

Hebrew Myths and Pseudo Bibliography

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The audience at the June, 1995 Eighth Annual National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in American Higher Education may have been startled to hear one of the speakers link Robert Graves and Louis Farrakhan; though Minister Farrakhan's Million Man March on Washington was not to be called until October 1995, by June the United States' focus on race was centered on the Simpson Trial in Los Angeles. Dr. Ephraim Isaac, Director of the Institute of Semitic Studies, visiting Professor at Princeton University, and fellow at Princeton Seminary, was speaking on "Racism, Anti-Semitism, and Academic Responsibility" when he drew the startling connection:

... Supposedly, then the Talmudic Rabbis read racist content into the Biblical story of the curse of Noah. According to the *Hebrew Myths* by Robert Graves and Raphael Patai, Ham is told by his outraged father, 'that because you have abused me in the darkness of night, your children shall be born black and ugly; because you have twisted your head to cause me embarrassment, they shall have kinky hair and red eyes; because your lips jested at my expense, they shall swell; and because you neglected my nakedness, they shall go naked.' Where in the Talmud do you find this? As a person who has read the Talmud and studied it, not a single place, not a single verse like this do you find in it. But in his erudite UCLA dissertation, Harold Brackman and Columbia University sponsored doctoral dissertations [sic] in which this quotation was produced, by people who do not know either Aramaic nor Hebrew and Reverend Farrakhan is being blamed, unjustly, for quoting this all over the place. Reverend Farrakhan is quoting what Columbia University and UCLA provided him. Alas, he is wrong, but the ultimate problem is this half-baked scholarship of modern universities... [The direct quotations are from a videotape of Professor Ephraim's speech.]

Professor Isaac was making, as one might guess, a larger point. "Professors who write about such subjects, or oversee doctoral dissertations ... in areas about which they have little or no linguistic or textual

knowledge carry part of the blame in fueling ancient prejudices. University administrators who are trashing the study of language contribute to the decline of scholarship and must share the blame." We might infer that Professor Isacc would extend this blame to authors writing outside their "fields of expertise" as well (the Graves canon is no stranger to this sort of attack).

A rough sequence of events: the Nation of Islam has, for years, distributed an anonymous tract called *The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews*. In a news conference held on February 3, 1994, Minister Louis Farrakhan claimed that the unpublished 1977 doctoral dissertation which Harold Brackman wrote for the University of California at Los Angeles agreed "with everything we said" in that anonymous tract (which, among other things, alleges that the Atlantic slave trade was "dominated" by Jewish merchants), and that Brackman's dissertation proved that the "Talmud 'invented' racism by concocting the so-called 'Ham myth.'"

On February 14, 1994, the *New York Times* published a letter from Harold Brackman, disputing Farrakhan's interpretation of his dissertation, which did in fact document the involvement of Jews in the slave trade, though Brackman "came to the same conclusion as every other reputable work of scholarship, that in the overall scheme of things it was extremely marginal." On Farrakhan's second point, Brackman sounds less sure:

As best I could, based on English translations, I discussed racial attitudes during this period, not only in Jewish sources, but also in the writings of Hellenistic physicians and geographers as well as the church fathers. . . . None of my conclusions correspond to this vicious libel. . . . The Talmudic sages never extended their negative speculations about Ham, Noah's son, and Canaan, Ham's son, to Cush, Ham's other son, identified as progenitor of the African peoples of Egypt.

On February 28, 1994 *The Times* published a letter from a freelance journalist, Lenni Brenner, arguing that the Talmud does contain the roots of racism. On March 1, 1994, Professor Isaac answered with his own letter to the Times editor, saying "there is not a single reference in [the Talmud] even remotely resembling Brenner's quotation copied from Brackman," and follows this statement with the version of the curse quoted in the Santa Fe speech above. He continues:

The source of this Brenner-Brackman quotation is a modern inflated and paraphrased interpretation of a post-medieval legend interpolated into a text of a post-ninth century Biblical commentary called *Tanhuma*. . . First, even the interpolated text. . . makes no reference to the descendants of Ham or even of Canaan as in the Brenner-Brackman quotation, but to Ham himself. Second, the oldest version of the commentary does not in fact contain any passage similar. . . On the contrary, it says that in the Bible Noah cursed Canaan, not Ham who was blessed earlier.

In a later "op-ed" piece written for *The Times*, Professor Isaac attributes the "modern inflated and paraphrased interpretation" to Robert Graves' and Raphael Patai's *Hebrew Myths* and again quotes the passage as delivered at Santa Fe, this time preceding the passage with the words "According to the oft-quoted *Hebrew Myths* by Robert Graves and Raphael Patai." He further argues that Canaan was cursed because Ham had been blessed when leaving the Ark, or Canaan was cursed in order "to spare the rest of Ham's family, including Cush, the ancestor of African peoples." He characterizes the passage quoted by Brenner and Brackman as "a Graves-Patai misleading rendering and paraphrase of a text interpolated into a medieval Hebrew Biblical commentary called *Tanhuma*. . ." (The full argument also appears in Deena Yellin, "Ephraim Isaac: Ethiopian Renaissance Man," *Lifestyles* Winter 1994, 37-40.)

In fact, the curse of Noah that Isaac, Farrakhan and Brackman all misquote is one of six versions of the curse-story Graves and Patai present in *Hebrew Myths*. Graves' version five is the version which assumes that Ham himself castrated Noah; the curse on Canaan, Ham's son, is necessary since Noah cannot beget a fourth son whose children could be ordered to serve Ham and his brothers.

The curse in version 5 in *Hebrew Myths* is not substantively different from the version Isaac quoted, but Isaac's diction is not Graves' diction:

. . . And since you have disabled me from doing ugly things in the blackness of night, Canaan's children shall be born ugly and black! Moreover, 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.

The narrative continues, "Men of this race are called Negroes; their forefather Canaan commanded them to love theft and fornication, to be banded together in hatred of their masters and never to tell the truth" (*Hebrew Myths*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963, 121)

Of course, Patai and Graves do not present this particular Hebrew myth naively. "The myth is told to justify Hebrew enslavement of the Canaanites," their notes to the myth clearly state. "Shem and Japheth's descendants made common cause against the Canaanites—the sons of Ham—whom they enslaved: a historical situation to which Noah's curse gives mythical validity. . . . That Negroes are doomed to serve men of lighter colour was a view gratefully borrowed by Christians in the Middle Ages: a severe shortage of cheap manual labour, caused by plague, made the re-institution of slavery attractive (122)."

Nor is the reconstruction of the versions of Noah's curse, contrary to Isaac's apparent claim, made in ignorance of the Hebrew language or sources. Raphael Patai, when *Hebrew Myths* was published, was Director of Research at the Theodor Herzl Institute in New York, after spending fifteen years in Jerusalem, where he was Director of the Palestine Institute of Folklore and Ethnology and had, in 1963, written more than two dozen academic studies of those materials. In presenting the fifth version of Noah's curse, Graves and Patai consulted at least five sources (as the notes again make clear): the Sanhedrin tractate of the *Babylonian and Palestinian Talmud*, the Pesahim tractate of the *Palestinian Talmud*, the *Tanhuma Buber Midrash* or the *Pentateuch* (the work of a fourth century Palestinian Amora), the *Tanhuma Noah*, and *Genesis Rabba* (a fifth century midrash compiled in Palestine). These sources for version 5 are in addition to five other midrashic (and other) sources quoted for versions 1-4 and 6.

However, in an earlier article, "Genesis, Judaism, and the 'Sons of Ham,'" in volume 1 of *The Journal of Slavery and Abolition* (3-17), Professor Isaac offered a much more specific critique of the Graves-Patai passage misquoted by Farrakhan. First Patai asserts that "nowhere in the Jewish literature of the Biblical, post-Biblical or Rabbinic period is there to be found a single comprehensive quotation resembling this one" (10). The word *comprehensive* is important to

Isaac's case. He goes on to cite each of Graves and Patai's sources. B. Sanhedrin 70a (72a-b is probably a typographic mistake, as nothing there concerns Ham or Noah) alludes "to a Rabbinic opinion" that Ham may have castrated or otherwise have sexually abused Noah. Further, three of the Rabbinic sources consider Canaan to be Ham's fourth son, not his firstborn. In *Genesis Rabba* 36:7, the reference in "doing ugly things in the blackness of night" (which Isaac glosses as "doing something [cohabitation] in the dark") is to Canaan, not Ham. Not all manuscripts, Isaac asserts, agree on the phrase "ugly and black"—the phrase is not present in all manuscripts; and moreover, "black" would not be a pejorative, "for the Rabbis at times described their own ancestors as black" (11-12). Isaac is forced to admit that Graves and Patai's final sentence does rest on *Tanhuma Noah* 13—but that the original makes reference only to Ham, not to Canaan, or to the descendants of either (12).

It is very interesting that in this more detailed article, Professor Isaac concludes "there are indeed elements of ethnic chauvinism in the Biblical and Rabbinic myths concerning the Canaanites" (13). He then recounts the elements of the curse on the Canaanites and their forefather Canaan, elements virtually identical to the elements of the curse as delineated by Graves and Patai. But, he maintains, this curse is irrelevant to the issue of black history. "Nevertheless, on the basis of the primary sources, one cannot apply or transfer the curse against Canaan and the prejudices against the Canaanites to Cush or his descendants. Both the Biblical story and the Rabbinic literary sources are unambiguous in the distinction they make between Canaan, the forefather of the Canaanites, and Cush, the forefather of black people" (13). Professor Isaac has gone from arguing that there is no racism in the Talmud to admitting that there is racism there, but not racism directed at blacks, or more precisely, at the mythic forefather of black people.

Critical reviews of *Hebrew Myths* just after its publication focused on two weaknesses, neither of which related at all to Graves' and Patai's understanding of the language of their sources. "Commentators could not resist mentioning that the authors had failed to take into account the work of Claude Levi-Strauss—but that was put down to Patai, who was an anthropologist, rather than to Graves (Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves*, 489)." Predictably, the more important problem critics saw with the collection is its insistent assumption of a matriarchal culture that preceded the patriarchal Hebrew culture. Neither of these

criticisms seems related to the curse of Noah, frankly.

I suppose we should not be surprised that, by the time a Graves translation has been quoted and requoted, its meaning has completely changed and the scholarly apparatus which gave it context has disappeared. We should be surprised, I think, that even a Biblical scholar arguing against the use of the Graves fragment begins to argue against Graves' methods and, more worrisome still, does not see that the corrected quotation and the scholarly apparatus actually make his case. Correctly, I think, Isaac argues the larger point against Minister Farrakhan's use of the misquotation and uses the episode to argue for greater learning and, ironically, respect for sources. The still larger point which I would draw is that those of us who are scholars, who have read *Hebrew Myths* and *Greek Myths* and *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* and *The White Goddess* have a duty to clarify meaning when a Minister Farrakhan or anyone else pours half-understood elements of Graves—or any other scholarship—into a stew of numerology, bad history, irrelevant facts and misquotation.

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