur in the earlier talmudic-midrashic corpus -- the others are in later medieval sources -- and view dark skin as a curse of God. The first (Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 108b) records the following folktale told by a third-century CE rabbi: God prohibited Noah and all the creatures in the ark from engaging in sex during the flood (“I have decided to destroy my world and you would create life!”). Three creatures transgressed -- the dog, the raven, and Ham, son of Noah -- and were punished. Ham’s punishment was that he became black, a procreative (i.e., genetic) punishment for a procreative (i.e., sexual) sin.<sup>13</sup> The second story (Midrash, *Genesis Rabbah* 36.7), in an elaboration of the biblical narrative in Genesis 9 (“And Ham saw [Noah’s] nakedness”), assumes that Ham castrated his father Noah. In retaliation Noah said to Ham: “You prevented me from doing that which is done in the dark [the sexual act], therefore may your progeny be black and ugly.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The idea that black skin came about due to a change in seminal composition had wide currency. See the church father Origen’s *Commentary to Song of Songs* 2.2: “Among the whole of the Ethiopian race...there is a certain natural blackness because of seminal inheritance (*ex seminis carnalis successione nigredo*), that in those parts the sun burns with fiercer rays, and that having once been scorched, the bodies remain darkened in the transmission of the inborn defect (*infusata corpora genuini vitii successione permanant*). *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte* (Leipzig, 1901- ) 33:125. R.P. Lawson translates: “natural blackness inherited by all” and “bodies that have once been scorched and darkened, transmit a congenital stain to their posterity” for the bracketed words. *Ancient Christian Writers* (Westminster MD, 1946- ) 26: 107. Similarly, [Hippocrates, \*Airs, Waters, Places\* 14](#), [Strabo 15.1.24](#), [Herodotus 3.101](#); cf. [3.97](#), [Aristotle, \*Generation of Animals\* 2.736a](#), 10-15, and [Democritus \(H. Diels and W. Kranz, \*Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker\* \(Berlin, 1951-52\) 68A141](#). In a Persian version of Ṭabarī’s *History* done by Abu `Ali Mohammed Bal`amī (10th century), we find the same idea of altered genetic composition. Elaborating on the biblical story, Bal`amī says that Noah cursed Ham and said: “‘May God change the semen of your loins.’ After that all the people and fruit of the country of Ham became black.” M. Hermann Zotenberg, ed. and trans. *Chronique de Abou-Djafar-Mo`hammed-ben-Djarir-ben-Yezid Ṭabarī traduite sur la version persane d’Abou-`Ali Mo`hammed Bel`ami* (Paris, 1867-1874) 1:115.

<sup>14</sup> Precisely the same explanation for Aphrodite’s (the love goddess) title as the “Black One” is given by Pausanius, the Greek geographer of the second century CE: people make love in the dark (*Description of Greece* 8.6.5). The *Sanhedrin* passage is paralleled in the Jerusalem Talmud, *Ta`anit* 1.6, 64d.

First, it should be noted -- it is often not -- that these folktales are concerned with skin color, not race. Ham's progeny, the Bible tells us, comprised different ethnic groups: Egyptians, Libyans, Canaanites, Ethiopians. Still, the idea that dark skin is a punishment for a sinful act is disturbing to our 20th-century western ears.

But should we listen to a 1700-year-old Near Eastern text with 20th-century western ears? Historians train for years to learn to remove themselves culturally and chronologically, and to listen with the ears of their subjects.

When we do this we recognize immediately the literary form of the stories as an etiological myth. Early Jewish, Christian, and Islamic sources always assume that mankind derived from one original couple and that this couple had the same skin color as those investigating the question. Since a good part of humanity had a considerably darker complexion, these cultures were faced with the question of how relative lightness changed color. Their answer was divine extranatural intervention; in other words, an etiological myth. The stories thus account for the anomaly of dark skin in a lighter-skinned society. (Folk etymology may have also been involved, for the Hebrew "Ham" may have been understood -- incorrectly -- as deriving from *hum*, "dark," or "brown.")

Such tales explaining the origin of natural (or linguistic) phenomena are commonly found in Jewish literature, beginning with the Bible. The story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is an etiological myth meant to explain the snake's peculiar (legless) anatomy, woman's pain in childbirth, and man's toil in life. Linguistic etiologies based on the name of a person, place or nation (folk etymologies), are similarly commonplace. An oft-cited example is the name "Moses" explained in the Bible as based on a Hebrew root meaning 'to draw', "for I drew him out of the water" (Exodus 2:10).

The ancient Israelites did not invent the genre; etiological myths are common to all cultures, including African as well. A Cameroon folktale (later incorporated in the Uncle Remus stories) tells of the Mountain Spirit's two children who became dirty while playing. Their father sent them to the sea to wash. One jumped in and emerged white again. The other was afraid of the water and only got the soles of his feet and the palms of his hands wet. When the father saw the children he turned to the dirty one and said: "Since you did not listen to me and did not wash, may you therefore become black and may your children and your children's children all become black. Only the soles of your feet and the palms of your hands will remain white."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> P. Simon Rosenhuber, *Märchen, Fabeln, Rätsel und Sprichwörter der Neger in Kamerun* (Limburg, 1926), pp. 56-57. The Uncle Remus tales incorporated African traditions: J.C. Harris, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (1880), no. 33; in the Penguin edition (1982), ed. Robert Hemenway, on pp. 150-151. Cf. J.A. Rogers, pp. 60-61. Of course, there are African creation myths -- the Uncle Remus story is one -- that assume the original humans to have been black, some of whom then became white. A wide variety of black/white stories is found in the work of Veronika Görög-Karady who



Etiological myths of course reflect views and attitudes of society, and there is no question that the two rabbinic stories imply an aesthetic preference for lighter skin color. There is no question that the authors considered their own skin color to be the norm and, therefore, the preferred. Such human conceit is, however, hardly peculiar to the Jews of antiquity. People everywhere find most desirable that which most closely resembles themselves. Social scientists call this human trait “somatic norm preference” and differentiate it from racism, a phenomenon determined by societal structures.<sup>16</sup>

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has collected 161 African accounts (myths, tales, songs, etc.), recorded since the beginning of the century, that represent the relationship between Africans and Europeans. A significant proportion of these are etiological origin myths that explain the creation and/or the social stratification of the different races, and an additional group are African reformulations of mostly biblical origin myths. (*Noirs et blancs: leur image dans la littérature orale africaine*, [Paris, 1976]. Studied further in: “Parental Preference and Racial Inequality: An Ideological Theme in African Oral Literature” in *Forms of Folklore in Africa: Narrative, Poetic, Gnomonic, Dramatic*, ed. Bernth Lindfors [Austin, 1977], pp. 104-134; “Noirs et Blancs: A propos de quelques mythes d’origine vili” in *Itinérances--in pays peul et ailleurs* (Paris, 1981) 2:79-95; and “Retelling Genesis: The Children of Eve and the Origin of Inequality” in *Genres, Forms, Meanings: Essays in African Oral Literature*, ed. V. Görög-Karady [Oxford, 1982], pp. 37-44.) An example of an African reformulation of a biblical story is that recorded by W.W. Reade from the inhabitants of Sierra Leone in 1864: Man was originally black; when God shouted at Cain for killing his brother, Cain turned white from fright; thus the origin of white people (*Savage Africa* [New York, 1864], p. 31 = *Noir et blancs*, pp. 342-343, no. 89; cf. J.A. Rogers, *Sex and Race* 1:11). A similar story, but with God confronting Adam who then turned white, was told by American ex-slaves (R.R. Earl, *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self, and Community in the Slave Mind* [Maryknoll, NY, 1993], pp. 47-48). Görög-Karady listed several “bathing” stories (nos. 37-48, pp. 292-298) although the Cameroon account is not one of them. Add also the following: An origins story told by an American ex-slave has the original humans, all black, living in a cave. Those who slept closest to the opening of the cave were turned white by the sun (R.R. Earl, *Dark Symbols*, pp. 49-50); a Yoruba creation story is recounted by R.E. Hood, “Creation Myths in Nigeria: A Theological Commentary,” *The Journal of Religious Thought* 45 (1989): 71; an etiology of black and white people told by South Carolina Blacks speaking a Black-English dialect called Gullah in S.G. Stoney and G.M. Shelby, *Black Genesis: A Chronicle* (New York, 1930), pp. 161-171.

On the problem of filtering through the culture and language of the transcribers, see Ralph Austen, “Africans Speak, Colonialism Writes: The Transcription and Translation of Oral Literature before World War II,” in the series *African Humanities* 8 (1990) of Boston University.

<sup>16</sup> See the work of H. Hoetink, *The Two Variants in Caribbean Race Relations* (Oxford, 1967; originally published in Dutch in 1962). For some examples of this universal

It is this very distinction that historians have adopted to explain an apparent contradiction in classical antiquity. Greco-Roman society does not exhibit racist social structures and yet a number of the ancient writers express anti-Black sentiment. The answer: such sentiment just reflects a preference for the somatic norm and is really an ethnocentric expression of conformism to dominant aesthetic tastes.<sup>17</sup> Is there, however, more to the two rabbinic stories than a universal expression of somatic preference? After all, these tales see dark skin as a form of divine punishment. What does this say about underlying rabbinic attitudes?

The biblical story of the Tower of Babel will help us answer the question. One original couple, Adam and Eve, speaking one language (Hebrew of course, the preferred linguistic norm) cannot account for the world's multiplicity of languages. An etiological myth -- this time in the Bible -- was thus created as explanation. The divine punishment for mankind's sinful revolt against God was the introduction of the variety of human languages. As with human color, so with human speech variety is introduced into the world by means of etiology with divine punishment.

The role of divine punishment in these etiologies explains the existence of the non-normal, that which was perceived as different. "Curses ... served as explanation for enigmatic physiological or environmental peculiarities. The ancestor or proto-type of those exhibiting such abnormalities was considered to have been cursed by God ... or by some ancient hero."<sup>18</sup> There is no indication, however, in the many biblical and rabbinic etiological stories, that "non-normal" aspects of the world -- whether man's toil, woman's labor pains, non-Hebrew language, dark skin, or anything else -- were viewed in a deprecatory light. They were seen and appreciated, rather, as manifestations of the world's variety. Here, for example, is the talmudic Rabbi Jonathan of Bet Guvrin on non-Hebrew languages: "There are four languages that beautifully serve particular functions.

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phenomenon, see the remarks of Sextus Empericus (ca. 200 CE) in his *Against the Ethicists* 43; Al-Hamadānī (ca. 900 CE) quoted in B. Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East* (New York/Oxford, 1990), pp.45-46; and Benjamin Franklin quoted in Jordan, *White over Black*, p. 143, cf. 102.

<sup>17</sup> The somatic norm explanation is set out by Frank Snowden in *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks* (Cambridge, Mass, 1983), pp. 75-79, and *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* (Cambridge, Mass, 1970), pp. 171-179, and especially by Lloyd Thompson in *Romans and Blacks* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1989), passim; see index, "somatic norm image."

<sup>18</sup> S. Gevirtz, *Curse Motifs in the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East* (Ph.D. diss. University of Chicago, 1959), p. 258.

Greek for song, Latin for things military, Aramaic for elegy, and Hebrew for speech.”<sup>19</sup> R. Jonathan’s knowledge that Greek, Latin, and Aramaic may have had their remote mythic origin in divine punishment, did not impact upon his everyday, real-life knowledge of human languages, and did not prevent him from appreciating their beauty. This is similar to the nature of the Greeks’ belief in their myths as explained by Paul Veyne. “These legendary worlds [of Greek myth] were accepted as true in the sense that they were not doubted, but they were not accepted the way that everyday reality is.... They took place ‘earlier’, during the heroic generations, when the gods still took part in human affairs. Mythological space and time were secretly different from our own.... [M]ythical time had only a vague analogy with daily temporality.... The heroic generations are found on the other side of this temporal horizon in another world.... It is precisely because the mythical world is definitely other, inaccessible, different, and remarkable that the problem of its authenticity is suspended....”<sup>19a</sup>

The African etiological myth from Cameroon is not very different in this respect. It too seeks to explain variations in nature -- shading differences on the palm of the hand and the sole of the foot. In both the rabbinic and the African folktales, blackness is seen as divine “punishment” for disobedience. The Cameroon story says, “Since you did not listen to me and did not wash, may you therefore become black.” The rabbinic story in effect says, “Since you did not listen to me and did not abstain from sex, may you therefore become black.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Jerusalem Talmud, *Megillah* 71b, bottom. On this point, see Jean-Claude Girardin, “A propos de la malédiction de Canaan,” *Social Science Information/Information sur les sciences sociales* 31 (1992): 150.

<sup>19a</sup> Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?* trans. P. Wissing (Chicago, 1988; originally published in French, 1983), pp. 17-18, 20. On pp. 25-26 Veyne deals with etiologies as a type of mythological literature.

<sup>20</sup> The function of punishment in these origin-myths is well documented by scholars of folklore. Here, for example, is Görög-Karady on the black/white etiologies of the Vili in the Congo: “The texts thus manifest a fundamental ethnocentrism.... The Black constitutes the prototype of humanity from which all the ‘races’ have issued. What is more, [the Black] appears as the normal condition by which humanity is measured where all the other species of mankind -- mixed breeds [*métis*] or whites -- figure only as deviations or incomplete or unsatisfactory forms.... The thematic nucleus of the majority of these Vili texts consist of a fault or misdeed imputed to the ancestor or one of the ancestors and to which the deviation of humanity issues directly.” Or, “The racial differentiation flows directly from the nature of the crime.... The transformation of skin color appears as the punishment for an evil action.... All these texts affirm the culpability and justified mythic damnation of the white ancestor” (*Itinérances*, pp. 82-83, 88-89).

Having examined the function and language of etiological myths in ancient society, we are now, only now, in a position to ask what do the rabbinic folktales tell us about the authors' view of dark skin? The answer: the rabbis had an aesthetic preference for their own skin color. There is no denying this, but such a universal ethnocentric attitude is far from the anti-Black perspective which is alleged. Reflecting neither animus nor racism, the ancient Jewish stories explain the variety of human color, while implicitly favoring the somatic norm of the writers.

How did the ancient Greeks and Romans account for variation in skin color? Their explanation sounds more "scientific" to our ears: people living in the southern regions are burned dark by the sun; those in the north are pale because of the lack of sun; those in the middle (Greece and Rome) are just right. It should not be supposed, however, that this environmental-climatic explanation for dark skin was based on egalitarian presuppositions. The climatic theory viewed darkness as a result of exposure to extreme heat on the normal, white, skin color ("roasted skin" as Lucretius, the Roman poet and philosopher, would say). Always behind this theory stood the assumption that the changed color was a kind of degeneration, and characteristic of inferiority (*decolor*, that is "discoloration," in the Latin texts).<sup>21</sup> Neither the Greeks and Romans nor the

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<sup>21</sup> This was noted by William Cohen in regard to France's later adoption of the classical explanation. Cohen discusses the anthropological theory of polygenism which, as the climatic theory of antiquity, accounted for human racial variation. This too "established for blacks a separate destiny from whites -- an innate inequality" (*French Encounter* [above, n. 6], p. 13). Indeed, polygenism was frequently cited as support for American slavery. *Monogenism, as the climatic theory of antiquity, accounted for human racial variation by assuming a change from the original human couple. "On a theoretical level, environmental theories ... were egalitarian; in practice they were not. Being black was definitely less desirable than being white. The climatic theory posited people who were originally white and who turned black only as a result of exposure to extreme forms of temperature; in varying degrees it was thought that this transformation was a form of degeneration, implying a departure from the norm." "These climatic theories upheld the theory of a common descent of all human races, but such a doctrine was by no means egalitarian. Rather, it pointed to a definite belief in a hierarchy of races." "[Monogenism] by no means suggested that the common descent signified equality between the races. Monogenism explained the variety in races as a degeneration from the original pair, due to extreme conditions of environment" (pp. 13, 82, 86; see also 236-237).* Cohen's point was made also by Jean Devisse, but for the Islamic world. Commenting on Ibn Khaldūn's (14th century) rejection of the Curse theory of blackness in favor of the climatic theory, Devisse says: "This position is not ... so favorable as it may at first seem. True Ibn Khaldūn ... did attribute the blackness of the Sūdān [Blacks] to the action of the sun.... But this theory itself was turned against the Sūdān! A few lines further on, Ibn Khaldūn very seriously explains that, due to the very nature of climate, only the men of the 'temperate' zone can be characterized by *balance*. Thus we are brought back to the Mediterraneocentrism we have already talked about. Beyond the 'temperate' zone, whether to the north or to the south ... climatic excesses engender dangerous excesses of

Jews saw darker skin as aesthetically pleasing. The one expressed this view by means of the environmental theory, the other by means of etiological myth with divine curse. The negative aesthetic sentiment is the same; the (culturally-based) literary expression differs.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to the folktales just examined, those who allege rabbinic racism generally offer two further texts as proof for their claim. Here too, the claim is empty, for it is based on misunderstood readings of abridged and faulty translations. The first text is from the *Zohar*, a thirteenth-century kabbalistic work:

**And Ham was the father of Canaan** (Genesis 9:18). [I.e.,] the refuse and dross of the gold, the stirring and rousing of the unclean spirit of the ancient serpent. It is for that reason that it is written the “father of Canaan,” [namely, of Canaan] who brought curses into the world, of Canaan who was cursed, of Canaan who darkened the faces of mankind.... “Ham, the father of Canaan,” that is, [the father of] the world-darkener.<sup>23</sup>

Jordan (p. 18) sees in this passage a rabbinic curse of blackness, but in truth, the *Zohar* text has nothing whatsoever to do with Blacks or dark skin. This passage, rather, deals with the phenomenon of human mortality and refers to it as the “serpent’s darkening the face of mankind” because of the role the biblical serpent played in introducing death into the world. A linguistic equivalency in the Bible (“Cursed be” said of both Canaan and the serpent in the Garden of Eden story) allowed the *Zohar*’s author to treat “Canaan” (Israel’s ancient enemy) as a verbal substitute for the serpent and to say

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character.” Devisse is in *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, ed. Ladislav Bugner (Cambridge, Mass, 1976), vol. 2.1, p. 221, n. 179. Lucretius is in *De rerum natura* 6.1109-1112. **The same assumption about the association of black skin with barbarism and white skin with civilization underlies a diametrically opposed theory, that man was originally black and as he became more civilized he became lighter: J.C. Prichard, *Researches into the Physical History of Man* (1813); in ed. 1973 on p. 391, quoted by Thomas Trautman, *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley, 1997), p. 170.**

<sup>22</sup> In actuality the classical “scientific” explanation may have derived from the etiological myth of Phaeton who brought the sun chariot too close to the earth. “It was then, as men think, that the peoples of Aethiopia became black-skinned” (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 2.235-236). Some discussion of the environmental theory in the Greco-Roman world will be found in Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity*, pp. 170-179. See also K. Trüdinger, *Studien zur Geschichte der Griechische-römischen Ethnographie* (Basel, 1918) and E. Honigmann, *Die sieben Klimata* (Heidelberg, 1929).

<sup>23</sup> The text is found in ed. R. Margalioth, *Zohar, Tiqqune ha-Zohar, Zohar Ḥadash* (Jerusalem, 1940-53) 1:72b-73a.

that “Canaan,” i.e. the serpent, was cursed and brought curses and death (“darkness”) into the world.<sup>24</sup> This interpretation is obvious from another passage in the *Zohar* where the same exegetical connection is made between Canaan and the snake and where *the snake* is said to have brought curses into the world (1:79b, see also 1:228a). The “serpent’s darkening the face of mankind” is also found elsewhere in the *Zohar* (1:124a and cf. 131a) where the evil inclination, which is compared to the primeval serpent, is said to **darken the faces of mankind.**” This obvious meaning of “darkening the face of mankind” in our passage was commonly noted by both medieval and modern commentators alike.<sup>25</sup>

How did Jordan misunderstand the *Zohar*? Why would he see an allusion to the blackness of Ham when the *Zohar* speaks of “*Canaan*, the world-darkener”? Because, not knowing the original language, Jordan used a faulty English translation: “**And Ham was the father of Canaan** (Genesis 9:18). *Ham* represents the refuse and dross of the gold...”<sup>26</sup> The laconic Aramaic, however, does not have the word “Ham.” It reads: “**And Ham was the father of Canaan** (Genesis 9:18). The refuse and dross of the gold...” with the implied subject of “the refuse and dross of the gold” being *Canaan*, not Ham, as can be seen by consulting the standard commentaries cited above. **This was well captured by the French translation which reads literally “Cham est le père de Canaan’ (Gen. 9:18). C’est le rebut de l’or ....”**<sup>26a</sup> The English translation is, as any translation, an interpretation, and here the interpretation is incorrect.

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. *Genesis Rabbah* 36.2 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, Jerusalem, 1965, p.336): “**And Ham was the father of Canaan**, [that is,] the father of the curse (*phth*),” which may stand behind the *Zohar* passage. For *phth* as “curse,” see Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York, 1950), pp. 12-13 n. 59, and idem, *Jewish Quarterly Review* 36 (1945-46): 346.

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., the following commentaries: Shim`on Labi (mid-sixteenth century), *Sefer Ketem Paz* (Livorno, 1795) p.207b; (Jerba, 1940) p.179b; Judah Leib Ashlag, *Ha-Sulam* (Jerusalem, 1952) vol.3, “Noah,” p.105, sec. 298; Yeḥiel Bar Lev, *Yedid Nefesh* (Petaḥ Tiqva, 1992), ad loc., 2:95; Moses Cordovero, ‘*Or Yaqar* (Jerusalem, 1967) 4:91, s.v. *Kena`an de`aḥshikh*. “Darkening the face of mankind” is used elsewhere in the *Zohar* (2:149b) in explicating Gen 1:2 (“darkness on the face of the deep”) having nothing to do with Ham. **In a midrashic work, Tanḥuma (*Shemot* 17 and *Wa-yeshev* 4), this same verse is explicitly said to refer to “the Angel of Death who darkens the faces of mankind.”** The image is as obvious as it is common. See, for example, Hesiod, *Works and Days* 154-155: “Black death seized them and they left the bright light of the sun.”

<sup>26</sup> H. Sperling and M. Simon, *The Zohar* (London, 1934) 1:246-247.

<sup>26a</sup> *Le Zohar*, trans, annotated and with introduction by Charles Mopsik (Lagrasse, 1981) 1:368.

Having convinced himself that the *Zohar* is speaking of Blacks, Jordan then compounded his misreading of the passage by seeing in it a reference to the Black's sexuality. Thus, rabbinic Judaism is responsible not only for derogation of black skin, but also for the stereotype of the oversexed Negro. "The depth and diffuse pervasiveness of these explosive associations [of blackness and sex] are dramatized in the mystic *Zohar* ... where Ham, it was said, 'represents the refuse and dross of the gold, the stirring and rousing of the unclean spirit of the ancient serpent'" (p. 36). Apparently, the "ancient serpent" to Jordan's mind represents the Black penis!

In zoharic symbolism, our world, the domain of evil -- represented by the primeval serpent -- is described as the unclean world, likened to the dross that remains after gold has been refined (alluding to God's descending and gradually diminishing "light" in the process of creation). There is no penis in this passage, black or otherwise.<sup>27</sup>

It is not surprising that this mystical work of medieval Judaism, replete with complex and abstruse symbolism, would be misunderstood by one not familiar with the literature. Use of a translation does not improve comprehension. Nothing is helped in our case by the fact that part of the original Aramaic passage in the *Zohar* is not even included in the translation. Jordan naturally was unaware of this. Obviously, reading an abridged translation of an abstruse text loaded with symbolism and code words will produce an incorrect understanding. The *Zohar* passage says nothing about Blacks and nothing about sex.

The second text usually cited by those who wish to prove rabbinic "racism" derives from a work called *Tanḥuma*, a medieval collection of legends and rabbinic exegeses. Here is Graves and Patai's rendition (p. 121):

Because you twisted your head around to see my nakedness, your grandchildren's hair shall be twisted into kinks, and their eyes red; again, because your lips jested at my misfortune, theirs shall swell; and because you neglected my nakedness, they shall go naked, and their male members shall be shamefully elongated. Men of this race are called Negroes.

It is not surprising that this rendition has provided much ammunition for the racist theorists. However, an exact translation of the original, devoid of stereotyped and preconceived notions, produces a significantly different reading:

Ham's eyes turned red, since he looked at his father's nakedness; his lips became crooked, since he spoke with his mouth; the hair of his head and beard became

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<sup>27</sup> Jordan's strange interpretation of the *Zohar* is followed (without attribution) by Joseph Washington, *Anti-Blackness in English Religion*, p. 12.

singed, since he turned his face around; and since he did not cover [his father's] nakedness, he went naked and his foreskin was extended. (*Noah*, section 13)

Is this an anti-Black statement? Does it speak of Blacks at all? What is it saying? The text is a difficult one which presents several problems (e.g. in the Bible it was precisely Ham who did *not* turn his head around), but let us focus only on “crooked lips” and “extended foreskin,” literal translations of the original Hebrew *sefatayim* `aqumot/`aqushot and *nimshekhah* `orlato. What do these two terms mean? Elsewhere in rabbinic literature they bear the specific meanings of “movement of the lips” and “uncircumcised penis” (or, a penis on which an operation has been performed to rebuild a foreskin). Unfortunately, that does not make the passage any clearer. The text is admittedly an enigmatic one, whose precise meaning escapes philological investigation.

Nevertheless comparison with non-Jewish literature may provide some interpretive clues, for medieval Christian and Islamic sources commonly portray the black African with red eyes.<sup>28</sup> If the Jewish *Tanḥuma* text is describing the African, it would certainly not be unique in including red eyes in its description.

The same can be said for *Tanḥuma*'s “extended foreskin,” which Graves and Patai assume to be a reference to penis size. If they are right, such a depiction of the

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<sup>28</sup> For Islamic sources, see, e.g., Jāḥīz, *Hayawan*, ed. Harun, 3:245, 5:35-36, translation in André Miquel, *La Géographie humaine du monde musulman jusqu'au milieu du 11<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1973<sup>2</sup>), 1:11. Mas`ūdī, *Kitāb al-tanbīh wa'l-ishrāf*, translated by B. Carra de Vaux as *Le livre de l'avertissement et de la revision* (Paris, 1896), pp. 38-40. Minoo Southgate, “The Negative Images of Blacks in Some Medieval Iranian Writings”, *Iranian Studies* 17 [1984]: 12. B. Carra de Vaux, ed. *L'Abrégé des merveilles* (Paris, 1898), ch. 6, pp. 99-100; ed. Paris, 1984, p. 105. Authorship is attributed to either Mas`ūdī or Ibrāhīm ibn Waṣīf Shāh (d. before 1209). N. Levtzion and J.F.P. Hopkins, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*, pp. 37, 133 and 170. For Christian sources, see, e.g., the Old French *Les Narbonnais* quoted in W.W. Comfort, “The Literary Role of the Saracens in the French Epic,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 55 (1940): 650-651, and Albertus Magnus in J.P. Tilmann, *An Appraisal of the Geographical Works of Albertus Magnus and His Contribution to Geographical Thought* (Ann Arbor, 1971), p. 101. In Christian writings the devil was commonly portrayed as an Ethiopian (i.e. a black African), and in such descriptions red (or, flaming, fiery, glowing) eyes was a typical feature. One example among many: *The Martyrdom of Bartholomew* (= *Pseudo-Abdias*, Book 8) in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* 8:556. See Lloyd A. Thompson, *Romans and Blacks* (Norman Oklahoma, 1989), p.113 and p.213, n114; Jack Winkler, “Lollianos and the Desperadoes,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 100 (1980): 155-181, p. 161. A full treatment of this subject, with more examples, will appear in my forthcoming book on the Curse of Ham. See now *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 188-189.



African should be cause for no more surprise than the reference to red eyes. As early as Galen, we find a large penis said to be characteristic of Blacks. “The black with an oversize phallus was a traditional theme” in Greco-Roman art.<sup>29</sup>

But are Graves and Patai right? The fact is that, as stated, the Hebrew term in *Tanḥuma* has a quite specific meaning, and it has nothing to do with penis size. Similarly, the words translated by Graves and Patai as “swollen lips” cannot under any circumstances have that meaning.

We are back, then, to where we started: an enigmatic text. Some elements in the passage (red eyes, and singed/curly hair too) were commonly used -- across cultures and times -- to describe Blacks, while other elements (crooked lips, extended foreskin) remain unexplained.

It may be that *Tanḥuma* is not depicting any known people at all, but is rather engaging in imaginative fantasy. History has preserved a wide range of descriptions of distant and presumed wild and strange peoples, found from antiquity onward among pagan, Christian, Islamic, and Jewish writers. Beyond the limits of the known world, particularly in mysterious Africa, lived the fabulous races. “India and parts of Ethiopia especially teem with marvels,” reported Pliny, who goes on to talk about the monstrous animals and humans existing in the extreme reaches of Africa.<sup>30</sup> During the Middle Ages, such accounts of the fabulous races of Africa were disseminated by means of John Mandeville’s popular *Travels* (circa 1360).<sup>31</sup> Jean Devisse described the medieval

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<sup>29</sup> Galen is preserved in quotation by the Arab historian Mas`ūdī, *Les Praires d’or*, ed. Pellat (Paris, 1962), 1:69. The quotation is that of J. Desanges in *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, ed. Ladislav Bugner, vol. 1/1, p. 312, n. 131; for another example, see *ibid.*, pp. 221 (Snowden) and 278f. (J. Leclant). See also Jordan, *White over Black*, p. 159. On macrophallic Blacks in classical iconography, see Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity*, pp. 23, 272-273. On the image of oversexed Blacks in Roman antiquity, see also J.P.V.D. Balsdon, *Romans and Aliens* (Chapel Hill, 1979), p. 218.

<sup>30</sup> *Natural History* 7.2.21, 6.35.187.

<sup>31</sup> *The Voiage and Travaile of Syr John Maundeville...* (reprint: London, 1932; Louvain, 1988) shows no reliance whatsoever upon rabbinic stories. It is therefore quite surprising to read that the “anti-Black influence of Jewish interpretation on that of Gentile Christian Europeans” can be detected in fourteenth-century England in the writings of Sir John Mandeville, as stated by Charles Copher, “Three Thousand Years of Biblical Interpretation with Reference to Black Peoples,” in *African American Religious Studies: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, ed. G. Wilmore (Durham, 1989), p. 116, reprinted in Copher, *Black Biblical Studies* (Chicago, 1993), p. 110. The article originally appeared in the *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 13 (1986): 225-246. A full

Christian European view of Africa as “a land of geographic, physiological, and intellectual abnormality....Africa [was seen] as dangerous and the African as subhuman.”<sup>32</sup> Some Christian works then combined the legends of monstrous races with biblical genealogy: the monstrous races are descendants of those (Adam, Ham, Cain) who had sinned.<sup>33</sup>

The medieval *Tanḥuma* text, containing legends and lore, may be representative of the same literary genre. If the sense of the passage as a whole is meant to depict the distant sub-Saharan African as strange, or even fantastic, it should not surprise us. Nor is it unusual that Jews, as others, combined such descriptions with biblical genealogy.

But is *Tanḥuma* in fact describing the black African? If so, where is the Black’s most distinguishing characteristic -- his skin color? This crucial point is probably what led Louis Ginzberg, author of the massive seven-volume *Legends of the Jews*, to conclude that the text does not in fact have Blacks in mind. (After all, in biblical/rabbinic thinking, Ham was also seen as the ancestor of the non-Black races of Egypt, Libya, and Canaan.) Ginzberg, perhaps the greatest scholar of rabbinic folklore, paraphrased *Tanḥuma* as referring only to the *non-Black* Canaanites: “The descendants of Ham, through Canaan therefore, have red eyes....”<sup>34</sup> All this doesn’t faze Joseph Washington,

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catalogue of the fabulous-race descriptions can be found in J.B. Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Cambridge, 1981).

<sup>32</sup> In Ladislav Bugner, ed., *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, vol. 2/1, p. 52.

<sup>33</sup> W.W. Comfort, “The Literary Role of the Saracens in the French Epic,” *PMLA* 55 (1940): 651-654, and Ruth Mellnikoff, “Cain’s Monstrous Progeny in *Beowulf*: Part II, Post-Diluvian Survival,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 9 (1980): 192. The medieval works mentioned by these authors are the *Vienna Genesis* and the Irish *Lebor Na Huidre*. Similarly, the Old French *Chansons de geste* see Cain as the progenitor of the grotesque monster Saracens. See the chapter “Cain’s Kin” in Friedman’s *Monstrous Races* (pp. 87-107) for a discussion of the idea that the monstrous races derive from biblical figures who had sinned. Cf. also the Muslim al-Dīnawarī (9th century), who reports the tradition that the monsters of Africa are “descended from Noah who incurred the wrath of God so that he changed their form.” (*Al-Akḥbār al-Ṭiwāl* in N. Levtzion and J.F.P. Hopkins, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History* (Cambridge, 1981), p. 23.)

<sup>34</sup> *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia, 1925) 1:169. Note also that the Canaanites did not practice circumcision (*Legends* 3:275), which may well have made them appear strange (“his foreskin was extended”) to the Jew. Thomas Peterson (*Ham and Japheth: The Mythic World of Whites in the Antebellum South*, p. 44), quotes Ginzberg’s paraphrase but replaces “through Canaan therefore” with ellipsis. By adding these words Ginzberg clearly understood the passage as not referring to Blacks, who are descended

who “proves” his argument of Jewish racism by assuming a rabbinic identification of Canaan as Black, an assumption that is absurd.<sup>35</sup> An accurate reading of the *Tanḥuma* passage, on the other hand, is made by A.A. Jackson, a Black Baptist minister, who recently concluded: “These Jewish traditions make no connection between Ham and blackness, no connection between the curse of Ham/Canaan and skin color.”<sup>36</sup>

The *Tanḥuma* passage remains an enigma. It may refer to black Africans in descriptive language commonly used by different cultures. Or it may be portraying the distant and strange as fantastic. In either case, the passage would be in line with pagan,

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from Kush, not from Canaan. By removing this explanatory gloss, Peterson has Ginzberg say precisely what he took pains not to say.

<sup>35</sup> *Anti-Blackness* (above, n. 6), p. 13. Washington must have confused Judaism with Islam. In Islam the association of Canaan with black Africa is common, and is found in two forms: either Canaan is a black African, or Kush is made the father or the son of Canaan. The first form can be seen in *Mukhtaṣar al-`ajā`ib*, trans. B. Carra de Vaux, *L’Abrégé des Merveilles* (Paris, 1898), pp. 99-101: “[Ham] had a son, after Canaan, Kush, who was black.... Among the children of Canaan are the Nabīṭ, Nabīṭ signifies “black”.... Among the children of Sūdān, son of Canaan, are...the Zanj.” Other examples: *The Book of the Zanj* in E. Cerulli, *Somalia 1* (Rome, 1957), p. 254, trans., p. 234, text; Ibn `Abd al-Ḥakam (9th century), *Futūḥ Miṣr*, ed. C.C. Torrey (New Haven, 1922), p. 8; The second form is found in Maqrīzī, *Ibn Faḍl Allah al-`Omarī: Masālik el Abṣār fi Mamālik el Aṣṣār*, ed. Gaudefroy-Demombynes, (Paris, 1927), Appendix I, p. 85; Ibn Mas`ūd apud Ṭabarī, ed. Brinner, p. 50; Dimashqī, *Nukhbat al-Dahr*, ed. C.M.J. Fraen and A.F. Mehren (St. Petersburg, 1866), p. 266; Ibn Sa`d, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr*, vol. 1/i, ed. E. Mittwoch (Leiden, 1905), p.19; Ṭabarī, trans. Brinner, pp. 105, 109, etc.; Mas`ūdī, *Muruḥ (Praires)*, ed. Meynard 3:1-2, 240, *Les Praires d’or*, ed. Pellat 2:321, 418 n. 1. **For more examples see my book, *The Curse of Ham*, pp. 352-353, nn. 23-24.**

Drake, like Washington, has confused Judaism with Islam when he claims that rabbinic literature “makes Kush the son of Canaan.” Of course, no rabbinic reference is, or could be, cited, since such a genealogy contradicts the Bible. See also Washington, p. 6, where the same confusion is apparent: “Jewish explanations of the Genesis saga wherein Noah’s son Ham (or variously his son or grandson Canaan) was black and the progenitor of black people.” **Similarly confusing Canaan with Blacks is J. Lécuyer, “Le père Libermann et la malédiction de Cham,” in *Libermann 1802-1852: Un pensée et une mystique missionnaires*, ed. Paul Coulon and Paule Brasseur (Paris, 1988), p. 604.**

<sup>36</sup> *Examining the Record: An Exegetical and Homiletical Study of Blacks in the Bible* (New York, 1994), p. 10. A correct translation of the passage was recently published by Samuel A. Berman, in his English translation of Genesis-Exodus portions of the work, *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu* (Hoboken NJ, 1996), p. 67.

Christian, and Islamic views dating from well before *Tanḥuma*'s redaction (8th-10th centuries in the Islamic world) to well after it. On the other hand, it is possible that the passage does not refer to Blacks at all. Yet, in the face of such doubts, Graves and Patai are so certain that the text refers to Blacks, that they inject their own stereotypes into the translation and then top it off with the unwarranted gratuitous insertion "Men of this race are called Negroes." Thus was created, in 1963, a new rabbinic text. On such pillars was the house of "rabbinic racism" built.<sup>37</sup>

The three passages we have examined (excluding the *Zohar*), constitute the sum total of rabbinic texts purportedly expressing anti-Black attitudes. Some of the purveyors of "rabbinic racism" theories at this point may have realized the weakness of their position, for, scratching at the bottom of the barrel, they enlisted two medieval Jewish travelers as representatives of anti-Black rabbinic thinking. Eldad ha-Dani's (9th century) reference to Africans' cannibalism and Benjamin of Tudela's (12th century) mention of Africans' animal-like behaviour, nakedness, low intelligence, and promiscuity supposedly indicate a deep-rooted Jewish antipathy toward Blacks.

Leaving aside for the moment the question of how medieval travel diaries can be said to represent classical rabbinic thought, Eldad and Benjamin's descriptions are commonly and widely found in non-Jewish sources, whether ancient or medieval, and whether pagan, Christian, or Islamic.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> The degree of textual and interpretative uncertainty lying behind Graves and Patai's reconstruction brings to mind an evaluation of another of their theories. Commenting on their statement on matriarchal societies, T.O. Beidelman said that it "contains unbridled conjecture on the discredited theories of the reputed existence of early matriarchal societies." ("A Kagaru Version of the Sons of Noah: A Study in the Inculcation of the Idea of Racial Superiority," *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* 3.4, no. 12 (1963): 479, n. 19.)

<sup>38</sup> For antiquity and late antiquity, see Homer, *Odyssey* 1.23; Diodorus 3.8.2; Jerome in *Patrologia Latina* 25:1091-1092; Agatharchides apud Diodorus 3.32-33; Strabo 17.2.1 (cf. 16.4.17); Herodotus 4.183; Diodorus 3.15.2; Origen, *De Principiis* 2.9.5; Juvenal 15.49f; Ptolemy, *Geographia* 4.8(9).3. For the medieval world, see Hayden White, "The Forms of Wildness: Archaeology of an Idea" in Dudley and Novak, ed., *The Wild Man Within*, p. 20; E. Miner, "The Wild Man Through the Looking Glass," *ibid.*, p. 89; G.R. Crone, ed. and trans. *The Voyages of Cadamosto and Other Documents on Western Africa in the Second Half of the Fifteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1937), p. 54; Katherine George, "The Civilized West Looks at Primitive Africa: 1400-1800," *Isis* 49 (1958): 64, 66. Similarly, Muslim geographers commonly attribute nakedness, sexual permissiveness, cannibalism, and beastlike behavior to the Blacks. See: Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East* (New York-Oxford, 1990), pp. 52-53 (and see pp. 47-48 and 122); André Miquel, *La Géographie* 2:44, 144, 193, 198; Gerhard Rotter, *Die Stellung des Negers in der islamisch-arabischen Gessellschaft bis zum XVI Jahrhundert* (Ph.D. diss., Friedrich-Wilhelms Universität, Bonn, 1967), pp. 161 and 182; Minoos Southgate, "The

Given the universalism of the phenomenon that we are describing, it is somewhat disconcerting to find these two Jewish sources cited as unique instances of such views toward Blacks. Drake (2:27), for example, contrasts Eldad with reports of “Romans and Persians through the eleventh century,” which however “do not speak of cannibalism among the people.” Drake is here, as very often elsewhere on this topic, simply wrong.<sup>39</sup>

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Negative Images of Blacks in Some Medieval Iranian Writings”, *Iranian Studies* 17 (1984): 4. The index to Levtzion and Hopkins’s *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History* lists eight references under “Cannibal, -ism,” to which eight more can be added (pp. 86, 200, 255, 274, 298 bis, 321, 406 n. 48), and twenty references under “Nudity” (add p. 354). Regarding “beastlike behavior” see *Corpus*, pp. 200, 205 bis, 206, 211, 214, 321-322, and Alfarabi in Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi, *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook* (Glencoe IL, 1963), p. 42. Examples of reports on the Blacks’ hypersexuality are found in Lewis, *Race and Slavery*, pp. 34, 45-46, 52, 60, 93-94, 97; idem., *Islam from the Prophet Muhammad to the Capture of Constantinople* (New York, 1974) 2:254-256; Miquel 2:44; Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, pp. 205 and 214; see also David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress*, p. 44 (cf. Lewis, pp. 75-76). A full treatment of this subject, with more examples, will appear in my forthcoming book on the Curse of Ham. (The only subject actually treated in the book (p. 188) is nakedness.)

<sup>39</sup> Drake’s entire section dealing with rabbinic sources (2:17-30) exhibits a large number of misreadings and misunderstandings and is studded with mistakes. The most serious error undergirds his major “discovery” -- a supposed dichotomy between Palestinian Jews and the Babylonian Jewish diaspora. Drake finds anti-Black sentiment only in the latter, a development, he says, of the Jewish encounter with the Zanj, thousands of black slaves working the land of Mesopotamia. The cultural differences of the Zanj “may have incited fear, dislike, or even contempt among the Jewish exiles” (p. 29).

In setting out his claim Drake argues that: (a) a text found in Palestinian sources (Jerusalem Talmud, *Ta’anit* 1.6, 64d) is found only in Babylonian sources, (b) a Palestinian statement (R. Ḥiyya) is Babylonian, (c) *Genesis Rabbah*, a product of Israel, is a product of Babylonia, and (d) the presence of the Zanj in Mesopotamia, evidence for which begins in 689 CE, influenced the thinking of a Palestinian rabbi who lived 400 years earlier.

Thus, to prove his theory that “denigration of black slaves was quite consistent with Mesopotamian Jewish social stratification,” Drake performs the following historical and geographic reconstruction: he puts Israel in Babylon and makes four centuries disappear. But Drake’s historiography goes even further. Having invented a world, its characters, and their relationships, he attempts now to investigate its myths. The origin of the idea of black skin as curse, he claims, lies in its ideological justification of the Zanj enslavement. Discovering, however, that the evidence does not support his theory, for the talmudic folktale says nothing about enslavement, Drake calls this situation “curious.”

Indeed, such descriptions of black Africans are so common, that it is not Tudela who is exceptional but a fifteenth-century rabbi, Isaac Abrabanel. He responded with unconcealed anger to the comment of a tenth-century Karaite from Jerusalem, Yefet b. Ali, on the issue of Black sexuality. Yefet had interpreted a biblical verse (Amos 9:7) to refer to Black women “who are promiscuous and therefore no one knows who his father is.” Abrabanel: “I don’t know who told Yefet this practice of promiscuity among Black women, which he mentions. But in the country of my birth [Portugal] I have seen many of these people and their women are sexually loyal to their husbands unless they are prisoners and captive to their enemies. They are just like any other people.”<sup>40</sup>

If we summarize the results of our investigation thus far, we find that the five Jewish texts reputed to show anti-Black racism actually present an entirely different picture. One text (*Zohar*) does not speak of Blacks at all; another (*Tanhuma*) may not. Two others (Eldad and Benjamin) are late medieval compositions not part of the rabbinic canon, reflecting only the views of the individual authors, which are shared by -- and much more prominent in -- pagan, Christian, and Muslim writers. The remaining texts (Talmud and Midrash) show a preference for the somatic norm on the part of two authors of antiquity. Yet, despite these meagre findings, the racist theorists claim that anti-Black sentiment permeates rabbinic literature.

**“Anti-Black Sentiment is Pervasive in Rabbinic Literature and Reflects a ‘Talmudic View’ of Blacks”** It is rather strange to consider such sentiment (assuming for the moment it existed) pervasive in rabbinic writings. The folktale of sex in the ark consists of 15 words in a total of some 2 1/2 million in the Talmud.

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Among historians it might be regarded as odd to posit a theory, note that it doesn’t coincide with the facts, call it curious, and go on. As a non-historian trying to write history, Drake confronted two barriers: lack of knowledge of the source languages and cultures, and lack of knowledge of relevant historical methodologies. To overcome these impediments, Drake, an anthropologist by training, was forced to rely upon the mistranslations and misrepresentations noted above. It is indeed unfortunate that this eminent social scientist was so misled.

The date for the arrival of the Zanj follows François Renault, *La Traite des noirs au Proche-Orient médiéval VII<sup>e</sup> – XIV<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Paris, 1989), p. 25, and Alexandre Popovic, *La révolte des esclaves en Iraq au III<sup>e</sup>/IX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1976), p. 60, in English translation by Léon King, *The Revolt of African Slaves in Iraq in the 3rd/9th Century* (Princeton, 1999), p. 20.

<sup>40</sup> *Commentary to the Bible*, to Amos 9:7, p. 109 in ed. Tel Aviv, 1960; in ed. Gregorio Ruiz, *Don Isaac Abrabanel y su comentario al libro de Amos* (Madrid, 1984), pp. 244-245.

It is just as strange to hear that such views represent “the talmudic view” of Blacks. The rabbinic canon is not the work of a single author speaking with the voice of authoritative doctrine. Rather, this literature encompasses the thinking of over 1,500 individuals spanning five centuries and two countries covering almost 6,000 large-sized folio pages. Given the prodigious number of topics covered and variety of opinions expressed, it is ludicrous to speak of “the talmudic view of Blacks.”

Furthermore, the rabbinic corpus is not only multitudinous; it is also multifarious. It includes discussions on all aspects of daily life, and on every area of human existence and thought: religion and superstition, medicine and astronomy, commerce and agriculture, magic, botany, zoology, biology, mathematics, history, customs, fables and folktales, among others. Some of this material expresses central tenets in Jewish life and thought; other material represents momentary opinions of individuals. Some statements reflect communal consensus; others the fancy or fantasy of one person. Much of this latter aggadic material was even termed “hocus pocus” [*sifre kosemim*] by one of the major personalities in the talmudic-rabbinic corpus, R. Zeira (3rd-4th centuries CE).<sup>41</sup> Hai Gaon (d. 1038), the leading rabbinic personality of his age and head of the talmudic academy in Babylonia, spoke about the authority of aggadic (stories, folklore, etc.) dicta: “Aggadic statements are not as halakhic (religio-legal) statements. Rather, they represent what anybody thinks up by way of exegesis.... They are not decisive. Therefore we do not rely upon them as authoritative.”<sup>42</sup>

The claim that two aggadic folktales, representing .0006 percent of the overall talmudic corpus and transmitted by two of 1500 personalities, represents “the talmudic view” sounds a little ridiculous. In 1680 Pere Richard Simon denounced Buxtorf the Elder and other Judaeophobic authors for “one of the commonest failings of Christian Hebraists, their tendency to regard fanciful Midrashim and other collections of rabbinic moral tales and obiter dicta as serious textual interpretation of the law.”<sup>43</sup> Three hundred years ago the claim was anti-Christian; today it is anti-Black. The Talmud remains the seedbed of all evil in civilization.

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<sup>41</sup> Jerusalem Talmud, *Ma`aserot* 3.10, 51a.

<sup>42</sup> B.M. Levin, *Oṣar ha-Geonim: Ḥagigah* (Jerusalem, 1931), p. 59. For a survey of the medieval rejection of aggada as having binding authority, see M. Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis: A Thirteenth-Century Commentary on the Aggadah* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), pp. 1-20.

<sup>43</sup> Frank Manuel, *The Broken Staff* (Cambridge, Mass, 1992), p. 136.

## **“The Rabbinic View of Blacks is the Source of Racism in Western Civilization”**

This claim rests upon the New World justification for Black slavery by appeal to a biblically ordained “Curse of Ham”, the belief that Blacks, and Blacks alone, were cursed with eternal slavery. American pro-slavery writers of the antebellum period often supported their position by reference to this Curse, according to which:

[Noah] was the first to plant a vineyard. He drank of the wine and became drunk, and he uncovered himself within his tent. Ham ... saw his father’s nakedness.... When Noah woke up from his wine ... he said: “Cursed be Canaan [Ham’s son]; the lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers. (Genesis 9:20-25)

Of course, the biblical account speaks only of slavery, not blackness. But those charging rabbinic racism do not wish to attack the Bible. Their target is the Talmud and Midrash. Their claim is that the Curse of Ham is a rabbinic invention.

But just as there is no Curse of Ham in biblical literature, so too there is no Curse of Ham -- that is, a curse of slavery on Blacks -- in the rabbinic texts. The biblical story is an etiology accounting for Canaanite slavery. The rabbinic stories, on the other hand, speak of blackness, not of slavery. They are, as we saw, etiologies accounting for the existence of dark-skinned people.

The Curse of Ham hinges on the assumed linkage of blackness and slavery. But such linkage is not found in the Bible or later Jewish literature. Neither of the two rabbinic folktales of the origin of darker-skinned people (sex in the ark; sex in the dark) occur in the context of Noah’s curse of slavery.<sup>44</sup> Slavery and dark skin are two

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<sup>44</sup> I am talking of internally cohesive narrative frameworks in which associations between elements are clear and necessary for the cohesion of the unit. I naturally exclude anthologies of traditions in which separate elements are strung together, such as in *Genesis Rabbah*. This is not to say that there are no relationships between discrete elements in such compositions, but that the relationships are of an external sort, not being inherently crucial to the narrative. The difference will become clear below when I discuss Islamic narratives of the Curse of Ham. On this issue, see Joseph Heinemann, *Aggadah and Its Development* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1974), p. 181, who uses this distinction as a defining characteristic of the classical midrashic works as opposed to *Pirqei de-Rabbi Eliezer* or to the “rewritten Bible” genre. The former are “composed of hundreds of exegeses and explanations to various verses, such that each of them is independent and is not generally related to those that come before or after [in context].” Again, Heinemann explains the defining characteristic of the expositional midrashim such as *Genesis Rabbah* as opposed to the homiletical midrashim such as *Leviticus Rabbah*: “The former collect expositions, interpretations and comments – as many as they can find – on each biblical verse or even on each word or phrase and arrange them consecutively according to the order of the biblical text, the result being that more often than not there is no connection at all between the individual items that follow one another....” (Joseph Heinemann, “Profile of a Midrash: The Art of Composition in Leviticus Rabba,” *Journal*



independent etiological myths. Nowhere in early Jewish literature -- either rabbinic or, for that matter, nonrabbinic -- is that distinction violated. Dark skin devolving on Ham comprises one set of traditions; slavery as Noah's curse on a non-Black Canaan comprises a second. The two traditions are never joined.

Never joined, that is, except in the minds of some moderns. Graves and Patai tried to weave together the various and distinct traditions in order to present a readable whole for a popular audience. In their treatment it is Canaan's progeny who are both enslaved and turned black. This popular but false treatment has perhaps caused more damage than any other, for it became the source for most of the "Judaism is racism" thinking. So, to take just two examples, Washington at the very outset of his book, refers to the "Jewish oral tradition" claiming that Blacks are "doubly damned," and Akbar Muhammad states that "Jewish theologians" are the source for the "dual act of God." The confusion between Canaan, who was enslaved, and Ham, who became black, begins unfortunately with the publication of Graves and Patai's book in 1963.<sup>45</sup>

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*of American Academy of Religion* 39 (1971) 142-143; this article is an English abridgement of Heinemann's Hebrew article that appeared in *Hasifrut* 2 (1971) 808-834. Literary cohesion is the primary criterion in differentiating exegetical anthologies such as *Genesis Rabbah* from the classic collections of homilies. "The exegetical anthology, like *Bereshit (Genesis) Rabbah*, presents a series of interpretive opinions on Scripture in the form of a running commentary, verse by verse, often phrase by phrase, without any other clearly discernible logic of organization" (David Stern, "Midrash and the Language of Exegesis: A Study of *Vayikra Rabbah*, Chapter 1," in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick, New Haven, 1986, p. 106). Although Stern notes that his definition is somewhat exaggerated, since we do sometimes find redactional organization in sections of these works, nevertheless, "there is no consistent or systematic or recurring plan to the exegetical anthology" (p. 123). Similarly, Richard Sarason, "Toward a New Agendum for the Study of Rabbinic Midrashic Literature," in *Studies in Aggadah, Targum and Jewish Liturgy in Memory of Joseph Heinemann*, ed. J.J. Petuchowski and E. Fleischer (Jerusalem, 1981), p. 64, n. 21.

<sup>45</sup> Washington, p. 1; Muhammad in Willis, ed., *Slaves and Slavery* (above, n. 4) 1:66-68. Jordan does recognize the distinction, as does Cain Hope Felder, who writes that "later Europeans adopted the so-called curse of Ham as a justification for slavery." (*Troubling Biblical Waters* [Maryknoll NY, 1989], p. 38). Although it was not the Europeans, but the Muslims centuries before them, who combined blackness and servitude, Felder at least recognizes that the two were separate in rabbinic Judaism. J.A. Rogers' earlier work (*Nature Knows No Color-Line*, pp. 9-10) conflates and confuses the different rabbinic sources and thus adumbrates the later belief in a rabbinic dual curse.

An indication of the damage done by the Graves and Patai book is to be seen in the increasing reliance upon it by works such as Yosef ben-Jochannan's *Cultural Genocide in the Black and African Studies Curriculum* (New York, 1972), which quotes the work and repeatedly refers to it (p. 29 et passim).

Almost 900 years ago the rabbinic exegete Abraham ibn Ezra spoke out forcefully against a “doubly-damned” Curse of Ham interpretation. He noted that, “there are those who say [he intends the Muslims] that the Blacks are slaves because of Noah’s curse on Ham” and he refuted that claim by pointing to Nimrod, son of Kush [i.e., Black] the first post-deluvian king. Obviously, a king cannot be a slave. Ibn Ezra presses his point further when he comments on the biblical “Cursed be Canaan; he shall be a slave to his brothers”: “i.e., to Kush, Mizraim, and Phut.” Kush, the ancestor of the Blacks, is the master; not the slave.<sup>45a</sup> And if this is not yet abundantly clear, again he observes (to the verse “Ham is the father of Canaan”): “It says Canaan *and not Kush* because Canaan is the one who will be cursed.” Similarly Nahmanides, another medieval rabbinic scholar, stresses the same point.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, in the rabbinic world-view, the association of slavery with Canaan, and not Ham, is implicit in the very linguistic classification used in the Talmud for the two categories of slaves: “Hebrew” and “Canaanite.”<sup>46a</sup>

“Early rabbinic teachings distinguished the innocent black descendants of Kush from the accursed descendants of his brother Canaan.”<sup>47</sup> The Curse of Ham is, indeed, an idea which spawned devastating consequences in history. It is not, however, an idea found in Judaism.

But it is found in those societies that institutionalized Black slavery. From the seventh century onwards the concept appears as a recurring theme among Islamic writers who tightly link blackness and slavery. In some, blackness is added to the biblical story of

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<sup>45a</sup> Similarly, the Karaite scholar Aaron b. Elijah (14th century) quoting anonymous commentators to Gen 9:25 (*Keter Torah*, Gozlow/Eupatoria 1866-67, ad loc., 1:39a). Aaron commonly used and quotes from Rabbanite writers. Again, in explaining “his little son” of Gen. 9:25, Aaron says that “little” cannot refer to age, since that would have the effect of putting the curse of slavery on Ham and “the descendents of Ham are not slaves” (ibid.).

<sup>46</sup> Respective *Commentaries* to Gen 9:25.

<sup>46a</sup> Cf. Rashi to *bQid* 22b, s.v. *sadeh niqnet*: “All [non-Jewish] slaves are referred to by the name of Canaan because it is said of Canaan ‘May you be a slave of slaves....’”

<sup>47</sup> David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York, 1984), p. 42. On this point, and the Curse of Ham generally, see B. Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East*, pp. 123-125 n. 9. Incredibly, Jan Nederveen Pieterse (*White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* [New Haven, 1992], p. 44 and p. 237, n43) cites Davis here as a reference for his statement that “the association of the curse of Canaan with blackness arose ... in medieval Talmudic texts,” precisely the opposite of what Davis actually said.

the curse of slavery; in others, blackness and slavery occur together as curses in an extrabiblical framework; in still others, the biblical framework is there but those cursed with slavery come to the story already black. The common thread binding all these accounts together is the linkage of blackness and slavery.

A few examples from the Muslim authors will suffice. From Ibn Khaldūn (fourteenth century) quoting “genealogists” with whom he disagrees:

Negroes are the children of Ham, the son of Noah, and...they were singled out to be black as the result of Noah’s curse, which produced Ham’s color and the slavery God inflicted upon his descendants.

And from Ṭabarī (ninth century) quoting others:

[Noah] prayed that Ham’s color would be changed and that his descendants would be slaves to the children of Shem and Japheth.

Or quoting the father of Ibn ‘Aṭā’ (647-732):

Ham begat all those who are black and curly-haired.... Noah prayed that the hair of Ham’s descendants would not grow beyond their ears, and that wherever his descendants met the children of Shem, the latter would enslave them.<sup>48</sup>

The obvious meaning of “hair not growing beyond the ears” is made explicit in *The Book of the Zanj*:

Ham was most beautiful in face and form, but God changed his color and that of his progeny because of the curse of Noah. [Noah] cursed Ham blackening his appearance and that of his progeny; and that they be made slaves to the sons of Shem and Japheth. This narrative is widely found in history books, as is recorded in the “Book of the Gold Ingot” (*Sabā’ik adh-dhahab*). When the prophet of God (Noah) partitioned the earth among his sons, Africa belonged to Ham. He begot sons who are the Negro, whose hair does not go below their ears, as we see them.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*, ed. E. Quatremère (Paris, 1858) 1:151; translation of F. Rosenthal (London, 1967<sup>2</sup>) 1:169-170. Ṭabarī, *Tarikh*, ed. M.J. de Goeje, vol. 1 (Leiden, 1879), pp. 215, 223; translation of William M. Brinner, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 2 (New York, 1987), pp. 14, 21. Ibn Khaldūn’s genealogists are Muslim according to Walter J. Fischel, “Ibn Khaldūn: on the Bible, Judaism, and the Jews,” *Ignace Goldziher Memorial Volume*, ed. S. Löwinger et al. (Jerusalem, 1958) 2:157.

The persistence of this linkage of slavery with blackness in the Islamic world is explained by Islam's long history of enslaving black Africans. (Even today in many Arabic dialects, the word for Black is `abd which actually means "slave.") Such linkage provided the justifying myth sustaining the social structure. In Jewish history, the Israelites conquered and enslaved the Canaanites and thus invented their own justifying myth: Noah's curse of the eponymous Canaan with eternal slavery. In Islamic history, it was not Canaan who was enslaved, but black Africa. The biblical curse story was then reinterpreted to embrace both slavery and blackness -- Islam's own etiological myth.<sup>50</sup> The same mythic justification was then adopted from Islam by other societies in which the Black became *the* slave. Christian Europe, after its discovery and enslavement of black Africa, and antebellum America commonly relied upon the Curse of Ham to maintain the existing order.

One would expect those societies that enslaved the Black to justify, and thus support, their social structures with whatever means possible. The rabbinic etiology was one of several available means. In its original context, the etiology had a anthropogenic function (it explained the existence of dark skin in a relatively white world) in Near Eastern cultures of antiquity and late antiquity (it is also found in Samaritan and Christian writings of the fourth century)<sup>51</sup>, but was later re-used to serve a different purpose. When Blacks became identified with the slave class in the Islamic world and in the Christian world after the 15th century, the etiology was dusted off and reborn as the "Curse of Ham," thus providing justification for social structures that subjugated the Black. An ancient Near Eastern myth, taken out of context and given a new meaning, served well as one of many pegs upon which to hang a new commercially and socially driven racism.

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<sup>49</sup> My English follows the Italian translation of Enrico Cerulli, *Somalia* 1 (Rome, 1957), p. 254, text on p. 234. The *Kitāb al-Zunūj* is a late 19th-century redaction of earlier manuscripts. On the work, see Prins in the *Journal of East Africa Swahili Committee* 28 (1958): 26-40, and G.S.P. Freeman-Grenville, *The Swahili Coast, 2nd to 19th Centuries* (London, 1988), sec. II, pp. 8-9, originally published as *Uganda Museum Occasional Papers, No. 4: Discovering Africa's Past* (Kampala, 1959).

<sup>50</sup> The identity of slave and Black in Islamic societies also explains the association of Canaan with black Africa (or with Kush) in Islamic sources; see n. 36. On this point, see Paul Kaplan, *Ruler, Saint and Servant: Blacks in European Art to 1520* (Ph.D. Boston Univ., 1983), p. 172.

<sup>51</sup> Samaritan: *Tibat Marqe*, ed. and trans. (into Hebrew) Z. Ben-Ḥayyim (Jerusalem, 1988), pp. 288-289, sec. 232a. Christian: Ephrem the Syrian quoted in a catena of patristic explanations and exegeses to the Pentateuch published by Paul de Lagarde, *Materialien zur Kritik und Geschichte des Pentateuchs* (Leipzig, 1867), part II, p. 86, and cited by M. Grünbaum, *Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sagenkunde*, p. 86.

It is ironic that ancient Jewish literature is ransacked to find racist sentiment, for, as we have seen, the best place to find such sentiment is in those societies that enslaved Blacks. Rabbinic Judaism, on the other hand, never had the temporal power to enslave anybody, certainly not Africa. This historical fact is reflected in the literature, for rabbinic sources contain not a hint of anti-Black racism in the comprehensive social structure detailed in the normative legal canon (*halakhah*).

Instead of attempting a truly historical investigation of racial prejudice in western civilization, the “new scholarship” has isolated three or four stories of ancient Jewish myth, extracting them from their intellectual environment, transporting them over a 1500-year period, untouched by historical and cultural developments, and has plunked them down in our own time as the finally-revealed source of prejudice.

Assuming for the sake of argument, and contrary to the evidence, that Judaism’s ancient folktales reflected anti-Black sentiment, we must then ask if and how were these folktales used to denigrate Blacks in Jewish history? We will not find any such use. But if the same question is asked of, first, Islamic, and then, Christian, societies, we will find that heavy usage indeed was made of the folktales. The stories served as raw material from which was fashioned the Curse of Ham, used to justify the social institution of Black slavery in those societies. That is why we first hear of the Curse in Islamic writings after the conquest of Africa in the 7th century, and in Christian writings after the European discovery of black Africa in the 15th century.

Scholars have long recognized the “inter-hermeneutic encounters” between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. And as these cultures encountered one another their traditions were reappropriated and recreated as they moved into the new historical environments.<sup>52</sup> The scholar of African oral traditions David Henige aptly compared this process to the principle of natural selection: “Those traditions that are best able to outlive changing circumstances are those that exist today.... Surviving requires that they adapt to whatever changes they encounter.”<sup>53</sup> In the new Islamic and Christian worlds of Black slavery the ancient Jewish etiology of black skin became the Curse of Ham.

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<sup>52</sup> See Steven Wasserstrom, “Jewish Pseudepigrapha in Muslim Literature: A Bibliographical and Methodological Sketch” in *Tracing the Threads: Studies in the Vitality of Jewish Pseudepigrapha*, ed. John C. Reeves (Atlanta, 1994), pp. 95, 99-100. The same phenomenon occurs as traditions move into new historical and ideological environments within the same culture. See Eli Yassif, “Traces of Folk Traditions of the Second Temple Period in Rabbinic Literature,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 39 (1988): 212-233.

<sup>53</sup> *Oral Historiography* (London, 1982), p. 4.

## Rabbinic Views of Blacks

It should be abundantly clear by now that an historical assessment of rabbinic thought requires a knowledge of the relevant languages, literatures, and disciplinary methodologies. Translations, anthologies, encyclopedia articles -- the building blocks of the “rabbinic racism” theorists -- will only result in a mass of incompetent misreadings and misunderstandings.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Several have been pointed out during the course of this essay. A few more egregious errors may be noted.

Some authors assume that the idea of blackness as curse entered European thought from Jewish sources, by means of Christian interest in rabbinic exegesis. Jordan (p. 37) admits that “the measure of [such] influence ... is problematical,” but he goes with the proposition anyway. Washington (pp. 1, 10-11) is virulent in his denunciation: “The most maleficent traducement Israel’s biblical tradition pressed upon England was the popular belief in anti-Blackness.... The vitriolic and inflammatory castigation of Ham, whose ‘dark’ to ‘black’ and ‘hot’ associations were seared in the imagination of sixteenth-century Bible adherers, Englishmen inherited from Talmudic, Halakhahhistic [sic], and Midrashic literature.... The depth of anti-Blackness communicated to Englishmen by the custodians of the Talmud and Pentateuch in their commentaries....” Thomas Peterson (pp. 43-44) attempts to trace the line of transmission further: the Ham myth entered America via *Augustin Calmet’s Dictionary of the Holy Bible*; Calmet’s source was Jewish legends. It was these legends that “first suggested that blackness and slavery resulted from Noah’s curse.” Thus the source of the Curse of Ham in America is traced back to “rabbinical traditions.” But here is what Calmet says:

The author of Tharik-Thabari [i.e., *Ta’rikh* written by Ṭabarī, the Islamic historian] says that Noah having cursed Ham and Canaan, the effect was that not only their posterity became subject to their brethren and was born, as we may say, in slavery, but likewise that the color of their skin suddenly became black; for they [i.e., the Arabic writers] maintain that all the blacks descend from Ham and Canaan.

(Quotation from *Calmet’s Dictionary of the Holy Bible*, ed. C. Taylor [London, 1800], s.v. Ham, the edition used by Peterson. The work was first published in French in 1722-28; the first English edition in 1732. I am indebted to Dr. Peterson for placing at my disposal copies of Calmet which he had used.) It is surprising that, given the explicit reliance upon Ṭabarī (d. 923), Peterson would have considered “rabbinical traditions” as Calmet’s source. [In the published version of this article I said, following Peterson, that the quote from Calmet entered America by means of its citation in a work by Bishop Thomas Newton. But Peterson erred. Newton had cited another work by Calmet. I have thus made the correction above, deleting the reference to Newton. See David M. Whitford, *The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era* (Surrey UK, 2009), pp. 153-154.]

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Another example is provided by the influential essay of William McKee Evans, “From the Land of Canaan to the Land of Guinea: The Strange Odyssey of the ‘Sons of Ham’,” *The American Historical Review* 85 (1980): 15-43. Evans attempts to study “the shifting ethnic identities of the ‘sons of Ham’ ... from the Land of Canaan to the land of Guinea, [hoping to] learn something about the historical pressures that shaped modern white racial attitudes” (p. 16). Evans’s entire thesis hangs on the assumption that “during the first Christian centuries most ‘Canaanites’ [i.e. non-Hebrew slaves] were in fact either Syrians or *Kushim* from black Africa” (p. 22). Thus the eternally enslaved Canaanites were interpreted to be black Africans in Jewish sources, and this interpretation then moved on to Islam and Christianity. How does Evans know that most of the non-Hebrew slaves in Jewish Palestine in the first centuries were Syrians and Blacks? He cites two sources: S. Baron’s and J. Klausner’s chapter in *The World History of the Jewish People*. But Baron says nothing of the sort, and while Klausner does (“Negro slaves ... were common”), he does so without citing any source. Undoubtedly he was relying on four Rabbinic references to Black slaves, which only show that Black slaves existed in Israel at that time, perhaps even that most African Blacks in Israel were slaves. The references do not, however, provide evidence that most slaves were Black. On this point, see Samuel Krauss, *Talmudische Archäologie* (Leipzig, 1910) 2:85-86, “Unsere Quellen kennen besonders die Mohren als Sklaven,” not die Sklaven als Mohren. Note also Bernard Lewis’s remark (*Race and Slavery*, p. 23) that in 7th-century Arabia it would appear that Blacks constituted a minority of the slaves. There is no evidence that shows that most of the slaves were Black. As in Rome, so in the provinces, slaves undoubtedly came from a number of different areas. One example preserved in the rabbinic corpus is the name of the 3rd-century Patriarch Yudan (Yehuda) Nesia’s slave as “Germani,” which derived either from the slave’s country of origin or from his very light skin, said to be characteristic of Germans (*jShab* 6.[9], 8c; *jYoma* 8.5, 45b; *jAZ* 2.10, 42a; cf. Alexander Kohut, *Aruch ha-Shalem* 2:368, s.v. and J. Levy, *Wörterbuch Talmudim*, s.v. Similarly, Germanus (Germanicus, Germana) are common Roman slave names in Greco-Roman sources; see J. Baumgart, *Die römischen Sklavennamen* (Breslau, 1936), p. 61, who derives such names from the country of origin (cf. pp. 22-23).

As noted throughout this study, the various misreadings of the ancient and medieval sources are not even of the texts themselves, but of translations of the texts. Sometimes these misreadings bear laughable results. So, for example, the folktale referred to above, in which God prohibited those in the ark from engaging in sex, says that among those who transgressed were the dog and Ham, each committing the act with its own partner, a female dog and a female human respectively. A popular English translation (Soncino edition) of the rabbinic text puts it this way: “Ham and the dog copulated in the Ark.” In Winthrop Jordan’s work this became Ham “copulating with a dog” and from there to Charles Lyons’ “Ham commits bestiality on the boat by copulating with a dog.” Similarly, Joseph Washington (p. 10), Gene Rice (“The Curse that Never Was [Genesis 9:18-27],” *The Journal of Religious Thought* 29 [1972]: 25-26, n. 112), L. Holden, *Forms of Deformity* (Sheffield, 1991), pp. 49, 71, and apparently also William Evans (p. 26). See David M. Whitford, *The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era*

A further impediment to an accurate evaluation of rabbinic views is an approach which limits the evidence, an approach which often becomes what David Brion Davis has described as “pounc[ing] upon quotations extracted arbitrarily from the Babylonian Talmud and other rabbinic sources.”<sup>55</sup> If one is truly interested in knowing what rabbinic Judaism thought about dark-skinned people, obviously all of the relevant literature must be examined for references direct and indirect, in order to reconstruct a resulting attitude or attitudes.

When we undertake such an objective and thorough investigation, we find a positive perception of Blacks running throughout the rabbinic corpus. The most common reference to Blacks in the literature is that which treats biblical black skin as a metaphor for that which is distinctive in a positive way. In an exposition on Moses’ Ethiopian wife (Numbers 12:1), the rabbis say: “Just as the Ethiopian is distinctive in his skin color, so was Zipporah distinctive in beauty and good deeds.” Several other biblical references to “Ethiopian” receive the same metaphorical treatment. Saul, who according to rabbinic tradition is identified with Kush of Psalms 7:1, was handsome (“distinctive in appearance”); the people of Israel, whom God considers to be “like the Kushites” (Amos 9:7), were distinctive in fulfilling God’s commandments, etc.<sup>56</sup>

Not recognizing the metaphor as reflecting a positive view of black skin, Drake, Copher, Brackman and others see rather rabbinic attempts “to explain away the blackness of Moses’ wife.”<sup>57</sup> Apparently the snowballing effect of the “new scholarship” finds anti-

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(Surrey UK, 2009), p. 25n22 for other examples of those copying Jordan’s error. The absurdity of this translation of the rabbinic text was recently noted by A.A. Jackson in his *Examining the Record*, p. 9.

<sup>55</sup> David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress*, p. 337, n.144.

<sup>56</sup> *Sifre Numbers* 99 and parallels.

<sup>57</sup> Drake 2:309; Copher, “Egypt and Ethiopia in the Old Testament,” in *Nile Valley Civilizations* (= *Journal of African Civilizations* 6.2 [1984]), p. 173, now reprinted in Charles Copher, *Black Biblical Studies* (Chicago, 1993), p. 59; Brackman 1:83-84. Brackman goes even further: “Not one rabbinic source accepted this interpretation [that ‘Kushite’ of Numbers means Black].” ... “It is painfully obvious that their qualms over Numbers 12 were rooted in race prejudice” (1:79, 130). This is just an uninformed comment, for many rabbinic sources did interpret “Kushite” just that way. See: *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* ad loc.; R. Meyuhas b. Elijah, *Commentary to Numbers*, ed. S. Freilich (Jerusalem, 1977), ad loc.; Samuel b. Meir (Rashbam), *Commentary to the Pentateuch*, ed. A.I. Bromberg (Jerusalem, 1969<sup>2</sup>, based on ed. D. Rozen, Breslau, 1882), ad loc., p. 177; some of the Tosafot, *Da`at Zeganim*, ad loc.; Ephraim b. Shimshon, *Commentary to the Pentateuch*, ed. E. Korach and Z. Leitner (Jerusalem, 1992) 2:76; Hezekiah ben



Black sentiment everywhere, as long as it's in a rabbinic text. However, any student of midrash will recognize in the exegesis a common, and innocuous, interpretive technique.

Metaphoric explanations of names and descriptions of biblical figures are widespread in midrashic literature and are driven by two factors: the hermeneutical desire to extrapolate as much as possible from the biblical text, and the literary characteristic of what one scholar has termed "retreat from anonymity." Thus, the common attempt to identify the unknown (in our case, the Kushite) with the known (in our case, Zipporah).<sup>58</sup>

An example is provided by the case of Iscah, daughter of Haran, brother of Abraham (Gen 11:29). Otherwise unknown, Iscah is identified with Sarah by means of an "etymological" explanation of her name: "All gaze (*sakhin*) at her beauty, as it is written 'And the princes of Pharaoh saw her [i.e. Sarah] and praised her to Pharaoh' (Gen 11:15)."<sup>59</sup> "Iscah" is thus a description of the known Sarah. So too in our case, "Kushit" is a description of the known Zipporah.

There are other rabbinic references to Blacks and black skin. Take for example the following passage in the eighth-century *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* (chapter 24), which tells of God "colorizing" the world, as it were.

He blessed Noah and his sons -- as it says: "And God blessed them," i.e. with their gifts, and he apportioned the entire earth to them as an inheritance. He blessed Shem and his sons [making them] black and beautiful and he gave them the habitable earth. He blessed Ham and his sons [making them] black as the raven and he gave them the sea coasts. He blessed Japheth and his sons [making]

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Manoah, *Hizzequni: Commentary to the Pentateuch* (ed. C.B. Chavel. Jerusalem, 1981); and anonymous commentators cited by Ibn Ezra, *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, ed. Asher Weiser (Jerusalem, 1977), ad loc. A variation, recorded by a medieval source as a tannaitic statement cited from *Sifre* (but not extant), states that Moses married the Ethiopian after Zipporah had died (quoted from a manuscript containing anonymous Ashkenazic Bible interpretations combined, and published, with those of Ephraim b. Shimshon, 2:86). Other rabbis claimed that Zipporah herself was an Ethiopian, or, at least, a half-Ethiopian. Eliezer of Worms says that Jethro married an Ethiopian, from whom Zipporah was born (*Commentary to the Pentateuch*, ed. S. Kanivsky [New York, 1981], 3:43 to Num 12:1). The manuscript referred to above records the same tradition in the name of the talmudic sages (Ephraim b. Shimshon, *Commentary* 2:86.)

<sup>58</sup> Isaac Heinemann, *Darkhe ha-'Aggadah* (Jerusalem, 1970<sup>3</sup>), p. 28; see also, Eliezer Segal, "Sarah and Iscah: Method and Message in Midrashic Tradition", *Jewish Quarterly Review* 82 (1992): 417-429

<sup>59</sup> *Sifre Numbers* 99 (p. 98). For more examples see Heinemann loc. cit. and Segal, n. 7.

all of them white and he gave them the desert and fields. These are the portions he gave them as an inheritance.

The key word in this account is 'blessed'. According to this text God's endowing of various skin colors is part of his blessing to humanity. Obviously this text sees dark skin differently than the sex-in-the-ark (or, dark) folktales we saw above.

If there were a monolithic "rabbinic view" of dark skin as a curse, it would have been highly unlikely for *Pirqe* -- based and dependent upon the earlier rabbinic views -- to consider this color a blessing. And it would have been highly unlikely for this text to consider the color of Shem -- and his descendants, the Jews -- to be black. Naturally enough, it is a preferred shade of black to that of the Hamites, but it is considered by the author(s) to be black nonetheless.

Further insight to rabbinic views of Blacks might be gained from those texts treating other biblical references to a Kushi/Ethiopian. One does not find, for example, any attempt to "explain away" the father of the prophet Zephaniah, whose name is Kushi. On the contrary, rabbinic tradition has it that this "kushi" was a righteous man. Similarly, the Ethiopian Ebed-melech, who saved the prophet Jeremiah (Jer 38:4-13) is considered to be one of the select few who did not die, but entered paradise alive. Other midrashic accounts cast him in the role of a king who converted to Judaism.<sup>60</sup> Clearly, a thorough investigation of the rabbinic corpus results in a very different picture from that which is alleged.

Rabbinic society was not an ideal world free of xenophobia. However, it was certainly not anti-Black. The various attitudes which emerge from rabbinic literature depict a society that barely thought about Blacks, qua Blacks, at all. The social structures of rabbinic society (as governed by, and embedded in, its legal literature) depict a world in which color was irrelevant.

This essay began by noting a perception of the Black as seen by the dominant society throughout history. It will end by noting a view of the Black as seen by the talmudic and midrashic rabbis. A little known, and never quoted (it is not found in translation), early midrashic commentary explains Isaiah's view of the messianic age. The prophet said: "[God] is coming to gather all nations" (Isaiah 66:18). The rabbinic paraphrase puts it this way:

Isaiah said: In the messianic period he who is light-skinned [*germani*] will take hold of the hand of him who is dark-skinned [*kushi*] and the dark-skinned will

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<sup>60</sup> Zephaniah: Talmud *Ta`anit* 15a. Ebed-melech: in many midrashic collections, anthologies, and medieval writings; see the references in Ginzberg, *Legends* 5:96 and 6:412, and in M. Higger, *Mesekhtot Ze`irot* (New York, 1929), pp.74, 129-132.

take hold of the hand of the light-skinned and arm in arm they will walk together.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Louis Ginzberg, *Ginze Schechter* (New York, 1928) 1:86.