



Monday, November 17, 2025

0. HOW “BLACK PEOPLE” APPEAR IN JEWISH SOURCES

The Bible and early rabbinic texts don’t talk about “IC3” or “Black race,” but they have a few key labels that later readers connect to Black Africans:

- Cush / Cushite / Cushi – people from *Cush* (Nubia / Ethiopia / Sudan; broadly lands south of Egypt). [Bible Odyssey+1](#)
- Cushi eventually becomes a Hebrew word for a dark-skinned African, and in modern Hebrew it’s widely felt as a racial slur. [Wikipedia](#)
- Ham – one of Noah’s sons; his descendants include Cush (Gen 10).
- Later midrash and commentary link Ham + Cush + black skin + servitude together.

Those links are what get weaponised.

1. BIBLICAL TEXTS THAT LATER GET RACIALISED

1.1 Genesis 9:20–27 – Noah’s “curse” on Canaan (root of the Ham story)

The text

Noah gets drunk; Ham “sees his father’s nakedness.” When Noah wakes, he says:

“Cursed be Canaan; a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers...” (Gen 9:25–27). [Wikipedia+1](#)

The Torah itself:

- Never says Ham or Canaan is Black.
- Seems aimed at explaining Israel’s right to dominate Canaanites, not Africans. [T'ruah+1](#)

How Jewish tradition later makes this about Black people

Two key steps, analysed in detail by David Goldenberg (*The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity and Islam*): [ResearchGate+2macmillan.yale.edu+2](#)



1. Genealogical link – Genesis 10 says Ham fathers Cush, and Cush is associated with Nubia/Ethiopia, i.e. Black Africa.
2. Rabbinic and medieval sources start to read the curse plus other midrashim as:
 - Ham (or his line) punished in his skin,
 - Ham's line associated with Blackness and servitude.

On its own, Genesis 9 doesn't mention Blackness. But it becomes the foundational "proof text" later used (by Jews and Christians) to say Black Africans are the cursed descendants of Ham and so "naturally" slaves.

thetorah.com+1

1.2 Cush / Cushites and Jeremiah 13:23

The Hebrew Bible refers to Cush and Cushites (Ethiopians) many times – often neutrally or positively (warriors, wealthy neighbours). thetorah.com+1

The one that gets racialised most is:

"Can a Cushite (Ethiopian) change his skin, or a leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil." (Jer 13:23). [TIPs+1](#)

Original point: Israel's habit of sin feels as fixed as skin colour or leopard spots.

How it can be and has been used

- The verse assumes that a Cushite's dark skin is visible and unchangeable.
- Later Jewish and Christian interpreters sometimes treat this as more than a metaphor, reading black skin = fixed nature (and in Christian exegesis, sometimes "black" = sinful soul that must be "whitened").
[Unisa Press Journals+1](#)

Within a racist frame, that gets turned into: "*Black people's nature is unchangeably X (lazy, sinful, etc.), the Bible itself says so.*"

1.3 Song of Songs 1:5–6 – "I am black but comely"

"I am black but comely, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon... Do not gaze at me because I am black; the sun has tanned me." (Song 1:5–6). [Chabad+1](#)

Jewish tradition mostly reads the woman here as sun-darkened, not an African Cushite. But the verse becomes part of the symbolic toolkit around blackness.

Rabbinic & medieval Jewish commentary

- Rashi paraphrases: "Even if my husband has left me because of my blackness... I am black because of the tanning of the sun, but I am comely... Though I am black like the tents of Kedar, yet I can be cleansed like the curtains of Solomon." [Mi Yodeya+1](#)
- Midrash on Song of Songs plays with "black in place X (sin), beautiful in place Y (Torah/mitzvot)", turning "black" into a metaphor for sin / disgrace and "comely" for repentance / grace. [Sefaria](#)

So even though the literal woman is just sunburnt, blackness is used as image of shame, distance from God, and beauty is something that *overrides* or cleanses the blackness.

Later on, those metaphors are easy to fold into racial thinking: black as polluted / shameful, white / bright as pure.

2. RABBINIC TEXTS THAT LINK HAM, SKIN, BLACKNESS AND SERVITUDE

This is where Jewish sources most directly feed later race theories.

2.1 Babylonian Talmud – Sanhedrin 108b: “Ham was smitten in his skin”

The Talmud says that on the ark three creatures had sex and were punished:

“Our Rabbis taught: Three copulated in the ark, and they were all punished – the dog, the raven, and Ham. The dog was doomed to be tied, the raven to spit [seed], and Ham was smitten in his skin (laka be’oro).”

halakhah.com+1

The passage:

- Mentions Ham punished in his skin.
- Does not specify how (colour, disease, etc.) and says nothing about slavery.

On its own, it’s just a bodily punishment.

Later racialising move: medieval Rashi

Rashi, the classic 11th-century commentator, glosses Sanhedrin 108b:

- “Smitten in his skin, i.e. from him descended Cush (the negro), who is black-skinned.” [Tablet Magazine+2parkesinstituteblog.wordpress.com+2](#)

Modern summaries note a related midrashic line, attributed to Rashi’s tradition:

- “Ham emerged from the ark black-skinned, and all his descendants are black forever.” [Hevria+1](#)

Now we have:

- A Jewish etiology of black skin: Ham’s sexual sin on the ark → punishment in his skin → black descendants.
- Combined with Genesis 9’s curse on Canaan as “slave of slaves,” this becomes a dual curse: Black in skin and destined to be slaves. [bibleinterp.arizona.edu+1](#)

That dual curse is exactly what later Christian and Muslim writers pick up as “the Curse of Ham,” but its earliest skin element comes from Jewish rabbinic lore. [Wikipedia+2ResearchGate+2](#)

2.2 Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer 24 – “Colorizing” the sons of Noah

The 8th-century midrash Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer (PRE) gives a vivid racial picture after the flood:

“[God] blessed Noah and his sons... He blessed Shem and his sons [making them] black and beautiful and He gave them the habitable world. He blessed Ham and his sons [making them] black as the raven, and He gave

them the coasts of the sea. He blessed Japheth and his sons [making them] entirely white, and He gave them the deserts and the fields.” [Sefaria+2Sefaria+2](#)

Important features:

- All three lines get physical colour:
 - Shem: black and beautiful
 - Ham: black like a raven
 - Japheth: all white
- Territories are assigned accordingly.

On its face, PRE doesn’t say Ham’s blackness is ugly or that he’s a slave. But:

- It turns skin colour into an explicit ethnic marker for the three “races.”
- Later readers can (and do) plug racist rankings into this framework – especially by reading “black as the raven” in a negative way for Ham while keeping Shem’s “black and beautiful” separate.
[egyptsearchreloaded.proboards.com+2ResearchGate+2](#)

Goldenberg points out that this kind of story is an etiology of dark-skinned peoples, and only later gets fused with the separate etiology of slavery from Gen 9. [ResearchGate+2PagePlace+2](#)

2.3 Other Midrashim on Ham: sexuality, castration, and servitude

Genesis Rabbah and later midrash collections expand what Ham did to Noah:

- Some versions say Ham castrated Noah, stopping him from fathering a fourth son who would be a servant, so Noah curses Ham’s existing son Canaan instead. [jewish philosophy place+1](#)
- Others say Ham had sex on the ark, or mocked Noah’s nakedness publicly.

In these stories:

- Ham’s sin is sexual and disrespectful.
- The punishment is servitude for his line and, via Sanh. 108b and Rashi, skin punishment (interpreted as blackness).

Taken together, rabbinic lore provides:

- An origin for black skin (Ham smitten in his skin → black descendants),
- An origin for permanent servitude (Canaan “slave of slaves”),
- A moral story linking Blackness + servility to sexual misconduct and mockery.

Later anti-Black thinking can, and does, point back to these.

2.4 “Cushi” and its tone

The Hebrew Bible uses “Cushi” and “Ish Cushi” to refer to individuals from Cush (south of Egypt). That’s an ethnic/geographic label for dark-skinned Africans, roughly equivalent to “Ethiopian.” [Wikipedia+1](#)

- Some Cushites are positive figures (e.g. Ebed-Melech the Cushite who rescues Jeremiah).
- Others are neutral messengers or soldiers.

Over time, however:

- “Cushi” shifts in post-biblical and modern Hebrew toward insult, parallel to how “Ethiopian” or “Negro” can shift from neutral to slur in English. [Wikipedia+1](#)

So every biblical or rabbinic occurrence of “Cushi” becomes available to racists as a way to label Black Africans in a contemptuous tone, even if the original text was neutral or positive.

3. LATER JEWISH USE OF THESE TEXTS TO SUPPORT BLACK INFERIORITY OR SLAVERY

3.1 Early Judaism and the “Curse of Ham”

Goldenberg’s work shows:

- In Second Temple and early rabbinic Judaism, references to Black Africans are limited and mostly not hierarchical. [macmillan.yale.edu+1](#)
- There is a distinct rabbinic etiology of black skin (Ham “smitten in his skin”, PRE’s colour-coding), but slavery is not yet tied to colour; slavery is simply part of the ancient Near Eastern world.

The full “Black and slave” package only emerges later, when:

- Jewish exegetes are reading alongside Christian and Islamic traditions that have already racialised the Ham story. [bibleinterp.arizona.edu+1](#)

So early Jewish texts provide pieces (black skin as punishment for Ham; colour-coded sons), which are then assembled into a racial theory in medieval and early modern periods.

3.2 Medieval and early-modern Jewish writers in a Christian and Muslim environment

Medieval Jewish authors lived inside societies where:

- Christian and Muslim thinkers were already using Ham + blackness + slavery to explain why Black Africans were slaves. [davidwacks.uoregon.edu+2Wikipedia+2](#)

Jewish commentators and chroniclers, especially in Europe and the Middle East, sometimes:

- Repeat the idea that Ham’s descendants are Africans with black skin;
- Accept or echo the notion that Black Africans are naturally servile, taking that larger racial ideology for granted.

Goldenberg traces examples where Jewish writers explaining Jewish and Muslim participation in slaveholding lean on Ham’s curse and the etiology of black skin to normalise African slavery, just as Christian writers do. [macmillan.yale.edu+2bibleinterp.arizona.edu+2](#)

The individual passages are scattered across responsa, chronicles and commentaries, but the pattern is:

- When Jews participate in societies that already see Black Africans as a slave class, they resignify their own Ham / Cush material to fit that hierarchy.
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3.3 Rabbi Morris Raphall (1861) – “Bible View of Slavery”

A very clear modern example of a Jewish authority using Torah to defend slavery (in a context where the slaves are overwhelmingly Black) is Rabbi Morris J. Raphall of New York.

On 4 January 1861, at B’nai Jeshurun synagogue, he preached a sermon titled “The Bible View of Slavery”, later printed as a pamphlet. thetorah.com+3Internet Archive+3jewish-history.com+3

In it, Raphall:

- Argues that the Hebrew Bible recognises and regulates slavery, and therefore:
 - Slavery as an institution cannot be condemned as inherently sinful.
- Draws on:
 - Genesis 9 (Noah’s curse),
 - Patriarchs owning slaves,
 - Biblical slave laws in Exodus/Leviticus/Deuteronomy.

Although he doesn’t spell out a race theory, in Civil War America his sermon functions as a Jewish defence of Southern Black slavery based on Torah. Contemporary critics and later historians see it as a Jewish contribution to the theology of Black subordination. thetorah.com+2B'nai Jeshurun+2

So even without explicit “Black people are inferior” language, the choice to read Torah as affirming the rightness of slavery in 1861 effectively treats Black people as a biblically sanctioned servant class.

3.4 Modern resonance: “Cushi” and anti-Black racism in Israeli Hebrew

In modern Israel:

- “Cushi” is commonly heard as a racist word for Black people (including Ethiopian Jews), despite its biblical origins as an ethnic label. Wikipedia+1

That means:

- Every biblical verse or rabbinic line that is recited or quoted with “Cushi” in contemporary slang can carry a contemptuous, inferiorising tone for Black listeners, even if the original text was not written that way.

Jewish educators and rabbis today have to navigate that tension: teaching texts that say “Cushi” while striving not to reinforce the modern slur.

4. HOW CLOSE TO “EVERY JEWISH TEXT” IS THIS?

Given:

- The entire Hebrew Bible,
- All of Mishnah, Talmud, midrash,
- A thousand years of commentary, halakhic responsa, sermons and folk literature,

no one can genuinely list every sentence that's ever been used to put Black people down.

What we *can* confidently say, based on the scholarship (especially Goldenberg), is that the core Jewish textual building blocks actually used to argue that Black people are inferior are:

1. Genesis 9:20–27 – the curse on Canaan, later mapped to Ham, then to Black Africans. [Wikipedia+1](#)
2. Jeremiah 13:23 – the Cushite's unchangeable skin, taken as proof of fixed “Black nature.” [TIPs+1](#)
3. Song of Songs 1:5–6 – “black but comely,” plus midrash that turns blackness into sin/disgrace imagery to be cleansed. [Sefaria+1](#)
4. Sanhedrin 108b + Rashi – Ham “smitten in his skin” → Cush “the negro” → black-skinned descendants as punishment. [halakhah.com+2Tablet Magazine+2](#)
5. Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer 24 – sons of Noah explicitly colour-coded (Shem “black and beautiful,” Ham “black like a raven,” Japheth “entirely white”), providing a template to map three “races” to three lines. [Sefaria+1](#)
6. Later midrash & commentarial expansions on Ham – connecting his sin, blackened skin, and servitude in a single story. [jewish philosophy place+2ResearchGate+2](#)
7. Modern Jewish pro-slavery readings (e.g. Raphall's 1861 sermon) and everyday use of “Cushi” as a slur, which apply these texts to real Black lives. [Internet Archive+2thetorah.com+2](#)

All the other pieces – Jewish participation in slavery, adoption of European racial theories, everyday prejudice against Black people – plug into these core textual anchors.

Signed

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	IC5		O1 Chinese O9 Any Other Oriental	
	IC6		M1 White & Black Caribbean M2 White & Black African M3 White & Asian M9 Any Other Mixed	
	IC7		NS Not Stated	

Who are you?



BIRTH PLACE



LINEAGE



APPEARANCE



STATE OF MIND



DNA

UK Government Race and Ethnicity Codes.

Are you a Racist?

 IC1	W1 UK White W2 White European W9 Other White	 IC3	B1 Caribbean B2 African B9 Other Black	 IC6	 M1 White & Black Caribbean M2 White & Black African M3 White & Asian M9 Any Other Mixed
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 IC7	NS Not Stated Information Not Yet Obtained Refused	 IC3	7 Not Known Yet 7 Rebel Race	7 Not Known Yet 7 Rebel Race	7 Not Known Yet 7 Rebel Race