The question that Stephen Haynes addresses regards an apparent paradox, embodied in the figure of Benjamin Palmer, founder of Rhodes College, where Haynes teaches. Lauded by the institution as an “ideal of Christian education,” Palmer is also well known for putting his religious convictions in the service of the support of slavery, segregation, and even genocide. At the root of the problem for Haynes lies the “Christian ideal of community rooted in creation” that has been obscured by certain American religious and cultural forces. These forces are revealed in his analysis of Noah’s curse in Gen 9:20–27.

Haynes is not the first to write on the subject of the place of Noah’s curse in the discourse on slavery in America. His work expands upon the earlier work of writers such as Thomas Peterson, first by placing American readings within the broader context of Western biblical interpretation, second by placing them within the context of the Nimrod and tower of Babel traditions, and third by analyzing the history of interpretation of Gen 9 subsequent to the demise of slavery. Haynes’s interdisciplinary approach ultimate seeks to reveal “how Genesis 9–11 has been read rather how it ought to be read.”

In his survey of the history of interpretation of Gen 9, Haynes observes that themes characterizing proslavery readings of the narrative arose early (ch. 2). Central among these is idea that Noah is innocent and righteous whereas Ham the perpetrator of a
heinous act. Haynes then traces the development of ideas concerning Nimrod, the shadowy figure of the Table of Nations in Gen 10 (ch. 3). His review covers a span that includes the brief and obscure biblical references, the imaginative expansions in early Jewish tradition, his africanization though his association with Ham, his subsequent symbolic representation of the dark side of humanity, and his association with hidden knowledge.

Haynes sets his analysis within the context of a growing body of scholarship that argues the paramount importance of “honor” in Southern society and finds the distinctive features in American proslavery readings to reflect concerns with honor and order (ch. 4). Such “honor scholarship” he finds significant in providing answers to how the text might have been received by proslavery intellectuals. However, against assertions that consider Southern timocratic ideals contrary to evangelical Christian ethics, Haynes follows E. R. Crowther, who eschews dichotomizing religion and honor in seeking the driving forces of antebellum Southern society. Instead, Crowther posits the notion of “holy honor.” Haynes extends Crowther’s analysis to proslavery apologists and cites examples of interpretations of the curse that hinge on notions of honor and shame as well as righteousness and sin. Further, he finds honor and faith used interchangeably. Haynes argues that antebellum proslavery intellectuals contributed heavily to the development of the construct “holy honor” identified by Crowther but notes that, although later segregationists likewise appealed to this text, the theme of honor was displaced by that of sexual perversion.

Haynes argues that hand in hand with the concern for honor was the concern for order (ch. 5). This concern was rooted in the understanding that “Negro character” is exemplified by disorder and is naturally at odds with an orderly ideal society. The subjugation of Ham in the text adumbrates the enslavement of his perceived descendants, Africans, in history, both reflecting the subjugation of the forces of disorder. Although, Haynes argues, this concern with justifying the institution of slavery led to the text falling into relative obscurity following the demise of the institution, such thinking was revived within the context of legal segregation in the 1950s. Haynes cites Humphrey K. Ezell’s relatively atypical 1959 book *The Christian Problem of Racial Segregation*. Ezell’s approach to integration and racial mixing once again invoked themes of order and disorder in the interpretation of Noah’s curse, appealing again to the “psychological characteristics of Negroes.”

He goes on (ch. 6) to argue that nineteenth- and twentieth-century American concerns for order and disorder were used to fill out the portrayal of the obscure Nimrod, who had come to be portrayed as dark-skinned. For Haynes, the portrayal of Nimrod ultimately reflects American cultural concerns from the nineteenth century through the 1960s, such as slavery, black disorder and tyranny, segregation, and Christian religious separatism.
Haynes then turns to his starting point, Benjamin Palmer (ch. 7). Through his survey of Palmer’s evolving interpretation of Gen 9–11 between 1855 and 1902, Haynes seeks to demonstrate “how he applied the chapters to emerging episodes in American racial history, particularly when they could no longer be applied to the defense of slavery.” Against Eugene D. Genovese, who contends that the Southern religious argument for slavery was not based on race and that the narrative of Noah’s curse was generally considered to be insignificant, Haynes argues that neither was true of Palmer, “in whose mind Noah’s curse had everything to do with ‘race’ and with the racial hierarchy that fueled American destiny.”

Ultimately, Haynes argues, Palmer’s tremendous influence was shaped by the fact that he saw American history through the lens of Noah’s prophecy: “In Palmer’s evolving understanding of Genesis 9–11 as a blueprint of God’s design for America, we glimpse an unrepentant advocate of Noah’s curse eager to apply the myth to successive episodes in the struggle between whites and people of color—first to justify the enslavement of blacks; then to discover divine sanction for the law of separation as it applied to political secession, civic segregation, and ecclesiastical separation; and finally as a warrant for the ‘practical extinction’ of Native Americans.” Haynes’s discussion of Palmer concludes that Palmer’s understanding of Gen 9 was also influenced by the concepts of honor and order (ch. 8) and that, despite having been disassociated from his ideas of religious racism today, Palmer’s legacy lives on in those who assert the relevance of the passage to life in contemporary American society (ch. 9).

In the final chapters (10 and 11), Haynes argues for and offers a counterreading or “subversive reinterpretation” of the narrative as a corrective to the baneful influence of previous readings. He argues for a “canonical” reading in the light of the Eden narrative that suggests the curse is not divinely warranted. Appealing to Rene Girard’s critical theory, based on the notion of “mimetic rivalry,” he finds Gen 9:20–27 to be a “persecution text” whereby Ham becomes a scapegoat for the mediation of an unspoken rivalry between his brothers, Shem and Ham, for their father’s blessing. This, of course, is contrary to the traditional notion, alluded to above, that Ham had committed some heinous act that warranted the curse. Haynes concludes with a well-reasoned warning against a simplistic approach to the dynamics of American racism, its connection to religion and religious texts.

Haynes’s thorough study will certainly prove valuable to those interested in textual interpretation. A few noteworthy issues arise in his treatment that might be mentioned here. First, generally speaking, Haynes sets his method over against traditional historical-critical concerns with the “original meaning of the text.” However, to juxtapose “what the original author intended” over against subsequent interpretations is somewhat
oversimplified, particularly given the fruitful direction of his book. The received text is as complex an entity as any moment in the subsequent history of interpretation.

Second, the fact that Haynes casts such readings of Nimrod as “unauthorized biography” raises a central question in the interpretation of texts. As is well known, the rabbinic interpreters routinely filled in the lacunae in the narrative, but to refer to such interpretations as “unauthorized” emphasizes “authorial intent” over against the reality of the tradition as ultimately the property of the interpreter.

Third, the extent to which cultural forces shaped readings of the text is a problem that will require further scholarly attention. It is not entirely clear in Haynes’s analysis the extent to which nonreligious societal pressures shaped Palmer’s views on race or the extent to which Palmer’s views informed his reading of the Bible, over against the Bible being a source of his views. Haynes finds Palmer influenced by an “intuitive racism” but also states that “although ‘scientific’ racism did exercise an influence upon his reading of the Bible, Palmer turned again and again to Genesis 9–11 when called upon to apply the biblical witness to crucial societal issues” (126). He recognizes Gen 9 to be a source of American racism (127) but also states that “Palmer’s use of these biblical narratives . . . elucidates both their role in American racial discourse and their remarkable flexibility in the hands of someone in search of a transcendent warrant for racial hierarchy” (145, emphasis added).

Haynes has certainly accomplished the objective of establishing and elucidating the history of interpretation of Gen 9. In doing so, he demonstrates the extent to which texts both influence and are influenced by society. Further, his study highlights the tension between historical-critical analysis and modern methods concerned with the nature of the interpretive act, while demonstrating the need for both. This dynamic should remain a focal point for scholarly activity.