

among Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Yet the application of the curse to racial slavery was the product of centuries of development in ethnic and racial stereotyping, biblical interpretation, and the history of servitude.

Nevertheless, by the early colonial period a racialized version of Noah's curse had arrived in America. In fact, the writings of abolitionists indicate that by the 1670s the "curse of Ham" was being employed as a sanction for black enslavement. In 1700, when Samuel Sewall and John Saffin squared off over the rectitude of human thralldom, the efficacy of Ham's curse figured in the debate.²³ It is significant that Saffin, whose tract carries the distinction of being "the earliest printed defense of slavery in Colonial America,"²⁴ was reluctant to make the dubious identification of Africans with Ham (or Canaan). But as white servitude declined and racial slavery came under attack, the curse's role in the American defense of slavery was increasingly formalized. By the 1830s—when the American antislavery movement became organized, vocal, and aggressive—the scriptural defense of slavery had evolved into the "most elaborate and systematic statement" of proslavery theory,²⁵ Noah's curse had become a stock weapon in the arsenal of slavery's apologists, and references to Genesis 9 appeared prominently in their publications.

Honor, Order, and the American Biblical Imagination

This study devotes particular attention to the American legacy of Noah's curse, beginning with a careful examination of its role in the antebellum proslavery argument. By locating American readings of Genesis 9 within the history of biblical interpretation, the distinctive features in proslavery versions of the curse are clarified. Overwhelmingly, these reflect two concerns that pervaded antebellum slave culture—honor and order.²⁶

Over the past half-century, much has been written about Southern honor. Even today attempts to explicate the "Southern mind" rely on the concept. Social scientists design experiments to demonstrate that honor is indeed constitutive of the Southern male character, and commentators find honor useful for explaining hostile behavior on Southern highways.²⁷ Yet despite decades of attention to honor's links with Southern history, few have attempted to explore its role in the religious defense of slavery, even though the solid scholarly consensus is that "on no other subject did the [antebellum] Southern mind reveal itself more distinctly than on the institution of slavery." Because part II considers the place of honor in proslavery readings of Genesis 9, it will be useful to review the evolving scholarly understanding of honor's place in the Southern mind.

Among the first to hazard an explanation of the distinctive Southern character was Mark Twain. In *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain employed the sort of insightful hyperbole that became his trademark when he identified the roots of the Civil War in the type of literature favored by Southern readers:

Sir Walter [Scott] had so large a hand in making Southern character, as it existed before the war, that he is in great measure responsible for the war. It seems a little harsh toward a dead man to say that we never should have had any war but for Sir Walter; and yet something of a plausible argument might, perhaps, be made in support of that wild proposition. . . . [The Southern] character can be traced rather more easily to Sir Walter's influence than to that of any other thing or person.²⁸

This reference to the immensely popular British author of historical romances has been dismissed as "probably the wildest passage in all Mark Twain's literary criticism."²⁹ But when Twain connected the novels of Scott, the code of honor inscribed in them, the antebellum South, and the American Civil War, he was composing a prelude to the twentieth-century scholarly quest for the lineaments of the Southern character. The quest was officially launched in 1941 in W. J. Cash's impressionistic but influential reading of honor as a dimension of the Southern mind that survived the Confederacy's defeat. In 1949, Rollin G. Osterweis argued in a classic study that romanticism was a constitutive element of Old South culture.³⁰ In *The Militant South* (1956), John Hope Franklin initiated a new era in scholarly study of the South by emphasizing the centrality of honor to Southern history and explicitly linking slavery and the Southern character. According to Orlando Patterson, Franklin was the first to show "a direct causal link between the southern ruling class's excessively developed sense of honor and the institution of slavery."³¹

For the past forty years, scholars of the American South have emulated these pioneers by exploring the effects of Southern chivalry and honor on the region's distinctive identity. The resulting vast literature features such notable studies as Clement Eaton's "The Role of Honor in Southern Society" (1976), Bertram Wyatt-Brown's *Southern Honor* (1982) and *Honor and Violence in the Old South* (1986), Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* (1982), and Kenneth Greenberg's *Honor and Slavery* (1996).³² Of particular interest for these second-generation scholars has been the nexus between white Southerners' cult of honor and their advocacy of slavery. In a variety of insightful ways, they interpret the Old South's attachment to slavery as a function of its commitment to a strict timocratic code. In the 1980s, Wyatt-Brown articulated the emerging consensus when he declared that honor must be seen as "greater, longer and more tenacious than it has been viewed before, at least in relation to the slaveholding South."³³

This study takes up Wyatt-Brown's charge by investigating the dynamics of honor and shame in antebellum readings of Noah's curse intended to defend the institution of slavery. On the basis of this investigation it will be argued that proslavery readings of the curse were rooted in a pair of crucial premises: that slaves are debased persons and slavery a form of life without honor and that as the eponymous ancestor of Africans, Ham embodies the dishonorable condition of black slaves. Accordingly, the themes of honor, dishonor, and social death are pivotal for comprehending the cultural significance of antebellum American readings of Genesis 9.

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2002