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## **RETHINKING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BLACK PRESENCE IN THE PENTATEUCH FOR TRANSLATION AND STUDY BIBLES: Part I**

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The black presence in the Bible is often inadequately represented in most Western versions of the Bible and, by the same token, in the study Bibles that accompany them. Passages related to black people are often glossed over, or occasionally mistranslated. Some scholars go to great length to expound on passages which seem to be unflattering to blacks, while those which portray them positively are sometimes called into question in spite of the wealth of historical evidence and the support of ancient authorities. On occasion, some versions literally translate rabbinical hearsays and church speculations instead of translating the Hebrew text. Consequently, the contributions made by black people are either ignored, doubted, or made a subject of controversy.

In this paper I have identified portions of the Pentateuch in which the black presence has received an unsympathetic hearing by scholars. Since these views have swayed Bible translation, I have reanalyzed the same passages again to show that the ancient Hebrews who wrote those texts did not harbor negative feelings against black people and therefore, these passages should not be translated in ways that portray blacks negatively. My exegesis of these passages is based on linguistic analysis of the Hebrew text, of the Septuagint (LXX), and occasionally of the Vulgate. When my findings are significantly different from those of existing

versions, I propose alternative translations and make suggestions on how to write notes for study Bibles that describe the contributions of black people accurately.

### **Where in the world is Cush?**

The earliest mention of Cush in the Bible is found in connection with the Garden of Eden in Gen<sup>1</sup> 2.10-14:

A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers. The name of the first is *Pishon*; it is the one which flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. The name of the second river is *Gihon*; it is the one which flows around the whole land of *Cush*. And the name of the third river is *Tigris*, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the *Euphrates* (italics added).

The connection of Cush with the river Gihon has created a great deal of confusion. To begin with, there is no river known by this name, and the brook or canal near Jerusalem called Gihon in 1Kgs 1.33, 38, 45 where Solomon was anointed as king, does not run all the way to Cush. 2Chr 32.30 and 33.14 list King Hezekiah's closing of the upper outlet of Gihon and its redirection to the west side of Jerusalem as one of the highlights of his rule. We all know that this little brook does not flow around the land that is traditionally associated with Cush. The fact that Gihon in Gen 2.10-14 is different from Gihon elsewhere has led to a great deal of confusion. The confusion about Gihon is reflected in footnotes and in study Bible comments about the geographical location of Cush in Gen 2.13. As a result, three distinct geographical hypotheses have emerged. These hypotheses are fundamental for understanding the scholarly debate about the presence and role of black people in the Bible. It is therefore important to carefully evaluate each hypothesis so as to show clearly what is at stake.

### **The Mesopotamian hypothesis**

This hypothesis is based mainly on the names of the rivers mentioned in Gen 2.10-14. Two of them, the Euphrates and the Tigris, are in lower Mesopotamia. The exact location of the rivers **Pishon** and **Gihon** are as yet unknown. Generally, no effort is made to identify Pishon. Attempts to identify Gihon, however, go far back in history. Pirot (1953, 121) writes that some scholars have hypothesized that Gihon is the river Oukou, known now as Kerka, which runs through the Assyrian Kashshu area. Wenham (1987, 65-66) quotes Speiser and Weinfeld among the scholars who believe that "the land of Cush is the land of the Cassites and the Gihon is one of the rivers or canals of Mesopotamia." Those who hold this view argue that if Cush in Gen 2.13 is equated with the region south of Egypt, the Garden of Eden would be too vast, stretching all the way from Assyria to Africa. However, if Cush is thought of as in Mesopotamia, the geographical location of Eden makes more sense. It is more logical for the river that sprang up from Eden and later divided into four to flow within the same area rather than running from lower Mesopotamia all the way to Ethiopia. Wenham agrees with this logic since he writes

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.

that “this makes it easier to envisage a point where all the rivers met, possibly in the mountains of Armenia or at the head of the Persian Gulf.” The notes in the NIV Study Bible reflect this view of Cush. Among other authorities, the *Nouveau Dictionnaire Biblique Révisé et Augmenté* (1992, 726-728) also places Cush in Gen 2.13 in Mesopotamia.

The Mesopotamian hypothesis, however, raises more problems than it can solve. Since Cush is generally not associated with Mesopotamia, it is extremely doubtful that Cush here refers to lower Mesopotamia. Gen 10.8, often quoted to make this equation possible, is also doubtful. Gen 2.13 talks about a territory, whereas Gen 10.8 is a proper name. For this reason, most versions which translate Cush by Ethiopia elsewhere do not translate it as Cush in Gen 10.8; they simply transliterate it. It will be argued later that Cush in Gen 10.8 does not refer to Cassites at all.

### The South Arabian hypothesis

Other scholars place Cush in South-West Arabia, that is, in the territory occupied by modern-day Yemen. Those who champion this hypothesis look to Hab 3.7 and to the execration texts to support their claim. In Habakkuk we read the following:

I saw the tents of *Cushan* in affliction;  
the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble.

Here *Cushan* is used in a poetic parallelism. It can therefore be equated with Midian. Also, 2Chr 21.16, especially the phrase “the Arabs who are near the Cushites” has been used in support of the claim that Cush sometimes refers to Midian. Cazelles (1958, 18) quotes Maisler, the translator of the execration texts, as “allowing for two Kushu, one which is found in the partly desert region of southern Palestine.” Scholars who place Cush in South Arabia base their argument on these two references to conclude that Cush in Gen 2.13 must be equated with Midian.

There is indeed a phonetic and an orthographic similarity between Cush and Cushan which seems to give validity to this hypothesis. They are written in the Hebrew Bible as *kush* and *kushan*. However, in spite of this similarity, a difference still exists even in the consonantal text. The final *n* in Cushan is phonemic, that is, it is an important feature that helps distinguish the two places. Cush occurs more than twenty-two times as a geographical place or as a geographical adjective, and eight times as a proper name throughout the Hebrew Bible. In all its occurrences it has been spelled consistently. Cushan, on the other hand, occurs only five times, twice in Judg 3.8, twice in Judg 3.10, and once in Hab 3.7. In four of these instances, it is the proper name (or the nickname of a king) and only once is it a place name. If Cush were the same geographical place known as Cushan, we would expect to find various spellings: sometimes *kush* and sometimes *kushan*. However, the Hebrew Bible, in spite of all its orthographic inconsistencies, always spells Cush in the same way. Therefore, the fact that orthographic representations of the two names are never found in free variation strongly indicates that *kush* and *kushan* refer to two geographically distinct places. Hab 3.7 shows that biblical writers were aware of the two places but kept them separate orthographically. Cush and Cushan may be cases of near geographical homophony, that is, place names that sound the same or nearly the same but refer to different locations. These two place names may be perfect homophones in Egyptian (Maisler transcribes both as Kushu), but ancient Hebrew writers pronounced them differently as is evidenced by the final

*nun* in the consonantal text. The place in Midian was called/pronounced *kushan* whereas the one below Egypt was known and pronounced *kush*.

### Cush: the East African hypothesis

Ancient Egyptians refer to the land below the second cataract of the Nile as Cush. Ancient Hebrews also refer to the area as Cush. Brown, Driver, and Briggs identify it as “land and people of the southern Nile-valley, or Upper Egypt, extending from Syene indefinitely to the south.” Etymologically, Cush is said to be an Egyptian word meaning “south”. Ancient authorities including Herodotus, the translators of the Septuagint (LXX)<sup>1</sup>, Josephus, and Jerome equate Cush with Ethiopia. The CEV and the BS translate Cush by Ethiopia. Most Bible dictionaries, commentaries, and other exegetical helps, though they raise doubt about the appropriateness of equating the Cush of Gen 2.13 with Ethiopia, equate many other biblical references of Cush with Ethiopia, and occasionally with Sudan or Nubia.

Though ancient authorities locate Cush of Gen 2.13 in eastern Africa, the issue of the river Gihon remains unresolved. For this reason, the question of Gihon has to be examined again. So far, scholars know of no river in Ethiopia or any part of the world with this name. However, Josephus<sup>2</sup> identified it with the Nile. By translating Cush as Ethiopia both the LXX and the Vulgate seem to identify Gihon with the Nile. These ancient authorities may in fact be correct... Ethiopia seems to have been renowned for its rivers. Is 18.1-2, 7 and Zeph 3.10 mention these rivers. It is quite possible that Gihon was actually one of the rivers of Ethiopia or even another name for the Nile. Van Rad (1949, 77) has remarked that ancient Egyptians made a distinction between their Nile and the river which was south of the second cataract. Though now we all know it to be the same river, in ancient times the part of the river south of Egypt may have been known under a different name<sup>3</sup>. Could it have been called Gihon by the Ethiopians before it eventually came to be known as the Nile? Even today, a river may bear two or more names if it flows in different areas. Each region may choose to give it a name without prior consultation with the people from other regions. Therefore, the fact that the river Gihon is not known to scholars today should not be taken to mean that the Septuagint and Josephus were wrong in equating it with the Nile. Today’s uncertainties about Gihon should

1 In addition to the Hebrew source text, the following versions have been consulted for this article: **English**: Contemporary English Version (CEV), Today’s English Version (TEV), New International Version Study Bible (NIV), The Jerusalem Bible (JB), The New Jerusalem Bible (NJB), Revised Standard Version (RSV), New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) with the Society of Biblical Literature notes, New Revised Standard Bible with Oxford annotations, King James Version (KJV), New American Standard Bible (NASB). **French**: La Traduction Œcuménique de la Bible (TOB), La Bible de Jérusalem (BJ), La Bible Osty (BO), La Bible en Français Courant (BFC), La Sainte Bible: Version Darby (Darby), La Bible traduite par Pierre de Beaumont (Beaumont), La Bible traduite par André Chouraqui (Chouraqui), La Bible de la Pléiade, La Sainte Bible de Maredsous (Maredsous), Segond Révisé avec notes (SR), La Bible traduite Louis Segond (LS) with Scofield comments, La Bible du Semeur (BS), La Bible des Communautés Chrétiennes (BCC). **Spanish**: La Biblia, Version Popular (BVP). **Greek**: Septuagint (LXX). The **Latin** Vulgate (Vg) was occasionally used. Two **Jewish** versions: TANAK (English), and La Bible du Rabbinat Français (BRF) proved helpful.

2 *Antiquities* 1.1.3.

3 In Jer 2.18 the Septuagint translates the river *mê schichôr* as the Nile. Even versions such as Tanak which did not equate Gihon with the Nile in Gen 2.13 translate *mê schichôr* as the Nile! This seems to show that the Nile may have had many names. [NIV has a note: “That is, a branch of the Nile.” – ed]

also not be a sufficient reason to say that the Garden of Eden was not partly located in black Africa. Some African-American scholars may be right in seeing the fuss over Gihon as a ploy to “de-Africanize” the Bible.

### **Cush in translations and study Bibles**

The uncertainty about the location of Cush in Gen 2.13 is reflected in some versions of the Bible and in some study Bibles. In most modern versions Cush is simply transliterated even though ancient authorities such as the Septuagint, the Vulgate and the King James Version translate it as Ethiopia. With respect to footnotes, and comments in study Bibles, there are generally two approaches to Cush. In the English versions at my disposal, only the NRSV with SBL notes, the NASB, and the TEV have notes that equate Cush with Ethiopia in Gen 2.13. The NIV Study Bible does not address Cush specifically, but by locating Gihon “in lower Mesopotamia near the Persian Gulf” it indirectly removes Cush from Africa. Most French versions, including the SR Study Bible with Scofield comments, have a brief note here giving Ethiopia as an alternative reading. Among the versions that do not have footnotes on Cush in Gen 2.13 are the two Jewish versions: the Tanak and the BRF, and the Spanish common language BVP. Surprisingly, the African edition of the NJB does not have a note here either.

### **Suggestions for translation and study Bibles**

Translators cannot be 100 per cent sure about the location of Cush in Gen 2.13 because of the uncertainty about Gihon. However, since the Septuagint, the Vulgate, Josephus, ancient Egyptians, ancient Hebrews, together with the King James Version, the BS, and the CEV equate Cush with Ethiopia, modern translators who decide to translate Cush as Ethiopia should not feel lonely. They should know that they are surrounded by a cloud of competent witnesses who have done so before them. Translating Cush by Ethiopia from Gen 2.13 on is better than keeping Cush in the text. Many Christians do not have the foggiest idea where Cush is. Why then retain an archaic geographical label that only scholars know? It is unfortunate that even translations which are targeted to younger people have Cush in the text and Ethiopia in a footnote. It should be the other way around. The term that is most readily familiar to the readers should be in the text, and the one that is less known should be in a footnote. The only modern versions available to me which translate Cush as Ethiopia and place it in the text instead of in a footnote are the CEV and the BS. The translators of the CEV and the BS should be commended for this.

I find the haphazard translation of Cush in many versions very confusing to readers. Sometimes Cush appears in the main text as Ethiopia, and at some other times as Cush, for no apparent reason. Generally, to avoid confusing readers, geographical terms are translated concordantly, not contextually. However, this is not the case for the place known in the Bible as Cush. The European versions at my disposal, except LXX, the Vulgate, the KJV and the CEV constantly fail to translate Cush as Ethiopia. All the other versions pick and choose when they want to translate Cush as Ethiopia and when they want to leave it as Cush. For instance, the Tanak transliterates Cush in Gen 2.13, but when the same name occurs in Ezek 30.5, 9 it translates it as Nubia. In Num 12.1 it transliterates Cush but in Ezek 29.10 it has Nubia. In Zeph 2.12 and 3.10 it has Cush but in Is 18.1 and Esth 1.1 we read Nubia. Worse, in Amos 9.7 Cush is translated as Ethiopia. So, for the same Cush, the Tanak has *three* different names even though the Hebrew form is everywhere

the same. Is this intentional, or is it an oversight on the part of the translators? Whatever the reason may be, changing back and forth between Cush, Nubia, and Ethiopia is not helpful to the uninformed reader.

Some object to translating the biblical Cush by Ethiopia on the grounds that it may mislead modern readers into thinking that Cush is the same as modern-day Ethiopia. However, such a misunderstanding can be easily corrected in a footnote. The footnote can inform the reader that when biblical writers and ancient Hebrews and Egyptians talked about Cush they meant the territory that encompasses modern-day Sudan, modern-day Ethiopia, and modern-day Eritrea. Here again, the CEV's method of repeating the same footnote everywhere Ethiopia is used in the text is a model that can be easily followed.

In a study Bible one can be more extensive. One may even want to give the origin of the word "Ethiopia". One may say that etymologically "Ethiopia" comes from the Greek word *Aithiopia*, meaning "the land of burnt faces." One may want to quote Herodotus who applied the word *aithiopos* = ethiopian to all black people. In Hebrew, as in Greek, Cush is used to refer to black people. Those who wish to add more details can discuss the different hypotheses about Cush. However, whatever one does, it is advisable to follow the LXX, the Vulgate, the KJV, the BS, and the CEV by having the known term *Ethiopia* in the text, instead of in a footnote. Translating Cush as Ethiopia does not hide the ancient Hebrews' worldview which placed part of the Garden of Eden in black Africa. Keeping Cush in the text instead of in a footnote does not help modern readers, nor does it help associate Africa with the Garden of Eden. It is part of the "de-Africanization" of the Bible that urgently needs correction.

### **The alleged "Curse of Ham": its effects on the African Christian's psyche**

The next biblical references which are significant to black people are Gen 5.32 and 9.18-27. Here Noah's three sons are mentioned. Gen 9.18-27 describes a scene that has given rise to the "Curse of Ham theory". There is no biblical passage that has been more persistently used to oppress black people than these verses. It has provided rationalization for slavery and colonialism of black people. It is no longer actively taught that blacks are who they are and what they are because their ancestor Ham was cursed. However, somehow nearly all black Christians have learned directly or indirectly that Ham is their ancestor, and that he was cursed by his father Noah for some "sin" he committed against him. The evils that have befallen Africa in the past and those that still plague the continent are still explained by some by reference to this curse. The fact that Perryman had to organize a mock trial in 1993 to bring in legal arguments to acquit Ham shows that even in the United States there are still some segments of the black population that still believe that the black race is cursed through Ham. In *The Fire Next Time*, African-American novelist James Baldwin (1978, 59) writes:

[T]his did not apply only to Negroes, who were no more "simple" or "spontaneous" or "Christian" than anybody else—who were merely more oppressed. In the same way that we, for white people, were *the descendants of Ham, and were cursed forever*, white people were for us, the descendants of Cain (emphasis added).

Usry and Keener (1996, 70) trace this tradition to Jewish rabbis in the 2nd century A.D. It was taken up in the 9th century by Islam. Muslims used it to enslave Africans

long before it served as a rationale for Christian theologians to defend slavery in the southern United States. Perryman (1995, 35) shows that the “Curse of Ham theory” found its most avid defenders among southern theologians of the last century. He quotes the authors of the *Self-Interpreting Bible* (1896, 226) as follows:

The descendants of Ham, by his sons Cush, Mizraim, Phut, and Canaan, peopled Africa and Western Asia. For about four thousand years past the bulk of the Africans have been abandoned of Heaven to the most gross ignorance, rigid slavery, stupid idolatry, and savage barbarity...(emphasis added).

Since it is the misinterpretation of Gen 9.18-27 that has brought misery and suffering on blacks, I have decided to reexamine the Hebrew text. It has become clear to me that Ham was not guilty of any wrongdoing. I reach the same conclusions as Perryman even though I use different arguments. He uses legal arguments to clear Ham while I rely only on the linguistic clues that ancient Hebrew writers left in the text. In fact the passage in which this episode is found is riddled with exegetical problems that seem to go unnoticed in most versions; or else they prefer to translate received traditions instead of translating the text. Consequently, their translations are explicitly or implicitly biased against Ham, and by extension, against all black people, since some theologians claim that blacks descend from him.

#### Exegetical problems in Gen 9.18-27: focus on v 21

The first problem in Gen 9.18-27 is the translation of v 21 in nearly all versions, including the LXX and the Latin Vulgate. The problem is first of all pragmatic, not only linguistic even though it is at the linguistic level that is the most obvious. The Hebrew runs:

<i>wayyēsht</i>	<i>min-hayyayin</i>	<i>wayyishkâr</i>
drank he and	wine the	from drank he and
<i>wayyitgal</i>	<i>bētôk</i>	<i>‘ohölôh</i>
her of her tent	midst in	undressed he and

And he drank of the wine, and became drunk, and lay uncovered in his tent.

The problem in v 21 is the word *‘ohölôh*. The possessive suffix *h* shows that it should be parsed as 3rd person feminine, singular, that is, “her”. Munk (1985, 102) explains it as follows: “in the midst of her tent. *‘ohölôh* is written with a singular pronominal suffix, because, according to the Sages, the tent was his wife’s...” Even though the grammatical structure of the Hebrew text indicates that Noah went into his wife’s tent (*‘ohölôh* = her tent) every single version from the LXX down to the CEV has “his tent<sup>1</sup>”. Probably translators have rendered “her tent” as “his tent” because they cannot fathom that Noah would have his own tent and his wife would have her own tent. However, this is possible.<sup>2</sup> In many traditional African cultures,

1 French is fortunate in that “sa” in “sa tente” can refer either to Noah’s wife’s tent or to Noah’s own tent. However, since the Hebrew is clear that it refers to Noah’s wife’s tent, there is no reason to keep this ambiguity.

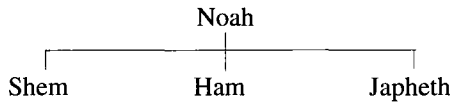
2 In Gen 24.67 some versions translate the same word as referring to Sarah’s tent. There is therefore no reason why it cannot be translated in Gen 9.21 as Noah’s wife’s tent.

it is not uncommon for the man to have a different room from his wife. In some cases, especially when polygamy is involved, each of the wives come to their husband's room when it is her turn to sleep there. There are variations to this. Sometimes, it is the man who goes to each of his wives' rooms to sleep. In Noah's case, no polygamy is involved. But it is not unlikely that he would go to his wife's tent when he wanted to be intimate with her. This may be why he undressed there. Wenham (1987, 199) writes that "overindulgence in alcohol and sexual misconduct go hand in hand in Scripture and in modern society, Gen 19.32-35." Here, Noah has clearly overindulged in the wine he had made. Somehow, changing "her tent" to "his tent" does not seem to do justice to the text. It even removes the subtle message that the original writer may have wanted to convey. The importance of translating 'ohôlôh as "her tent" and not as "his tent" will become obvious later. For now let us concentrate on Noah's children.

**Who is Noah's youngest son?**

Much is at stake in knowing who Noah's youngest son is, but unfortunately very little is known about him. Very few versions have been as forthright as the CEV in stating clearly that Ham is the youngest of Noah's three sons. Many commentaries and study Bibles state clearly that Ham was Noah's youngest son. However, as will be shown presently, there is no shred of biblical evidence to support this claim. The Hebrew text does not say anywhere in any form or shape that Ham is Noah's youngest son. Versions that make him the youngest son are translating rabbinical and church traditions instead of translating the Hebrew text.

In Gen 5.32 and everywhere else where Noah's sons are mentioned they are listed as follows:



Recent linguistic studies show that the order in which lexical items occur in a list may be motivated by social iconicity. If this is true, then one must try to explain why here, in 1Chr 1.10, and elsewhere, the word order is always Shem, Ham, and Japheth<sup>1</sup>.

By examining the word order in which these three names occur, most scholars have deduced that Shem is the oldest son, Ham the middle son, and Japheth the youngest. This interpretation seems very plausible, because usually when genealogies are given in the Bible they go from the oldest to the youngest. The

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<sup>1</sup> Munk (1985, 101) conjectures that Japheth came last in the list because, though he was the oldest, he never learned from his antediluvian mistakes. An interpretation based on the pragmatics of proximity may be volunteered here. It has been observed that sometimes the order in which things occur is dictated by the social proximity that the speaker or the writer feels about the people in the list. For instance, my wife has two sisters and two brothers. They are all married. Usually, in American English, men are mentioned before their wives. However, in a normal conversation my wife would say Pam and Dale, Sue and Scott instead of Dale and Pam, Scott and Sue. My wife places her blood relatives first before her brothers-in-law because she grew up with them. She is close to them. It may be that the order in which the three names occur has nothing to do with birth order, but simply reflects social proximity.



leading Catholic exegete Pirot (1958, 203) observes that the Jawhist (Gen 9.18) and the Priestly (Gen 5.32; 6.10; 7.13; 10.1) traditions agree Shem is the oldest, and Japheth is the youngest. This is by far the most widespread view. It has even influenced some versions in translating the Hebrew phrase *'āchî yepet haggâdôl* as “Japheth’s older brother”. This way of rendering the Hebrew makes Shem the oldest. The versions which follow this line of reasoning make the adjective *haggâdôl* (= older) modify Shem at the beginning of v 21.

### **The word order and the syntactic clues are at odds**

Though following the most popular interpretation serves my cause instead of hurting it, it is nevertheless appropriate to show that deducing from the word order that Shem is the oldest has no syntactic support. For *haggâdôl* to modify Shem which occurs at the beginning of the verse is quite unusual in Hebrew syntax since generally in Hebrew the adjective is next to the noun it modifies. It is probably for this reason that the LXX, Second Révisé, the NIV, Darby, and the Bible du Rabinat Français take the adjective *haggâdôl* as modifying Japheth because it is closer to it than to Shem. Therefore, these versions see Japheth as the oldest of Noah’s three sons. Munk (1985, 101) mentions a rabbinical tradition which sees Japheth as the oldest. Josephus may have followed this tradition because he implies by “Shem, the third son of Noah”<sup>1</sup> that Japheth was Noah’s oldest son. The fact that Japheth’s descendants were mentioned first, and Shem’s last in Genesis 10 and 11 may support the claim that Japheth was indeed the oldest son. The interpretation that most scholars derive from the word order is clearly at odds with the syntactic evidence. This is the reason for the divergent ways<sup>2</sup> in which *'āchî yepet haggâdôl* has been translated. This is also the reason why nobody is absolutely sure who Noah’s oldest son or his youngest was. Darby points out in a footnote that “it is not clear whether *haggâdôl* modifies Shem or Japheth.”

### **Ham is not the youngest**

If Japheth is taken to be the oldest, then Shem must be the youngest. This view agrees with the tradition Josephus was following (see the section following). If, however, Shem is the oldest, then Japheth must be the youngest. Nearly all genealogies found in the Bible follow a descending order. This is the reason why for some versions the evidence of word order weighs more than the syntactic clue mentioned above. This then provides the ground for making Shem Noah’s oldest son. In either case, Ham is not the youngest of Noah’s sons. In every single genealogy where the three sons are mentioned in the Bible, Ham’s position remains unchanged. By keeping him always between Japheth and Shem, biblical writers seem to be saying that he was the middle child, irrespective of who is the oldest and who is the youngest. Therefore, taking Ham as Noah’s youngest son brings us into a head-on collision with the Hebrew text. Nowhere does the Bible say or even imply either syntactically or by the word order that Ham is Noah’s youngest son.

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<sup>1</sup> *Antiquities* 1.6.4.

<sup>2</sup> Munk has misguidedly translated *yepet haggâdôl* as “Japheth-le-Grand” (Japheth the Great) in order to avoid this complex issue.

In spite of this lack of evidence, all kinds of conjectures have been made to turn Ham into the youngest of Noah's three children. The whole purpose of this exercise was to make him the one who saw his father's nakedness. Wenham (1987, 201) quotes Cassuto who has, admittedly, solved the puzzle of the youngest son. He is quoted as saying that, even though Ham was the youngest son, the order was changed exceptionally in this case for euphonic purposes! Admittedly, in pairs of words Hebrew tends to put the shortest word first. But here we have a triplet, not a pair. Moreover, it is doubtful that phonetically Shem is shorter than Ham! Van Rad (1949, 135) mentions a rabbinical tradition which makes Canaan, not Ham, Noah's youngest son. However, the fact that it is repeated twice, in vv 18 and 24, that Ham is the father of Canaan makes this tradition unreliable for the present analysis. Both the syntactic evidence and the inference that can be made from word order show clearly and unambiguously that Ham is not Noah's youngest son. Consequently, replacing *bēnô haqqâṭān* as "youngest son" by *Ham* is an ill-informed choice.

### Even Josephus contradicts himself

Sorting out who is Noah's youngest son is not easy, as we have seen. Trying to force Ham into that position inevitably leads to all kinds of contradictions. Even the respectable Josephus is caught contradicting himself on this issue. In *Antiquities of the Jews* 1.6.4 he states that "Shem, the third son of Noah, had five sons." Since Noah had only three sons, if Shem is the third son, it must mean that he is the youngest. However, previously in *Antiquities* 1.4.1 he gives the following order "Shem, Japheth, and Ham." Josephus has clearly altered the biblical order here. Ham's name has been put last because Josephus was now following a Jewish tradition that made Ham the offender. Josephus knowingly altered the order given in the Bible to make Ham fit this tradition! Josephus disregards his own statement in section 1.4.3 that Shem was Noah's third son. Insisting that Ham is Noah's youngest son leads one to contradict oneself sooner or later because this view is not supported by biblical data. Consequently, it is wrong for any version or commentary to state that Ham is Noah's youngest son. Versions which advocate this are following traditions instead of translating the Hebrew text. They may unknowingly be lending support to those who espouse the view that blacks are cursed through Ham.

### Other exegetical problems in Gen 9.24b

If one accepts the Jawehist and Priestly traditions, and implication of the order of the genealogy, that Japheth is Noah's youngest son, one may need to revise how the Hebrew phrase *'āsher 'āsâh lô* (= what he did to him) has been translated in many versions, in order to avoid contradiction. The same is true if we take Shem to be the youngest; and Japheth the oldest. Since most versions have concluded that Ham is guilty of wrongdoing, they have translated *l* in *'āsher 'āsâh lô* negatively. The Hebrew preposition *l* can be rendered positively or negatively depending on the context. But nearly all the English and the French versions at my disposal have translated the Hebrew preposition negatively, except TOB which remained ambiguous by not translating the prepositional phrase *lô* = to/for him). This departure from the conventional way of translating *lô* seems to indicate that the

TOB<sup>1</sup> translators were aware of the tradition that said that Japheth (or Shem) was the youngest son. Since they knew from the rest of the story that Japheth (or Shem) did nothing wrong, they avoided the exegetical complications involved in translating *l* negatively. Thus, they omitted translating *lô* altogether. V 24 reads as follows in TOB:

...lorsque Noé, ayant cuv  son vin, sut ce qu'avait fait son plus jeune fils...

Noah, after finishing being drunk, knew what his youngest son had done...

Omitting a portion of the Hebrew text in order to evade an exegetical problem is not a commendable translation practice.

### Should *b n  haqq t n* be translated as “youngest son” or as “grandson”?

Translating *b n  haqq t n* as “youngest son” raises a fundamental question. If Ham did something wrong, why did Noah curse Canaan? Scholars who have commented on this episode have been intrigued by Noah’s behavior. As should be expected, all kinds of conjectures have been made. Here are some of the reasons that have been given to explain Noah’s action. It has been proposed that since Noah had pronounced a blessing on his sons in Gen 9.1, he could not unsay that blessing. It has also been suggested that this curse is a case of “mirroring punishment: Noah’s youngest son, Ham, sinned against him, therefore it was appropriate that Ham’s youngest son, Canaan, should be punished for his father’s wickedness” (quoted in Wenham 1987, 201). This hypothesis has a serious flaw. There is no prior example of “mirroring punishment” in the Bible. It has also been hypothesized that Canaan was punished because God punishes the iniquities of the fathers on their sons for up to four generations, Ex 20.5. Though this explanation seems to have a biblical base, it fails to answer why only Canaan and none of Ham’s three other sons was cursed. The NIV Study Bible refutes this hypothesis by remarking rather adroitly that Ex 20.5 “restricts such punishment to those who hate me [God].” Ham does not hate God, therefore Ex 20.5 cannot apply. The NIV note goes on to say that “it is probably better to hold that Canaan and his descendants were punished because they were going to be even worse than Ham.” This explanation is just as speculative as any other and cannot be taken seriously. Here are just a few of the exegetical problems that are encountered if *b n  haqq t n* is translated as “youngest son”.

### Translating *b n  haqq t n* contextually, not concordantly<sup>2</sup>

Japheth (or Shem) whom the Bible shows to be Noah’s youngest son, did not do anything wrong to warrant translating *l* adversatively. Moreover, he did not act alone. Ham, whom many have wrongly accused as having done something wrong, is not portrayed anywhere in the Bible as Noah’s youngest son. These considerations make it impossible to translate *b n  haqq t n* here as “youngest son”, as it is translated everywhere else. The only solution is to translate the Hebrew

1 BCC follows TOB here in omitting “to him.”

2 One of the most elementary principles that Bible translators are taught is that words ought not to be translated the same in every environment. The reason for this is obvious; it is the context in which a word occurs that gives it its meaning. Usually the example of the Hebrew word *nefesh* is given. It has been shown that in one context it may mean “person”, in another “soul”, still in another “mouth”, yet in another “throat”, etc. Translating *nefesh* concordantly would obscure the meaning of some passages.

phrase contextually. The French translator of the Palestinian Targums, Le Déaut (1978, 132-133), has quoted Ginzberg in a footnote as saying that since the Hebrew phrase *bēnô haqqâṭân* literally means “petit fils” (little son), translating it as “grandson” would fit the context. Some rabbis have proposed that *qâṭân* here should not be translated concordantly. Even though their suggestion does not advance the black cause it is worth noting that they too think that in this verse *qâṭân* should be translated contextually<sup>1</sup>. In fact, the exegetical conundrum finds an easy solution if we translate *bēnô haqqâṭân* contextually as “grandson.” To be sure, in many contexts in the Bible *bēnô haqqâṭân* has been appropriately translated as “youngest son”<sup>2</sup>. However, in this particular instance, translating it concordantly does not seem to be the best solution.

A number of clues show that translating the phrase by “grandson” seems more plausible than translating it as “youngest son”. Ham is Noah’s son, and Canaan is Ham’s son. This makes Canaan Noah’s grandson. Since Noah cursed Canaan, and none of the other four sons of Ham, some commentators have said that Canaan must have done something wrong. Perryman (1995) writes that the fact that Ham is always mentioned in the story in association with Canaan was a signal that Canaan was the culprit. It is in order to establish Canaan’s guilt that some Hebrew traditions made him Noah’s fourth son. If he was the fourth son, then the phrase *bēnô haqqâṭân* would have applied to him directly. However, since that tradition does not have a biblical foundation, it cannot be used here. However, translating *bēnô haqqâṭân* as “grandson” can be justified. Nowhere in the Hebrew Bible does the word “grandson” occur as a lexical item. Hebrew talks about grandchildren in a roundabout way, by listing who begat whom, as for example in Zeph 1.1. This syntactic structure would have been too complex for this compressed story. This may be the reason why the writer introduced Canaan twice as Ham’s son. Having been thus introduced already, the writer may have assumed that his listeners, and later his readers, would know whom the phrase *bēnô haqqâṭân* referred to. Moreover, since Canaan was specifically cursed in the story, the author left the listener or reader enough clues to arrive at the correct interpretation of *bēnô haqqâṭân*. Therefore, translating it as “grandson” is the best possible solution if we are to avoid the exegetical problems involved in translating it as “youngest son”. Moreover, the biblical writer(s) may not have been wrong to speak of Canaan as (literally) Noah’s “youngest son.” In Gen 31.28, 43; 32.2 Laban refers to his grandchildren as his sons.

If *bēnô haqqâṭân* is translated as “grandson”, then the preposition *l* can appropriately be translated as an adversative. This makes it possible to translate Gen 9.24b as “what his grandson did to him”.

1 The Palestinian Targum says that the word *qâṭân* should be taken as “little” in the sense of “contemptible”.

2 The phrase *bēnô haqqâṭân* has been translated by all versions since the LXX as meaning “his youngest son” because this is what the phrase means in Gen 27.15; 42.13, 15, 20, 32, 34; Judg 9.5; 1Sam 16.11; 17.14; 2Chr 21.17; 22.1.

### Seeing one's father's nakedness vs uncovering one's father's nakedness

Those who claim that Ham was guilty of wrongdoing generally differ on the exact nature of his sin. Some take the phrase *wayyar' Châm... 'êt 'erwat 'âbîw* ("Ham saw the nakedness of his father") literally. Those who take the phrase literally claim that Ham's offense was that he lacked reverence towards his drunken father. They allege that when he saw that his father was drunk and naked, instead of covering him, he mocked him and told the story of his nakedness to his two brothers. So, Ham's "sin" was failing to act properly.

Others understand the words metaphorically. Taken figuratively, they can become an idiomatic phrase with sexual overtones, as in Lev 18.6-19. Consequently, it has been claimed by some that Ham's offense was sodomy, or some kind of sexual misconduct. A number of problems arise from this interpretation.

First of all, in Hebrew there seems to be a difference between "to see the father's nakedness", *wayyar' Châm... 'êt 'erwat 'âbîw* and "to uncover the father's nakedness", *'erwat 'âbîkâ... lô' tégallêh*. Since in Lev 18.6-19 *râ' âh* was not used, this may imply that in biblical Hebrew "to see one's father's nakedness" is semantically different from "to uncover one's father's nakedness." If this is so, then the act described in Gen 9.22 is not to be taken figuratively. If the phrase "to see the father's nakedness" is taken metaphorically to mean sexual intercourse, it cannot possibly have this meaning in 9.23 where it says that Shem and Japheth did not see their father's nakedness? Of course not! Consequently, "Ham saw his father's nakedness" should not be taken as involving any sexual act. Secondly, if he sodomized his father, why would he go and tell his brothers? Sodomy or sexual misconduct is an intimate act that people usually do not brag about publicly. Thirdly, the fact that the two brothers went and physically covered Noah shows that the phrase is better understood literally, that is, Ham saw something with his own eyes.

### The advantages of translating *bênô haqqâṭân* as "grandson"

In his 1993 *Trial of Ham*, Perryman offered a hypothesis which, when combined with translating *bênô haqqâṭân* as "grandson", seems to give the best explanation of this incident. Perryman's hypothesis also involves a sexual act, but he contends that the offender was not Ham. He also contends that the act did not involve Noah himself, but rather his wife. According to him, the offender was Canaan, Ham's youngest son. He claims that Canaan raped or attempted to rape Noah's wife, that is, his mother. This explanation seems very reasonable for the following reasons:

1. Noah went to his wife's tent, possibly to get intimate with her.
2. Noah undressed himself in her tent.
3. The Hebrew text says that Noah cursed Canaan, not Ham.

Translating *bênô haqqâṭân* as "grandson" offers another interpretation of Gen 9.18-27. Perryman hypothesized that Canaan entered Mrs. Noah's tent and raped her or attempted to rape her. Ham, Canaan's father, heard some unusual commotion from his mother's tent. Rushing in, he saw his son sexually assaulting or trying to assault his own grandmother. He also saw his father drunk and naked. He managed to drag his son out of the tent. As he pulled him away, he saw his two brothers and told them to go and cover their father who was drunk and sleeping. Later, when

Noah woke up from his drunken sleep, he was told what happened. Outraged by what his grandson had done, he cursed him.

This novel explanation, like the more widely circulated ones, is just a hypothesis, though a more reasonable one. Among other things, it has the merit of following very closely the Hebrew text. It suggests that the phrase *wayyar'... 'ét 'erwat 'âbîw* can be taken literally. Indeed Ham saw that his father was naked. He reported it to his brothers and they covered him. This also explains better why it was Canaan, not Ham, who was cursed in v 25. Wenham (1987) reports that some rabbis and some scholars think that if Canaan was cursed, it means that he did something wrong. Munk (1985, 103) quotes Ibn Ezra who followed Pirke d.R. Eliezer in claiming that “his youngest son” applied to Canaan because he was Noah’s youngest son. Short of being eyewitnesses ourselves, if *bênô haqqâtân* is translated as “grandson” and if it is combined with Perryman’s hypothesis, we arrive at an understanding that does not call for excessive speculation. Additionally, this hypothesis fits the wider socio-cultural perception that the Hebrews had of the Canaanites as sexually immoral people.

### Suggestions for translation and study Bibles

Given the linguistic analysis of the previous sections, vv 21 and 24 need to be translated afresh. We therefore propose to translate v 21 as follows:

He drank from the wine and he became drunk and he removed his clothes in the midst of *his wife's* tent.

“His tent” should be translated as “her tent” simply because the Hebrew text has a feminine pronoun. The clear statement that Noah went to her tent allows the reader to understand a sexual nuance.

For v 24 we propose the following translation:

When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his *grandson* had done to him...

Translating *bênô haqqâtân* as “grandson” shows clearly and unambiguously that Canaan was the wrongdoer. Consequently, it makes Noah’s curse less arbitrary, because it was fully deserved. Theologically, this translation is liberating for millions of blacks who have, somehow, lived under the guilt of generational sin. It also shows that God did not condemn all the descendants of Ham to be slaves. Consequently, this passage cannot or should not be exegeted to claim that God approved of black people being made slaves.

These new insights give us a fresh understanding of the passage. By following what the Hebrew text actually says or strongly suggests, we have arrived at a translation that is exegetically sound. The Hebrew text clearly says that Noah went to his wife’s tent. It also suggests that it was Noah’s grandson, not his youngest son who wronged him. By translating *l* as adversative, and making the grandson the subject of the verb, we avoid the absurdity found in most versions that Ham did something to Noah, but that Noah cursed Canaan. However, if for some reason a translation committee objects strongly to translating *bênô haqqâtân* as “grandson”, it may still keep “youngest son” in the text. But such a committee owes it to its readers to state clearly in a footnote that this Hebrew phrase can be understood contextually to mean “grandson”. Alternatively, a version that keeps “grandson”

in the text should indicate in a footnote that, when taken literally, the phrase could mean “youngest son.”

*[To be concluded in our January 2001 issue.]*

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## ROMANS 1.17 AND COGNITIVE GRAMMAR<sup>1</sup>

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*Ignotus grammatica est ignotus theologica ek pisteōs eis pistin*

—Philip Melancthon

### Introduction

This paper suggests that an exegetical problem in Rom 1.17 can be resolved by an appeal to the theory of Cognitive Grammar regarding prepositions.<sup>2</sup> The locution *ek pisteōs eis pistin* has been subject to any number of interpretations which are reflected in the numerous commentaries on Romans and, of course, in translations by a wide variety of renderings. Some have taken a word-for-word approach, but even then they do not always treat the prepositions in the same way; compare, for example, the King James Version and Luther, each of which handle the expression on a literal word-by-word basis:

KJV	from faith to faith
Luther	<i>aus Glauben in Glauben</i>

The RSV/NRSV keeps the same structure of two asyndetically-joined prepositional phrases and renders the prepositions in an idiosyncratic fashion:

RSV/NRSV	through faith for faith
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Other translators have preferred a paraphrase in recognition of the fact that a translation which simply glosses the syntax gives an obscure reading:

NEB	...because here is revealed God's way of righting wrong, a <b>way that starts in faith and ends in faith.</b>
Jerusalem Bible	...since this is what reveals the justice of God to us: it shows how <b>faith leads to faith.</b>
Die Bibel im heutigen Deutsch	<i>Der Weg dazu ist vom Anfang bis zum Ende</i> (from beginning to end) <i>das bedingungslose Vertrauen auf ihn.</i>

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Paul J. Achtemeier and Lincoln Hurst for reading an earlier draft of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> A partial list of the most important works include: C. Vandeloise, *L'espace en français*, Paris: Editions du Seuil 1986; A. Herskovits, *Language and Spatial Cognition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1986; R. Langacker, *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar*, Stanford: Stanford Univ. 1987-1991; C. Zelinsky-Wibbelt (ed), *The Semantics of Prepositions*, Berlin, N.Y.: Mouton de Gruyter 1993.