

The Bible and the African Experience: The Biblical Period

Charles B. Copher¹

Abstract

Dr. Charles Copher is one of the black pioneer scholars of Old Testament. His distinction lies in his scholarly and analytical study of the black experience in the entire Bible. He notices that “numerous references to Africa and Africans are located in several types of the biblical literature: in the Pentateuch or five books of the Law; in the so-called historical books; in the books of prophecy; in poetical-wisdom books – all in the Old Testament; and in the New Testament Gospels, the one historical book, letters, and the apocalypse.” (p. 3) By his knowledge of the Hebrew language, Copher derived the black presence in the Bible by studying the names of people such as Moses, Phinehas, Hophi, and so on. Copher observes that Africa was home for the refugees from Palestine and these included Jesus. His analysis led him to the conclusion that the “authors of the biblical content were native Africans in origin... Indeed, in numerous instances, the biblical experience is an African experience.”

Africa figures as home and place of refuge from the time of Abraham through the time of Jesus. Africans, from slaves to rulers, appear as actors on the stage of history.

¹ Dr. Charles B. Copher served for many years at the Interdenominational Theological Center in the dual capacity of Professor of Old Testament and Languages and as Academic Dean.

The Journal of the ITC

Authors of much of the biblical content were native Africans in origin. And in the veins of the Hebrew-Israelite-Judahite-Jewish peoples flowed African blood. Indeed, in numerous instances, the biblical experience is an African Experience.

In my opinion, the subject that has been announced for me to discuss, "The Bible and African Experience" is sufficiently broad to permit or indeed to require, a division into several subtopics, each one of which merits serious consideration. It could well treat of relationships between the Bible, viewed as a collection of writings that came into existence over a period of some twelve hundred years and the continent of Africa from the time that the earliest of those writings were produced down to the present moment. For indeed Africa has a place in the biblical writings from the very beginning, however far back in history one may set those beginnings.

What is more, Africa figures in the biblical history from the earliest times of creation when, according to the biblical account, four rivers went out from the Garden of Eden, one of which, the Gihon, went around the whole land of Cush or Ethiopia – a river that we many view as the River Nile. Africa figures again in the earliest history in the account of the initial peopling of the earth as indicated in the Table of Nations (Genesis 10:6-10; 1 Chronicles 1:8-16) in which the eponymous ancestors of three African Nations or peoples (Cush/Ethiopia, Mizraim/Egypt, and Put (Phut)/Libya or Punt (Somaliland) and their offspring are referred to. And what is true of the earliest periods of history, as recorded in the Bible, is true of the biblical history in most of its periods into New Testament times.

The Bible and the African Experience

The African Experience

Viewed from the perspective of the sixty-six books which make up the Protestant canon, Africa and some of her peoples appear in books that range from Genesis, in which are recorded the earliest biblical accounts, whether written by Moses or not, through chapter 7:9-10 of the Book of Revelation in which the Seer of Patmos envisions a host made up of peoples of every nation known to him, gathered before the throne of God. In fact, so prominently does Africa figure in some of the biblical content that one might well say, "No Africa, no biblical content."

On the other hand, not only does Africa and some of her peoples and places have a place within the biblical content, representing most periods of biblical history, but additionally, topic-wise, the Bible has had a place in the lives of African peoples ever since its existence as a body of sacred writings down to the present day. Even before that portion of the Bible known as the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament of the Christians, had reached its final form around the year 100 A.D., Africa from Jerusalem, was reading from a version of those Scriptures that had been produced in the African city of Alexandria, Egypt.

Such African use of the Bible continued and spread throughout North Africa and into what is known as both ancient and modern Ethiopia. In the meantime, Africans became the leading biblical scholars in interpreting and commenting upon the Bible. Alexandria became the center of a school of biblical interpretation. When, after the passage of centuries, West Africans and their descendants were scattered around the world and introduced to the Bible, it became for many of them the book above all books.

The Journal of the ITC

Another topic of great importance has to do with not only how Africans viewed the Bible, but also with the ways, in which they have understood, interpreted, and used it. Perhaps it is not too far off the subject to note here that in numerous, but not in all instances, the interpretation of the Bible among West Africans and their dispersed relatives was influenced by their white enslavers, especially with reference to the so-called, unbiblical curse upon Ham and other passages that could be used to uphold the enslavement of Black peoples. And it is heartening to note that increasingly in more recent times, Black people in their continued use of the Bible are interpreting it from their own perspective. Thrilling is it, to note that they have moved from a position in which, in the year 1870, some requested the Pope to remove the curse of Ham from Black people to a position from which today a Black Catholic priest in the Cameroon can unreservedly refer to the so-called curse of Ham as a myth² - even as many of those in the diaspora have done at least since the late eighteenth century

Certainly another possible sub-division of the general overall topic would have to treat of the African provenance of more or less goodly portions of the biblical content which must be attributed, directly and indirectly, to authors who were African – and this apart from their having been Hebrew-Israelite-Judahite, or Jews. Furthermore, this authorship goes beyond the view that Moses, to whom the Pentateuch is attributed by some, was born and reared in Africa and thus was an African. Students of Africa might well pause, if only for a moment,

² E. Mveng, "La Bible et L'Afrique Noire," *The Jerusalem Congress On black Africa and The Bible: Proceedings*, April 14-30, 1972, eds. E. Mveng and R.J.Z. Werblowsky (n.p.). p. 36.

The Bible and the African Experience

to consider the traditions that the redactors of two of the Gospels, Mark and Matthew, carried out Apostolic ministries in Egypt and Ethiopia, respectively, and it would be interesting for such a study as this to note that the Apostle Paul, greatest of the contributors to the New Testament corpus, was on occasion accused of being an Egyptian revolutionist (Acts 21:38).

Sub-topics such as the foregoing do, indeed, merit development. Since time precludes such development, it will be left as a task for others, and the remainder of this essay will deal with the general subject only as it has to do with Biblical Period.

Looking at Africa as part of the biblical content according to the Protestant Bible, it is to be observed that in addition to numerous instances in which reference is made to the mighty acts that God performed in Egypt on behalf of the Hebrews, the word "Egypt," along with cognates, and with allowances made for duplications of texts, occurs some 740 times in the Old Testament. The word "Ethiopia" and/or Cush, along with cognates, occurs fifty-eight times in the King James version of the Old Testament – Ethiopia thirty-nine times; *Cush* (untranslated), with cognates, nineteen times. And Put (Phut), identified as either Libya or Punt, occurs some seven times. In the New Testament there are approximately fifty references to Africa and African personalities.

As anticipated previously, it is to be observed that the numerous references to Africa and Africans are located in several types of the biblical literature: in the Pentateuch or five books of the Law; in the so-called historical books; in the books of prophecy; in poetical-wisdom books – all in the Old Testament; and in the New Testament Gospels, the one historical book, letters, and the apocalypse.

The Journal of the ITC

More specifically and in detail the word “Egypt” occurs seventy-nine times in the accounts of the Hebrew patriarchs and Joseph; eighty-one times in the narratives of the Enslavement, Moses and the Exodus; one hundred thirty-five times with reference to the Hebrews having been brought out of Egypt. In eleven of the sixteen books of prophecy (including Daniel) reference is made to Egypt one hundred eighty-three times; Jeremiah 62; Ezekiel 48; Isaiah 37; Hosea 13; Amos 7; Zachariah 5; Micah 4; Joel 1; Amos 7; Zachariah 5; Micah 4; Joel 1; Nahum 1; and Haggai 1. In the Old Testament historical books there are one hundred eighteen references to Egypt, dealing with nine different events, while in the poetical-wisdom books Egypt is referred to in the historical books in seven instances. And reference is made to it and its peoples in prophetic oracles within seven of the prophetic books, as follows: Isaiah 3; Jeremiah 3; Ezekiel 4; Daniel 1; Amos 1; and Zephaniah 1. Three times the country is referred to in the poetical-wisdom literature.

Phut, or Put, appears five times in prophetic oracles within the books of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Nahum.

It is in assembling the numerous references to Africa and some of her peoples, and arranging them in the chronological sequence of biblical history, that we may view the African experience during the Biblical Period. This we shall now do according to the historical periods that follow. Before we engage in this enterprise, however, we must keep in mind the fact that in the Bible information about the African experience, in the main, is given by and from the perspective of Hebrew-Israelite-Judahite-Jewish writers – not by nor from the viewpoint of Africans, except where it can be established that Africans, whether Hebrew or otherwise, were the authors.

The Bible and the African Experience

Africans, so to speak, are passive providers of the information in most instances.

With this awareness, we may proceed to deal with the African experience according to the following eight historical periods: 1) The Period of the Patriarchs and Joseph; 2) The Period of the Enslavement, Exodus, and Wilderness Wanderings; 3) The Period of the Judges; 4) The Period of the United Monarchy; 5) The Period of the Two Kingdoms – Israel and Judah; 6) The Period of the One Kingdom – Judah; 7) The Period of the Exile and Restoration; and 8) The New Testament Period.

The Period of the Patriarchs and Joseph

During the period of the patriarchs and Joseph the African Experience in relation to the Bible is set forth in the narratives about Abraham, father of the Hebrew; of Jacob, father of the Israelites; and of Joseph, father of the two most important northern tribes of Israel, as will be noted again further along – all within the book of Genesis. In the instance of Isaac, it is expressly stated that he must not go down to Egypt (Genesis 26:2). Relative to Abraham it is recounted that because of famine in the land of Canaan he and his entourage, including Lot who was to become the father of the Ammonites and Moabites, migrated to Egypt. There they remained until the pharaoh expelled them, but not before bestowing upon Abraham great riches. It is further recounted that in Egypt Abraham obtained an Egyptian maid, Hagar, by whom he sired his first-born son, Ishmael. For Ishmael, his mother obtained an Egyptian wife. In turn Ishmael became the father of several progeny among whom was Kedar, the exceedingly black one, who became ancestor of several tribes in Asia. Part and parcel of the narratives concerning Jacob is that which recounts the selling of Jacob's favorite son,

The Journal of the ITC

Joseph, into Egypt, where he has several experiences including being elevated to a position of power second only to that of the pharaoh himself, and his receiving in marriage an Egyptian wife. In the meantime, Jacob, as the account continues, finds it necessary to send some of his sons to Egypt in order to purchase food during a time of famine Canaan. A climax is reached in the narrative when Jacob with his entire family moves to Egypt where they are given residence in the region of Goshen; and the story ends with Jacob's death and burial in the land of Canaan whither his sons carry the corpse, accompanied by Egyptians who join in the mourning.

Returning to the accounts concerning Joseph: he sires two sons by his Egyptian wife, Asenth, Ephraim and Manasseh, who as noted, become the fathers of the two chief northern tribes in the land of Canaan. When he dies his body is embalmed and kept unburied in anticipation of the time when the Hebrews return to the land promised to their fathers.

Thus during the period of the patriarchs and Joseph, Africa figures prominently in the life of the Hebrews in a mutually wholesome and satisfactory manner, with the blood of Hebrews and Egyptians becoming mixed, at least among important persons of the two groups. Two of the most important among the so-called twelve tribes of Israel will not only have had their origin in Egypt in Africa, but will be half-Egyptian through their mother.

Somewhat incidental to the African Experience, in view of the fact that Egypt in the Bible is referred to as the land or tents of Ham (Psalms 78:51, 105:23, 27, 106:21 ff.) is a reference to a land of Ham in the vicinity of Canaan during the time of the patriarch Abraham (Genesis 14), and yet a second reference to the children of Ham as occupants of a Canaanite region until the time of King Hezekiah (Chronicles 4:40 ff.)

The Bible and the African Experience

The Period of the Enslavement and Exodus

According to the biblical account, the African Experience was the only experience known to the Hebrews for a period of some four hundred years. During this time they are depicted as living not only in the land of Goshen, but also as living side by side with Egyptians. In the course of time, several years after the death of Joseph, when a pharaoh who knew nothing of Joseph ascended the throne fearful that the Hebrews now become a national security risk, the Hebrews were enslaved and a policy of genocide instituted against them. In this state of enslavement they remained until under the leadership of Moses, and after a series of plagues inflicted by God upon the Egyptians, they escaped from Egypt across the Sea of Reeds into the desert, in the event known as the Exodus. Sharing with Hebrews in the event was a mixed multitude which, as Leviticus 24:10 ff. recounts, included Egyptians.

Important, indeed, is it to note that in their going out from Egypt the Hebrews and fellow travelers were not paupers. The latter chapters of the book of Exodus, and other passages indicate that they went out not only equipped for war, but also possessing great wealth.

But the African Experience during the period of the Enslavement and Exodus is not exhausted in the general, overall picture just depicted. The biblical record provides evidence at several points, in addition to the reference to a mixed multitude, that the Africans constituted the same or were identical with the Hebrew Experience. Africans constituted at least some elements among the Hebrews – apart from the fact that all Hebrews living in Egypt across the centuries were Africans by birth. Particularly is this so in the case of Moses and his family. One may note that Moses is not

The Journal of the ITC

identified as a Hebrew, but as an Egyptian by the daughter of Jethro (Exodus 2:19), which identity (as later rabbis were to note) Moses did not deny.³ Further, many names in the family of Moses, such as the name Moses itself, Aaron, Mirari, Miriam, Petiel, Hophni, and Phinehas are Egyptian names. The name of Phinehas, grandson of Aaron, means the Nubian or Negro, depending upon the given translator. This is indicative, according to scholars of note, that the whole family of Moses was of African/ Nubian/Negro origin.⁴ And, it may be added, that from ancient Greek and Roman times until the present, by some Jews as well as Gentiles, Moses and even the Hebrew people as a whole have been believed to have been of either Egyptian or Ethiopian provenance.⁵ Added to all this is the account of Moses having married a Cushite/Ethiopian wife who if not Zipporah, a daughter of the Midianite-Kenite priest, reflects Africa in Asia once again, as in the case Ishmael and his descendants; or if not Zipporah, then, as Josephus and some rabbinic

³ See Louis Ginzberg, *Legend of the Bible* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), p. 305.

⁴ William Foxwell Albright in *From The Stone Age to Christianity*. (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1946), p. 193ff., and *Yahweh and The Gods of Canaan* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1969), p. 165.

⁵ For discussions of the Egyptian and/or Ethiopian origin of Moses, and of the Jews, see Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage Books, 1939); John G. Gager, *Moses in Greco-Roman Paganism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972); Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 5, 2, trans. William Whiston in *The Works of Flavius Josephus* (Hartford, Conn.: S.C. Scranton Co., 1903), 923; and Elias Auerbach, *Moses*, trans. and eds. Robert A. Barclay and Israel O. Lehman (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1975).

The Bible and the African Experience

midrashim would have it, the daughter of a king of Ethiopia.⁶

The African Experience is reflected once again in the influence of Africa upon the Hebrews, especially during the period of the sojourn in Egypt, the period which saw Israel come into being as a people. And increasingly, scholars of differing theological persuasions are recognizing and admitting African origin and influence upon much of what appears in the biblical content, beginning with Moses and his time and continuing across the centuries. This is to say that some of the biblical content itself, as well as Hebrew culture referred to in the Bible, is of direct African derivation, or based upon African culture. Estimates of the extent of origin and influence vary among scholars, and it is most interesting to note that the conservative scholar Charles F. Aling in this book *Egypt and Bible History From Earliest Times to 1000 B.C.*, asserts that Israel owes a great debt to Egypt.⁷ Among things that he considers borrowed by the Hebrews from the Egyptians are linguistic borrowings; proper names; wisdom literature such as Proverbs 22:17-23:14; social and political institutions such as governmental structure by Solomon-scribal schools in Jerusalem to train young men for government service; titles found in the Israelite bureaucracy going back to the time of David, etc. another scholar, Marcel Laperrugue of France, whose views are set forth in an essay entitled, "The Bible and the Civilizations of the Nile Valley" (my English translation), published in the book *Black Africa and the*

⁶ Josephus, *op. cit.*, 2, 10; Ginzberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 300ff., by way of examples.

⁷ *Op. cit.* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1981), pp. 123ff.

The Journal of the ITC

Bible, lists and discusses as borrowings the rite of circumcision, worship of the golden calf, the solar cult, the cult of trees, worship on high places and the temple of Solomon – to name a few.⁸ And with this latter listings of things borrowed from the Egyptians by the Hebrews the prophet Ezekiel would be in substantial agreement at many points, for in castigating Judah for her sins he states, “Thus will I make thy lewdness to cease from thee, and thy whoredom brought from the land of Egypt: so that thou should not lift up thine eyes unto them, nor remember Egypt any more (Ezekiel 23:27).

The Period of the Judges

The Bible records hardly anything of an African Experience during the period of the Judges, that period between the entrance of the former Hebrew slaves into the land of Canaan under the leadership of Joshua and the establishment of a monarchy under Saul. However, one thing to be noted is the continuing function of the African-based Aaronic priesthood through such persons as Eli and his two sons, both of whom bear the Egyptian names Hophni and Phinehas. A second item is that Egyptians as distinct from Hebrews continue to make up part of the population and that there is intermarriage between the two groups as is attested in the account of the Hebrew Shehan's giving one of his daughters in marriage to an Egyptian slave (I Chronicles 2:34).

The Period of the United Monarchy

The period of the United Monarchy, during which Saul, David, and Solomon reigned, and which lasted roughly from 1028 to 922 B.C., is one that witnessed

The Bible and the African Experience

increasing relations between Hebrews-Israelites-Judahites in Canaan and Africans, especially during the reign of Solomon.

A Black soldier, referred to only as Cushite, appears as a member of David's private army in the account of Absalom's revolt (II Samuel 18). He could have been an ordinary Black Israelite-Judahite, or a member of a Philistine contingent from Crete, an island inhabited from earliest times by peoples from Africa.⁹ Toward the end of David's reign Hadad of Edom fled to Egypt for asylum after an unsuccessful revolt, and remained there until after David's death (I Kings 11:17ff.). In the meantime the reigning pharaoh gave to Hadad an Egyptian wife, sister to the queen.

At several points the African Experience enters the records of Solomon's reign. First and foremost, perhaps, Solomon's chief wife was an Egyptian princess whose father captured and gave to Solomon the city of Gezer as dowry; and whom an early Church Father identified with the Black Maiden in the Song of Songs.¹⁰ Then there are the accounts of Solomon's trade with Egypt, and with Ophir, which is identified by some as a location in Africa (I Kings 10:28ff.; I Kings 9:26-28). Further, there is the account of the visit by the queen of Sheba whose kingdom, as it appears, included parts of Africa as well as territory in southwest Arabia (I Kings 10:1-13; II Chronicles 9:1-12). Additionally there are the accounts of Hadad's return from Egypt upon the death of David, and of Jeroboam's finding refuge in Egypt after escaping the

⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 173ff.

⁹ Scholarly opinion today recognizes this to be an uncontested fact.

The Journal of the ITC

wrath of Solomon, remaining there until Solomon's death (I Kings 11:14-22, 40).

The Period of the Two Kingdoms

The African Experience, so prominent during the reign of Solomon, continued to be outstanding after his death through the succeeding generation. Hardly had the United Monarchy split into two kingdoms when Sheshonk I, pharaoh of Egypt, called Shishak in the Bible, invaded Judah, the southern kingdom, and depleted it of its wealth, in addition to reducing the kingdom to vassalage.

The account given in I Kings 14-25-28 is duplicated and expanded both historically and theologically by the author of II Chronicles (12:2-12). According to the Chronicler, Shishak invaded the country with twelve hundred chariots and sixty thousand horsemen. His army, so large as to be innumerable, included Egyptians, Libyans, Sukkim, and Ethiopians. And still further, according to the Chronicler, Judah was invaded a second time during the reign of King Asa by Zerah the Ethiopian, whose army numbered a million men. On this second occasion the invaders are reported to have been defeated by God and completely destroyed (II Chronicles 14:9-15). Just who this, Zerah, the Ethiopian, was cannot be agreed upon by historians. Some regard him as an Arab chieftain, while others think that he may have been head of an occupation force left in the land by Shishak.¹¹

During the eighth century, Africa enters the picture once again shortly before the fall of the northern kingdom

¹⁰ See Robert M. Grant, *The Bible in the Church: A Short History of Interpretation* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1948), p. 77ff.

The Bible and the African Experience

in 721 B.C. Second Kings 17:4 reports that Hoshea, last king of Israel, sought aid from So, king of Egypt, in his revolt against Shalmaneser, King of Assyria. The prophet Hosea criticizes Israel for such activity (Hosea 7:11-16); prophesies that Israel shall return to Egypt (Hosea 9:3,6); takes note that God had called Israel, His son, out of the land of Egypt (Hosea 11:1); and had been Israel's God since the days of Egypt (Hosea 11:9). Some commentators interpret Hosea 7:11 and 9:16 to mean that during the closing years of the northern kingdom many Israelites abandoned their homeland and settled in Egypt, as later many of the inhabitants of Judah would do.¹²

Shortly before Hosea had uttered his prophecies, the prophet Amos had had occasion to make reference to the Ethiopians, saying that they were equal to the people of Israel in the sight of God (Amos 9:7).

The Period of the One Kingdom

It is in the book of Isaiah and corresponding passages in II Kings and II Chronicles that the African Experience during the last days of Israel and the next immediate generation in Judah is recounted. This next immediate generation is the hey-day of the twenty-fifth Ethiopian/Egyptian dynasty which ruled over both Egypt and Ethiopia, and struggled with the Assyrians for dominance in Western Asia. Ethiopia/Egypt instead of upon God during these days is most severely rebuked by the prophet Isaiah who, in verbal and symbolic prophecies, condemns Judah's action in this regard. In Chapter 18 of the Book of Isaiah is the prophet's address to the ambassadors of the Ethiopians, a people whom he

¹² The Judahite flight to Egypt is recorded in II Kings 25:26, and in Jeremiah 43: 1-7.

The Journal of the ITC

describes as “a nation tall and smooth, a people feared near and far, a nation mighty and conquering, whose land the rivers divide” (18:1-2 RSV). And in Chapter 19 appears a strange oracle concerning Egypt that may come from a later time. The oracle vacillates between pronouncing doom upon and the restoration of Egypt, and predicts a time when the Egyptians will be co-worshippers of God with Assyrians and Israelites. Chapter 20 depicts the prophet as going about as a captive of war over a period of years, symbolic of the doom that is to come upon the Egyptians and Ethiopians. And the prophet’s rebuke is continued in Chapters 30 and 31 of the book in which he proclaims woe upon Judah for her trust in Egypt. At the same time he depicts the military might of the African kingdom. He declares: “Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help; and stay on horses, and trust in chariots, because they are many; and in horsemen, because they are very strong; but they look not unto the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the Lord!...Now the Egyptians are men, and not God; and their horses flesh and not spirit...”

For the next seventy-five years after the prophet Isaiah the African Experience finds no reflection in the Scriptures, except that given in retrospect to the fall of Thebes in 663 B.C. by the prophet Nahum. Beginning around 626 B.C., however, the experience reenters the Bible in the form of historical narratives, prophetic oracles, and accounts pertaining to some persons who were of both direct and indirect African descent.

To begin with, there is the person of and the oracles of the prophet Zephaniah. Zephaniah’s father is stated to have been one Cushite (Zephaniah 1:1) – the Cushite/Ethiopian/Negro. His family tree is traced back to one Hezekiah, thought by some to have been none other than the king of Judah. The prophet’s identity is a much-disputed matter among the scholars. It may be noted

The Bible and the African Experience

that one school of thought views him as a native Black African who was active as a prophet in Judah.¹³ Another regards him as a Black Judahite who most likely was a member of the royal family.¹⁴ And there is, to be sure, a third opinion that thinks that despite his father's name, "Cushi," he was neither Black nor related to the king.¹⁵ Whatever his color and his relationship to Africa, the African Experience finds reference in his prophecies. On one hand he pronounces doom upon the Ethiopians who still in his day are an outstanding people (Zephaniah 2:12), while on the other hand he predicts a day when worshipers of Yahweh will come from beyond the rivers of Ethiopia and bring offerings (Zephaniah 3:9-10). The context of the latter prophecy indicates that these worshipers are not to be people dispersed from Judah but native Africans. Thus the passage is akin to Psalm 68:31, which portrays Ethiopia as stretching out her hands to God.

Hardly had the voice of Zephaniah ceased from speaking before the prophet Nahum predicted the fall of Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian empire. In doing so he compared Nineveh's forthcoming destruction with that of Thebes, capital of the great Egyptian empire, fifty years previously. In a bold question he asks Assyria's capital city, "Art thou better than populous No (Thebes) that was situated among the rivers, that had the waters round about it, whose rampart was the sea, and her wall was from the sea?" He then goes on to say that Thebes fell

¹³ This view is supported by Gene Rice in his article, "The African Roots of Prophet Zephaniah," *The Journal of Religious Thought*, 36, (Spring-Summer, 1979): 21-31.

¹⁴ This is the opinion of the writer.

¹⁵ A survey of Old Testament Introductions establishes this view as the majority one among white scholars, except that when the prophet is viewed as having been Black he is assumed to have been a slave.

The Journal of the ITC

despite the fact she was aided by Ethiopia, Egypt, Put, and the Lubim (Nahum 3:8-9).

Shortly after the time of Nahum, the African Experience, with respect to historical events, is depicted in the Books of II Kings, II Chronicles, and Jeremiah. Second Kings 23:29-24:5, duplicated and expanded on II Chronicles 35:20-36:4, recounts Egypt's domination of Judah during the period 609-605 B.C., under Pharaoh Necho, specifying Necho's defeat of King Josiah, the dethronement and deportation of King Jehoahaz to Egypt, and the Egyptian installation of Jehoiakim as king of Judah. During Jehoiakim's reign, according to Jeremiah 26:20-23, Uriah, a prophet, who like Jeremiah had prophesied against Jerusalem and Judah, escaped for safety to Egypt, only to be brought back and executed by the king.

As a book, Jeremiah alone is a treasure trove of references to the African Experience. As previously stated, it contains 62 references to Egypt as a country, apart from references to specific localities within it, as well as references to Ethiopia and other African lands. In addition to historical events recorded in the book, some of which have already been mentioned, there are several oracles against Judah seeking Egypt's help; oracles of doom upon Egypt; oracles of doom upon Judahites some of whom remain in Judah and some of whom have fled to Egypt, and delivered in Egypt; and one brief oracle that is favorably disposed toward Egypt.

Moreover, the book contains historical accounts about persons of both immediate and remote African descent. Included in the remote category is the person of Jehudi, great-grandson of one Cush, and obviously a court official, who read Jeremiah's scroll of prophecies in the presence of King Jehoiakim only to have the scroll cut in pieces and thrown into the fire (Jeremiah 36:14-23). Similarly there are accounts about Ebed-melech the

The Bible and the African Experience

Ethiopian, another official in the Judahite court, who was instrumental in saving Jeremiah's life, and was afterwards blessed by the prophet (Jeremiah 38:7-13; 39:15-18). Prior to these accounts there is Jeremiah's impartial analogy between Judah's inability to alter her wicked ways and the Ethiopian's powerlessness to change the color of his skin (Jeremiah 13:23). And in chapters 40:1-43:8, which is an expansion of what is recorded in II Kings 25:26, there is an account of a group of Judahites who fled to Egypt, taking the prophet Jeremiah with them against his will.

The Period of the Exile and Restoration

The later references to the African Experience in the book of Jeremiah are to be dated in the period of the Exile; while references in the Book of Ezekiel make for an overlap between the last days of Judah and the Exile, and the references in Ezekiel are second in number only to those in Ezekiel 29:16-18, which predict a restoration of Egypt, and Egypt's recognition of Yahweh as Lord, all of Chapters 29-32 consist of prophecies that in one way or another are antagonistic toward Egypt. Even so, Ezekiel's anti-Egyptian oracles show her to be, at least in his opinion, a proud, great, wealthy nation, ruler over nations among whom she stands as a lion, exerting great influence upon both Hebrew kingdoms, not only in times past but even in his own day – almost a hundred years after the fall of Thebes to the Assyrians in 663 B.C. it is not without historical interest to note that according to Ezekiel, Egypt's origins lay in the land of Pathros, Upper Egypt, and that it is there that she will be restored, albeit as a lowly kingdom. But Egypt is not to be alone in her forthcoming destruction: her African allies, especially Ethiopia, then Put, Lud, and Libya; and Asiatic Arabia are to go down with her Ezekiel 30:1-9).

The Journal of the ITC

Dating from the period of the Restoration is Isaiah 27:13-23 in which a prophet foresees a return of exiles from Egypt and Assyria to Jerusalem in order to worship on the holy mountain. And belonging also to this period, as providing data on the African Experience, are passages in that portion of the Book of Isaiah referred to as the Second Isaiah, chapters 40-55. Additionally, and indicative of that experience, are Psalms such as 78:31, with its references to Egypt and 106:21ff., with their reference to Egypt as the land of Ham, the two latter dating from after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., as their contents indicate. Perhaps also in the post-Exilic period belongs Psalm 68 with its verse 31 in which it is said that princess shall come out of Egypt, and Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.

The data in Second Isaiah consist of Chapter 43:3 and 45:14. In speaking of Judah's restoration the prophet asserts that Yahweh will ransom Israel by exchanging Egypt and Ethiopia for her, and the wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Ethiopia, along with the Sabeans, will become Israel's possession, even as slaves, and will acknowledge Israel's God.

Of the five references to Egypt in the Book of Zechariah, dated between 332-164 B.C, one prophesies that Jewish exiles will be brought back to Palestine from the land of Egypt (10:10-11), while a second (14:18-19) states, strangely, that a plague will come upon the Egyptians if they fail to come up to Jerusalem in order to observe the Feast of Booths.

The New Testament Period

The African Experience is reflected in the New Testament in only a few instances. Passages that do reflect it appear twice in the Gospel according to Matthew, one instance each in Mark and Luke,

The Bible and the African Experience

duplicating one of the passages in Matthew; and five or six times in the book of Acts. Two indirect references appear in the Book of Revelation.

Matthew 2:13ff. recounts Joseph's flight with Mary and the infant Jesus into Egypt where, as his people across the centuries before him, he found refuge and remained until after the death of Herod. Also in Matthew 27:26, as in Mark 15:21 and Luke 23:26, is the account of Simon of Cyrene who was forced to help Jesus carry the cross. Acts 2:5-10 records that on the Day of Pentecost there were present in Jerusalem both Jews and proselytes from Egypt and parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene; and Chapter 2:9 stated that Cyrenians and Alexandrians were among those who disputed with Stephen.

Additionally in Acts, there is Stephen's long speech in the course of which he reviews the history of his people, including their enslavement in Egypt (7:2-37); and a similar speech delivered by Paul in Antioch of Pisidia (13:16ff.). Prior to Paul's speech, chronologically, is the narrative of Phillip's conversion of an Ethiopian eunuch who, as noted previously, was reading from the Book of Isaiah, and who obviously was a proselyte or God-Fearer. Acts 13:1 states that among the prophets and teachers at Antioch in Syria was one Simeon called the Black One, and Lucius of Cyrene. Somewhat like the surveys of their people's history by Stephen and Paul are passages in the book of Hebrews, which refer to Moses, and the event of the Exodus (3:16; 8:9; 11:20ff.).

Revelation 7:9-10 and 14:6ff. serve well to conclude New Testament passages that reflect the African Experience. The first reads:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in

The Journal of the ITC

white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying with a loud voice "salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne and the Lamb."

And the second reads:

Then I saw another angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and tongue and people; and he said with a loud voice "Fear God and give Him glory, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the fountains of water."¹⁶

Conclusion

Thus, to say nothing about the several subdivisions into which the general subject may be divided, that one which is limited to the African Experience during the biblical period alone, reveals that the experience is present in several ways. It is present in the literature of many of the periods of biblical history, and in almost every type of the literature. Africa figures as home and place of refuge from the time of Abraham through the time of Jesus. Africans, from slaves to rulers, appear as actors on the stage of history. Authors of much of the biblical content were native Africans in origin. And in the veins of the Hebrew-Israelite-Judahite-Jewish peoples flowed African blood. Indeed, in numerous instances, the biblical experience is an African Experience.

¹⁶ This information comes from Claude Wautheir, *The Literature and Thought of Modern Africa: A Survey*, trans. Shirley Kay (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1967), p. 209.

The Bible and the African Experience

Bibliography

Wautheir, Claude, *The Literature and Thought of Modern Africa: A Survey*, trans. Shirley Kay (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1967).

Rice, Gene, "The African Roots of Prophet Zephaniah," *The Journal of Religious Thought*, 36, (Spring-Summer, 1979).

Robert M. Grant, *The Bible in the Church: A Short History of Interpretation* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1948).

Grant, Robert M., *The Bible in the Church: A Short History of Interpretation* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1948)