CHAPTER 2

Africans and the Bible

The Bible has affected the lives of Africans and their descendants in the Diaspora possibly more than any other document in human history. This phenomenon can be divided into at least two spheres: The first features the roles and experiences of Africans in the Bible, while the second concerns the ways in which these roles and experiences have influenced Africans living in post-Biblical times. Because the Biblical account is seen by many as prescriptive, the interpretation of African roles in the narrative is critical, as it has often determined how post-Biblical Africans were treated. In particular, the Bible has been crucial to slavery, with both benefactors and detractors of the institution taking solace in its pages.

Egypt and Nubia in the Bible

Pharaohs of the twenty-fifth dynasty appear in the Old Testament as allies against the Assyrians, and Taharka (690–664 BCE) is mentioned by name (Isaiah 37:9; 2 Kings 19:9). Egypt and Nubia's union under this dynasty is demonstrated by the prophet Isaiah's conjoined messages to each (Isaiah 18–20). In language corresponding to Herodotus, Isaiah (18:2,7) writes this of Nubia:

> Go, swift messengers to a nation tall and smooth,
> To a people feared far and wide,

A powerful and oppressive nation
Whose land the rivers divide.

Such esteem for Nubia is consistent with the view of states along the Nile as powerful neighbors of Israel, ever present in regional affairs. Indeed, the very formation of the Hebrew people is intimately associated with Egypt and Nubia. Egypt in particular features large in the Old Testament, playing successive roles as asylum, oppressor, ally, and foe. The enslavement and subsequent divine deliverance of the Hebrews was a source of consolation and hope for enslaved Africans and their descendants thousands of years later. But while many identified with the Hebrews, others celebrated the connection to Egypt.

Assuming a historical basis for Hebrew enslavement, it is unreasonable to believe they would have avoided sexual unions with Egyptians and Nubians for 400 years; indeed, individual stories suggest that the interaction between Hebrews and Egyptians or Nubians may have been significant. Even before the Hebrew community in Egypt, Egyptian women figured prominently in the lives of the prophets. Abraham, the father of revelatory monotheism, had a son Ishmael by the Egyptian Hagar, and Ishmael in turn married an Egyptian woman. Upon entry into Egypt, the patriarch Joseph also married an Egyptian woman, Asenath, who bore Manasseh and Ephraim, so that at least one of the twelve tribes was of partial African origin. Moses himself married a Nubian woman (Numbers 12:1). These examples suggest such women were desirable and instrumental at critical junctures, birthing clans and nations.

Beyond the question of intermarriage is the issue of cultural influence. The Hebrews were necessarily affected by their long stay in Egypt; after all, Joseph was embalmed. Such influence probably remained with the Hebrews for many years, as they exited Egypt with a "mixed multitude" (Exodus 12:38). Much of the Old Testament is concerned with eradicating that influence, along with others from Mesopotamia. If the Exodus is afforded credibility, it gives pause that the Hebrews, every one of them, came out of Africa after a 400-year sojourn. The story is not unlike the human birthing process, the crossing of the Red Sea a movement through the amniotic fluids of an African mother.

Mention of individual Egyptians and Nubians in the Bible is relatively rare. Some are in servile positions; others are associated with

the military. They include the unnamed Nubian military courier or messenger who told King David of his son Absalom's death in battle (2 Samuel 18:19–33). Then there is Ebed-melech (or "royal slave"), a Nubian eunuch in the service of Zedekiah, king of Judah. He rescued the prophet Jeremiah from certain death by interceding for him before Zedekiah; for his intervention, Ebed-melech would be spared the coming judgment (Jeremiah 38:1–13; 39:15–18). Others with possible blood ties to Egypt or Nubia include Aaron's grandson Phinehas, possibly an Egyptian name meaning "the Nubian" (Exodus 6:25); and the prophet Zephaniah, son of "Cushi" or the Cushite (Zephaniah 1:1). Perhaps the most famous involves the Queen of Sheba, a complicated story involving a King Solomon already married to a daughter of the Egyptian pharaoh (and eventually hundreds of other women; see 2 Chronicles 8:11).

Africans and Origins

The question of identifying Africans in the Bible is influenced by assumptions brought to the text. The exercise of "discovering" Africans in the Bible often presupposes that the document is essentially concerned with non-Africans. But what if the assumptions are different, and the Bible is presumed to be primarily concerned with "people of color," including Africans?

Independent of anthropological and archaeological records, the Bible has its own tradition of human origins. In the interpretation of that tradition over the centuries, the Garden of Eden story has rarely been situated in an African setting. A forced correlation between Biblical narrative and scientific findings, however, directs attention to East Africa and would suggest to those concerned with Biblical teachings that the earliest actors were Africans. The notion of an African Eden, however, was far from the imagination of Western slaveholding societies. Instead, a tale condemning Africans was widely accepted.

The account concerns the prophet and ark-builder Noah, and it is possibly the most dramatic example of how the interpretation of holy writ can have life-altering consequences. After the flood, the progenitors of the entire human family are listed in the "Table of Nations" (Genesis 10). According to a conventional reading, Ham became the father of "the black people," as his sons are listed as Cush, Mizraim, Put or Punt, and Canaan; that is, Nubia, Egypt, possibly Libya or

lands beyond Nubia proper, and Palestine. Such a reading assumes that Noah's other two sons, Japheth and Shem, were "white" and "Asian," or at least not black.

The term *Cush* probably derives from *Qevs* and is simply a place-name, bearing no racial or ethnic connotations. The Greek terms *Ethiopia* and *Ethiopian* do not appear in the Hebrew and Chaldean Old Testament, but rather the words *Cush* and *Cushite*, suggesting Nubian features were not a concern for Old Testament writers but became one with the rise of Alexander and the ensuing period of hellenization, when translators of the Septuagint, the Old Testament in Greek, opted to substitute *Ethiopia* for *Cush*.

Although the physical features of the Cushites or Nubians were not a significant matter for early Jews, an incident that precedes the presentation of the Table of Nations would eventually be interpreted in a way that would affect issues of slavery and race for centuries to come. The incident concerns a drunken Noah whose "nakedness is uncovered" by his son Ham, a phrase with multiple possible meanings. When Noah awoke from his stupor and realized "what had been done to him," he uttered words that would have profound implications for people of African descent:

> Cursed be Canaan;
> The lowest of servants
> He shall be to his brothers.
> (Genesis 9:24–27)

The ambiguity of the passage lends itself to conflicting interpretations. Who was being cursed, Ham or his son Canaan? Did Noah's curse carry divine sanction, or was it the innocuous expletives of an angry mortal?

The interpretation of Noah's curse depends upon the perspective. Believers are divided over its meaning. To the cynical, the curse was written after the entry of the Hebrews into Palestine to justify the appropriation of land. For the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slaveholder, it became "the Hamitic curse" and meant that African slavery had been providentially decreed. In this reading, the European slaveholder was simply fulfilling the will of God, as God's chosen instrument.

To the extent that the curse enjoys divine sanction, the likelihood that it was meant to apply to all of the descendants of Ham is mitigated by the record of the Bible itself. The only person discussed in any detail in Genesis Chapter 10, site of the Table of Nations, is one

Nimrod, son of Cush, who "became a mighty one on the earth. He was a mighty hunter before the Lord," and credited with establishing such cities as Babel and Nineveh in Assyria. If anything, Nimrod represents a tradition of imperialism and domination rather than subservience. Another example is Egypt itself, as it was the Egyptians, descendants of Ham, who were the slaveholders. Again, it was to the Nubians that the Israelites turned for help against the Assyrians out of recognition of their ascendancy. There is also the fascinating account of Moses and his Nubian bride (Numbers 12), a marriage opposed by Moses' siblings Miriam and Aaron for reasons unclear. In a stunning rebuke, Yahweh not only supports Moses but also turns Miriam's skin into a leprous, luminous white that persists for days, an unusual punishment laced with humor if not sarcasm.

Unfortunately, the import of the divine rebuke did not endure. Scholars of the revered communication would produce additional literature to accompany the scriptures and unfold their meaning. In contrast to the Jewish Talmud (a collection of laws and rabbinical wisdom and the second most holy text in Judaism), another tradition began, perhaps around the fifth century BCE, that may have characterized blackness itself as a consequence of and punishment for Ham's transgression. This tradition that can be found in the fifth-century CE literature of the Midrashim and the sixth-century CE Babylonian Talmud. However, some scholars argue that the idea of blackness as scourge actually derives from mistranslations of these texts, rather than the texts themselves.

African-born persons rarely appear in the New Testament. Jesus is said to have spent an unspecified number of his childhood years in Egypt, where in all likelihood he would have lived in the large Jewish community at Alexandria (Matthew 2:13–23). Simon of Cyrene (North Africa) is remembered for helping Jesus carry the cross (Luke 23:26; Matthew 27:32; Mark 15:21). The "Ethiopian" eunuch, who will be discussed in more detail, is prominently featured in the book of the Acts of the Apostles.

It is striking that the formation of the early Jewish state involved the literal transfer of a community from one land of Ham to another. It is therefore not possible to hold an intelligent discussion of the Old Testament without understanding the contribution of the African. It is not a question of a lone Nubian here and an odd Egyptian there; rather, the Old Testament world was awash in Africa's colors and cultures.

The Queen of Sheba

While the Hamitic curse would be used in the future with devastating effect, another account in the Old Testament forms the basis for perhaps the most significant and certainly most hallowed tradition involving Biblical Africa, linking the continent to the African Diaspora from ancient times to the present. In arresting defiance of, and in diametric opposition to, the damnation of Canaan, the very glory of God is held to have rested upon a favored Ethiopia. The explanation of how that happened is a fascinating journey into an African reading of the Bible, and it links the continent to three separate faiths in fundamental and enduring ways.

The story begins with King Solomon, who already had ties to the Nile valley by his marriage to an Egyptian princess and possibly by way of his mother Bathsheba, whose name may signify "from the house or land of Sheba." Word of his fabled wisdom spread far and wide, eventually attracting the Queen of Sheba, who journeyed to Israel with a large retinue to hear Solomon's wisdom for herself (2 Chronicles 9:1–12; 1 Kings 10:1–13). More than favorably impressed, the Queen gave the king a large quantity of gold, spices, and precious stones. In exchange, Solomon gave unspecified gifts of his own.

According to the Ethiopian holy book *Kebra Nagast* or "Glory of Kings," completed in the early fourteenth century and drawn from the Bible, the Qur'ān, apocryphal literatures, and other sources, Solomon and the Queen, identified as Makeda in the Ethiopian manuscript, struck up a romance consummated through Solomon's guile. After nine months and a conversion to Judaism, Makeda gave birth to Menelik (literally, "son of the wise man"), who years later returned to Jerusalem where he was acknowledged by his father, crowned the king of Ethiopia, and implored to remain in Jerusalem to inherit the throne of Israel. Longing for home, Menelik instead returned to Ethiopia with a number of priests and the *Tabot* or the Ark of the Covenant (or Tabernacle of Zion). The Ark, symbol of Yahweh's presence and Israel's unique status, henceforth rests, according to this tradition, in Ethiopia, thereby transferring to the Ethiopians the honor of "God's chosen people." Likewise, the kings of Ethiopia are descendants of Solomon, each a "lion of Judah."

There are multiple layers to the story. To begin, the location of "Sheba" is in dispute: many cite Saba in Yemen as the most likely site, while some insist upon Nubia or Ethiopia. Interestingly, Jesus simply

refers to the "Queen of the South" who came "from the ends of the earth" to hear Solomon's wisdom (Matthew 12:42; Luke 11:31), a characterization of space and distance in remarkable resonance with Homer's *Odyssey*, wherein the Ethiopians are described as "the most remote of men," dwelling by the streams of Ocean, "at earth's two verges, in sunset lands and lands of the rising sun." As Ethiopia did not exist during the time of Solomon, the only viable alternative to Yemen for Sheba's location is Nubia, where the queen may have been one of the Candaces. In the end, Sheba's precise location may not matter very much, as populations and cultural influences regularly crisscrossed the Red Sea in antiquity; in fact, southern Arabia was periodically dominated by powers on nearby African soil, particularly from 335–370 CE and 525–575 CE, when Ethiopia ruled portions of the southern peninsula.

Another complication is the *Kebra Nagast*'s claims of an initial association with Judaism. Ethiopia is better known as a Christian state. Founded at Aksum (Axum) in 59 CE, Ethiopia became home to Amhara-Tigrean, Galla, Afar, Somali, and Omotic populations, distinguishing it both culturally and territorially from Nubia (which lay to the north). Christianity entered Ethiopia early; tradition links missionary activity to the apostle Matthew, but Ethiopia's definitive turn to Christianity took place in the middle of the fourth century CE, when King Ezana and the royal court embraced the new religion, and in the fifth century CE, when large-scale conversions occurred. In 1135, the Aksumite rulers were overthrown by the founders of the Zagwe dynasty, whose greatest achievement was the creation of a remarkable ceremonial center at Lalibela (or Roha, named after the dynasty's most illustrious ruler), site of churches hewn from "living rock," fashioned deep in the earth. The Zagwes were in turn overthrown by the Solomonids in 1270, claiming descent from Solomon and Makeda.

The Solomonids drew upon traditions enshrined in the *Kebra Nagast* to legitimate their seizure of power, claiming the best of both worlds by trumpeting their alleged hereditary connections to Israel while simultaneously championing Christianity. Led by a literate elite who wrote in Ge'ez (or Ethiopic), Christian Ethiopia experienced an efflorescence under the Solomonids, particularly from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries. Although severely challenged by Aḥmad Granye's sixteenth-century Muslim campaign that saw widespread destruction of churches and monasteries, only to be

followed by incursions of Galla or Oromo in the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, Ethiopia's unique Christian legacy survived. Ethiopia would become an icon in the modern African Diaspora, a symbol of independence and fierce pride, and the focus of a new religion developed in the Caribbean.

Beta Israel

The Solomonids were not the only ones to draw from the *Kebra Nagast* for legitimation. The Jews of Ethiopia, who refer to themselves as the *Beta Israel* ("House of Israel") and take umbrage at the term *Falasha* ("stranger, wanderer," coined by non-Jewish Ethiopians), also claim descent from Solomon and Makeda. The Beta Israel have a different account of what happened following Menelik's return to Ethiopia: With the Ark of the Covenant in tow, Menelik's entourage came to a river and separated into two companies. Those who crossed eventually became Christians, while those who paused remained Jews: a marvelous allegory at the least.

Scholars and politicians have debated whether the Beta Israel are "true" Jews for centuries. Aside from the Solomon–Makeda tradition (given little credence by many scholars), there are other, competing theories attempting to explain how Jews came to Ethiopia. In 1973, for example, Israel's Sephardic Chief Rabbi recognized the Beta Israel as true Jews, a remnant of the lost tribe of Dan (one of the ten who seemingly vanished after their capture by Assyria in 722 BCE). Other scholars cite evidence of a Jewish military garrison at Elephantine Island, near the traditional border of Egypt and Nubia, between the seventh and the fifth centuries BCE. Yet others point to the proximity of southern Arabia, in which communities of Jews have lived since the seventh century BCE, with most arriving after the destruction of Jerusalem's Second Temple in 70 CE.

Whatever their origins, the Beta Israel's subsequent history in Ethiopia is also a matter of scholarly contention; some maintain they were persecuted and harassed for most of their existence, while others argue the relationship between Jews and the Christian state was at times complementary and cooperative. The Beta Israel took refuge in the mountain fastnesses of Ethiopia and were cut off from world Jewry. There they continued to sacrifice animals, observe the Sabbath, follow other religious laws and dietary proscriptions, and circumcise on

the eighth day. They lost the Hebrew language, however, speaking in Amharic (a modern language) and praying (while facing Jerusalem) in Ge'ez. Armed with the Torah but unaware of the Talmud, Ethiopian Jews managed to survive. Toward the end of the twentieth century, they participated in the general immigration of Jews to Israel (the *aliyah*) in spectacular ways: In 1984, so-called Operation Moses brought 16,000 Ethiopian Jews to Israel, followed by the airlifting of thousands more in 1991. Media images of these "black Jews" arriving in Israel was nothing less than electrifying. That there were verifiable African Jews with a venerable past raised new questions about the scope of the African Diaspora.

The "Ethiopian" Eunuch and the Call to Christianity

In addition to the Queen of Sheba and the Beta Israel, the account of the "Ethiopian" eunuch has also fired imaginations across time and space. The New Testament records the baptism of "an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure" (Acts of the Apostles 8:27–40). As Ethiopia either did not yet exist or was just coming into being, and as a series of female rulers of the Nubian state of Meroë held the title *Candace*, this encounter probably refers to a Nubian court official who, after his baptism, "went on his way rejoicing," presumably all the way to Nubia. Christianity had certainly entered Nubia by the second century (following the establishment of the Coptic church in Egypt), but Nubia did not convert en masse to Christianity (according to area tradition) until the mid-sixth century and the arrival of missionaries from Byzantium. For the next 800 years Nubia flourished as a Christian culture, its literacy based upon Old Nubian, a language written in Greek form with Meroitic vowelization. Meroë itself had ended by 350 CE, but Nubia continued on, splintering into Nobatia (or Nubia), Alwa, and Makuria. The rise of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn and the Mamluks in Egypt in 1169 began Christian Nubia's gradual decline until 1323, when a Muslim ruler took power. Nubian Christianity survived into the sixteenth century, in retreat from a growing Islamized and Arabized Nubian population and government.

Like Egypt, Nubia, and Ethiopia, North Africa also converted to Christianity, although the region's rapid embrace of Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries raises doubts about the depth of its preceding

commitment. Even so, North Africa was the site of a brilliant Christian civilization, producing the likes of Saint Augustine of Hippo (354–440), born in North Africa and likely of Berber descent. Christian scholars and leaders located throughout Egypt and North Africa played major roles in the various schisms and doctrinal disputes characterizing the troubled history of the early church. However, while North Africa and Egypt provided the setting, European languages dominated the religious discourse; Latin was used in the North African church, and Greek in the Coptic.

An African past filled with splendor and pageantry would serve to defend against the onslaught experienced by the enslaved in the Americas, who were repeatedly told that Africa held no historical significance. Though ancient and in a corner of the continent from which the vast majority of the enslaved did not hail, Egypt, Nubia, and Ethiopia were yet in Africa, and therefore they represented the dignity of the entire continent, a place of honor bestowed largely through exposure to Christianity and Judaism. By the nineteenth century, the prophesy that "Ethiopia shall soon stretch her hands out to God" (Psalm 68:31) would be interpreted by many as a call to convert masses of Africans and their descendants to Christianity, thereby shaping Africa and its Diaspora in profound ways.

Suggestions for Further Reading

In addition to some of the relevant suggested readings for Chapter One, especially that of St. Clair Drake, works covering the general history of Ethiopia include Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1994); Jean Doresse, *Ethiopia*, trans. Elsa Coult (London: Elek Books and New York: Putnam, 1959); and Sergew Hable Sellassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270* (Addis Ababa: United Printers, 1972).

Regarding the *Kebra Nagast*, the only English translation available remains, curiously, E. A. Wallis Budge's *The Queen of Sheba and Her Only Son Menyelek (Kebra Nagast)* (London and Boston: The Medici Society, Ltd., 1922). Given the date of the translation and Budge's reputation as something of a racist, a modern translation is sorely needed. Donald N. Levine's *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1974) provides a critical reading of both *Kebra Nagast* and the development of Ethiopian society.

An excellent work on the Beta Israel is Steven Kaplan's *The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia: From Earliest Times to the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York U. Press, 1992), which can be joined with a study edited by Tudor Parfitt and Emanuela Trevisan, *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999).

Concerning the Hamitic curse, see David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U. Press, 2003), for a discussion of its development as an idea, and Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: the Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 2002), for an indication of how the myth came to be exploited. Finally, among the most important works addressing blacks or Africans and the Bible are James Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984); Charles B. Copher, *Black Biblical Studies: An Anthology of Charles B. Copher* (Chicago: Black Light Fellowship, 1993); Cain Hope Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989) and his *Scandalize My Name: A Critical Review of Blacks in the Bible and Society* (Silver Spring, MD: Beckham House, 1995).