20 And Noah began to be an husbandman, and he planted a vineyard:  
21 And he drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was uncovered within his tent.  
22 And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren without.  
23 And Shem and Japheth took a garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father's nakedness.  
24 And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him.  
25 And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.  
26 And he said, Blessed be the Lord God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant.  
27 God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. –[Genesis 9:20-27](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+9%3A20-27&version=KJV)

**From Noah's Curse to Slavery's Rationale**

**By FELICIA R. LEE Published: November 1, 2003**

As stories go, this one has all the elements of good soap opera: nudity, sex and dysfunctional families.

For many scholars, though, the enigmatic[mysterious] tale in Genesis 9 describing how Noah cursed the descendants of his son Ham with servitude remains a way to explore the complex origins of the concept of race: how and why did people begin to see themselves as racially divided?

In the biblical account, Noah and his family are not described in racial terms. But as the story echoed through the centuries and around the world, variously interpreted by Islamic, Christian and Jewish scholars, Ham came to be widely portrayed as black; blackness, servitude and the idea of racial hierarchy became inextricably linked.

In the Bible, Ham finds Noah drunk and naked in Noah's tent. He tells his brothers, Shem and Japheth, who proceed to cover their father without gazing at him. When Noah finds out what happened, he curses Ham's son Canaan, saying he shall be ''a servant of servants.'' Among the many questions attached to this tale are what Ham did wrong. Was it looking at his father or telling his brothers or some implied sexual transgression? And why was Canaan cursed for Ham's actions?

''The reason the text was so valued by 19th-century people was that it was about honor,'' Mr. Haynes said. ''Ham acted dishonorably, and slavery was life without honor.''

By the 19th century, many historians agree, the belief that African-Americans were descendants of Ham was a primary justification for slavery among Southern Christians.

One of the pitfalls in answering questions about race is finger-pointing, said Werner Sollors, a professor of English and African-American studies at Harvard, who has written widely about race, including the curse of Ham.

''The question is: where does this thing we call racism or racial hierarchy start, and it's been very contentious,'' he said. ''It's a huge question and has a big blame attached to it. Is it the Christians, the Muslims or the Jews? You find evidence for all three.''