



# First United Church of Oak Park

## **Accursed Texts**

Genesis 9:18-28

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The story of Noah is well known and well loved. The arresting tale of Noah's Ark captures the imagination—a tale of the survival of the whole human race, the entirety of animal life, in fact, as it floats perilously atop the flood of global disaster with only one another for support. Then from that slender thread of life, the entire family of the human race spread across the whole world. The children of Noah bear names like Egypt, and Sheba, and Canaan, and Sidon—these are the names of whole nations and great cities, but here those great nations are the names of descendants of Noah.

The story of Noah is an origin myth, it is telling the story of how did the world come to be the way that it is. How did the nations come to be, how did people spread across the earth? It is an origin myth, it is telling the story of how—making reality explicable and placing it inside a coherent narrative. The story is not itself a morality play, it is telling the story of how.

And in the middle of this origin story, in the middle of explaining how the entire world order came to be, there is a small narrative aside. There is a short, uncomfortable, unflattering story about Noah and his family immediately after they departed from the Ark. It was the story I read a few moments ago. In this story, Noah plants a vineyard and immediately falls prey to drunkenness. He drinks so heavily that passes out, naked, apparently in the middle of the day because all of the rest of his household was still awake and wondering where the patriarch of the family was. His son Ham stumbles upon his father, sees the state he is in and goes to get help from his brothers. They do their best to cover him up. When Noah finally comes to, he is naked, covered up by one of his son's coats, and hungover. He then lashes out at his son, Ham, as if the whole thing were his fault, and curses him, declaring he and his descendants will be enslaved to his brothers forever.

Again, this is an origin myth. It is not a morality play, and a person would really have to tie themselves up in knots to read this story and decide that Ham is the one who is at fault here, that Ham and his descendants deserve what's coming to them. This is not a morality play, it is an origin myth, it is telling the story of how the order of the world came to be. What was the story? And in this case, this story is telling the origin of enmity between peoples. It is telling the story of conflict and enslavement.

Remember the names of those children? One of the sons of Ham was named Canaan. Canaan is the name of the nation of people who were living in the Promised Land when the Israelites arrived there after their desert wanderings. The displacement of the Canaanites is the story told in the book of Joshua. One of the other sons of Ham was named Egypt. The curse Noah lays upon Ham curves back like a sickle—declaring that Ham's children will be enslaved. It is in fact the other way around, as the Hebrews were enslaved in Egypt. Again, this is an origin myth. It is not a morality play, it is telling the story of how. And in this case, this story is telling the origin of enmity between peoples. The Hebrews being enslaved by the descendants of Ham, then

driving from the Promised Land some of the other descendants of Ham. It is telling the story of conflict and enslavement. This is a true story in its way. A true story we know all too well, of blood feuds between people that carry on for generations with a terrible life of their own. This is a true story but it isn't advice.

A straightforward moral meaning from this text is neither explicit nor implied. And again, a person would have to tie themselves in knots to read this and say that Ham is the one who is at fault, and that a generational curse is an appropriate consequence for accidentally seeing his father naked.

Yet, that is exactly the reading that proliferated for centuries. And as uncomfortable and unflattering as this story is on its own, the use to which Christians have put this story is far more uncomfortable and unflattering.

You see, this story is the source and root of a poisonous weed of a doctrine called the curse of Ham. The curse of Ham is the interpretation of this story to say that African peoples are divinely ordained to be enslaved to light-skinned people. Where was that, you might ask?

We are back to the names of the children, Egypt, Sheba? These were the names of nations in Africa. This foul reasoning goes like this—since African nations are descended from Ham, the curse of Ham means that it is God's will for African people to be enslaved. This interpretation was widespread in this country throughout the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In fact, if you read widely in the writings of Black preachers during the civil rights movement, you will find that they are often debunking the spurious theological notion of the curse of Ham. They were debunking it because as recently as the 1970's this was a common Biblical interpretation among Christians in this country.

Well, among white Christians anyway. Because the only people who were reading the story this way were those profiting from the existence of the institution of slavery. It's enough to make a person want to go the route of Thomas Jefferson, who literally took a pair of scissors and removed passages from his Bible that he didn't agree with.

But I believe that the blessings of the Holy Spirit means that even in a text like this—in which is hard to see anything but gloom and little use has been made of it other than to sow misery—even in this story there is good news for us today. If this story is an origin myth of terrible enmity between people, then what lesson should we take from it?

The story answers clearly, yet soberly. Those divisions are a drunken error. The lie that one people are better than others is nothing more than the angry lashing out of a man who drank too deep and awoke hungover and desperate to justify his own actions by blaming another. At the root of the enmity between the Israelites and Canaanites we see that the original cause is foolishness.

What's more, the divisions that sprung from such foolishness are shown to be indefensible. Because the story of the children of Noah says that humanity is of one single common flesh, everywhere possessed of equal dignity and insight. There is a deep kinship that ties us together, one single origin, one single united blood, one human family. We all of us are children of Noah, floating perilously on the surface of global disaster, and have only one another for support. The story of Ham. It is a little story, an uncomfortable story, an unflattering story. Not only in itself but in how Christians have read this text down the march of years. There are divisions among us, that is true. But if you go back far enough what will be found at the root are causes for division that pale

in the face of the binding together of people. We ought love one another in our diversity, we ought rejoice the kinship that unites us, we ought trust one another as beloved kin.

But even through the mess and the muck and the misuse of this story, there shines a golden thread of God's good news for us. That humankind shares deep kinship with one another, far deeper than anything which distinguishes us. Amen.