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Blacks and Jews in Historical Interaction: The Biblical/African Experience

The subject before us for consideration is part of a larger one, in the light of which it must be studied and only in the light of which it can be understood. That larger subject is: "Blacks and Jews in Historical Interaction: The Biblical/Black Experience." But having stated the larger subject of which the immediate one is only a part takes us short distance in dealing with it. Before real treatment can be given it is necessary first of all to establish a foundation upon which a superstructure can be erected. The foundation consists in confirming the existence of Black peoples in the Biblical world with whom Jews could have interacted; it cannot be taken for granted that there were. Once such a confirmation is made, then and then only may the presentation proceed. For this reason the paper consists of two parts, the foundation and the superstructure.

The existence of black peoples in the Biblical world, especially of so-called Negroes, with whom ancient Jews could have interacted, is a matter of great interest, discussion, debate, and of confusing, contradictory opinions. Within modern times, in Western civilization, two diametrically opposed views have developed, with several sub-views between two extreme positions. From the introduction of Blacks, especially those who came to be called Negroes, into the consciousness of Western Europeans around 1450 C.E. until roughly 1800 C.E. there was one view rather commonly held in both the popular and scholarly mind. This view was that the Hamites referred to in the Bible were peoples black in color, and generally regarded as what were called Negroes. It may be called the old, traditional Hamite view; and was based upon the Genesis account of Noah's sons,¹ particularly Ham-Canaan, and upon the so-called Table of Nations in Genesis 10 and I Chronicles 1, which lists Ham and his descendants. At times the view was associated with Noah's curse of Canaan, interpreted more frequently to be a curse of Ham and his descendants, at times not, on the basis of which curse the Hamites were destined to be slaves of the families of Shem and Japheth, and to be black in color — despite the fact that in the Biblical accounts Ham is not cursed, nor is color mentioned or even implied unless of course the word Ham in Hebrew meant black at the times the stories and the Table originated.

Additionally, although a rival view came into existence around 1800 C.E., this traditional Hamite view continued to be held; and associating

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¹Genesis 9.

Hamites with Blacks/Negroes especially, and further associating these peoples with Noah's curse of (Ham)-Canaan, it was employed to justify the enslavement of black Africans. This use was made to the fullest between the year 1800 and the American Civil War. But the emancipation of Blacks from slavery did not terminate the usage. The practice has continued in America and elsewhere, at times receiving greater emphasis than at others, as in the United States of America during the years immediately after the 1954 Supreme Court decision in regard to segregation in education. Some traditionalist, conservative "Christians" resurrected the view and employed it as a divine justification for the continued segregation of Blacks. Twenty years later the view is still adhered to by many.

Dissociated from the curse of (Ham)-Canaan, and/or in spite of the association, the traditional Hamite view was and still is used in favor of black peoples including the so-called Negroes.² According to this usage which has been made by some Whites and by numerous black individuals and groups, the Biblical Hamites were Negroes and included the Hamites listed in the Biblical Table of Nations, notably: Egyptians, African Cushites (Ethiopians), and Asiatic Cushites of South Asia, Mesopotamia, Phoenicia, and Canaan. These peoples, taken to be black in color, are regarded as the founders of the great ancient civilizations of the Middle East. And, to be sure, according to the Biblical accounts, Jews were in interaction with all of them.

Over against the traditional view, whether or not associated with the curse of (Ham)-Canaan, there came into being around 1800, as has been stated, a new Hamite hypothesis or view.³ It dissociates the so-called Negroes from the Hamites, removes color from the criteria for determining racial identity, and regards black non-Negroids to be white — Caucasoid or Europid Blacks. It is this view or hypothesis which came to characterize the so-called sciences of anthropology, ethnology, and kindred studies, but also critical historical-literary Biblical studies. And just as anthropology and ethnology removed Negroes from the Biblical world so did critical study of the Bible remove Negroes from the Bible and Biblical history — except for an occasional Negro individual who could only have been a slave. Thus today in critical Biblical studies, as in anthropology and ethnology, the ancient Egyptians, Cushites, in fact all the Biblical Hamites, were white; so-called Negroes did not figure at all in Biblical history, and there could not have been interaction between Blacks and Jews if by Blacks is meant so-called Negroes.

He who would build the superstructure called for by the title of this paper is thus faced with the further task of choosing between Scylla and Charybdis, between two diametrically opposed views: one that allows for an interaction, one that does not.

² See the book *Yaradee: A Plea for Africa*, by Frederick Freeman (Philadelphia, 1836), and also histories of the Afro-Americans written by Black authors from 1840 to the present.

³ For a discussion of the new Hamite hypothesis, see Edith R. Sanders, "The Hamite Hypothesis," *Journal of African History*, X (1969), pp. 521-532.

In an endeavor to find the truth of the matter the reader undertook research which now permits of rather well supported conclusions.⁴ Making use of what he regarded to be tenable supports for the traditional Hamite views; and supports supplied by adherents to the newer view, including critical Biblical scholars, he assembled several categories of evidence that testify to a Black including Negro presence in the Biblical world. This Black presence was to be found in Egypt, African Cush, Asiatic Cush, and in eastern Mediterranean lands.

For Egypt-African Cush the categories of evidence are: archaeological data, consisting of Egyptian-Cushite written records, paintings, sculptures, and skeletal remains; modern historical works; critical Biblical scholarly works; personal names and adjectives; opinions of modern travelers, archaeologists and anthropologists; ancient Greek-Roman legends and historical writings; works of early Christian commentators; and ancient Jewish writings, including the Bible, Babylonian Talmud, Midrashim, and legends. Categories of evidence for Asiatic Cush are: writings of ancient Greeks; modern historical works; archaeological data; and ancient Jewish works, the same as above. And for the Mediterranean lands, archaeological data and modern historical works are the categories.

The evidences testify that, according to American sociological definitions of Negro, the ancient Egyptians were Negroes; that according to modern anthropological and ethnological definitions the ancient Egyptian population included a large percentage of so-called Negroes, possibly 25% as an average across the long period of time that was ancient Egyptian history. They indicate that the African Cushites (Ethiopians) were predominantly of Negroid identity; and that Blacks, including Negroes, during Biblical times, inhabited parts of Asia from the Indus River Valley westwards into Elam-Persia, Mesopotamia, parts of Arabia, Phoenicia, Canaan, Crete and Greece. Further, the evidences indicate that, *in the main*, wherever in the Bible Hamites are referred to there were peoples who today in the Western world would be classified as Black, and Negroid. Additionally, they establish a Black element within the ancient Hebrew-Israelite Jewish population itself.

With respect to the superstructure that may now be erected, it may be done in several ways. This essay proceeds by pointing to interactions across the years of Biblical history in chronological sequence, beginning with the prehistoric period. Materials used will be mainly conditions and events of history as these are set forth in the Bible, supplemented by archaeology, and "Legends of the Jews."

First of all, it is to be noted that in prehistoric times, before the coming of the Hebrews to Canaan, and also during the time of Hebrew-Israelite-Jewish occupation, Negroid peoples lived in the land, apart from any black element in the Hebrew-Israelite-Jewish population.⁵

⁴ See the essay by the reader entitled "The Black Man in the Biblical World," published in the Spring issue 1974 of *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*.

⁵ See Anati, Emmanuel, *Palestine Before the Hebrews*, page 322; and McCown, Chester C., *The Ladder of Progress in Palestine*, pages 130, 142 f., 166.

Shortly after 2000 B.C.E., a time when even new Hamite hypothesis advocates claim the so-called Negro first appeared in history, the Patriarchal period began. At the beginning of this period, according to one Biblical tradition, the patriarch Abraham migrated from what later came to be called Chaldea, a land occupied by Cushites. Jewish legend has it that Abraham and his people suffered persecution at the hands of none other than Nimrod, the Cushite founder of Mesopotamian civilization and culture.⁶ According to another tradition which is not necessarily in conflict with the other, Abraham's starting place was Haran in northwestern Mesopotamia. From this region he migrated into Canaan where he moved among Hamites and non-Hamites, remaining aloof from all, and refusing to permit intermarriage. From predominantly Hamite Canaan he moved to Egypt where despite the designs of a Hamite pharaoh upon Sarah the tribal blood remained pure. Nevertheless the patriarch himself produced a son by an Egyptian woman who herself later on obtained an Egyptian wife for the son. Under Isaac and Jacob, according to the prevailing tradition, there was no regular intermarriage with the Hamitic Canaanites. But in Canaan Esau and Judah engaged in marriage with Canaanite women;⁷ and, whatever were the Hebrew tribes that migrated to and settled in Egypt during the patriarchal age, in that land occurred a significant infusion of black blood. Joseph married an Egyptian wife to whom were born two of the more important Hebrew tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh. Apart from and in addition to the interactions occasioned by such a marriage as that of Joseph, there were interactions arising from the Hebrew state of affairs during the period of Egyptian sojourn. Whether or not the Hebrew settlement was related to the Hyksos invasion and occupation of Egypt, the first years saw a favorable position. The latter years saw a state of oppression, with concomitant reactions, and it was these that the Jews best remembered. But more remains to be said about the infusion of black blood into the Hebrew tribe or tribes in Egypt, through Moses and his family, with all the implications for Black/Negro-Jewish interactions. The book of Exodus records Moses' escape from Egypt to Midian where the daughters of Jethro, on the basis of his appearance, mistakenly identified him to be an Egyptian, and where Moses married Zipporah, one of Jethro's daughters. Then the book of Numbers states that Moses had married a Cushite woman who could very well have been none other than a Cushite Zipporah herself, Cushites having been inhabitants of Arabia and adjacent regions as well as Africa. Josephus, and Jewish spinners of legends were later to say much about Moses' marriage to a Cushite woman in spite of some rabbinic explanations to the contrary.⁸ Furthermore, there are good grounds for believing that the tribal family of

⁶ See, for example, *The Talmud*, by H. Polano, pages 30 ff. for one such story.

⁷ Genesis 36, 38.

⁸ Josephus, Flavius, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book II, Chapter 10, translated by William Whiston. For a contrary view see Ginzberg, L., *Legends of the Jews*, VI, 90, as referred by Henry S. Noerdlinger, *Moses and Egypt*, page 70.

Moses was of black Cushite origin. Support for the opinion comes in the form of Egyptian names carried by members of the family as well as by other Hebrews: Moses, Phinehas, Hophni, Merari, Pashur, etc., especially Phinehas, which means Black, Negro, Nubian, etc.⁹ This last name it is to be observed was the name of a grandson of Aaron, and was carried by members of the priesthood through the period of the Babylonian exile.

Still further, indications of interactions between Black Africans and possibly Hebrew tribes in Canaan during the patriarchal period lie in the Tel-el-Amarna correspondence. According to one communication Black/Negro troops in the Egyptian army were plundering the community because they had not received their pay.¹⁰

During the period of the conquest and settlement of Canaan, the period of the judges, interactions between Hamites-Jews are to be seen in the several Biblical accounts that have to do with relations between Hebrews and Canaanites and between Hebrews and other Cushites. In these accounts there are directives against intermarriage and to exterminate, contrary to which there were co-existence, intermarriage, and the beginnings of amalgamation of the Canaanites. There is also the recounting of an invasion and oppression by a Mesopotamian ruler with the name Cushanrishathaim — the “Cushite of double infamy.” And toward the end of the preiod pristine Hebrew religion was Canaanized-Africanized, and thus polluted, by fertility practices instituted by Eli’s Egyptian-Cushite named priest-sons, Phinehas and Hophni.¹¹

For the period of the United Monarchy interactions are to be noted in the accounts of relations between the Israelites-Judeans and Canaanites and Phoenicians; in the account of the Cushite messenger in David’s army;¹² in the accounts of Solomon’s dealings with the king of Egypt and marriage to an Egyptian princess; in the narrative about the Queen of Sheba; and in the accounts of Hadad’s and Jeroboam’s flight to protection under the King of Egypt.

References to interactions during the two hundred-year history of the two kingdoms are in the several narratives of Jeroboam’s return from Egypt, Shishak’s invasion of Judah-Israel, and the invasion of Zerah, the Cushite. Additionally, they appear in the narratives and oracles of the 8th century B.C.E. recorded in Kings-Chronicles and in the books of Amos and Hosea. Within the prophetic books are Amos’ comparison of Yahweh’s equal regard for Israelites and Cushites (Ethiopians, Negroes);¹³ and Hosea’s castigation of Israel for her wishy-washy trust in Assyria and Egypt instead of trust in Yahweh. Possibly also inter-

⁹ Albright, W. F., *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, pages 193 f.; *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan*, page 165.

¹⁰ Pritchard, James B., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, page 232.

¹¹ I Samuel 2.

¹² II Samuel 18.

¹³ 9:7.

actions are to be seen in the account of the repopulation of Israel with outsiders by the Assyrians.¹⁴

For the remainder of the 8th century, that is, from 721 B.C.E. to the end of the century, interactions between Blacks and Judeans may be viewed in clearest light. This period was that of the early years of the 25th Egyptian Dynasty, the Cushite or Ethiopian. In the Bible itself the view is provided by the book of Isaiah son of Amoz, with its several references to the Egyptians-Cushites.¹⁵ In content the references range from complimentary descriptions of Cushites to warnings against trust in Egyptian-Cushite military strength, and prophecies that the Assyrians will make of the Egyptians-Cushites captives of war. Also indicative of Black-Judean interactions is the narrative of Chaldean intrigue in Judah toward the end of the century by Merodach-baladan; and the other anti-foreigner oracles in the book. Additionally, during the period 727-700 B.C.E. both Israel and Judah were allies of Egypt-Cush.

Interactions between Blacks and Judeans during the period 700-582-570 B.C.E. were both internal within the Judean community, and external outside the community. These interactions may be seen especially in the books of II Kings and II Chronicles, and in the prophetic books of Zephaniah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Zephaniah himself is said to have been the son of one Cushite,¹⁶ and his family tree is traced back to a certain Hezekiah whom some Biblical scholars identify with Hezekiah the Judean king.¹⁷ Assuming, as do several Biblical scholars of note, that Zephaniah was a black Judean,¹⁸ and that his ancestry included King Hezekiah, Blacks were among the population, and black blood flowed in the veins of Judah's kings.

The book of Jeremiah makes mention of a Jehudi, great-grandson of one Cushite, who was sent by the princes of Judah to Baruch, Jeremiah's scribe, and who read Jeremiah's oracles dictated to Baruch in the hearing of King Jehoiakim.¹⁹ Additionally it contains an adage with respect to the Cushite's color as being unchangeable; narratives concerning a Cushite friend and helper of Jeremiah, Ebed-Melech; oracles against foreign nations including Egypt and other Hamites; and narratives about the fall of Judah to the Chaldeans and about Judean communities in exile in various parts of Egypt. It may be noted that the references to Blacks in the book of Jeremiah indicate that there was a Black element in the Judean population; that black Cushites were sufficiently well known that they could furnish an analogy between unchangeable color and behavior; and that members of the court included black Cushites.

¹⁴ II Kings 17:24 ff.

¹⁵ Chapters 18, 19, 20, 30, and 31.

¹⁶ Zephaniah 1:1.

¹⁷ A survey of Biblical *Introductions* reveals the following: E. Sellin wrote in 1923 that Zephaniah is generally held to have been a prophet of royal blood; among those who support the view are J. A. Bewer, R. K. Harrison, E. A. Leslie, R. H. Pfeiffer, and Charles L. Taylor, Jr.

¹⁸ Some who identify the prophet as a "Negro" are: Aage Bentzen, J. A. Bewer, Curt Kuhl, E. Sellin and A. Weiser, but note the contrary view of Georg Fohrer in his revision of Sellin's *Introduction*.

¹⁹ Chapter 36:14 ff.

Further, and interesting to note incidentally, is the name of one of the places where Judean exiles settled in Egypt — Tahpanhes, "Fort of the Negro."

The book of Ezekiel, as does the book of Jeremiah, contains oracles against Hamites, including Phoenicians, Egyptians, and Cushites. Like the book of Jeremiah also, it permits a view of Judah in exile, in Chaldea, where the Judeans lived under rather favorable circumstances. At the same time it asserts that Judah's origins were mixed, and criticizes Judah for her whoredoms with the Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Egyptians.

And the historical books of Kings-Chronicles narrate the fall of Judah, the capture of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple — the most tragic experience for Judeans-Jews in Old Testament history, at the hands of the Chaldeans. These events made for the most hostile interactions between the Judans-Jews and a people regarded as black — not only at the time, but for times to come, whenever they were remembered. In the meantime, between 609-586 B.C.E., Egypt was alternately an antagonist-protagonist with respect to Judah.

With the entrance of the Persians into Judean-Jewish life in 538 B.C.E., a new era of interactions began. In the Persian-Elamite population, and in the Persian army were Blacks.²⁰ Relations between the two peoples were good; so good in fact that someone has remarked that only in the instance of the ancient Persians did the ancient Jews have only good to say. But the Bible, supplemented by extra-Biblical materials such as the Elephantine papyri and Jewish midrashim and legends, provides still more insights into Black-Jewish interactions during the Persian period which for Jews may be said to have lasted from 540 B.C.E. until the beginning of the Greek Period under Alexander the Great in 332 B.C.E. There are the hopes and aspirations for a going forth from Babylon back to Palestine, and the general universalism voiced by a Second Isaiah; there are the lofty universalistic passages of a Trito-Isaiah that envision a time when Assyria and Egypt will be accepted on par with Israel by Yahweh, and when Yahweh's temple shall be a house of prayer for all peoples. At the same time there are passages such as the anti-Chaldean Psalm 137, and the Trito-Isaianic passages that envision the day when Blacks and others shall serve Israel.²¹ There are also the interactions revealed by the Elephantine papyri with their record of a Jewish community in Upper Egypt that has suffered at the hands of native Egyptians. Perhaps most significantly of all, there are the anti-Black traditions and legends that began to come into existence at least by the time of Ezra, around 400 B.C.E., many of which were recorded in the Babylonian Talmud and in the Midrashim. These are the "Ham" stories, and legends about the origin of black Jews whether in Palestine or in Africa. And here it is to be

²⁰ See, for example Childe, V. G., *The Most Ancient East*, page 144; Olmstead, A. T., *History of the Persian Empire*, pages 238 ff.; M. Dieulafoy, *The Acropolis of Susa* (English title); J. A. de Gobineau; and the ancient histories of G. Maspero, and George Rawlinson.

²¹ Isaiah 60, 61.

noted that the stock of "Ham" stories continued to grow, after the Biblical period, on beyond the time when a historical gap between East and West was created by Islamic hegemony over the Near and Middle East, and westward over parts of the Mediterranean world.²²

Not to be excluded for insights into Black-Jewish relations during the Persian period are the numerous particularistic and universalistic passages in the prophetic books of Joel, II Zechariah, chapters 9-14 of the book, and Malachi. Generally speaking, Jewish attitudes in these books include extremes of both particularism and universalism.

Between the end of the Persian period and the writing of the latest books in the Bible interactions between Blacks and Jews are to be seen in the books of Maccabees wherein Jewish history during the Greek period is recounted; in the Gospel according to Matthew, with its narrative of the "Flight into Egypt"; in the book of Acts with its accounts of Jews present from all the world in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, of Niger among the followers of Jesus at Antioch in Syria, and of Philip's conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch; and in the writings of Josephus. The books of Maccabees show Jewish relations with Egypt. Matthew depicts Egypt as still a haven for Jews persecuted in the homeland, yet tying residence in Palestine with coming out of Egypt. The book of Acts lists adherents to Judaism from countries inhabited by Blacks, and indicates that black people were among the early members of the Christian Church. And Josephus, who recounts the history of his people, including much about Moses and Cushites, goes into lengthy dissertations about the provenance of the Jews and their affinities with the Egyptians.²³

Reviewing and summarizing, there were Black-Jewish interactions during the entire course of Biblical history. These interactions may be seen in the Bible, supplemented by archaeological data, the works of Josephus, and by extra-Biblical Jewish traditions, Biblical interpretations such as appear in the Babylonian Talmud and Midrashim, and legends. In the main, except for the relatively few universalistic passages in the Bible, the reactions, which are from the Jewish side only, are negative in nature. And in the Babylonian Talmud, Midrashim, and legends the reactions are wholly anti-Black, despite the conclusion that Blacks formed a part of the ancient Hebrew-Israelite-Jewish community.

²² On the dates for the Talmud and Midrashim, one may consult I. Epstein (in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*), who gives a brief bibliography. An excellent discussion is presented in *White Over Black* by Winthrop D. Jordan; and there are numerous collections of interpretations and legends in L. Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews*, and in books by S. Baring-Gould, H. Polano, and Samuel Rapaport.

²³ *Against Apion* (Whiston's translation).