

WHAT CAN BLACKS LEARN FROM THE ISRAELITES' USE AND INTERPRETATION OF BIBLICAL TEXTS?

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The Israelites' religion was a driver of their actions. It led them out of bondage in Egypt and out of disunity, leading them into the possession of the land of Canaan and ultimately into national unity and empire. The main function of their religion throughout their history was to help them achieve both their individual, collective and, ultimately, national goals. Among the nations of the ancient Near East, the Israelites traced their origin as a small community.² They saw themselves as underdogs among the nations; but underdogs who by strategies backed by their religious beliefs, transformed their weak minority status to eventually become a great and redoubtable nation. How the Israelites used their religion to spur them into liberating action is a lesson that, if well mastered, could transform the state of the black community into a formidable force for complete liberation and self-reliance.

This article will attempt to do three things. First, it will demonstrate how the Israelites used their religious beliefs as a vehicle for change. Secondly, it will show how that same scriptural usage was adopted by the Negroes to free themselves from slavery. Finally, we will contrast the Israelite and Negro usage of scriptures with the way the

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²Abraham was called by Yahweh to leave his homeland of Haran and sojourn in the land of Canaan that would eventually become the land of his progeny. From a precarious origin, the Israelites planned the occupation of Canaan by strategically developing a theology of land possession (Gen 12:1-3; 16:1-16, *passim*)

Blacks Must Learn From The Israelites

modern day blacks, as a race, utilize them. It will be argued that the modern blacks are harming themselves with the so-called gospel religion that perpetuates their underdog inferiority complex, which completely debilitates them to overcome economic, social and racial prejudice inflicted upon them by the other nations.

The Israelites affirmed that the fear of the LORD was only the beginning of knowledge (Prov 1:7), not the end of it. Therefore, they interpreted this to mean that the worship of Yahweh was not the end goal of knowledge and wisdom; it was the initial step toward the attainment of wisdom. By the use of wisdom and knowledge, they saw themselves as Yahweh's agents, responsible for applying that wisdom to ameliorate their political status in the land. Using the Scriptures as an agent for change influenced the apostle James, many years later, to write, "But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith [in God] without works is dead?" (James 2:20, NKJV).³ "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith [in God] but do not have works? Can faith [in God alone] save you? (James 2:14). These texts show that, for religious people in both the Old and New Testament times, faith in God meant nothing if it was not followed by the effective action on the part of the oppressed to effect change.

The story of Jacob and Esau demonstrates how greatly decisive action was valued by the Israelites of later generations who emulated how Jacob, Isaac's second born transformed himself into the first-born. The dying father passed blessings and inheritance to his first-born son. To receive the blessing, Jacob tricked his father Isaac into believing that he was Esau (the first-born son). He obtained

³Unless otherwise noted, biblical texts will be quoted from *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

Blacks Must Learn From The Israelites

for himself the blessing by bringing his father a dish of goat meat prepared to taste like the wild game Isaac was expecting from his eldest son. Jacob was blessed before the LORD (Gen 27:7).⁴ This blessing *before Yahweh* meant that the Israelite religion sanctioned Jacob's clever but underhanded methods of achieving his ambitious goals of wealth and power. We cannot judge Jacob's action by modern day standards of morality; but we have to see it through the eyes of the people in ancient Israel who used this story as a source of inspiration and motivation for their contemporaries who were poised to usurp the land of the Canaanites. The writer proclaimed Jacob's brazen act as one acceptable to Yahweh because it ultimately promoted the Israelites' economic and territorial goals. Jacob's crafty action consolidated to himself wealth and power, an act that was ultimately seen as a landmark in the Israelites' journey toward a strong national identity. The Israelites, inspired by Jacob's usurpation of his elder brother's birthright, were emboldened to believe that they could usurp the Canaanite land.⁵

The Hebrew Bible was not written in the abstract as a philosophy of religion; it was written to address the pressing needs or questions of the Israelites at the time when events were unfolding. It either called them to action or helped them endure long and difficult periods in their history. As times changed, so did their interpretation of the Scriptures. I am of the firm conviction that the most effective use of the Old Testament text for modern Christians, and, in particular, for

⁴A blessing was given by means of a ritual that a dying father performed in his sick bed. By this ritual a father passed the paternal authority to the first-born son who thereby became the head of the family.

⁵The main error that cost Esau the birthright was his identification with the people of the land. His mother complained because of his love of Hittite women (Gen 26:34-35, 46; 27:46).

Blacks Must Learn From The Israelites

contemporary black Christians, is by paying close attention to its *Sitz im Leben*,⁶ the real life situations that it addressed.

An exegetical study of the Bible must be employed in the black church if the biblical text is to be an effective agent of liberating change in the black community. Black preachers should show how God assured the Israelites' success in a given situation and how that is applicable to current blacks experiencing a similar predicament. They must demonstrate how what they preach is practicable to the real life of their audience. The preachers must inspire their congregations to action in order to ameliorate their prevailing situation.

It is unfortunate that the Bible is widely used in black churches today in ways that serve to keep the huge numbers of blacks living with economic hardship from understanding the roots of their condition. It is by lacking that understanding that blacks are not able to formulate effective strategies to improve their social status among the community of nations. In too many churches, the impassioned recitation of biblical verses, taken out of their original context, operates as a kind of opiate that builds churchgoers up to a state of frenzy that temporarily anesthetizes them from feeling their plight; but does not enlighten them about their problems or show ways to tackle them in a practically realistic way. Why is this the case? Why do so many seminary graduates lead church services in the same unenlightened way after graduation as they did before acquiring seminary training? The problem is two-fold: the seminaries' unfocused mission for training pastors for the church and the students' fake call to the ministry.

⁶The biblical text's setting in its real life; that is, its historical context is very critical in our understanding of its meaning because every text was written to respond to real life's situations that the Israelites were facing at the time of writing. Therefore, not everything in the Bible is applicable to the twenty-first century.

Blacks Must Learn From The Israelites

Ideally, seminaries should teach ministers exegesis in ways that make the biblical text come alive first in its original environment and next in the contemporary situation. In addition, students training for ministry in the black church should be taught, as part of their seminary training, how to adapt those texts to contemporary contexts in the real world where people experience joy, hurt and pain and look to them for help or theological answers. That is the only way people may hear the reading of the biblical text as the word of God. Several reasons account for the seminaries' lack of effective training of the pastors; but in this article we will only explain two of them.

The current state of controversy about the historical-critical method—controversy that infects the teaching of exegesis in seminaries—leaves pastors entering their new ministries uncertain about how to apply the exegetical method to their biblical interpretation. Many graduates just abandon any exegetical approach in their preaching as a result, and emulate TV evangelists who win audiences by charisma and not teaching. They mesmerize their audience with theatricals and not solid scriptural analysis.⁷ This is unfortunate because the Hebrew Bible offers the black community perhaps the most highly relevant model of liberation from racial, political and economic oppression to be found anywhere. The Bible provides what I call the model of the “underdog surge.” This model teaches that any community can liberate itself by formulating a strategy of liberation. The history of Israel fits two Latin proverbs: *Per ardua ad astra*, “Through difficulties [you reach] the stars.” Another Latin axiom that fits the Israelites' surge is: *Magna semper origina parva habent*, “Great things often have small

⁷ Although some do teaching and others are historical-critical exegetes, those mostly emulated do not.

Blacks Must Learn From The Israelites

beginnings.”⁸ Many black churches currently, do not understand the dynamic of the “underdog surge model” that stresses planning and strategy to overcome adversity. Instead, worshipers pray expecting that God will remove their problems, supported by the popular saying that “Prayer can move mountains,” a kind of piety that builds expectations for divine handouts which also generates an underdog mentality, i.e., paralyzing faith that relies on empty prayers that promote inertia.

The second problem retarding the effective training of black pastors is the condition of the student who enters seminary. A survey shows that some, if not most, join the ministry because there was nothing better they could do competitively in the world to eat bread. Thus they fake God’s call, which is the only best option that, upon graduation, would give them status, self-esteem and a salary. And since there is no rigorous examination of the candidate’s call to church ministry, motive for joining the ministry, pre-seminary testing to analyze the candidate’s intelligence and psychological state, many black seminary graduates are not fit for effective ministry in the black church. They only learn how to preach (actually to scream); but not to teach. Most of them are poor church administrators without stewardship skills; church money is often misused or misappropriated, causing mistrust among churchgoers, which results in poor church offering and tithing.

In contrast, the Israelites’ leaders from time immemorial were well trained. To be a rabbi, one had to go through rigorous training in the interpretation of the Torah and Jewish history. The Israelites based their forward move on the basis of their historical circumstances. Long before I

⁸ I enjoyed Latin more because it taught me several ways for self-improvement. These two maxims were my motivational therapies whenever I was discouraged in my work or in my academics.

Blacks Must Learn From The Israelites

heard of the concept of Sankofa,⁹ I had realized in my mind that the Israelites moved forward with their heads tilted backwards. As a community, they recognized that they were underdogs among the nations surrounding them (Deut 26:5b-9).¹⁰ To deal with this stark reality, they used Scriptures in two highly effective ways that placed them either in “a waiting mode” or “an action mode” depending on the circumstances. The waiting mode refers to the way the Israelites read their Scriptures to soothe their emotions and boost their morale to endure cruel social and political situations. The “action mode” was when the Israelites used Scriptures to provide themselves with the self-motivation they needed to take decisive action to liberate themselves.

Some biblical texts taught the Israelites in a hopeless situation to wait on the Lord (Isa 40:31 and Ps 40:1) while other texts gave an apocalyptic perspective that encouraged them to endure and persevere without giving up in the struggle.¹¹ In their apocalyptic imagination the Israelites disguised themselves and the evil powers oppressing them by zoomorphic representations depicting that the good days were at hand. Just before the dark period of the exile, First-

⁹ The Sankofa bird is depicted as a bird flying forward with an egg in the bill of its mouth. Ghanaians of any particular ethnic group regard the Sankofa bird as teaching that a person must not be ashamed to “Go back and fetch it” (i.e., to fetch some reality of life that has been left behind or experienced in the past). So said Mark Lomax as he delivered the Copher lectures in March 2012.

¹⁰ In this creed, the Israelites traced their origin from Jacob, not Abraham or Isaac, as their patriarch. From that one man they claim to have become a nation that ultimately usurped the land of the Canaanites.

¹¹ Cf. the Books of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Revelation in the New Testament, which provide the best example of Scriptures that helped the Israelites to hold on to their faith in times of persecution.

Blacks Must Learn From The Israelites

Isaiah, the pre-exilic prophetic teacher, painted an apocalyptic picture that is still applicable to the modern world. He told his audience that the day was coming when:

The wolf **shall**¹² dwell with the lamb, and the leopard **shall** lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. (7) The cow and the bear shall feed; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. (8) The sucking child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. (9) They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. ... (11) ***In that day***¹³ the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant which is left of his people, from **Assyria**, from **Egypt**, from **Pathros**, from **Ethiopia**, from **Elam**, from **Shinar**, from **Hamath**, and from the coastlands of the sea. (Isa 11:6-11).

The belief in a blissful future was cathartic to the Israelites in times of inescapable crisis. It enabled them to wait (Heb. *qawah*) on the LORD in the face of a protracted struggle with no end in sight. By waiting on the LORD the Israelites placed themselves in a waiting state where they did not retreat from their resolve to move forward when conditions changed on their own.¹⁴ Africans have a saying, *Nkonke kuyapela; ekungapeli kuyahlola*; "Everything must

¹² It should be noticed that apocalyptic literatures refer to the future that is immediate or remote; but a future that is assured to happen only if the believers held to their faith in God.

¹³ See especially Ecclesiastes 3:1-8.

¹⁴ Some things just happen without human hands: see Daniel 2:3, 45 where a rock was cut from the mountain without human hands and it crushed the iron, the bronze and clay statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had established.

Blacks Must Learn From The Israelites

come to an end; what does not end signifies a bad omen.”¹⁵ In their wisdom literatures, the Israelites summed this truth repeated in several places in the book of Ecclesiastes.

Exodus 1:8-14; 2:23-25 illustrates the Israelites' use of scripture to provide themselves with the motivation they needed to take action. In Exodus 1:5-8 we learn that the Israelites who went to Egypt were seventy in number. Joseph, already in Egypt by God's mysterious ways, (Gen 45:4-5) negotiated with the king of Egypt for good land to be made available to the Israelites. But a long time afterwards, Joseph and all his brothers died and all their generation (Exod 1:8). In 1:9-10 we read:

Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, “Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, [*and, if war befall us, they join our enemies*] and fight against us...] *and escape from the land.*”

The Israelites countered Pharaoh's scheme by the use of the contrastive particle we-, “but,” as the text reads:

But the descendants of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong; so that the land was filled with them. (Exod 1:7).

To counter the vicissitudes of their political circumstances, the Israelites did not simply rely on God's supernatural intervention. They, instead, formulated a strategy by which they utilized the sperm and the egg/womb that God had already given them. They multiplied in accordance with the

¹⁵ This saying is taken from the Ndebele (an ethnic group in the south of Zimbabwe) wisdom sayings.

Blacks Must Learn From The Israelites

Priestly's central theme of the Hebrew Scriptures: to "multiply and fill the land [of whatever country they were in]." ¹⁶ To fulfill God's promise to Abraham that he would be the father of a multitude, the Israelites played the numbers game: they rapidly multiplied. But the more they increased, the more they intimidated their host country, Egypt. The Priestly (P) writer's story of creation includes the population increase to fill the land as a divine mandate. Thus when God created *adam*, "humans," P says that God blessed them and said: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the land [*not the earth*]." Reading the Scriptures against their environment helps to explain some enigmatic texts. For example, the preference for sons to daughters becomes self-evident. It was propelled more by the military agenda than by male chauvinistic prejudice. ¹⁷

The Israelite strategy for the conquest of Egypt appears to have been simple. Flood the land with the Israelite population and intimidate the natives into submission. If that does not work, then use the population's might to fight and dispossess them. To achieve either of these two objectives, the Israelites multiplied rapidly. The sperm was so precious that it was not to be spilled deliberately on the ground. ¹⁸ Such an action was punishable by instant death as happened to Onan (Gen 38:9). The

¹⁶The Heb. word *'erets* should, in many texts be translated "land" and not "world." The Israelites were interested in the land of Canaan and not in the world in general. See also Mafico, "The Land and the African Context for Theology," *Journal of Interdenominational Theological Center*, Vol. 37:1-2 (2011), 63.

¹⁷Men, not women, went to war. The king won battles by the number of male troops that he had.

¹⁸ Reading Gen 38:9-11, we notice that Onan was a very young boy when he was asked to impregnate Tamar. Judah told Tamar to wait as a widow until Shelah grew up. By that time, Tamar would have been too old for the young boy. But as long as her womb could still bear a baby, it needed a sperm from whomsoever, young or old.

Blacks Must Learn From The Israelites

interplay between the sperm and the egg/womb resulted in an Israelite population explosion in Egypt. The Egyptians discerned the Israelites' military strategy and countered it with brutal oppression. But that did not stop Israel's population increase.¹⁹ The Egyptians were, therefore, forced to introduce a program of male infanticide imposed on the Hebrews (Exod 1:13-14). Reading the Bible against its *Sitz im Leben* enables the reader to realize that the Egyptians did not oppress the Israelites without a good reason. They oppressed them because they were engaged in a stealthy strategy for supremacy and empire.

The story of the exodus taught the Israelites a new lesson about God: that Yahweh was a coach or commander of the armies of Israel, but was not a deity who fought wars for them on his own (as they prayed on their knees). The Hebrew Scriptures are replete with references to the exodus motif (see Isa 43:16-21; 51:9-11, *passim*). It was recast in later times to teach the Israelites that being chosen by God, or being God's people, did not necessarily mean that they would live an easy life or simply be handed the good things they desired and requested in their fervent prayers. The Israelites were taught that they had to work for their own survival, using the talents and strategies that God had given them.²⁰

In contrast, while the Israelites learned from their history, the blacks seem to have a tendency to forget the lessons of their past. They have forgotten that in the American Negro's struggle for liberation from slavery and

¹⁹Exod 1:12 reads, "But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites."

²⁰The question God asked Moses in Exod 4:2 is very telling, "What is that in your hands?" The Israelites must depend on what they already have; not what they wish they had, in order to liberate themselves.

Blacks Must Learn From The Israelites

racial prejudice, they, like the Israelites, interpreted Scriptures both in a way that gave them motivation to endure oppression for a time and also in a way that enabled them to act in their own behalf when the time was right. How the Negroes interplayed endurance and action is illuminating.

To be in a waiting mode in order to endure pain, the slaves relied on apocalyptic texts. For example, because they often had no shoes and robes to wear, and because their movements were stringently restricted, they sang of a time when they would all have shoes and robes and would walk all over heaven as free people:

“I got some shoes. You got shoes. All God’s children got some shoes. When I get to heav’n gonna put on my shoes and walk **all over** God’s heaven.”²¹

There would be no discrimination or restrictions in heaven. **All** God’s children: black, yellow, or white would have shoes. The Negro slaves drew upon their traditional African beliefs as they sang this song. Africans, by tradition, did not believe in death and extinction. They believed in the living dead, which carried the notion of death and spiritual continuity. “In that great getting’ up morning, fare ye well,”²² the slave and the master will become equal. However, with God who often hid his face²³ there are some things the slaves would never understand until “By and by when the morning comes.”²⁴

Secondly, the Negro slaves interpreted Scripture in ways that energized them for revolution. They had faith that

²¹ Johnny Cash, “I Got Shoes” www.mp3lyrics.org. 1994.

²² Mark Gray, “Great Getting up Morning” from the Album *Tell Me the Story of Jesus*. MP3 Album September 13, 2010.

²³ Mic 3:4; Ps 22:24.

²⁴ “One cannot fail to see the correlation of this thinking with Pauline theology in 1 Corinthians 13:12, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully...””

Blacks Must Learn From The Israelites

someday they would overcome their troubles, despite no tangible proof at the time to support this belief.²⁵ They realized that, like Daniel, they might have to go through the fiery furnace, but eventually God would rescue them.

In such times when the Negroes were thrust in some inescapable predicament, they, like the Israelites, resorted to Scriptures and lamented: "He delivered Daniel from de lions' den, Jonah from de belly of de whale, And de Hebrew children from de fiery furnace, And why not every man?"²⁶ In singing this song, the Negro slaves affirmed that there were times when troubles and crises were unavoidable; but God would one day rescue them in a miraculous way. This lament helped them to stay focused on the problem and faithful to the God who would work with them in his own time. Thus, instead of surrendering and doing nothing, the Negroes stubbornly adhered to their faith that one day they would be free and the enemy would be defeated. The same resistance stance is found during the struggle for liberation from racial prejudice that undergirded the segregation of the Jim Crow era.

Negro slaves were also invigorated for revolution even by their view of Jesus. They viewed Jesus, not as the peaceful lamb of God for sacrifice for the sins of the world, or as a peaceful king entering Jerusalem riding on a donkey. Rather, they saw Jesus as the divine conquering warrior: "King Jesus seated on a milk-white horse with sword and shield in hand..."²⁷ "Ride on conquering King,"²⁷ This is a blatant

²⁵ "We Will Understand it Better By and By," *African American Heritage Hymnal*, GIA Publications, Inc. (2001), Hymn #418.

²⁶ Manic Street Preachers. "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel." http://actionext.com/names_m/manic_street_preachers_lyrics/didnt_my_lord_deliver_daniel.html.

²⁷ Ride on, Jesus, ride (Gregory Hamilton) Marcel West, "Ride on Conquering King." <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCIFctAExzY>. 1991.

Blacks Must Learn From The Israelites

portrayal of Jesus in baalistic imagery.²⁸ Instead of riding on the cloud,²⁹ Jesus rode on the white horse armed for war. Like the Israelites, the Negroes believed: "The God I serve is a man of war"; a mythical depiction of God as Yahweh *seba'oth*, (Yahweh, the armies of Israel). It is clear here that the Negro slaves viewed the Bible not just as the written word of God, but also as the living, energizing force of liberation that was also available to them during the struggle for liberation from racial segregation. Regrettably, this is not the view of the black church today.

The contemporary black church in its practicing of Christianity does not draw on the energizing legacy of the Israelites as depicted in their Scriptures. This, in my view, has created a black community crippled by its own spirituality. While black people still suffer from innumerable forms of oppression, the focus in the black churches worldwide has become primarily liberation from sin and not from racial prejudice with its inherent evil that seems set to cause blacks to sin and go to jail. Unless the poor environment in which the black children grow are improved, ecstatic sermons against sin are in vain.

The Hebrew Scriptures and black history do not teach a lesson about ignoring the pain of social injustice, focusing primarily on minor moral matters or even self-numbing platitudes. They show how the Israelites never gave up their drive to achieve a vision that was real and worth fighting and dying for. Blacks leaders serving the black church all over the world have a responsibility to show to their congregations some examples of this active, living faith that

²⁸ In Psalm 68:33, Yahweh is depicted in the epithet of Baal. Jesus, the Son of God is here clearly portrayed in the imagery of Baal. See F.M. Cross. *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press (1973), 157.

²⁹ In Ps 68:33 and Deut 33: 26, Yahweh is depicted as Baal because he rides on the clouds as his chariots. See also note 27 above.

Blacks Must Learn From The Israelites

prevailed in centuries and millennia past and can be tapped today in dynamic, practical and ongoing ways to overcome all forms of oppression.

Blacks Must Learn From The Israelites

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