


Black and slave? ‘Mestizo’ Augustine on Ham



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Research Project Registration:
Project Number: 02596857

Description:

This research is part of the project, ‘Augustine and Manichaean Christianity’, directed by Prof. Dr Johannes van Oort, extra-ordinary professor of Patristics and Early Christianity in the Department of Systematic and Historical Theology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria.

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Dates:

Received: 17 Mar. 2023
Accepted: 28 June 2023
Published: 20 Sept. 2023

How to cite this article:

Van Oort, J., 2023, ‘Black and slave? ‘Mestizo’ Augustine on Ham’, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 79(1), a8689. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i1.8689>

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After discussing the so-called Ham myth in South Africa, my focus is on the African church father Augustine (354–430). All texts from his immense oeuvre in which he mentions biblical Ham are reviewed in chronological order. In *Against Faustus*, the story of Noah and his sons is mainly explained as being Christological: Ham figures as a type of the unbelieving Jews who consented to the murder of Christ, but he is also a type of the Jews because he is ‘the slave of his brothers’ carrying the books by which the Christians may be instructed. Later Augustine corrects his confusion of Ham with the slave Canaan. The story of Ham (and Canaan) is most extensively discussed in the *City of God*. Neither here nor in the Expositions on the Psalms, Ham is described as being black or a slave. The same goes for a number of his other writings. In Augustine’s late works *Against Julian* and *Unfinished Work against Julian*, he thoroughly goes into the question of why (although Ham sinned) ‘vengeance was brought upon Canaan’. Augustine perceives God’s prophecy: from Canaan stems the cursed seed [*semen maledictum*] of the Canaanites. Nowhere, however, he claims that Ham or his descendants would have been cursed to be black or that all of his offspring were condemned to slavery.

Contribution: This article demonstrates that the Ham myth does not occur in Augustine. It argues that the ‘mestizo’ African Augustine might have been extra sensitive to questions of race and colour.

Keywords: Augustine; Ham; Ham myth; Canaan; black race; slavery; Jews; original sin.

Introduction

In South Africa’s history of church and state, the name of Ham has an ominous ring. For many years, people in this country justified their black fellow’s subordinated place in society and church with reference to biblical texts such as Genesis 9:18–26. Blacks have been called with derogative Afrikaans names like ‘*Gamsgeslag*’ [genus of Ham] and ‘*Gamsketel*’ [Gam kettle] and also as ‘Hamite’ [occasionally ‘Chamite’] by many English speaking people. It is not necessary to quote specific examples of this, because former (both Afrikaans and English) literature and, for example, newspapers and magazines are full of them. The same is true of many sermons once delivered in South African churches, chapels and open planes: black Ham is cursed into slavery for disrespecting the nakedness of his drunken father Noah.

In the past decades, several studies have made it clear that all these theories are based on false assumptions and bad exegesis. It cannot be deduced from the biblical data that Ham was black, and moreover, it was not he who was cursed to slavery, but his son Canaan (Gn 9:26–27). Not least, Afrikaans-speaking exegetes played a leading role in unravelling the so-called Ham myth (e.g., Van Selms 1967:135–140). Yet both in South Africa and elsewhere in the world (especially in the United States [US]), there are still many who – consciously or unconsciously, wholly or partly – adhere to the fatal theory. All this is not entirely surprising, because the erroneous myth has a history of centuries, both among Jews and Christians (e.g., Goldenberg 2005:141–356, 2017:76–86).

As for early Christian authors such as the church fathers, it is noteworthy that two Patristic specialists from Pretoria made the first and, as far as I am aware, only ‘treks’ to study crucial elements of the myth. Years before the dismantling of Apartheid in South Africa, J.A.A. Stoop led the way and wrote an explorative article with the broad title ‘*Die veroloking Van Gam in Africa*’ [The curse of Ham in Africa] (Stoop 1984). In this study, he focuses on early Latin authors such as Lactantius (c. 250–c. 325), Ambrose (c. 339–c. 397), Isidore of Seville (c. 560–636), as well as some later medieval authors and anonymous writings from Latin Europe. A decade later, in the year of the final official abolishment of Apartheid, H.F. Stander published ‘*The Church Fathers on (the cursing of) Ham*’, which focused on Greek church fathers such as Basil of Caesarea (c. 330–c. 379), Epiphanius (c. 315–403), Chrysostom (c. 347–407) and Theodoret (c. 393–c.460)

Note: Special Collection: Wim Dreyer Dedication, sub-edited by Jaco Beyers (University of Pretoria, South Africa).

(Stander 1994). It may be emphasised that both authors also made some exegetical excursions and pointed to post-biblical Jewish sources. However, Stoop nor Stander mentions anything about skin colour.

Although the eminent scholar Stoop concentrated his research on the Latin sources and, moreover, since his Leiden dissertation with J.N. Bakhuizen van den Brink could be regarded as an authoritative Augustine specialist (Stoop 1952), he refers to only two instances in the work of the said church father (and one incorrect instance because of a reference by Lewis 1968:178; Stoop 1984:158–159¹). It is my impression that – when *all* of Augustine’s texts in question had been carefully studied – a general conclusion such as ‘The Church Fathers agreed that the [sc. Noah’s] curse entailed slavery for the descendants of Ham (cf. Gn 9:25–26)’ (Stander 1994:119, with reference to Stoop 1984:158) would not have been drawn. Close analysis of Augustine’s (developing) viewpoints allows for a different and much more nuanced judgement. The Ham texts from his entire oeuvre show once again how much this *African* church father often surprises with his idiosyncratic and original points of view.

Augustine’s texts on Ham

The following overview may give insight into all places where, in his immense oeuvre, Augustine mentions Ham. I provide a translation of its Latin original. After that, I briefly explain the text within its context.

Texts from *Against Faustus* and *Retractations*

Augustine’s first mention of Ham by name is in his work against the ‘Chapters’ [*Capitula*] of the Manichaean bishop Faustus. This work in 33 books dates from c. 400 to c. 404 (Decret 1996–2002:1245) or, possibly better, from 398 to 403 (Augustine 2018:14). In any case, it is quite safe to see the composition of book 12 of *Against Faustus* in which our first quote appears as dating from about the year 400. It reads:

For of the heretics it was also said: ‘There must be heresies, so that those who are approved among you may become manifested’ (1 Cor 11:19). Go on, now, and bring up your slanders at the old sacred writings (sc. the Old Testament)! Go on, you slaves of Ham!

Contra Faustum 12, 24

Here the Manichaean heretics are branded as ‘the slaves of Ham’. It must be assumed that this wording has been chosen on purpose. For Augustine and his readers, the name Ham must have had a (very) negative connotation, and even more negative was the designation of the Manichaeans as his slaves. By implication, the common Christian and Jewish idea (on which below) that Ham would have been a slave seems to resonate here.

Augustine’s just quoted words are part of the rather extended book 12 in which the question is raised whether the (Catholic)

1. Stoop (1984:158) briefly discusses only *De civitate Dei* 16, 2 and *Contra Faustum* 12, 24, while (rightly) criticizing Lewis’ reference to *De civitate Dei* 19, 15.

Christians should accept (*accipere*, c. *Faust.* 12, 1) the prophets of the Old Testament. The Gnostic Manichaean Christians do not: like virtually all Gnostics since Marcion, they basically reject these Jewish writings. In *Against Faustus*, however, Augustine makes a unique and highly influential plea for Catholic Christians to accept the Old Testament. It is, after all, full of prophetic testimonies of Christ. In book 12, he explains that already Adam and Eve are ‘types’ [*figurae*] of Christ (c. *Faust.* 12, 8) and also, for example, Enoch (c. *Faust.* 12, 14). In this sense, he subsequently elaborates on the story of Noah and the ark (c. *Faust.* 12, 14–24): Noah is a type of Christ [*figura Christi*], and his son Ham is a type of the Jewish people.

Earlier in book 12, Augustine saw in Cain and his unbelief [*infidelitas*] a type of the Jewish people that persists in its unbelief in Christ (c. *Faust.* 12, 9–13). In the story of Noah’s ark and its aftermath, however, it is Ham who figures as a type of the Jews (c. *Faust.* 12, 23). Although his name is not mentioned, in fact, *Against Faustus* 12, 23 is the very first text in Augustine’s oeuvre in which Ham appears and then already as a type of the unbelieving Jews. I quote:

But the middle son, that is the Jewish people – therefore middle because that people neither held the first place of the apostles, nor believed last among the nations (cf. Rm 11:16.25) – saw the nakedness of his father, because he consented to the murder of Christ and reported it to his brothers outside.

Contra Faustum 12, 23

Noah’s middle son [*medius filius*] is, of course, Ham, Shem (Latin: *Sem*) being the oldest and Japheth the youngest. Continuing his identification of Noah as a type of Christ, Augustine here sees Ham as a type of the Jewish people who, in his opinion, crucified Christ.

The third instance in which Augustine speaks of Ham is in book 13. Here again we see the curious identification of Ham with the Jewish people:

This [sc. the possible claim that the Christians had *invented* the Old Testament prophecies now fulfilled in Christ and the church] is to be feared if the people of the Jews had not been widely scattered and widely known, being Cain who received a mark in order not be killed by anyone [Gn 4:15] and Ham, the slave of his brothers [cf. Gn 9:25], who carries the books by which they [sc. the Christians] may be instructed, but he himself burdened.

Contra Faustum 13, 10

Of course, much more could be said about these rather enigmatic passages, their context in Augustine’s *Against Faustus* and their biblical background. Over the centuries, many exegetes and historians have stated (or, rather: speculated) much about Noah’s sons and the nations that (possibly) emerged from them. As we shall see below, Augustine, too, had his particular views about this. But in this fairly early work against the Manichaean bishop Faustus, his focus is on the *Christological* explanation of the story of Noah and his sons. As for many other early Christian writers (Dulaey 2012–2018:211; Dulaey in Augustine 2018:322–333), the naked Noah is in his view by no means a negative phenomenon, but a type of Christ on the cross. Shem and

Japheth are, respectively, the church of the circumcision and the church of the gentiles. Augustine creates this tension, and it is not the interpretation of the author. Ham appears as a type of the Jewish people who, as he says in *Against Faustus* 12, 23, is ‘the servant or slave of his brothers’ [*servus fratrum suorum*]:

And therefore it [sc. the Jewish people] became the servant (*servus*) of his brothers. For what else is this people (*gens*) now but a certain library (*scriniaria*) for the Christians, carrying the law and the prophets as a witness to the doctrine of the church ...?

Contra Faustum 12, 23

One wonders if Augustine here and in the two earlier quotes is, as it were, casually describing Ham as a slave, simply because he follows old Jewish and Christian traditions (on these traditions, see e.g., Goldenberg 2005, 2017; also already Stander 1994:115–116; Stoop 1984:156–157). Indeed, his description of Ham as a *servus* seems to be a traditional and not fully thought-out and biblical-tested opinion, partly evoked by his considering the Jewish people as ‘slave [*servus*] of their brothers’ and identifying it as ‘*Cham*’. In the quote from *Against Faustus* 12, 24, it then is the Manichaeans who are indicated as ‘slaves of Ham’ [*servi Cham*], which in this work directed against the teachings of their bishop Faustus is perhaps the worst humiliation imaginable.

Our preliminary conclusions based on the quoted passages (and their contexts) from *Against Faustus* are as follows:

- The designation of Ham as a slave [*servus*] seems to have been influenced by traditional Jewish and Christian points of view.
- Nowhere is it stated or even suggested that Ham is black.

There is, however, an additional reason why Ham appeared as *servus* in two or three of our quotes above (only in *c. Faust.* 13, 10 explicit; in *c. Faust.* 12, 23 and 12, 24 more or less implicit). The attentive reader will have noticed that Augustine makes a ‘traditional’ (and still common) mistake in two of the quoted texts. In his *Retractations*, the book written towards the end of his life in which he critically discusses all his works (with the exception of his letters and sermons), Augustine explicitly mentions his mistake:

In the twelfth and thirteenth [sc. books of *Against Faustus*] I discussed the second son of Noah, who is called Ham, as if he had not been cursed by his father in his son Canaan, as Scripture shows, but in his own person. *Retractationes* 2, 7, 3

An important remark is made here: Noah’s curse to slavery applies to Canaan (cf. Gn 9:25 in the most common text version also used by Augustine). But what in this curse (if any) also affects Ham? The following texts will show Augustine’s later and well-thought-out view of Ham.

Texts from the City of God, book 16 and Questions on Genesis

Augustine’s most extensive statements about Ham can be found in his great work *De civitate Dei*. He composed the

work in 22 books in the years 413–426/7; book 16, in which all his statements about Ham, dates from about 420 (Van Oort [1991] 2013:62).

After describing in book 15 the existence of the two ‘cities’ (*civitates*: esp. [spiritual] communities, one living by faith and the other ‘according to the flesh’) in Abel/Seth and Cain, Augustine continues his history of both ‘cities’ after the flood. At the beginning of book 16, he wonders if, after the flood, there were people who worshiped the true God. The evident exception, according to him, was Noah, ‘who recommends with a prophetic blessing his two sons Sem and Japheth, considering and foreseeing what were to happen long afterwards’. Then it reads:

It was also by this [sc. Noah’s prophetic blessing] that, when his middle son – that is, the son who was younger than the first and older than the last born – had sinned against his father, he would curse him not in his own person, but in that of his son, his [sc. Noah’s] grandson, in these words, ‘Cursed be the *puer* Canaan; a servant (*famulus*) shall he be unto his brethren’ (Gn 9:25). Now, Canaan had been born of Ham, who had not covered his sleeping father but had rather betrayed his nakedness. For the same reason he [sc. Noah] adds to the blessing on his two other sons, the oldest and youngest, saying: ‘Blessed be the Lord God of Shem and Canaan shall be his *puer*. God shall gladden Japheth and he shall dwell in the houses of Shem ...’ (Gn 9:26, 27).

De civitate Dei 16, 1

The passage raises a number of questions such as: should we not read that God will *expand* Japheth (*dilatet* instead of *laetificet*), as Augustine also interprets his name in *City of God* 16, 2: ‘Nam Iapheth *latitudo* interpretatur: For Japheth means *enlargement*’? And why is it not repeated (as in the case of Shem) what, according to the biblical text in its common version(s), also applies to Japheth: ‘*eritque* (or: *sitque*) *Chanaan puer* (in other Latin versions: *servus*) *eius*: and Canaan shall (may) be his slave’?

Yet, the designations for Canaan as ‘*famulus*’ [domestic servant, slave], ‘*puer*’ (cf. Greek *pais*) and ‘*servus*’ unequivocally mean that he will be a slave. It is clear to Augustine that – as in the biblical text – it is Canaan who is cursed into slavery (and not Ham).

In *City of God* 16, 2, Augustine subsequently notes the following about Ham in a long exposition:

Ham in turn, his name meaning ‘hot’ (*calidus*), Noah’s middle son, discerning himself from both [sc. Sem and Japheth] and remaining between them, (being) neither the first-fruits of the Israelites nor the fullness of the gentiles (cf. Rm 11:16.25), what does he signify but the hot folk of the heretics (*haereticorum genus calidum*), not in the spirit of wisdom, but of impatience, with which the hearts of the heretics are wont to be hot (*solent ... fervere*) and disturb (*perturbare*) the peace of the saints? But even this [sc. *genus*] yields to the advantage to those who make progress, according to the apostle’s word: ‘There must also be heretics, so that those who are approved may be made manifest among you’ (1 Cor 11:19). Therefore, too, it is elsewhere written: ‘An instructed son will be wise, and he will use the unwise as his servant (*minister*)’ (Pr 10:5 LXX). For many things pertaining to the Catholic faith, while they are agitated by the hot disquiet

(*calida inquietudine*) of the heretics so that they may be defended against them, are more carefully considered and understood, and more clearly and urgently preached, and the question raised (*mota*) by the adversary becomes an opportunity of learning. However, not only those who are openly separated [sc. from the church, i.e., the heretics], but truly all who boast of the Christian name and live abandoned lives, may without absurdity seem to be figured by Noah's middle son: for the passion of Christ, which was signified by the nakedness of that man, they both announce by their confession and dishonour by their doing evil. About such people, therefore, it has been said: 'By their fruits you shall know them' (Mt 7:20). Therefore Ham was cursed in his son, as in his fruit, that is, in his work. So, too, his own son Canaan is appropriately interpreted their movement (*motus*), what else is this than their work (*opus*)? [...] The garment [which Sem and Japheth put on Noah] signifies the sacrament, their backs the memory of things past: for the church celebrates the completed event of the passion of Christ [sc. signified in Noah's nakedness], and no longer looks forward to it, now that Japheth already dwells in the homes of Sem, and their bad brother in their midst (cf. Gn 9:27). But the bad brother is in his son, that is, in his work (*opus*), the boy (*puer*) that is the slave (*servus*) of his good brothers, when they knowingly use the evils of the good for the exercise of patience or for the advancement of wisdom. [...] This passion of Christ is announced outwardly only in the sound of the voice of the reprobate (*reprobi*): for they do not understand what they announce. But the righteous (lit.: approved, *probati*) have such a great mystery in the inner person, and they honour in their heart the weakness and foolishness of God, which is stronger and wiser than men (cf. 1 Cor 1:25). The figure (*figura*) of this [sc. the inwardly and outwardly proclamation of Christ's passion] is that Ham, going out, announced this outwardly; but Sem and Japheth, in order to cover this, that is, to honour it, entered, that is, they did it internally. [...] Therefore, from the blessed two sons of Noah, and the cursed one in their midst, down to Abraham, for more than a thousand years, there is no mention of any righteous persons who piously worshiped God.

De civitate Dei 16, 2

The long passage contains many curious elucidations and explanations. The name Ham means '*calidus*: hot', according to Augustine in his interpretation possibly derived from the (also in Hebrew) learned contemporary Jerome (2023) (*Hier., Liber interpr. Hebr. nom., CCL 72, 63*, but see already Philo [1930], *De sobrietate* 13). This being 'hot' refers to the heretics [*heretici*] who are hot with impatience and thus disturb the peace of the saints [*sancti*]. But, according to Augustine with reference to Paul (1 Cor 11:19), heretics have their usefulness. He also refers to Proverbs 10:5 according to his Latin Bible version which follows the Septuagint: 'The instructed son will be wise, and he will use the unwise as his servant (*minister*)'. But Ham is not only a type [*figura*] of those who are separated from the Catholic Church (i.e., the heretics) but also a type of the pseudo-Christians. They are known by their fruits (cf. Mt 7:20):

Therefore Ham was cursed in his son, as in his fruit (*fructus*), that is in his work (*opus*). So, too, his own son Canaan is appropriately interpreted their movement (*motus*), what else is this than their work (*opus*)? *De civitate Dei* 16, 2

Following *City of God* 16, 1, Augustine here repeats that Ham 'was cursed [*maledictus*] in his son'. In this son Canaan, he

was 'the slave (*puer, servus, also minister*) of his good brothers'. But it remains that Ham himself is 'the bad brother' who went out 'to proclaim the nakedness of his father' (cf. Gn 9:22) and therefore Augustine can speak of 'the cursed middle son' (i.e., Ham himself).

We should conclude that there is a certain 'duplicity' or ambiguity in Augustine's speaking about Ham: Ham is cursed in his son Canaan and thus also he himself is 'the cursed (middle) son'. We sometimes encounter the same 'duplicity' or ambiguity in the rest of his explanation. But it is unequivocally clear that a real existence as a slave [*servus, puer, famulus, minister*] only applies to his son Canaan. Besides, there is no mention anywhere of a curse to 'blackness' – as there is no such a curse in the biblical account:

In *City of God* 16, 3 Augustine goes on to speak about the generations that sprang from the three sons of Noah, thus illustrating the progress (*procurus*) in time of the two 'cities'. Ham had four sons and with two of those sons seven grandchildren, eleven in total (Gn 10:6–7). The eldest was Chus (Kush) and his eldest was Nebroth (Nimrod), 'a giant hunter against (*contra*) the Lord' (Gn 10:9). Another son was Mesraim (*Mizraim*, i.e., Egypt), and his sons are enumerated, not as seven individuals, but as seven nations [*nationes*]. And from the sixth, as from the sixth son, the people [*gens*] called the Philistines are said to have sprung; so that there are in all eight. Then it [sc. the biblical account] returns again to Canaan, in whose person Ham was cursed; and his eleven sons are named. And thus, if we count sons and grandsons, there are thirty-one of Ham's descendants registered. *De civitate Dei* 16, 3

Striking in these statements of Augustine in response to Genesis 10 is the lack of any hint that Ham would be black. Canaan is mentioned (by name) only once.

In *City of God* 16, 10, Augustine returns to Noah's sons and with them to Ham (and indirectly to Canaan as one of his offspring). Here it reads:

Therefore, whether it [sc. the City of God] was non-existent before [i.e., before the building of Babylon's tower] or was hidden, or rather whether both [sc. cities] have continued (after the flood), namely, the godly in the two sons of Noah, who were blessed, and in their descendants, and the ungodly in the cursed son (*in eo, sc. filio*) and his offspring, from whom had risen up that mighty hunter against the Lord, is not easily to be determined. For possibly – and this is certainly more credible – there were despisers of God among the descendants of the two sons, even before Babylon was founded, and worshippers of God among the sons of Ham. For it is indeed to be believed that both kinds (*genus*) of men have never been absent from the earth. *De civitate Dei* 16, 10

After the flood, so Augustine, 'the ungodly city' [*impia civitas*] continued in the cursed [*maledictus*] son. With this, he designates no one other than Ham. The fact that Canaan is the one in whose person Ham was cursed is not voiced here. Thus, the cursory reader may assume that (only) Ham is the accursed one. It is striking, though, that Augustine considers it 'more credible' [*credibilius*] that 'worshippers of God' also occurred among the sons of Ham.

Finally, in *City of God* 16, 11, Augustine returns to the point that in Genesis 10, Japheth, Noah's younger son, is mentioned first. In addition, he says something about the descendants of Ham:

... [T]hen the sons of Ham are mentioned, who was the middle [son] [...]. For as the Egyptians are said to have risen from the son of Ham who was called Mesraim, there is no echo here of the origin of the name; nor (in the name of the) Ethiopians, who are said to belong to that son of Ham who was called Cush. *De civitate Dei* 16, 11

On the question of whether Augustine saw Ham's curse materialised in the black skin (and possibly also the slavery) of the Ethiopians as descendants of Cush (son of Ham, grandson of Noah and brother of Canaan), I hope to come back elsewhere.

However, an important note may be added here regarding Canaan. After the just quoted remarks from *City of God* 16, 1–2, his name as a *person* no longer appears. But definitely and even often the name appears as denoting the *land* of Canaan (see e.g., *City of God* 16, 13.15.16). By the chosen people of God, the 'promised land' of Canaan will be conquered, and the cursed Canaanites will be destroyed (e.g., *City of God* 16, 43). It is in view of this cruel later history that we must understand the curse of Canaan. This is clearly stated by Augustine in his *Questions on Genesis*, which dates from about 400, so the same time as *City of God* 16. With regard to Genesis 9:25–27, it says:

The question is why Ham, sinning in the offense of his father, is not cursed in himself, but in his son Canaan. Was it for any other reason than that it was prophesied in a certain way that the land of Canaan, after the Canaanites had been driven out and defeated, would receive the children of Israel, who would come from the seed of Shem?

Quaestiones in Genesim 17

From a quote from Augustine's late *Unfinished Work against Julian*, we will further learn what – in his opinion – this actually meant.

Texts from On Baptism, Expositions on the Psalms and On Christian Doctrine

In the order of the genesis of Augustine's works (and so in accordance with his development), we find Ham mentioned in the following writings.

Briefly in *On baptism* (ca. 400–405?). Here it runs:

Likewise, who gave birth to Cain, and Ham, and Ishmael, and Esau, the same gave birth to Dathan and others like him of the same people (*populus*) ... *De baptismo* 1, 25

Augustine speaks here of the dual origin of two kinds of persons, which he links to two 'communities' [*societates*] or 'cities' [*civitates*] and, in his broader context, also to the 'spiritual' and 'carnal' men, respectively. Ham belongs to the line of Cain, Ishmael, Esau, Dathan 'and others like him of the same *populus*'. No further distinction (e.g., on the basis of race or status) is made between these evil people.

Other texts to be mentioned come from Augustine's *Enarrationes in Psalmos*. I list them according to the well-known order of the Psalms. All the expositions in which Ham is mentioned date from about 415 to about 420; in addition, all seem to have been dictated (cf. e.g., Müller 1996–2002:817.821.829). So, they are not 'real' and more or less spontaneous sermons to the Catholic-Christian congregations of Hippo or, for example, Carthage, but are 'studied' explications. In these dictated *enarrationes* (termed this way by Erasmus), it reads:

And He struck down', it is said [sc. in the Psalm], 'every first-born in the land of Egypt, the first-fruits of their labours in the tents of Ham. And He took away his people like sheep, and led them like a flock in the wilderness.

Etc. *En. in Ps* 77, 23

And He struck down every first-born in the land of Egypt, the first-fruits of their labours in the tents of Ham.

En. in Ps 77, 25

These quotes consist of Psalms 77 (Heb 78):51–52 and Psalms 77(78):51, which form part of Augustine's rather voluminous quotations from this Psalm. In accordance with Genesis 10:6, Ham stands for Egypt (*Mizraim*), as is the case in Psalms 104(105) and 105(106). Those passages are discussed in the following quotes:

And Israel entered into Egypt, and Jacob was sojourning in the land of Ham (Ps 104[105]:23). Israel is the same as Jacob, as Egypt is the land of Ham. So here it is most plainly demonstrated that from the seed of Ham, the son of Noah, of whom Canaan was the first-born, the people of the Egyptians also arose. *En. in Ps* 104, 15

The passage is crystal clear, and the immediate continuation of this quote – in which Augustine discusses various readings of codices: some read, he reports, 'Chanaan' instead of 'Cham' – shows that he analyses very well-considered.

The next passages from his explanation of the same psalm are self-evident and, being (part of) biblical quotations, may only be cited:

He set forth in them [sc. Moses and Aaron] the words of his signs and of his wonders in the land of Ham. (Ps 104[105]:27) *En. in Ps* 104, 19

And Israel entered into Egypt, and Jacob was sojourning in the land of Ham. (Ps 104[105]:23).

He sent Moses his servant, Aaron whom He chose himself. He set forth in them the words of his signs and wonders in the land of Ham. (Ps 104[105]:26–27) *En. in Ps* 104, 38–39

Finally, Ham is mentioned in Augustine's explanation of Psalm 105(106):

They forgot God who saved them'. How did he save them? 'Who did great things in Egypt, wonderful things in the land of Ham, terrible things in the Red Sea. (Ps 105[106]:21–22) *En. in Ps* 105, 20

None of these passages, nor their (even broad) context, state that Ham would be a slave or black. According to the biblical data, 'the land of Ham' is merely said to mean Egypt. As we

saw earlier in the discussion of *City of God* 16, 3 and 11, Augustine knows that the Hebrew name for Egypt is Mesraim [Mizraim]. There is no indication whatsoever that he considered the people of Mesraim [Mizraim] to be blacks or slaves.

A final passage to be mentioned is in Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine*. The history of this work's origin is long, and we know that he first left it unfinished. Towards the end of his life, however, he found that he had not written it beyond (what is now) book 3, 35 and decided to complete it. The passage where Ham is mentioned is in book 3, 53.

Similarly, in the same book (sc. Gen.), when the descendants of the sons of Noah are enumerated, it is said:

'these are the sons of Ham by their families, after their languages, in their countries and in their nations'. (Gn 10:20)
De doctrina christiana 3, 53

Augustine makes no comment here on Ham, his crime, or even hints at his status (black? slave?). He only mentions the biblical passage as one of his examples from the book of Genesis to illustrate the sixth rule concerning 'recapitulation' [*recapitulatio*] of the famous African exegete Tyconius.

Texts from Against Julian and Unfinished Work against Julian

Towards the end of his life, Augustine returned several times to the problems concerning Ham and his son Canaan. By then, he was engaged in a dispute with a formidable opponent, the 'Pelagian' Julian of Eclanum. Julian was originally the Catholic bishop of Eclanum in Apulia, but was deprived of his see and banished for his Pelagian disposition. A fierce polemic arose with Augustine, which is reflected in Augustine's *Against Julian* in six books (ca. 422) and again in the six books of the *Unfinished Work against Julian* (ca. 428–430).

The first passage reads as follows:

Besides, how many are the testimonies of the divine scriptures, which bind the children to the sins of the parents – who can count them? For why did Ham sin, and vengeance was brought upon his son Canaan? *Contra Iulianum* 6, 82

On the issue of original sin [*peccatum originale*], Julian points out that, according to Ezekiel 18:2–4, the proverb which states that 'the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge' no longer applies, but instead: 'The soul that sins, the same shall die'. Augustine argues this to be a promise of the New Testament and 'of the spiritual legacy belonging to the other world'. It is only by the grace of the Redeemer [*gratia redemptoris*], so Augustine, that God cancelled the paternal decree (cf. Col 2:14). He then continues with the above quote in which he tries to prove the opposite of Ezekiel 18. Further examples mentioned by him are the sin of Solomon being punished on his son (3[Heb 1] Ki 12), the sins of Ahab visited upon his posterity (3[1] Ki 21) and so on.

We are not concerned here with the interesting point of whose 'exegesis' may be correct. As regards Ham, it is clear

that Augustine is (again) aware of the fact that Ham sinned, but 'vengeance was brought upon his son Canaan'. Nowhere in this passage, nor in its broad context, the question arises whether Ham was black and/or a slave.

In his *Unfinished Work against Julian*, Augustine feels compelled to return to Ham and Canaan once more and in further detail. In book 4, 29, Julian first speaks at considerable length (via Augustine's quote from Julian's *Ad Florum*) and then follows Augustine's answer in much more detail.

Let us first consider the part about Ham in Julian's work. It runs:

Yet they [i.e. the ancient inhabitants of the holy land] despised your admonitions, who scorned the benefits foreseen, as if they wished to prove that they were of the seed of Ham, on whom blessed Noah, mocked by his nakedness, had cast the fatherly cursing judgement. *Contra Iulianum opus imperfectum* 4, 129

Julian's quote addressed to his ally Florus is part of his explanation of Wisdom 12. It is about Israel's conquest of Canaan in which the depraved Canaanites had to be exterminated. God (though he could) did not do it at once but gave spaces for repentance (Sap 12:8,10). Which, however, did not help: '*semen enim erat maledictum ab initio*: for the seed (or: race) was cursed from the beginning' (Sap 12:11). Julian illustrates with the example of the '*semen Cham*': 'the seed of Ham, on whom blessed Noah, mocked by his nakedness, had cast the paternal cursing judgement'. Later in the same passage, Julian discusses Daniel 13:56 ('*Semen, inquit, Chanaan, et non Iuda*': the seed/race of Canaan and not Judah') and Ezekiel 16:3,45: 'Your mother is a Ceththaeon, and your father an Amorrhoeon'. Nevertheless, Julian opines that with God, there is always amnesty for sins, and he sticks to his principle: '*naturale peccatum non esse posse*: there cannot be natural sin'.

Augustine's reply goes into all of this at length. Concerning Ham (and Canaan), it reads in the same chapter:

For if, as you hold, because of emulation, that is, imitation, it had been said that they imitated their elder Ham, whom his father Noah cursed deservedly for his sin, surely God, when he had brought out the most just vengeance on that nation (*natio*), would command to spare its little ones, whom you cannot say deserved execution by imitating their ancestors. *Contra Iulianum opus imperfectum* 4, 129

And further on:

For contrary to your error, in this very seed (*semen*) in question, the prophetic authority was awake, so that the righteous Noah cursed the sinful son Ham in his son, that is, Canaan; so that from this we may understand that the children are bound by the merits of their fathers, unless this bond drawn by generation is dissolved by regeneration. Therefore, from this Canaan the Canaanites derive their origin, who were said to be cursed seed (*semen maledictum*) from the beginning; even their little ones, because they themselves were such, not by imitation, but by descent, were divinely ordered to be put to death with their

parents. The prophet Daniel wanted it to be understood that the adulterers were similar to these Canaanites, when he said to them: 'The seed of Canaan (*semen Chanaan*), and not Judah' (Dn 13:56), as if he were saying: Like the sons of Canaan, and not the sons of Judah; as it has been said: 'The generation (*generatio*) of vipers' (Mt 3:7), because of a certain likeness to the viper's malice. Etc.

Contra Iulianum opus imperfectum 4, 129

It is not my intention to elaborate on Augustine's theses for its' theological and dogma-historical content. To this end, much more of his answer(s) would have to be given and analysed in context. How earlier '*tradux peccati*' effected humanity may further remain unspecified here (see e.g., Beatrice [1978] 2013). That his influence in the questions of (original) sin and its effects has been far-reaching has often been shown (e.g., Scheffczyk 1981).

What matters here is that 'the sinful Ham' was cursed in his son Canaan and that this curse affected his '*semen*'. For Augustine, Ham and, in particular, his son Canaan represent the damned generation. This is especially illustrated with the religious and ethical conduct of the later Canaanites and their 'deserved' fate.

Nowhere, however, does Augustine claim that Ham or his descendants were cursed to be black or that all his progeny was sentenced to slavery.

Conclusion

The analysis of all texts in Augustine's entire oeuvre in which he mentions Ham leads to the following conclusions:

- Nowhere in Augustine's works does the so-called Ham myth appear.
- Although it sometimes seems that both Ham and Canaan are cursed, when Augustine describes more precisely, he always clearly states that the curse to slavery refers to Canaan and also that this curse is a prophetic prediction of Israel's future dealings with the Canaanites.
- Nowhere in this context is it reported (or even suggested) that any curse to blackness might exist.

Some further considerations

It has long been suggested that Augustine himself would have been a Berber (e.g., Frend 1942, 1987). This is most likely because he was born in the predominantly Berber provincial town of Thagaste (present-day Souk-Ahras in Algeria, near the Tunisian border) and his mother Monnica appears to have been of Berber descent. All of this could highlight a specific sensitivity to 'race' in general and 'colour' in particular. In recent popular literature, he is referred to as a '*mestizo*' (González 2016); such a characterisation (although not thoroughly proven by the author just mentioned) seems warranted. It is also quite possible that his European (Italian) opponent Julian of Eclanum alludes to his skin colour when he connects Augustine with the 'Aethiops' of Jeremiah 13:23

(Augustine, *Op. imp. c. Iul.* 4, 42; cf. on 'Aethiops', Augustine, *ibidem*, 10, 42). However, Julian's reference could also be 'only' an indication of a (black) African in general.

As far as I am aware, all study of 'race' questions in Augustine's oeuvre is still in its infancy. Whether, in addition to 'Aethiops', *Chus* (Cush) and his progeny (always or mostly) refer to black people may also be fruitfully explored.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

J.v.O. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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