

FIRST AMENDMENT TELEVISION

Position Papers — Civic Advocacy Track

Toward a Theology of Understanding

Religion, Empire, and the Architecture of Racial Belief

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Editorial Note: *This paper examines the historical use of religious interpretation as a tool of political and economic power. It is not intended as a theological judgment on Christianity, Judaism, Islam, or any religious tradition as a whole. Its focus is the historical relationship between institutions, interpretation, and power, and readers are encouraged to examine the cited sources — including those that disagree with this paper's conclusions.*

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I. THE CENTRAL ARGUMENT

Across recorded history, enslaved and subordinated populations have repeatedly been told stories explaining why their condition was just, natural, or divinely ordained. Political and economic power routinely seeks moral legitimacy through whatever respected institution can supply it — and in the case of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, religion became one of those institutions, alongside emerging racial theory, natural law argument, colonial statute, and later pseudoscience, each reinforcing the others at different points across four centuries. This paper focuses on religion's part in that arrangement — not because it was the only justification offered, but because it was among the earliest and certainly one of the most enduring, and because tracing how it was built reveals a pattern that recurs whenever power needs a moral story it did not earn. Recognizing this is not an attack on faith. It is the precondition for a faith — or a civic order — built on something sturdier than a story the original text did not support.

II. WHAT GENESIS ACTUALLY SAYS

The starting point has to be the text itself. In Genesis 9:25–27, Noah curses Canaan — his grandson, the son of Ham — not Ham. The curse says nothing about skin color or Africa. Whatever the passage meant to the audience that first received it, it does not, on its own terms, contain what centuries of later readers would claim to find in it. Everything that follows in this paper is the story of how that gap was filled.

III. HOW HAM BECAME BLACK

For centuries, one of the most influential biblical justifications offered for African enslavement grew out of this single, narrower passage. In European writing, one of the earliest applications came from the Portuguese chronicler Gomes Eanes de Zurara in 1453¹ — writing about the very Africans being loaded onto ships, and confusing the story enough that he attributed the curse to Cain rather than Ham. From there, European theologians and slave traders spent the next four centuries constructing an elaborate connective

tissue between Ham, blackness, and perpetual servitude that the original text does not contain. American pro-slavery clergy preached it from pulpits into the 1860s. James Baldwin would later write that as a child he understood himself to be a descendant of Ham, “and that I was therefore predestined to be a slave.”

This is the part worth sitting with: the doctrine was not simply an ancient inheritance misapplied. Historians who have traced its use — David Goldenberg, David Whitford, Stephen Haynes among them³ — document how the reading was assembled over time. Goldenberg traces its antecedents through post-biblical Jewish, Christian, and especially early Islamic-era Near Eastern sources, where Ham’s descendants were already being associated with dark skin and servitude centuries before the Portuguese voyages. What changed in the fifteenth century was scale and purpose: Europe took up those older associations and hardened them into a racial justification at the precise moment it was expanding a new and enormously profitable form of bondage. As the economics of the slave trade grew, scripture was increasingly interpreted — and reinterpreted — to supply the moral justification that trade required.

IV. RELIGION, COMMERCE, AND COLONIAL POWER

It matters here to be precise about who is being described. The Curse of Ham was promoted by particular theologians, clergy, colonial governments, and slaveholding interests who found it useful — not by Christianity as a whole, and not without contest from within the faith itself. Christian abolitionists challenged the doctrine on its own scriptural terms throughout the period of its use; the minister John G. Fee, for one, published a point-by-point biblical rebuttal of the slaveholders’ reading of Genesis in the decade before the Civil War.⁴ The doctrine’s staying power came not from scriptural inevitability but from its usefulness to an economic arrangement that needed a moral story — and from the fact that the people who benefited from that arrangement exercised disproportionate institutional control, for centuries, over how the text was publicly taught.

V. CONSTANTINE, NICAEA, AND THE PRECEDENT OF IMPERIAL DOCTRINE

An earlier example of political power shaping religious doctrine appears in the Roman Empire. Christianity arose within first-century Judaism, centered on Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified under Roman authority. During its first three centuries, Christian communities differed sharply over core questions, including the nature of Jesus and the authority of Jewish law, and experienced recurring periods of Roman persecution. In 325 AD, Emperor Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea amid a dispute about the nature of Christ and gave the council imperial backing.⁵ This did not settle every doctrinal dispute or immediately make Nicene Christianity the empire’s religion. Imperial policy continued to shift. In 380 AD, under Theodosius I, the Edict of Thessalonica required adherence to the Nicene faith and designated dissenters heretics, giving imperial authority to one account of Christian orthodoxy.⁶

The comparison to the later Curse of Ham concerns how people in power could lend institutional authority to an interpretation of religion. The events were separated by more than a thousand years and arose in different settings; the paper does not claim that Nicaea caused the racialized Ham doctrine. It shows a recurring danger: when political authority chooses and enforces a religious interpretation, disagreements over belief can become questions of public power. Slaveholding interests later used their own institutions — including churches, colonial governments, and law — to give a false reading of Genesis public force.

VI. COUNTERTRADITIONS: ABOLITION, BLACK CHRISTIANITY, AND BILAL

Not every thread of this history serves domination — and the traditions being examined here supplied some of their own strongest rebuttals.

Frederick Douglass, writing as a man who had escaped slavery and knew firsthand the religion practiced by his enslavers, drew a distinction that cuts to the center of this paper’s argument. In the appendix to his 1845 Narrative, he insisted he was attacking not Christianity itself but what he called “the slaveholding religion of this land” — the difference, in his words, between the Christianity of Christ and the Christianity of this land.⁷ Douglass’s point was not that religion is inherently an instrument of domination; it was that the same scripture used to justify slavery was, in the hands of the enslaved and of Black Christian tradition more broadly, turned into a language of liberation — the same Frederick, the same Gospel, and the same faith.

broadly, turned into a language of liberation — the same Exodus story, the same Gospel, read for what it actually said rather than for what power needed it to say.

A parallel example comes from outside Christianity entirely. In 1975, when Warith Deen Mohammed redirected the Nation of Islam toward orthodox Sunni practice after his father Elijah Muhammad's death, the organization renamed its newspaper Muhammad Speaks to Bilalian News — and its members began calling themselves Bilalians.⁸ The reference was to Bilal ibn Rabah, an Ethiopian man enslaved in seventh-century Mecca, tortured for converting to Islam, freed by Abu Bakr, and appointed by Muhammad as Islam's first muezzin — the voice that called the faithful to prayer.⁹ Bilal later became one of Muhammad's prominent companions and, according to early Islamic tradition, participated in the formative struggles of the first Muslim community.⁹

The choice to reclaim that name was an act of historical excavation — an assertion that Black dignity within Islam was not a modern grafting-on but present at the religion's founding. It is worth being precise about what this example does and does not show. Islamic societies practiced extensive slavery of their own across many centuries, including forms of racialized slavery, and some Muslim interpreters at points constructed their own versions of the Ham tradition; nothing here claims Islam stood outside that history. What the Bilalian renaming shows is narrower, and in a way more useful: that a religious community reached back into its own founding narrative and found there something worth reclaiming — the same move Douglass and the Black Christian tradition made inside Christianity. Scripture and sacred history are not fixed in the uses they can be put to. The direction they get pointed in depends on who is doing the interpreting, and why.

VII. FEAR, AUTHORITY, AND HUMAN AGENCY

Fear can be one way to protect an interpretation from scrutiny. That is a concern about how authority may be exercised, not a general claim about religious people. Jewish and Christian theologians have often understood the biblical phrase “fear of the Lord” as awe, reverence, or moral seriousness rather than terror. Yet where leaders emphasize punishment for questioning a doctrine while discouraging people from examining its sources, fear may make that doctrine harder to challenge. And where people are taught to wait for divine intervention in place of protecting their families, organizing, or acting together, that teaching may weaken their capacity to resist injustice. These are risks to examine in particular teachings and communities, not effects this paper has established for religion as a whole.

Why might people accept a doctrine that benefits someone else? Coercion is one possible answer. In other cases a doctrine may also provide certainty, community, comfort in suffering, or a sense of security within an uncertain social order. Those possibilities help explain the appeal of demanding belief systems, but they cannot tell us, without further evidence, why any particular person accepted the Curse of Ham.¹⁰ A theology of understanding must take those needs seriously and leave room for belonging, hope, and moral purpose while inviting people to examine an inherited belief.

VIII. TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF UNDERSTANDING

None of this is an argument against belief. It is an argument against unexamined belief — against inherited doctrine that has never been asked to show its receipts. And it is not, at bottom, a story about Christianity specifically. It is one instance of a pattern that recurs whenever political or economic power needs moral legitimacy it cannot generate on its own: the power reaches for whatever institution can supply that legitimacy — religion in one century, philosophy or law in another, science or data in a third — and dresses its interests in that institution's authority. The Curse of Ham is a religious example. It is not the only kind there is.

A theology of understanding would do what the Ham doctrine's own defenders never did: trace every claim to its source, distinguish invented tradition from original text, and separate what scripture actually says from what powerful men needed it to say. If a doctrine cannot survive that kind of investigation, was faith ever really its foundation — or was faith simply what the doctrine asked people to feel instead of asking them to look? And if understanding a belief more closely tends to weaken it, is the honest response to stop looking, or to ask what it was actually built to hold up?

ENDNOTES

1. Gomes Eanes de Zurara, *Crónica dos Feitos da Guiné* (1453), trans. C. Raymond Beazley and Edgar Prestage as *The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea*, 2 vols. (London: Hakluyt Society, 1896–1899); discussed in David A. Wacks, “The Curse of Ham in Medieval Iberia and the Enslavement of Black Africans,” [davidwacks.uoregon.edu](https://davidwacks.uoregon.edu/2020/12/30/ham/) (blog), December 30, 2020, <https://davidwacks.uoregon.edu/2020/12/30/ham/>. Zurara names Cain where the Genesis account names Ham and Canaan.
2. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial Press, 1963), pp. 38–39 (Vintage International edition, 1993; pagination varies by printing).
3. David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton University Press, 2003); David M. Whitford, *The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era* (Ashgate, 2009; reissued by Routledge); Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (Oxford University Press, 2002).
4. John G. Fee, *An Anti-Slavery Manual Being an Examination, in the Light of the Bible, and of Facts, into the Moral and Social Wrongs of American Slavery, with a Remedy for the Evil* (New York, 1851).
5. R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy*, 318–381 (T&T Clark, 1988); Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Harvard University Press, 1981).
6. On the distinction between Nicaea (325) and the Edict of Thessalonica (380): Mathew Lyons, “The Edict of Thessalonica,” *History Today* 71, no. 2 (February 2021); *Codex Theodosianus* 16.1.2.
7. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Appendix (Boston, 1845).
8. Duke Islamic Studies Center, “Bilalian News,” on the Nation of Islam's 1975 renaming of Muhammad Speaks under Warith Deen Mohammed, islamicstudies.duke.edu/blog-post/bilalian-news/ (accessed 2026).
9. On Bilal's enslavement, torture, and manumission: Ibn Ishaq, *Sirat Rasul Allah*, trans. A. Guillaume as *The Life of Muhammad* (Oxford University Press, 1955; repr. 2004), pp. 143–144. On his later prominence among the first Muslim community, including his traditional association with the Battle of Badr, see the same volume; accounts of the specific circumstances vary between early sources and are not treated here as settled in every detail.
10. For conceptual accounts of the appeal of certainty and belonging, see Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (Farrar & Rinehart, 1941), and Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion* (Peter Lang, 1987). These works do not establish how any particular congregation responded to the Curse of Ham.

SUGGESTED READING FOR FURTHER STUDY

For readers who want to keep examining the evidence rather than take this paper's word for it.

On the Curse of Ham and religious justifications for slavery

- David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (2003)
- David M. Whitford, *The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era* (2009)
- Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (2002)
- John G. Fee, *An Anti-Slavery Manual* (1851) — a contemporary Christian abolitionist rebuttal

On Constantine, Nicaea, Theodosius, and the fusion of church and empire

- Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (1981)
- R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (1988)
- Mathew Lyons, “The Edict of Thessalonica,” *History Today* (February 2021)

On Douglass, Black Christianity, and Bilal ibn Rabah

- Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Appendix (1845)
- Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, trans. A. Guillaume (1955)
- Edward E. Curtis IV's writings on Bilalian identity and the Nation of Islam's turn toward Sunni practice

On why demanding belief systems hold their grip

- Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (1941)
- Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion* (1987)

Perspectives that would push back on this paper

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- Historians who would place more weight on Islamic societies' own extensive history of slavery when reading the Bilal section
- Theologians who would distinguish “fear of the Lord” as reverence rather than terror, and argue the paper overstates the fear/understanding tension in mainstream practice
- Scholars who emphasize that commercial, political, and military motives for the slave trade predate and exceed its religious justifications

Readers are encouraged to weigh these against the paper's argument directly rather than take either side on faith.

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