

BY DAVID T. SHANNON*

Roots: Some Theological Reflections

Introduction

The purpose of this message is to share with you some theological reflections in Alex Haley's historical account of his family, entitled *ROOTS*. The editors of *Newsweek* see this saga as simply the tracing of one individual's ancestry seven generations to a small west African village, the account of the life of Kunta Kinte and his children's children down to Haley's own birth.

A. O. Edmons in *Library Journal* sees *ROOTS* as "a chronicle of one black family, a panorama of black life in Africa and America, a fascinating account of how one finds his personal past."

Jason Berry in *Nation* sees *ROOTS* as one of the great creations of American literature and predicts that like *ROOTS*, Kunta Kinte will become "an Everyman, but unlike any allegorical figure in our written culture." Berry sees in *ROOTS*, "illustrated in deep detail, the historical patterns of slave life . . . beneath the chronicles of white America, the razing heart and tenacious history of a people in captivity."

James Baldwin, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, though detracting by what he terms Haley's flamboyant Gothic fiction and cursory treatment of his most recent ancestors, states: "the passion of Haley's narrative, the sweep of its concept and its wealth of largely neglected material elevate *ROOTS* to an event of social importance—a book that is bold in concept and ardent in execution, one that will reach millions of people and alter the way we see ourselves."

This brief survey of the review of *ROOTS* attests to its literary qualities and significant historical content. They convey the general consensus that Haley's book is a significant work of art. His historical account of his family's history meets the criteria of great literature—it is universal in its appeal and timeless in its theme. Its characters are well drawn and presented in careful detail and vitality. His writing style is clear, coherent and precise. However, there seems to me a more important dimension of *ROOTS* which these reviews have not addressed: a theological significance in this saga of an American family.

O. T. Parallels: ABRAHAM-Kuna

The genre of family saga reminds me of the Old Testament Patriarchs. Although Haley's saga does not use the Old Testament as his model, a typology can be made. Abraham the father, the man of vision and hope, the man who was the father of a great nation is the first of the Old

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Testament patriarchs. He left his family, his friends, his country and traveled to a far country.

Kunta's obedience, courage and faith are extraordinary, just as Abraham's were. They are indices of his personhood. His obedience is demonstrated in his refusal to deny his family, country, his tradition, and his God. Kunta obeyed the voice within. He was obedient to what it meant to be human—he was obedient to what it meant to be a son of Allah, of God. He was obedient to the hope that the shackles of slavery would not imprison his mind. He parallels Abraham's obedience as found in Genesis 22:1-4. The writer states: "Abraham went out as the Lord had told him."

Like Abraham, Kunta was also a man of courage. His constant attempts to escape are pictures of daring fidelity to belief in freedom. Although he knew the odds were against him, he tried anyhow. The picture of Kunta is foreign to the typical portrait of the docile, ignorant slave. Kunta could have uttered David Walker's impassioned plea:

"Yea, would I meet death with avidity—far! far! in preference to such servile submission to the murderous hands of tyrants. God will not suffer us always to be oppressed. Our sufferings will come to an end in spite of all the Americans this side of eternity."—*Walker's Appeal*, pp. 25-26.

Abraham's courage is seen in his confrontation with God for Sodom. He put their safety first (Genesis 18:22-33). Kunta's obedience and courage were undergirded by faith, just like Abraham's. Throughout the saga Kunta is seen as a man of deep faith. He prayed constantly, and even when confronted with disbelievers he persevered in his faith.

Like Abraham, Kunta was a venerable patriarch. Abraham's faith is the reason Israel called him Father; beyond biological linkage they saw his affirmation of God as the key to his life and his history. To Abraham was given the promise of land, prosperity and posterity. Kunta did not have the experience with God that Abraham had, but in his heart was placed the vision of freedom. This was a dream that he never forgot!

O. T. Parallel: ISAAC-Kizzi

The second person in this typological study is Kizzi, the daughter of Kunta. Her role is more dramatic than her biblical counterpart, Isaac. In the Hebrew patriarchal narratives Isaac is passive and more of a background figure. The most dramatic element recorded about him was his witness to his father's demonstration of faith as recorded in Genesis 22. This is significant because although Kizzi's role in the Kinte saga (although more assertive) focuses upon the believability of her father's faith, Kizzi—"the one who's going to stay put"—fulfilled the meaning of her name in a symbolic rather than a physical sense. When her father named her he was hoping that she would never be sold—that she would "stay put" with them. However, as it developed she was sold, but she was the strong force in keeping Kunta's dream alive. She never forgot the words he shared with her. Just as Abraham must have shared his test from God on top of Mt. Moriah with Isaac, Kunta must have shared Kizzi's

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naming ceremony with her later in life—a ceremony begun centuries prior in the village of Jaffure in Gambia, West Africa.

Kizzi kept the tradition alive. She was the link in the saga. Just as Isaac must be seen as the connecting of the patriarchal narratives, Kizzi, the woman of strong determination, was the one to keep Kunta's dream alive, even to stabilizing Chicken George, the Jacob of the Kunta clan.

O.T. Parallel: JACOB-Chicken George

The similarity between Jacob and Chicken George is amazing as well as amusing. Both struggled with the claims of sonship: Jacob, because he was the second born, and Chicken George because he was the illegitimate child born of sexual assault. Both are ambitious—Jacob struggles to inherit his brother's birthright—his struggle with Laban, his father-in-law. Chicken George as a climber. He finally succeeded in becoming chief cock trainer, ousting the man who taught him. He later confronted his white father in his struggle for freedom. He saw that chicken fighting could be manipulated to his own advantage—remember Jacob.

Both Jacob and Chicken George took long journeys; both returned for reconciliation to their families and final restoration of peace in the community. When the family reached Henning, Tennessee, Chicken George was there, having purchased their freedom and planned their escape. The reunion here is similar to Jacob's meeting with Esau as recorded in Genesis 33.

O. T. Parallel: JOSEPH-Tom

The Old Testament parallel continues in that Tom, the son of Chicken George, is the man of wisdom. Like Joseph, he demonstrates the virtues of the wise person; he sees meaning and purpose in an apparently hopeless situation. He endures temptation—he does not repay evil with evil—when given an opportunity to strike back he refuses. Like Joseph, he looked for the higher purpose. Even when the family wanted to be exclusive and dismiss Little George, the poor white boy, he refused and included him as a member of the family. He, like Kunta, Kizzi and Chicken George, are the patriarchal deliverers, in accordance with Old Testament patriarchal narratives.

Especially in the character of Tom do we see the characteristics of the person of wisdom. Tom suggests that the way of good is the use of one's own resources and one's own ingenuity; although Chicken George was able to beat the system through devious ways (he reminds us of Jacob, the supplanter, the trickster), that is not the way of wisdom. Tom's wisdom becomes the dominant influence. He demonstrates *strength* that comes within; *discernment* that perceives reality, yet with hope; *courage* that persists in spite of constant danger.

Further Reflections

To what effect is a comparison between the Hebrew patriarchs and Alex Haley's ancestors? Old Testament scholars suggest that Israel's storytellers kept their history alive to give them a sense of continuity with

the past. They were to be reminded of their roots. Listen to a prescription of an old worship ritual:

When you come into the land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance and have taken possession of it, and live in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land that the Lord your God gives you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place which the Lord your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there. And you shall go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him, 'I declare this day to the Lord your God that I have come into the land which the Lord swore to our fathers to give us. Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down before the altar of the Lord your God.

And you shall make response before the Lord your God, 'A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the Lord the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which thou, O Lord, has given me. And you shall set it down before the Lord your God, and worship before the Lord your God; and you shall rejoice in all the good which the Lord your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you (Deut. 26:1-11).

Haley's *ROOTS* gives not only his family but all Black Americans of African descent a connecting link with the past. To know one's past is a key to one's identity—a key to who one is. It overcomes the void of a mysterious past on a "dark continent." Haley's pilgrimage removes the mystery. We are children of Africa—we have a past. The debate between Herskovish and Frazer is over—Black American's past is in Africa—a country of kings and leaders noble and free!

In identifying their biological forbears Israel saw how they functioned in the context of choice. They were not always slaves—they did exist as free persons, before their years of Egyptian bondage. They knew that they lived as free persons, able to determine their destiny, to respond to the meaning of freedom.

Thank God for Haley's literary predecessors—the researchers like Carter G. Woodson, Charles Wesley, Charles Thompson, and Luther P. Jackson. They plowed the ground. Haley articulates and makes vivid the research of many previous scholars. They provided the tracks—his imagination and determination led him to walk thereon—the result: *ROOTS*. We now can view their actions in the context of choice—to be Black is not to be a slave. Also, slavery does not denote inferiority. The Greeks were slaves, the Hebrews were slaves—but they were also free. To see Blacks in the context of freedom is to understand Blacks as members of the human family—God's creation—God's people.

Also, this comparison between the Hebrew patriarchs and *ROOTS* suggests that in both groups there were individuals who demonstrated human nobility in the face of seemingly impossible choices. Abraham is the example of great faith. The willingness to sacrifice his only son. Isaac dared to accept his father's faith. Jacob struggled through his own fragmentary self to center on God.

ROOTS seeks an answer to questions as to whether or not we can trace

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our individual lives to Africa; whether we have an identification of direct relationship with Africa. There was an answer to these questions and there can be an answer to ours also.

Haley's ancestral pilgrimage assures us that there was and there can be a context of choice and in this context there are bad and good decisions—that Africans demonstrated the highest in human capability as well as the lowest in human depravity. There was a context of free choice before slavery. There are and can be heroes like Kunta, Kizzi, Chicken George and Tom.

More significantly is our present response to what Haley has presented in his moving saga. In seeking to develop a hermeneutic of ROOTS one must ask the critical questions: "What did it mean?" and "What does it mean?" Thus far this paper has addressed the former question. Haley's ROOTS is indicative, rather than definitive; his treatment is historical, rather than systematic.

The challenge to us is to interpret the meaning of this great work—we must address the question "what it means."

D. H. Lawrence writes "It is no use trying merely to modify present forms. The whole great form of our era will have to go. And nothing will really send it down but the new shoots of life springing up and slowly bursting the foundations. And no one can do nothing (sic) but fight tooth and nail to defend the new schools of life from being crushed out and let them grow" (Quoted by Robert McAfee Brown, *Theology in a New Key*—p. 5).

I propose that Haley's treatment requires a new way of looking at the Black experience. It affirms the glory of our ancestral past. It celebrates the courage of our ancestors who struggled against slavery, segregation, discrimination and all types of oppression. It presents the reality of Black persons walking in the freedom of a "new day begun." This work means that we must not look back in anger but *walk forward in hope*.

Haley's recital of his family heritage and the concomitant celebration of his search reminds me of the furor created by the finding of the original account of Deuteronomy in 621 B.C. during the reign of Josiah, King of Judah. The discovery initiated a new era in Israel's history; biblical scholars refer to this as the deuteronomic reforms. This was the era of new understanding of their history and a new commitment to Yahweh. Haley's understanding challenges us as the deuteronomic reforms challenged Israel. We must "defend the new shoots of life from being crushed out and let them grow." This is our challenge!

Finally, ROOTS raises two fundamental concerns for everyone of us—a sense of self and, more importantly, a sense of self in relationship to God. This is dramatized in Kunta's naming ceremony when Omoro, having whispered Kunte's name in his ear so that he could be the first to hear it, concluded the ceremony.

Carrying little Kunte in his strong arms, he walked to the edge of the village, lifted up the baby and with his face to the heavens said softly:

Find kiling dorong leh warrata ka itel tee!
(Behold, the only thing greater than yourself!)