

## **Knut Holter's Africana Book Reviews: (1) Books on Africa and the Bible**

SIMBA: Stavanger Initiative on Method, Bible, and Africa, [www.simb.africa](http://www.simb.africa)

### **Goldenberg, David M.**

*Black and Slave: The Origins and History of the Curse of Ham*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017 (Studies in the Bible and its Reception). Hb. 360 p. \$ 89,38.

One might think that the concept of a so-called curse of Ham—which has caused and legitimized oppression, humiliation, and slavery of black people—is not representative for Christian theology. But unfortunately it is, at least in the sense that it for centuries influenced Christian ethical reflection and biblical interpretation. David Goldenberg is probably the foremost expert in this field. Back in 2003, he published a thorough study entitled *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, analyzing how dark-skinned people are portrayed in the Bible and in its Jewish, Christian, and Muslim reception history. His most recent book, *Black and Slave* (2017) reenters the field, this time with an even sharper and deeper analysis of the concept and especially development of a curse of Ham.

The textual starting point of the concept is Genesis 9:20-27, the narrative about Noah getting drunk, being seen naked by his son Canaan, and reacting with a curse of Canaan: 'Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers.' With the devoted historian's tools and patience, Goldenberg traces the reception history of this text, again and again demonstrating that biblical interpretation never takes place in a vacuum, but reflects and expresses overall political and cultural perspectives of the time. It is not possible here to go into the details of the book, let only a major perspective be mentioned. The concept of a curse of Ham is an etiology of why black people are slaves, and this etiology, Goldenberg argues, grew out of and was confused with an older etiology that explains why some people are black. The origin of the concept is found in the Near East, but eventually it spread to Europe and then to America. Goldenberg's book is probably too expensive and too heavy to receive a broad readership, but it should be available in major research libraries, as it provides a wealth of documentation and analysis of a shameful part of the reception history of the Bible.

*Reviewed 2 May 2018 by Professor Knut Holter*  
*Faculty of Theology, Diaconia and Leadership Studies, VID Specialized University,*  
*Misjonsmarka 12, N-4024 Stavanger, Norway, [knut.holter@vid.no](mailto:knut.holter@vid.no)*