

Regina Smith

A New Perspective on Amos 9:7a "To Me, O Israel, you are just like the Kushites."

Introduction:

As I read and reflected on the traditional interpretations of Amos 9:7a, I felt that much of the information contained in modern books and articles were based upon conjecture, subjective and unsubstantiated suppositions. The sparse comments offered on this text usually lacked any annotation, thereby making it extremely difficult to ascertain the sources of their information. Being troubled by these ambiguities was the catalyst for this exegetical study of the text of Amos 9:7a.

Review of the History of Exegesis (20th Century)

A perusal of the contemporary literature yields a diversity of opinions concerning Amos 9:7a. Examples of the comments are:

1. Ethiopians are selected for mention because they are remote and strange.¹
2. Israel is put on the same level as the most distant and despised people, the Ethiopians.²
3. Amos has chosen to set along Israel as equally worthy of divine attention, Kush, which is of unknown origin.³
4. Israel does not mean more to him than the Ethiopian of the far Ethiopian to me, O people of Israel must have

¹H. McKeating, *Amos, Hosea, Micah* (Cambridge: University 1971), 67.

²J. De Waard and W. A. Smalley, *A Translators Handbook on the Book of Amos* (New York: American Bible Society, 1979), 180.

³B. Vawter, *Amos, Hosea, Micah* (Delaware: Michael Glazier, Inc. 1981), 73.

- sounded most offending to Israelite ears.⁴
5. Just why the Ethiopians were chosen for this comparison is not clear. At least three possibilities present themselves; their distance from Israel, the blackness of their skin and the fact that they were frequently sold as slaves. The last two would seem more likely.⁵
 6. Not only was Israel on par with the heathen... but the heathen had equal value with the Israelites as objects of Yahweh's care.⁶
 7. Because of their apostasy they had become to Yahweh like the Ethiopian. But if Yahweh wanted to choose an other people as His own, there were other nations at His disposal, such as the Philistines and the Syrians.⁷
 8. If the text refers to the Ethiopians, then Amos is comparing Israel to a remote, little known people.⁸
 9. They are mentioned as representative of foreign and remote people who live on the outermost periphery of the known world.⁹
 10. The Ethiopian was used by the prophet to indicate an unchangeable type.¹⁰

⁴A. S. Kapelrud, *Central Ideas in Amos* (Oslo, I. Kommissjan Hos H. Aschehough & Co., 1956), 40.

⁵J. L. Crenshaw, *Hymnic Affirmation of Divine Justice* (Montana: Scholars, 1975), 136.

⁶W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* Translated by J.A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 171.

⁷J. Lindbloom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), 334.

⁸J. H. Hayes *Amos* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 219.

⁹H. W. Wolff, *Joel and Amos* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 347.

¹⁰A. Cohen, *The Twelve Prophets* (England: Soncino, 1946), 121.

As regards the Ethiopian, all of these statements have a basic negative connotation. In some instances the negativity is implicit, while in others is rather blatant. If the Ethiopian is mentioned, he is strange, enslaved, denigrated because of the blackness of his skin, remote, or little known in the ancient near eastern world purview.

My review of this literature raised the following questions. [1] Who are the Ethiopians, where do they reside and what is their relationship to others in the ancient near eastern environment? [2] If the Ethiopians are viewed negatively, then when and why did this occur? [3] In consideration of the context of Amos 9:7 and the wider scope of Amos' fundamental purpose, are there other possibilities, as to why the Ethiopians are mentioned? These are the questions that I will explore and answer in this article.

Attempting to ascertain the approximate dates of Amos' ministry is crucial to our understanding of Amos 9:7a. The editors of the book of Amos, as evidenced by the subscription in 1:1 believed that he prophesied sometime during the reigns of Jeroboam II, the son of Joash (793-753 B.C.E.), and king Uzziah [(Azariah) -792-740 B.C.E.].¹¹ This dating is further supported by other internal evidence. In 7:10-17, Amos is predicting the death of Jeroboam by the sword. The mention of the earthquake that occurred two years after Amos' appearance (1:1) has led some scholars, utilizing archaeological evidence to date his ministry around 760 B.C.E.¹² Others believe that the mood of confidence and relative self-assurance that Amos depicts as pervading the Northern

¹¹There is considerable debate concerning the chronology of the Kings of Israel and Judah. The dates given above postulate a period of coregency/overlapping reigns for both Jeroboam II (coregent with Joash-793-781) and Azariah (coregent with Amaziah 792-767). These dates are postulated following the evidence of E. R. Thiele in *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. B. Eerdmann, 1965). Almost all will agree that Joash and Jeroboam II were rough contemporaries.

¹²De Waad and Smalley, *Handbook*, 180.

Kingdom, reflects the period 760-750 B.C.E.¹³ Wolff believes that the allusions in Amos 1:13 of hostile actions east of the Jordan best describe the decade of 760 B.C.E.¹⁴ This is the decade when the Arameans (mentioned in 4:13 and 5:27) were able to maneuver freely due to the Assyrian preoccupation with the kingdom of Urartu. However, others date his ministry around 745 based upon the belief that his predictions of doom and gloom reflect his knowledge of the westward movement of the Assyrians, under Tiglath-pileser III.¹⁵ Commensurate with the evidence, the safest estimate for his ministry would be the mid eighth century (760-740). Exactly how long his ministry lasted is unknown. The estimates have ranged from a few hours¹⁶ to several years.

Contextual

The time period of the ministry of Amos is characterized by peace and prosperity in the northern and southern kingdoms. The threat which the Arameans had posed was counteracted by the campaigns of Adad-nirari III in Damascus, in which he finally succeeded in crushing Israel's northern neighbor, forcing Benhadad III, to pay heavy tribute. Assyria, after the death of Adad-nirari was stifled by plagues, internal strife, the inept military leadership of Shalmaneser IV, Asshur-dan III and Asshur-nirari V¹⁷ Assyria was also preoccupied with the expanding kingdom of Urartu.¹⁸ Egypt, the southwestern power, posed no serious threat.

¹³J. D. Smart "Amos", *IDB*, George Buttrick ed. (Nashville: Abingdon), I: 118.

¹⁴Wolff, *Abel*, *Amos* 89.

¹⁵Although Assyria is not mentioned by name in the MT of Amos, the LXX reads Assyria at Amos 3:9. Verse 6:14 may give a hint of the Assyrian invasion.

¹⁶J. Morgenstern, "Amos Studies II: The Sin of Uzziah, the Festival of Jeroboam and the date of Amos," *HUCA* 12-13 (1937-1938): 1-53.

¹⁷William W. Hallo and William Kelly Simpson, *The Ancient Near East* (New York's Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 131-132.

¹⁸John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 255-264.

Jeroboam was able to restore the borders of Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the sea of the Arabah (II Kgs 14:25), while Uzziah restored Elath to Judah and rebuilt it (II Kgs 14:22). The dimensions of the two kingdoms rivaled that of the Solomonic era. Israel was also able to gain ascendancy over the trade routes and industries of the near east, thus allowing her to collect the lucrative caravan tolls. The weaving and dying industries flourished, while the population density of the two kingdoms may have substantially increased. All of these feats enabled her to enjoy a period of economic wealth. This prosperity benefitted the newly emerging upper, merchant and artisan classes, but the overall condition of the lower classes deteriorated.

As displayed in the books of Amos and Hosea, the moral and social climate in Israel had deteriorated. The prosperous, in their pursuit of wealth, were guilty of numerous social injustices enacted upon the less fortunate citizens (8:4-6). Amos reports widespread immorality (2:6-8), greed, exorbitant feasts (6:4-6), and sexual impropriety (2:7). The prophetic class and the Nazirites were corrupt (2:12), while the cult was invaded by excessive and deviant practices (5:21-22, 4:4-5; Hosea 2:13; 4:1-14; 6:8-10; 8:4,-13). The people, ignoring their covenant obligations, allowed apostasy to become the order of the day (2:4). Such was the socio-political milieu in which Amos pronounced his judgements of doom.

How do the Ethiopians fit into this particular near eastern scene? First, is it essential to define the term Ethiopia. The Masoretic text reads, (*kušîyîm*), Kushites, or those people who inhabit the land of Kush. Kush is a very ancient word, which is attested just once in an Egyptian Old Kingdom text, but becomes more frequently mentioned in the Middle Kingdom.¹⁹ "Kush" was

¹⁹J. Henry Breasted, *A History of Egypt*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), 180 and Sir Alan Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs* (London: Oxford University 1961) 34, 133. The southern border of Egypt was rather fluid throughout its' history. Kushites may have been referred to earlier under the names Nubia, Wawat, Ta-Neshi See: Y. ben-Jochannan, *Black Man of the Nile* (Baltimore: Black Classic Books, 1972), 114-115, 161.

utilized by the Egyptians to refer to her southern neighbor. Ancient Kush was situated in the eastern part of the Sudan between the second and the sixth cataract of the Nile River. In the Bible, the country Kush generally implies the larger geographical sense of all of the land south of Egypt.²⁰

According to Josephus, the name Kush was utilized throughout Asia.²¹ The region that the Hebrews and Egyptians referred to as Kush, the Greeks called (*Agiopia*) "burnt faces." Most probably, the great confusion between the terms Kush and Ethiopia arose with the Septuagint (LXX), for it sometimes translates the word *kbš* as *ous* and other times as "burnt faces" (*Agiopia*).

The reality that Kush has an extensive (if not more extensive) history and civilization as those of other ancient civilizations, has only in the recent past been readily available to the western world. The Africans themselves, their other near Eastern neighbors, and ancient historians have long been aware of the general history of the region of Kush, Kushaitic and Hamaitic peoples. There is sufficient evidence that many Westerners intentionally distorted and/or concealed written and oral records as relates to the history of the African continent, in general and the Nile Valley civilizations, in particular.

The civilization of Kush is said to have originated among the early farming people of the middle Nile (above the 1-2 cataract) and was an integral part of the Nile Valley high culture. They were a riverain people whose culture was very similar to pre-dynastic Egypt, and at many points more progressive. There is evidence that some of early Egyptian civilization was built upon Kushite advances. The Egyptians, themselves believed that they

²⁰Kush is also utilized as a proper name-see Genesis 10:6, Ps. :7:1, Jeremiah 36:14, Zephaniah 1:1.

²¹E. Josephus, *The Life and Works of Josephus*, translated by W. Whiston, *The Antiquities of the Jews* (Mass. Hendrickson Publishers, 1988) I: 6.2, 36.

had come from the South. Archaeological evidence reveals that the people of Kush had a script of their own but also utilized Egyptian hieroglyphics. They engaged in international commerce and created their own types of jewelry, pottery, glass, metal ware, tools and weapons. Kush was renowned for its gold, copper, semi-precious stones, quarries and metal working. They built temples for their Gods and constructed pyramids (different and smaller than the Egyptian pyramids) for their monarchs.²²

The development of Kushite civilization is divided into two phases, Napatain and the later Merotic. These phases are directly linked with its successive capitals, Napata, (at the 4th cataract) and Meroe. It is the Napatain phase that is usually referred to in biblical literature.

Kush enjoyed a long period of independence and prosperity, until the emergence of the middle kingdom, when Wawat, the northern province was subjugated under Amunemhet I (1991-1962 BCE). This southerly march, intended to exploit Nubian resources was continued by his son and coregent Sesostri I (1971-1928 BCE). By the reign of Sesostri III, (1878-1843), Nubia was essentially under Egyptian supervision or direct rule.²³ As the new kingdom began to disintegrate in the 11th century, Kush became more powerful.²⁴ Kushite monarchs invaded Egypt and became so powerful that they were able to seize the Egyptian throne and rule for over a century (ca. 760-656).

²²The opinion of Dr. D. Randall MacIver - see L. Bennett, *Before The Mayflower* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1964), 6. Also, the thesis of C. Anta Diop *The African Origin of Civilization*. Translated by M. Cook (Westport: Lawrence Hill and Company, 1974). See B. Williams "The Lost Pharaohs of Nubia" *The Journal of African Civilizations* Nov, 6 (1984); 29-46.

²³Although Sesostri I marched into upper Nubia (Kush), he was unable to retain a foothold there. During the period of the Hyksos domination of Egypt, the northern provinces (lower Nubia) once again became independent. With the emergence of the New Kingdom, Nubia was once again under Egyptian supervision.

²⁴In the reign of Ramses XI, Egypt had essentially lost control of Kush. This occurred indirectly as a result of Ramses XI, requesting Penchasy, the Viceroy of Kush to take control of Upper Egypt. See B. Trigger, B. Kemp, D. O'Conner, A. Lloyd *Ancient Egypt-A Social History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1983) 229-232.

Kashta, (ca. 760) the Kushite, was the first monarch of the twenty-fifth dynasty.²⁵ Kashta controlled lower Nubia and extended his influence to Thebes, but it was his son Piye [(Piankhy)-751-716], who was able to dominate Middle and Upper Egypt. Tefnakht of Sais, a Delta ruler maintained control of lower Egypt until Piye's northern advancement, ca. 730-727 BCE. Tefnakht ultimately submitted to Piye, but was allowed to continue in power in Lower Egypt. It was said of Piye that he ruled a fourth of the African continent.²⁶ Shabaka, (Piye's brother) was able to effect the conquest of all of Egypt by defeating and ultimately killing Bocchoris, Tefnakht's successor. The military, political and economic power that the Kushite dynasty enjoyed was so pervasive that Taharqa, the son of Piye dubbed himself the "emperor of the world."²⁷

Under the rule of the Kushites, Egyptian culture did not decline, for this period of Egyptian history witnessed an attempt at cultural and artistic revival. The rulers looked to the past for inspiration. New temples were built, while old ones were restored. Ancient texts such as the Memphite Theology were copied, monuments restored and pyramid burial was revived.²⁸ These Kings were devoted to Amun but did not neglect the worship of Ptah at Memphis. The rulers of the 25th dynasty took as one of their names the prenomen of great rulers of the past. Piye used the prenomen of Ramses II, Shabaka (716-701), the prenomen of Pepy II, and Shabataka (701-689), the prenomen of Djedkare. The general economic, cultural and religious life of the Egyptian domain improved. The prosperity of the Kushite dynasty extended into their

²⁵There is considerable debate concerning the year that Kahta took the throne, though most agree tht this occurred circa 760-750.

²⁶The historical record of the campaign of Piye was preserved in the G. Barkal temple in the Sudan. This stele is now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. See also P. Goldman, "The Nubian Renaissance" Egypt Revisited, *Journal of African Civilizations* 10 (1989) 261-269.

²⁷J. Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom* (New York:Vintage Books, 1969). 9.

²⁸The kings of the 25th dynasty were buried in pyramids in their homelands.

homeland, for although the general populace had not followed the army to Egypt, their civilization continued to develop without significant interruption.²⁹

The rule of the Kushites was to continue for approximately one century. The final years of Tarhaqa's (689-664) reign and the complete reign of his successor, Tanatumun (664-656) were troubled by the rising strength of the Assyrians. The Assyrians under Eshardddon (680-669 BCE) and Assurbanipal (668-627 BCE) invaded Egypt, militarily subdued the Kushite kings and installed vassal rulers (Neko and Psamtik I). Although, after the Assyrian invasions, the Kushites returned to their southern provinces, Kush did not fade from the international scene, but continued to grow and prosper.

Thus, the historical evidence substantiates that Kush had a long standing, significant, thriving civilization. During the time period of Amos (mid 8th century), Kush was enjoying one of the high periods of her military, political and social power, with Kushite Pharaohs of the twenty fifth dynasty dominating the Egyptian throne. I found no evidence that the Kushites were despised, heathen, backward, strange, or any of the other frequent disparaging and pejorative metaphors and adjectives that some contemporary biblical scholars utilize to describe Kush. Although this may have been the prevalent notion in eurocentric scholarship, the historical information does not substantiate it.³⁰

²⁹For a general overview of this period see; Breasted, 537-561. Gardiner, 335-364. W. Hallo and Simpson, *The Ancient History* (1971), 285-292.

³⁰This information was long ago discredited by the very testimonies of the ancients themselves. Among them are: Josephus, Herodotus, and Diodorus. Black scholars, such as W.E.B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, David Walker, Chikh Anta Diop, and others, have similarly argued these points though their writings have been distorted and ignored. M. Bernal has written an excellent study demonstrating how the Aryan model began to supersede and supplant the Ancient model of historical analysis. The ancient model attributed the primacy of classical civilization to Afro-Asiatic roots. *Black Athena - The Afro-Asiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*. (New Jersey: Rutgers University, Vol. I. 1987, Vol. II 1991). This monumental work is projected to be four volumes.

Biblical literature does not even substantiate this notion. In fact throughout the Bible, Africans and African people occupy a normal place among the nations. In many places throughout Israelite literature, Africans and African peoples were esteemed.³¹ Thus, Amos' comparison of Israel to Kush does not imply anything disdaining or repulsive about the Kushites. Nor in the case of Amos 9:7, are the Kushites mentioned because of the blackness of their skin³² The Egyptians and Nubians, as they depicted themselves in statues and etchings, were black and reddish brown. For centuries there was a mutual exchange of ideas and culture between Africa and the East.³³ Black people were a regular sight throughout Israel,³⁴ therefore blackness or strangeness cannot be the issue.³⁵ Nor is being "uncivilized" the issue in this passage, for it has been demonstrated that Kush was a progressive and advanced civilization that was at an apex of its prosperity during Amos' time.

If then, culture and race are not the issues, why are the Kushites mentioned? Illuminating the various possible understandings of the text, aids in the discussion of just why the Kushites are mentioned in Amos 9:7?

³¹Randall C. Bailey, "Beyond Identification: The Use of Africans in Old Testament Poetry and Narratives," 163-184, in *Stony The Road We Trod*, Cain Hope Felder, ed., (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 165-184. It is my contention that the stories in Genesis 9:20-27 and Numbers 12: 1-16 are not exceptions to this principle. In neither story is "blackness" utilized in a pejorative sense. In Genesis, political alliances and possession of the land may be the issue. In Numbers, however, class, status, and political power may be the real issues as argued by Bailey.

³²See the article by Walter Vogels, "Invitation à Revenir à L'Alliance et Universalisme En Amos IX 7" VT 22 (1972): especially page 233.

³³cf. African Presence in Early Asia Incorporating *Journal of African Civilizations*, (1985) Revised Edition 1988. Especially the article by R. Rashidi "Africans In Early Asian Civilizations: A Historical Overview" pages 15-52.

³⁴R. Bennett, "Africa and the Biblical Period" (1971) 483-500. Charles B. Copher, "Egypt and Ethiopia in the Old Testament" *Nile Valley Civilizations Incorporating Journal of African Civilizations* 4 (1984) pages 163-178. R. Bailey, "Beyond Identification" 165-184. Y. ben-Jochannan *The African Origins of the Major Western Religions* (New York: Aldebu-Lan Boks, 1973).

³⁵Color, shades, hues, and race was not an issue in the ancient world, as it is in contemporary times. See the excellent study of F. Snowden, *Before Color Prejudice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1983).

halo kibāne kušīyîm 'attem lî benê yisra'el

The major points of variance in our understanding of this passage is in the translation of the *k* of *kibenê* and the *h* of *halo*. The *k* may be translated as "like" or "just as." The demyon "*k*" is utilized to express exact or approximate equality. The *h* of *halo* is employed as a sign of the interrogative, though when followed by *lo* "it has a tendency to become little more than an affirmation particle *hnh*, declaring with some rhetorical emphasis what is, or might be well known."³⁶ Thus my translation would be

You are just like the Kushites to Me
O children of Israel, declares the Lord.³⁷

If one takes into consideration the immediate context of this passage, namely 9:7b, the exegetical meaning is illuminated. Yes, I brought Israel up from the land of Egypt and the Philistines from Caphtor and Aram from Kir?

In 9:7, Amos is closely circumscribing a large part of the known world at that time. Kush in the South, Israel in the North, Caphtor³⁸ in the west and Kir³⁹ in the east. Therefore, Amos is utilizing these countries in an attempt to speak universally. Israel had indeed benefitted from the divine action of God, for God led

³⁶F. Brown, S. Driver, C. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1951), 453 and 520.

³⁷Other examples of rhetorical questions of this type are found in Gen 13:9; Deut. 3:11; Josh 1:9, 10:13; Judges 6:14; I Sam. 21:12; 2 Sam. 15:35; Micah 3:1; Ruth 2:9. See also E. Kautzsch and A. Cowley Gesenius' *Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford Clarendon, 1988) section 150e, 474.

³⁸Caphtor is probably to be identified with Crete. See Jeremiah 47:4,88; Deut 2:23; Zeph. 2:5; Sam 30:14. For a general discussion of the matter see D. Wiseman, ed., *Peoples of Old Testament Times* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973); 53-56.

³⁹A location in Mesopotamia. See M.C. Astour "Kir", *IDBS*, (Nashville, Abingdon, 1982) 524.

them out of Egyptian slavery to freedom and despite formidable obstacles procured for them the land of Canaan. Still, yet, God has guided and directed the histories of other peoples, namely, the Philistines, the Arameans and the Kushites.

Just as the rescue from Egypt is the basis of the judgement against Israel and Judah (Amos 2:4-16), likewise, the deliverance from Caphtor and Kir is the basis for the judgments against the Philistines and Aram (Amos 1:6-8 and 1:3-5). Interestingly, in the pronouncements against the nations (1:3-3:16), neither the Kushites or the Egyptians are mentioned. Rather they (Kushite kings) are ruling Egypt along with Assyria⁴⁰ are invited to assemble on the mountain of Samaria and witness the outrages and oppression in Israel. The enemy that God states will threaten Israel may be the mighty Kushite kings in Egypt or the Assyrians (3:9-11).

The utilization of the name of Kush in Amos' time would undoubtedly remind the Israelites that just as they were enjoying an era of profound prosperity and wealth, so were the Kushites enjoying one of the zeniths of their political, military and economic power. Then, even if God had a special relationship with Israel (Amos 3:2), they could claim no special favor based upon their past experience of the exodus, for God had performed the same feat for the Philistines and Arameans. Nor could they boast of their present wealth for God was doing the very same thing for the Kushites. In Amos 9:7 God, so to speak, covers all of the bases, the four corners of the world, the past and present.

Yes, in the wider scope of Amos' theology, God is not just the one who cares for Israel. God is a universal sovereign, guiding and directing the histories and destinies of all nations. The Kushites are mentioned in Amos 9:7a, as an example of God's freedom and prerogative to act favorably and beneficently on behalf of all the people of the earth.

⁴⁰Reading with the Septuagint, the MT has Ashdod.