

# Jewish Origin of the Curse of Ham

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The Hon. Min Louis Farrakhan dealt extensively with the Jewish origins of the Curse of Ham (or "Hamitic Myth") in his 2004 address entitled "Synagogue of Satan." We must understand that the very beginnings of racism and white supremacy are tied to this ingenious Jewish tall tale which has created so much mischief and caused the shedding of so much blood. It can be shown to be at the root in the justification of the slave trade and the displacement and murder of the American Indians. It was used to attack the Civil Rights Movement, to undermine abolitionism, to buttress the proslavery Confederacy, and was used as the instrument of control in Jim Crow.



This memorandum is the result of a cursory analysis of the state of academic discourse relating to the so-called Curse of Ham or Hamitic Myth. Please note that the arguments on this issue are detailed and voluminous and so our presentation here is, of necessity, an overview.

## Discussion

The Hamitic Myth is derived from the Biblical story of Noah. Taken alone as presented in Genesis 9:21-27, the characters are without a racial or geographical identity. It is the later interpretation of this race/religion/nation-neutral parable which assigned the curse specifically to the Black race such that by 1460 the institution of slavery would be universally believed to be the lot of the Africans.

## Jewish Origins

Evidence we have provided below locates the origin of these racist elaborations with the Jewish *Babylonian Talmud*. Dr. Harold Brackman is the strongest proponent of this theme but one finds a morass of argumentation centering around authenticity of sources, accuracy of translations, the use of pun, allegory, literalism, paucity of documentation, "ambiguities and complexities" of midrashic texts, etc., etc. Others appear to be positioning themselves for the impending firestorm over the claim that the Myth "played a relatively minor role" in slavery.

But even the most vociferous of the defenders of rabbinical honor, like **David M. Goldenberg** (in **Cornel West's** book), admit that the Talmudic rabbis had a "preference" for light skin and that their stories "see dark skin as a form of divine punishment". One author believes that the motive of the Talmudic rabbis in promoting their version of the Curse was to justify the ancient Hebrew enslavement of the Canaanites. What is not in dispute, however, is the ready acceptance of this racist construct by nearly every religious philosophy, culture and tradition on earth to justify their mistreatment of the Black race.

The Hamitic Myth itself has also taken on at least one other form in relation to Blackness (other versions have made Ham into a white man). Once Europeans saw evidence of the great African civilizations, they hastened to reinterpret the Hamitic Myth to suggest that the Hamites were in fact Europeans [!] who went into Africa bringing this civilization with them. This version of the Myth satisfied their academic needs--and was used when necessary by Jewish academics like **C.G. Seligman** among others. But, for the most part, their economic, social, religious, and political needs were met in the global promotion of the original rabbinical version.

Some argue that the Talmudic story is so miniscule--amounting to just a few sentences within a voluminous written tradition--that there is no way to claim it as the birthplace of Western racism and slavery. We

would suggest that the story was quickly amplified in concert with the growing Jewish interest in the slave trade. At one time slavery was a profitable enterprise and all races were deemed fit for the role. We suspect that Africans soon became the worker of choice (just as the early American colonists found Blacks to be physically superior), and adjusted their supply to fit this demand. Rabbis, who as charities also benefited from the trade, willingly altered their racial interpretation of the Ham story to fit this economic imperative. Soon we find legendary Jewish scholars like **Moses Maimonides**, a man who *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion* refers to as "the symbol of the pure and orthodox faith," spewing racist themes in his *Guide to the Perplexed*:

*"[T]he Negroes found in the remote South, and those who resemble them from among them that are with us in these climes. The status of those is like that of irrational animals. To my mind they do not have the rank of men, but have among the beings a rank lower than the rank of man but higher than the rank of apes. For they have the external shape and lineaments of a man and a faculty of discernment that is superior to that of the apes."*



Ideas were spread in those times the same way spices, rum and pork were spread--by way of the international merchants. The Jews monopolized this commerce, and these same Jewish merchant/travelers in the 12th century were denigrating the "sons of Ham" in their writings about the Africans. In the American South, the Jewish peddler was held in high esteem and eagerly anticipated by his rural, slaveholding customers for the goods and news, and for his Biblical ruminations. I suspect that this--multiplied by many centuries and many peddlers and many nations--is how a tiny Talmudic kernel can be made the universal creed.

Scholar St. Clair Drake hypothesizes that "special conditions in Mesopotamia generated rabbinic stories associating Negroidness with excessive and aberrant sexuality and Noah's curse." Drake argues that the Mesopotamia Jews negatively encountered significant numbers of Africans called the Zanj. In fact, Drake insists that *"some Jews had a stake in maintaining slavery. They were not just supervisors of slave labor; eventually, they became slave owners and dealers in the slave grade. A Diaspora Jewish culture with values quite different from those in Palestine developed."* He explains as follows.

During the first century A.D....among Babylonian Jewry was a class of native born aristocrats....Under these circumstances, parts of the Jewish community became involved in the importation and exploitation of "Zanj" labor in southern Mesopotamia. Insofar as the landed upper class followed the ancient Babylonian pattern, it would have been a slaveholding class. And it is likely that some of the farmers and tradesmen held slaves as well. The Jewish people were also represented in commerce, in manufacturing, and in the ownership of vessels that traded in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, where they were in direct contact with the "Zanj."

These negative features were not found in the *Jerusalem Talmud* where Black slavery was not a feature (See the work of Dr. Charsee McIntyre).

### General Uses of the Hamitic Myth

The Hamitic Myth has been liberally applied whenever historical circumstances required the aggressive re-assertion of white supremacy. It can be shown to be at the root in the justification of the slave trade and the displacement and murder of the American Indians. It was used to attack the Civil Rights Movement, to undermine abolitionism, to buttress the proslavery Confederacy, and was used as the instrument of control in Jim Crow.

Many people have adopted the mantle of "Chosen People" via the Hamitic Myth including the Puritans, the Jews, the Boers, the Afrikaners, and the Nazis, among many others. Even the Cherokees used it to justify their enslavement of the African (interestingly, it was "mixed-blood" Cherokees who engaged in this practice, just as it was mulatto "Blacks"

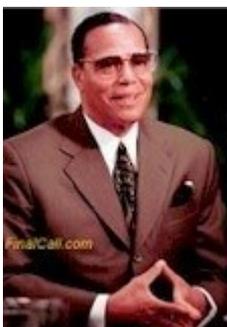
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who held African slaves). Southern Christians then used the same Hamitic Myth to justify the extermination of the Cherokees. Christians further employed the "Chosen People" myth of the slaveholding ancient Hebrews to justify their own slaveholding. Whites have even gone so far as to say that the snake in the Garden of Eden was the Black Man.

The slave trade to the Islamic world put the Myth to full use, and Islamic clerics expounded on the curse of Blackness (Brackman also reveals [p. 96] that many of the "camel-riding" slave traders were Jewish). Colonial missionaries like **Cotton Mather** of Massachusetts adopted the Myth as did the Boers of South Africa. It was roared from hundreds of American pulpits--North and South. Belgian colonizers appropriated it when they installed Tutsi overlords over former Hutu kingdoms, leading to the horrifying violence in Rwanda and Burundi. It is also said to be the basis of the Plessy v. Ferguson ruling. The founder of Mormons, Joseph Smith, and high official Brigham Young both used the Myth to condemn the Black man and exclude his participation in their cult. The Jehovah's Witnesses readily printed it as fact in the Watchtower.

In various translations of the rabbinical texts, we find themes of bestiality, sodomy, castration, homosexuality, drunkenness, and promiscuity, all applied to the vary nature of Ham and by extension to the race he presumably fathered. The rabbi's deviant sexual elaborations may have played a role in the feverish and overtly sexual violence against Blacks in the form of rapes and lynchings.

Though there is a direct linkage to the Hamitic Myth in many historical circumstances, not all belief in Black inferiority is directly traceable to the Myth. The presidents of Harvard, Princeton, and Wm. & Mary, Samuel Morse (the inventor of Morse Code), **Thomas Jefferson**, and even most of the white abolitionists expressed their belief in Black inferiority but they used other non-Biblical justifications, including history, anthropology, phrenology, chemistry, etc. It is difficult to say if the pervasiveness of the Hamitic Myth affected their "scientific" theorizing.

In 1550, Spain suspended its crusade of world conquest until the justification for these wars could be established. By connecting the native peoples with Africans, the Hamitic Myth could be extended globally, serving the "godly" aims of the conquerors.

### **Black Acceptance**

While not accepting its "natural slave" premise, **Edward Wilmot Blyden** accepted the African as a Hamite but tried to use the terminology to Black advantage. Others, like the poetess **Phillis Wheatley**, wrote of her color being a "diabolic dye." Slave **Jupiter Hammond** imbibed fully the crudest of the Myth's racist glosses. He admonished the Blacks who, improperly, think of freedom: "It may seem hard for us if we think our masters wrong in holding us slaves to obey in all things, but who of us dare dispute with God! He has commanded us to obey, and we ought to do it cheerfully and freely...for my own part I do not wish to be free; for many of us who are grown up slaves have always had masters to take care of themselves; and it may be for our own comfort to remain as we are."

Many other instances can be found of acceptance of the Myth as God's will and wisdom by Blacks and their slavery-fashioned clerics.

#### **Bible Verses Used as Justification of Slavery**

1 Chron. 18:11; 2 Sam. 20:23 (foreign mercenaries)  
 Josh. 9:21-27; Num. 31:26-47 (hewers of wood...)  
 2 Kings 5:20-27 (only other Biblical curse with skin change--to white)  
 Jesus had Canaanite blood; 1 of the 12 Apostles was a Canaanite (Mat 10:4)  
 Gen 17:13; Lev 25:24, 42-6 (condone slavery; 2 types of slavery)  
 Exod 20:10, 17 (protects slaves)  
 Matt 8:5-13 (accepts slavery)  
 Eph 6:5-9; Col 3:22-4:1; 1 Tim 6:3-4 (Paul approves slavery)

## Harold Brackman

Dr. Harold Brackman is a hired critic of the Nation of Islam and Hon. Louis Farrakhan. He received his Ph.D. from the University of California in 1977 on the basis of a dissertation he wrote entitled "The Ebb and Flow of Conflict: The History of Black-Jewish Relations Through 1900." It is unpublished but available through University Microfilms International Dissertation Services, Ann Arbor, Michigan. Brackman's 632-page dissertation discusses the Jewish invention of the profoundly racist Hamitic Myth. Brackman wrote:

"There is no denying that the [Jewish] Babylonian Talmud was the first source to read a Negrophobic content into the episode by stressing Canaan's fraternal connection with Cush."

The Jewish scholars, he said, advanced two explanations for Ham and his children being turned black. According to Brackman, "The more important version of the myth, however, ingeniously ties in the origins of blackness -- and of other, real and imagined Negroid traits -- with Noah's Curse itself. According to it, Ham is told by his outraged father that, because you have abused me in the darkness of the 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 exposure, theirs shall swell; and because you neglected my nakedness, they shall go naked with their shamefully elongated male members exposed for all to see."

When Brackman's astounding admission was published in *The Jewish Onslaught: Despatches from the Wellesley Battlefield*, by Wellesley professor **Tony Martin**, Brackman recoiled and actually pulled his "refutation" pamphlet off the market. Even Jews were embarrassed by the Brackman harangue. **Lenni Brenner**, author of *Jews in America Today*, titled his review of Brackman's booklet in the *Amsterdam News*, "Harold Brackman believes in recycling garbage," and opened with this: "There are some books so bad that I have to apologize for reviewing them. [Brackman's book] is one of them."

## Louis Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews* (pages 168-170)

When Noah awoke from his wine and became sober, he pronounced a curse upon Ham in the person of his youngest son Canaan. To Ham himself he could do no harm, for God had conferred a blessing upon Noah and his three sons as they departed from the ark. Therefore he put the curse upon the last-born son of the son that had prevented him from begetting a younger son than the three he had.

The descendants of Ham through Canaan therefore have red eyes, because Ham looked upon the nakedness of his father; they have misshapen lips, because Ham spoke with his lips to his brothers about the unseemly condition of his father; they have twisted curly hair, because Ham turned and twisted his head round to see the nakedness of his father; and they go about naked, because Ham did not cover the nakedness of his father. Thus he was requited, for it is the way of God to mete out punishment measure for measure.

Canaan had to suffer vicariously for his father's sin. Yet some of the punishment was inflicted upon him on his own account, for it had been Canaan who had drawn the attention of Ham to Noah's revolting condition. Ham, it appears, was but the worthy father of such a son. The last will and testament of Canaan addressed to his children read as follows: "Speak not the truth; hold not yourselves aloof from theft; lead a dissolute life; hate your master with an exceeding great hate; and love one another."

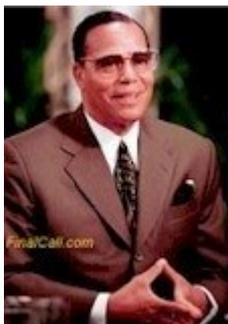
As Ham was made to suffer requital for his irreverence, so Shem and Japheth received a reward for the filial, deferential way in which they took a garment and laid it upon both their shoulders, and walking backward, with averted faces, covered the nakedness of their father. Naked the descendants of Ham, the Egyptians and Ethiopians, were led away captive and into exile by the king of Assyria, while the descendants of Shem, the Assyrians, even when the angel of the Lord burnt them in the camp, were not exposed, their garments remained upon their corpses unsinged. And in time to come, when Gog shall suffer his defeat, God will provide both shrouds and a place of burial for him

and all his multitude, the posterity of Japheth...

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Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (1968), pages 17-19:

The logical complement to the question of the Negro's change in color was whether the European by removing to a torrid climate would become darker or even black. Something of a consensus on this point emerged in the seventeenth century, since understandably Englishmen did not relish the prospect of turning into Negroes by prolonged residence in their expanding tropical empire. By the eighteenth century it was generally understood that European complexions would be darkened by tropical sun and weather, but that a return to cooler climates would restore the original color; even European children born in hot climates would be thoroughly white at first.

There was an alternative to these naturalistic explanations of the Negro's blackness. Some writers felt that God's curse on Ham (Cham), or upon his son Canaan, and all their descendants was entirely sufficient to account for the color of Negroes. This could be an appealing explanation, especially for men like George Best who wished to stress the "natural infection" of blackness and for those who hoped to incorporate the Negro's complexion securely within the accepted history of mankind. The original story in Genesis 9 and 10 was that after the Flood, Ham had looked upon his father's nakedness as Noah lay drunk in his tent, but the other two sons, Shem and Japheth, had covered their father without looking upon him; when Noah awoke he cursed Canaan, son of Ham, saying that he would be a "servant of servants" unto his brothers. Given this text, the question becomes why a tale which logically implied slavery but absolutely nothing about skin color should have become an autonomous and popular explanation of the Negro's blackness. Probably, over the very long run, this development was owing partly to the ancient association of heat with sensuality and with the fact that some Ethiopians had been enslaved by Europeans since ancient times.

What is more arresting, there did exist a specific textual basis for utilizing the curse as an explanation for blackness -- but it was a specifically Jewish rather than a Christian one. The writings of the great church fathers such as St. Jerome and St. Augustine referred to the curse in connection with slavery but not with Negroes. They casually accepted the assumption that Africans were descended from one or several of Ham's four sons, an assumption which became universal in Christendom despite the obscurity of its origins. They were probably aware, moreover, that the term Ham originally connoted both "dark" and "hot," yet they failed to seize this obvious opportunity to help explain the Negro's complexion. In contrast the approximately contemporaneous Talmudic and Midrashic sources contained such suggestions as that "Ham was smitten in his skin," that Noah told Ham "your seed will be ugly and dark-skinned," and that Ham was father "of Canaan who brought curses into the world, of Canaan who was cursed, of Canaan who darkened the faces of mankind," of Canaan "the notorious world-darkener."

While it probably is not possible to trace a direct line of influence, it seems very likely that these observations affected some Christian writers during the late Medieval and Renaissance years of reviving Christian interest in Jewish writings. It is suggestive that the first Christian utilizations of this theme came during the sixteenth century -- the first great century of overseas exploration. As should become clear in this chapter, there was reason for restless Englishmen to lay hold of a hand-me-down curse which had been expounded originally by a people who had themselves restlessly sought a land of freedom.

When the story of Ham's curse did become relatively common in the seventeenth century it was utilized almost entirely as an explanation of color rather than as justification for Negro slavery and as such it was probably denied more often than affirmed. Sir Thomas Browne, the first Englishman to discuss the Negro's color in great detail, ruled out Ham's curse as well as simple climatic causation after explaining that these two explanations were the only ones "generally received." Yet Peter Heylyn was letting Ham's curse into court just when Browne was tossing it out: in three successive editions of his grandiose *Microcosmus* he ignored the story in 1621, called a slightly altered version of it a "foolish tale" in 1627, and repeated his denial in 1666 but at the last moment

conceded that "possibly enough the Curse of God on Cham and on his posterity (though for some cause unknown to us) hath an influence on it."

The extraordinary persistence of this idea in the face of centuries of incessant refutation was probably sustained by a feeling that blackness could scarcely be anything but a curse and by the common need to confirm the facts of nature by specific reference to Scripture. In contrast to the climatic theory, God's curse provided a satisfying purposiveness which the sun's scorching heat could not match until the eighteenth century. The difficulty with the story of Ham's indiscretion was that extraordinarily strenuous exegesis was required in order to bring it to bear on the Negro's black skin. Faced with difficulties in both the climatic and Scriptural explanation, some seekers after truth threw up their hands in great humility and accounted blackness in the African another manifestation of God's omnipotent providence. This was Peter Heylyn's solution (at least in 1627).

**Prof. Tony Martin in *The Jewish Onslaught*:**

The association of Ham with the African race made of this myth a major rationalization for the European enslavement of Africans. For if God himself had ordained that Africans should forever be hewers of wood and drawers of water for the children of Europe and Asia, then the moral dilemma of slavery was resolved. The slavemaster was simply doing God's will.

Christians have customarily borne the brunt of the blame for the Hamitic Myth, and they certainly are not without sin in this regard. Yet, the Hamitic Myth (that is, the association of the African with the supposed curse of Noah), was invented by Jewish Talmudic scholars over a thousand years before the transatlantic slave trade began. As important as may have been the Jewish involvement in helping finance and prosecute the Atlantic slave trade (as detailed in *The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews*), their invention of the Hamitic Myth may be of even greater importance, since it provided the moral pretext upon which the entire trade grew and flourished.

Black historians such as J.A. Rogers have long written of the Jewish invention of the Hamitic Myth, but for purposes of this essay it is more appropriate to rely on the testimony of a 1977 Ph.D. dissertation by Harold D. Brackman of California's Jewish Simon Wiesenthal Center. Brackman is author of *Jew on the Brain: A Public Refutation of The Nation of Islam's The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews* (1992). For the year or so after its publication this modest and hastily put together work was the Jewish community's only quasi-academic defense against *The Secret Relationship*. It manifestly failed to stem the tide of the Nation of Islam's book and its weaknesses were elaborately exposed in a three part series by Jewish radical Lenni Brenner in the *New York Amsterdam News*. Which is perhaps why the Anti-Defamation League found it necessary in 1993 to issue an even more modest pamphlet retracing much of the same ground as Brackman's effort while trying to clean up Brackman's more obvious shortcomings.

The importance of Brackman's piece to the Jewish counter-effort became immediately apparent when the Wellesley affair erupted early in 1993. Henry Louis Gates' *New York Times* op ed (in an ADL reprint edition) and Brackman's pamphlet were immediately produced on campus. The Hillel people placed Brackman on library reserve (so that my students could have access to an alternative point of view). Their rabbi adviser sent me a xerox copy and Jewish correspondents to The Wellesley News mentioned it often in their letters and articles. Brackman himself entered the fray with a letter to the Africana Studies chair. "Unless I have been misinformed," he wrote, "Tony Martin of your department is having his students read the Nation of Islam's *The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews*....I am taking the liberty of enclosing my critique...in hopes it may aid you in determining whether Wellesley students are being indoctrinated with hate propaganda under the guise of historical scholarship."

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Brackman probably considers his own Ph.D. dissertation "hate propaganda" by now. It is replete with information and analysis that

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most of the Jews attacking me during the last seven months would consider "hateful."

"There is no denying," said Brackman, discussing the Jewish invention of the Hamitic Myth, "that the Babylonian Talmud was the first source to read a Negrophobic content into the episode by stressing Canaan's fraternal connection with Cush." Brackman pointed out further that two third century Jewish "Sages" provided homosexual embellishments for the biblical story as well - "Rab maintained that [Ham] had unmanned Noah, while Samuel claimed that he had buggered him as well."

After emphasizing once again that "talmudic glosses of the [Noah] episode added the stigma of blackness to the fate of enslavement that Noah predicted for Ham's progeny," Brackman turned more particularly to the question of blackness.

The Jewish scholars, he said, advanced two explanations for Ham and his children being turned black. The explanation which follows, and some of the preceding discussion, as already partially seen, have a direct bearing on some of the hate mail I received. Some of the anonymous hatemongers either read Brackman or were very familiar with the historical/religious tradition he described. According to Brackman,

The more important version of the myth, however, ingeniously ties in the origins of blackness - and of other, real and imagined Negroid traits - with Noah's Curse itself. According to it, Ham is told by his outraged father that, because you have abused me in the darkness of the 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 exposure, theirs shall swell; and because you neglected my nakedness, they shall go naked with their shamefully elongated male members exposed for all to see.

Several of the ideas expressed by these Jewish talmudic sages of seventeen hundred years ago recur in the hate mail I received in 1993. The question of swollen lips was expressed this way in a hate letter - "Wet the lips of nigger babies and stick them on a wall out of the way of decent people." The talmudic sage's preoccupation with anal sex (buggery) found this 1993 echo - "Homosexual niggers must use WD-40 instead of vaseline when humping each other since niggers look like African water buffalos." (The references to water buffaloes are doubtless due to the case, well-publicized in 1993, where an Orthodox Jewish student at the University of Pennsylvania, Eden Jacobowitz, used this term to insult African American women students). At least three letters to date (August 1993), contain similar allusions, including explicit references to the Hamitic Myth.

The question of the Hamitic Myth gives to Black-Jewish relations a most bizarre twist. For on the one side you have the Jews, by their own supposition God's chosen people. On the other hand you have the African race, by Jewish invention the recipients of God's implacable curse. This is hardly the basis for a mutually respectful relationship. After years of Jewish hounding, the Roman Catholic Church in 1965 (via its *Nostra Aetate* declaration), withdrew traditional Christian views of Jews as a Christ-killing collectivity. Now it is the turn of the Jews to retract, apologize and pay reparations for their invention of the "Hamitic Myth", which killed many millions more than all the anti-Jewish pogroms and holocausts in Europe.

**Slavery in Mosaic Law (*The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews, Vol. One, 202-05*)**

"Both biblical and rabbinic law permitted Jews to own slaves in all ages wherever slavery was in general practice....[L]iving in a society where slavery was an established institution, the Jews could hardly be expected to eliminate it."<sup>1</sup>

The holy laws of Judaism have never prohibited slavery or prevented all of its associated crimes and abuses. Black Africans were made brutally aware of this fact as their relationship with Jews developed. According to Jewish law, a Jew who buys an adult "heathen" male slave must have

him circumcised. If the slave refuses after a year of attempts, the Jew must sell the slave to a "heathen." In order to keep an uncircumcised slave, the slave must agree to obey the seven commandments of the descendants of Noah.<sup>2</sup> New World Jews, however, made no attempt to convert their slaves to Judaism.<sup>3</sup> In addition to slavery, Jewish law permitted the exploitation and oppression of the Gentile. For example, according to Rabbi Ishmael, paraphrased by Rabbi Henry Cohen in his book *Justice, Justice*:

[A] Jew was legally bound to restore a lost article he had found only if its owner were Jewish, but not if the article had belonged to a Gentile. Other kinds of talmudic "discrimination" against the non-Jew included: He could not serve as an agent for a Jew in a legal transaction; he could not buy cattle from a Jew; he could be charged an exorbitant price (termed: *ona'ah* or over-reaching), while a Jew could not be so charged....The early mishnaic law forbidding Jews to sell cattle to non-Jews was considered no longer binding, since such a ruling would, under new conditions, entail an economic loss for the Jew....For example, in the *Sefer Chasidim*, a book of rules written by a Rav Judah for the pietists of the twelfth century, a Jew, who was commanded to desecrate the Sabbath to save the life of a fellow-Jew, was prohibited from committing even a minor violation of the Sabbath to save the life of a Gentile!<sup>4</sup>

Jewish slave dealing in the American frontier was in direct conflict with the writings in Deuteronomy which insists that he who "is escaped from his master unto thee shall dwell with thee [and] thou shalt not oppress him."<sup>5</sup> But it is also the Old Testament which offered the holy justification for oppression on purely racial grounds. It suggested that "Ham was smitten in his skin" and it was Noah who told Ham that his "seed will be ugly and dark skinned."<sup>6</sup> It was this mis-interpretation of the scripture which the New World Jews chose to embrace. Even though slavery -- more accurately described as an apprenticeship system -- was Biblically permitted, the brutality of the system practiced by the European Jew upon the African was unprecedented. Dr. Feingold has found that among the ancient Hebrews, Biblical slavery

was of a precapitalist variety and had virtually no commerce connected with it. Unlike the situation in the plantation South, it did not shape the pastoral economy of ancient Israel which in any case found little use for masses of slaves. Rather than being considered an animated tool, as he was in the South, the slave in ancient Israel was merely a member of society in dependent status. He was entitled to the full protection of the laws of the community.<sup>7</sup>

Philip Birnbaum stated plainly in his work, *A Book of Jewish Concepts*, that there is no evidence that slave markets ever existed in Israel. "Kidnapping a man or selling him as a slave was a capital offense. A fugitive slave law, which once permitted in America the act of tracking runaway slaves by bloodhounds, would have been unthinkable in ancient Israel, where the relationship between master and slave was often cordial. The slave sometimes inherited the property of his master (Genesis 15:2-3) and was sometimes admitted into the family as a son-in-law (I Chronicles 2:34-35)."<sup>8</sup> According to a statement in the Talmud, the rabbinical interpretation of the law of God, the Hebrew slave was to be regarded as his master's equal.

· "You should not eat white bread, and he black bread; you should not drink old wine, and he new wine; you should not sleep on a featherbed, and he on straw. Hence, it has been declared that whoever acquires a Hebrew slave acquires a master."

· "A son or pupil may, but a Hebrew slave may not wash his master's feet or help him put on his shoes..."

· "Though the Torah permits us to impose hard work on a Canaanite (non-Jewish) slave, piety and wisdom command us to be kind and just" (Yad, Avadim 9:8). "Freed slaves were considered proselytes, converts to Judaism, in every respect."<sup>9</sup>

· "'Mercy is the mark of piety,' says the Shulchan Aruch, quoting the language of far earlier authorities, 'and no man may

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load his slave with a grievous yoke. No non-Jewish slave may be oppressed; he must receive a portion from every dainty that his master eats; he must be degraded neither by word nor act; he must not be bullied nor scornfully entreated; but must be addressed gently, and his reply heard with courtesy."<sup>10</sup>

The practice of Judaism did, at times, include the assistance of the Black slaves. In seventeenth-century Mexico, the Jews had a curious religious ritual: "A Negro was dressed in a red suit and went through the streets playing a tambourine. This was the signal to congregate for a special community meeting or for prayer."<sup>11</sup>

The brutality of slavery with the participation of the Jewish people shows that whatever humane guidance that Judaism provided was thoroughly ignored.

## Notes

1 Cohen, *Justice*, p. 49.

2 Reznikoff and Engelman, *The Jews of Charleston*, pp. 77-8; Sharfman, *Jews on the Frontier*, p. 190. By contrast, Jacob R. Marcus claims in *Studies in American Jewish History* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1969), p. 129, that "Among the 'twenty-five duties' is the prohibition against enslaving a fellow creature for life without his 'full approbation.'"

3 MCAJ2, p. 963; There are records of "Jewish mulattoes" (discussed previously)--the offspring of the rape of Black slave women by Jewish men--who set up their own Jewish communities. They were, however, shunned by the White Jewish community.

4 Cohen, *Justice*, pp. 50-1.

5 Cohen, *Justice*, p. 49.

6 Feingold, *Zion*, p. 86.

7 Feingold, *Zion*, p. 87.

8 Philip Birnbaum, *A Book of Jewish Concepts* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1975), p. 453.

9 Birnbaum, p. 453.

10 Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Age* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. 101.

11 Liebman, *The Jews in New Spain*, p. 254.