

“Race and the Bible”

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Tomorrow is Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Some years I talk about that; some years I don't. This year, after what happened in Charlottesville in August and the rise of new forms of white nationalist and white supremacist groups in this country over the past several years, I feel like I *need* to. Martin Luther King Day is the *only* federal holiday that honors a minister of the Christian gospel. The *Reverend* Martin Luther King. Maybe I don't talk about that enough. Maybe I don't talk about *racism* enough.

What I want to do this morning is walk you through the Bible with an eye toward race. We're going to start in Genesis and end in Revelation. I want to make sure that at least *you* all know what the Bible *really* says about race. There is a lot of rhetoric out there. And a lot of it's not very biblical.

Let's start in Genesis 10. This is the chapter that traces the descendants of the sons of Noah (Shem, Ham, and Japheth) after the flood. Noah's descendants give rise to a variety of nations in different parts of what was (then) the known world. This chapter is called the “table of nations” because it tells us – in the eyes of the ancient Israelites – where each nation came from. You need to understand that these early chapters in Genesis are more legend than history – modern anthropologists and historians would tell the story a bit differently – but in the ancient world, the world in which Jesus lived, this was what the Jewish people believed to be true. Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Ham had four sons: Cush, Egypt, Put, and Canaan. (Genesis 10:7) Canaan became the ancestor of the Canaanite people. Egypt became the ancestor of the Egyptian people. Put, according to Jewish tradition, founded the nation of Libya, the country immediately to the west of Egypt. And Cush founded the country *south* of Egypt, in the region we know today as Sudan and Ethiopia. In fact, when the Bible was translated from Hebrew into Greek a century or two before Jesus, the Hebrew name “Cush” was routinely translated as *Aithiopia*. There are some 50 references to “Cush” or to “Cushite” people throughout the Old Testament, and almost all of them refer to that region south of Egypt. The people living here had darker skin than most of the rest of the known world. In the book of Jeremiah, there's a rhetorical question: “Can a Cushite change his skin or a leopard his spots?” (Jeremiah 13:23) A consistent feature of the Cushites was that their skin tone was different (darker) than that of the Jews.

So, according to Genesis, the darker-skinned people living south of Egypt were descended from Noah's son Ham. But where did the Jewish people come from? According to the table of nations, they – and the other Semitic peoples, like the Moabites and the Edomites – were descended from Noah's son Shem. So the ancient Israelites believed that both they *and* the Cushites had a common ancestor, Noah. They believed they were *related* to each other. Distantly related, to be sure, but all part of the same

human family. The Israelites didn't always get *along* with the Cushites – 2 Chronicles 14 records a battle between Judah and Cush – but they didn't always get along with any of their other relatives either.

Sometimes, the Israelites *married* Cushites. We're told in Numbers 12 that Moses married a Cushite woman. That didn't go over well with his brother Aaron or his sister Miriam, and they criticized him for it. But God – *God!* – gets angry with Aaron and Miriam for their criticism of Moses. It wasn't that *Moses* did wrong in marrying a Cushite woman – it was Aaron and Miriam who did wrong, for faulting him for it. In God's eyes, *it was okay for Moses to marry a woman who was black.*

Was there, in the eyes of the Israelites, something inferior about people who had darker skin? Take a look at this verse, from the Song of Solomon: "I am black, but beautiful," says a woman, presumably from Africa. Was there something *wrong* with being black? Did the Israelites think that black people couldn't be beautiful? What if I told you that the word translated "but" is a standard conjunction in Hebrew that is usually translated as "and"? It's the Hebrew word *waw*; it's one of the first Hebrew words biblical students learn; it can be translated "and", "but", or "or". Most of the time, it's just simply *and*. Most English translations through the centuries have used the word "but." Is that what was originally intended? Or did bias (or prejudice) creep into the translations? What would happen if we read this differently, like some newer translations: "I am black *and* beautiful?"

There's really nothing in the Bible suggesting that there was anything *inferior* about people who were born with darker skin. The Israelites definitely considered themselves to be God's "chosen people," but that had nothing to do with *race*. That had to do with God's call of Abraham. The Israelites generally looked down on *all* other nations – and the nations that received the most criticism were their immediate neighbors, *who would have looked pretty much like they did*. The critical issue wasn't *race!*

But there is a curious incident recorded in Genesis 9, after the flood, right before the table of nations. Noah, his three sons, their wives, and all those animals disembark from the ark, and then Noah settles down, grows a vineyard, gets stinking drunk, and falls asleep naked and uncovered in his tent. (Not one of Noah's finer moments!) His son Ham discovers him in that state. Ham backs out of the tent and tells his two brothers, who come in and cover their father with a blanket. But when Noah wakes up he gets mad and curses one of Ham's sons: "Cursed be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers." (Genesis 9:25) Now think about this. Noah's not cursing *Ham*; he's cursing one of Ham's *sons*, who had nothing to do with this incident, and he's elevating the other three. It makes no sense! I'm thinking Noah still has a bit too much alcohol in his system. These are not the words of a rational man. *But this verse was used by some white slave-owners in this country to defend the institution of slavery based on race.* Which also makes no sense – which of Ham's sons is being cursed? It's not *Cush*, the ancestor of the dark-skinned Cushites; it's *Canaan*, the ancestor of the *Canaanites*. Why should those words, spoken in the heat of the moment by a man who was probably still drunk, punish all future generations of a *different people-group* all together? Simple answer: *they shouldn't have!*

Turn now to the New Testament. There's Jesus, proclaiming his message not just to the Jews, but to anybody who will listen, including a Syrophenician woman and a Roman centurion and a Samaritan woman and a whole bunch of others who weren't "the chosen people." In the book of Acts

we meet a eunuch from Ethiopia, one of the most trusted servants of the wealthy Ethiopian queen, in charge of her whole treasury. He rides to Jerusalem in a chariot and is on his way back home, reading a scroll of the book of Isaiah, when God sends Philip over to this chariot. *Go talk to that black man!* Philip helps the man understand what he's reading; Philip tells him about Jesus; they come across some water; the man asks, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" (Acts 8:38) And the answer is – *nothing!* There's *no reason* why a black man cannot be a *full member* of the household of God. *Race doesn't matter!* If God wanted a world where only *white* people mattered, *that* story wouldn't be in the Bible.

The fact of the matter is, the gospel of Jesus Christ is available to *everybody, regardless* of their ethnic origin or nationality. That was a tough sell back in the first century. Turns out that the "chosen people" weren't quite so "chosen" after all. Or rather, that through Jesus Christ, *everyone* has the opportunity to become part of the "chosen people," regardless of their race, nation, or skin color. In Jesus Christ, Jews are no better than Gentiles, and whites are no better than blacks. In Ephesians, Paul majestically explains to a bunch of Greeks that "you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:13), that "in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall" (Ephesians 2:14), that "through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father" (Ephesians 2:17-18); with the result that "you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God." (Ephesians 2:17-20) *Everybody* who has faith in Christ is included in the kingdom of God; there are *no* distinctions; there is *no* race or people or nation that is superior to any other; the color of your skin does *not* determine your worth or dignity or value or place in the eyes of God. All those (very human) dividing walls that we set up against one another – they are *all* dismantled through Jesus. He died for *ALL* of humanity. Not just a piece of it.

Whenever you hear someone spout rhetoric about why white people are so much better than everyone else – remember: *that is NOT what this book teaches.* I would encourage you to pray for those people – that God would invade their hearts and that they would start seeing the *truth* of the gospel.

There's one final passage I want to share with you, from the book of Revelation. John is having a vision of the heavenly realm: "After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb." (Revelation 7:9-10) Notice those words carefully. *Every* nation. *All* tribes and peoples and languages. That includes people from Cush. It includes African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians, Arabs, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders. Those words in Revelation are not accidental. God put them there for a purpose. *Heaven is the most inclusive place on earth!* (Well, not on earth, but you know what I mean!) If your image of heaven is filled only with *white* people – if there are no people there of other races – *then your image of heaven isn't biblical.* Do you see that? *Every* nation. Not just some of them. *All* tribes and peoples and languages. Not just the ones that you personally approve of. If there are some groups of people you would rather not see in heaven – well, surprise, *God* says they're going to be there, and I'm pretty sure *he's* the one who gets to have final say on that, not you or me.

So the people who are trying to create a sort of "heaven on earth" through rhetoric and advocacy that demeans non-whites ... they would do well to realize just how inclusive heaven truly is.