



African and multicultural origins of biblical history and interpretation

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Abstract

The issue of African orientated way understanding religious and scriptural writings is a reason for worry among numerous scholars and history specialists. There is the position and observation that the Bible and scriptural scholarship has been one-sided by mainly Eurocentric and 'white' perspective of scriptural history. Critics of the Eurocentric understanding of the Bible and religious history likewise recommend that Afrocentric scriptural elucidation is viewed as a "threat" by a few. There is a call from numerous critics and scholars for a more adjusted and reasonable comprehension of the pertinence of the African impact and its centrality in present day Christian religious philosophy. This is an essential point and is one that will be investigated inside and out on this paper.

Keywords: afrocentric, eurocentric, bible, Africa

1. Introduction

As various investigations state, any in-depth examination of Biblical content will demonstrate that one can't reduce the significance of the African region and individuals in the Bible without additionally decreasing and distorting an honest and far reaching perspective of the Bible. As one examination notes, "...Fortunately, the Bible refuses to remain captive to such distortions, Indeed we have seen the blossoming in our own time of new interpretative approaches to Scripture"^[1]. In other words, a more comprehensive perspective of the Bible is demanded for a more honest portrayal of Biblical history to happen. It ought to be noticed that these distortions of Biblical writings are connected to more extensive political and colonial perspectives that have over the centuries tended to effect on interpretations of Biblical and different texts for Eurocentric authority. The focal proposal of the present examination incorporates the view that there have in the past been endeavors to limit and even hinder the Afrocentric affiliations and interpretations in Biblical content. This infers a more comprehensive and multicultural approach is required in Biblical investigation and interpretations.

2. Reasons for the denial of African biblical interpretations

There are many reasons set forward regarding why African Biblical viewpoints were overlooked or undermined. One investigation in this regard has noticed that,

Today popular Christianity too easily assumes that modern ideas about race are traceable to the Bible or that there is not a significant Black presence in the Bible... Centuries of European and Euro-American scholarship along with a "save the heathen Blacks" missionary approach to Africans have created these impressions^[2].

As it were, the dissent of an Afrocentric point of view in the Bible and in Bible interpretation is firmly connected to types of prejudice and racial stereotypes and inclinations that turned into a characteristic piece of the ethos of colonialism amid the

past two centuries. It is this kind of biased contortion that has driven the deliberate expulsion of African references and relationship in Biblical textual translation. The literature additionally recognizes the way that the hidden explanation behind this denial of the African impact in the Bible has profound roots in the Eurocentric institutions of scholarship. This can be followed to the conservative view that Blacks have in certainty no genuine history in contrast with the abundance and significance of European history. "As astonishing as it seems most of the prestigious academics and universities in Europe and America have ridiculed the idea that blacks have any substantive history"^[3]. This derogatory perspective has its underlying foundations also in the colonial attitude that tended to see all Black individuals as inferior in status and 'ignorant' with a specific end goal to invasion the interruption and intrusion of their lands and regions. In other words, the defense for conquest and what was truly the burglary of African land and riches was given, all things considered, by the 'revamping' of Biblical text. Blacks were given a role as heathen' individuals who had not achieved the enlightenment that the white group had achieved through the Bible and Christianity and in this manner Blacks were viewed as inferior and subordinate. As noticed, this fundamental discrimination and prejudice has a long history, which showed itself in the colonial inclinations of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries and in numerous different areas other than Biblical elucidation. It is additionally critical to take note of this biased ideology that followed in the wake of the colonial control of Africa was firmly restricted to any view or interpretation that would put Blacks in forefront of Biblical analysis. This can be found in the way that in the period between the fourth century and the Enlightenment in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries. "Europe recast the entire Bible into a saga of European people" and this hegemony has been accepted as fact by most bodies and institutions in the Western world^[4]. Consequently, many scholars and leaders in Black theology have rejected and fought against various

ideological assumptions; such as the “Curse of Ham” or curse of Canaan (Genesis 9:20-27), which has been used to justify prejudice, bigotry and even enslavement. Quickly, the Curse of Ham alludes to the curse by Ham's dad, Noah, placed on Ham's child, Canaan. This curse was because of the way that Ham saw his dad bare after a bout of drunkenness. When Noah got up from his wine and discovered what his youngest son had done to him, he stated, “Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers.” (Genesis 9:20-27)

There are many interpretations of this episode of Biblical scripture. Some critics see this as a justification for the conquest of the Canaanites by the Israelites. However, what is more important from the point of view of the thesis being discussed is that many commentators are of the view that “The “curse of Ham” had been used by some members of Abrahamic religions to justify racism and the enslavement of people of African ancestry, who were believed to be descendants of Ham” [5]. This is a racist perspective that has been very damaging and was maintained until fairly recently by some theologians and scholars. However, while it has been largely abandoned by even the most conservative theologians the social and theological stigma of this interpretation of scripture still tends to have negative connotations in society. One could go on to trace this central causative factor of the omission of an Afrocentric approach to the heritage of a colonialist and Eurocentric worldview, which has tended to dominate society during the past two centuries. Eurocentric perspectives in many disciplines were undoubtedly preferred and there was a bias towards what were perceived as ‘inferior’ African orientations. This can be ascribed to fundamental prejudice that was, and sometimes still is, a hallmark of the colonialist mentality. This view has resulted in criticism that the Bible in particular has been ‘recast’ and that there have over the decades been continuous efforts to ensure that the Bible ‘fits’ into the mould of a perception of religion that accords with and exclusively relates to “...an ancient religious drama of Euro-Asian Hebrews’ [6].

This in essence refers to the central thesis of this dissertation; namely that there has been a biased and prejudicial view of religion that has been expounded by a version of the Bible that favors a mainly Eurocentric and Hebraic worldview. The following quotation from *The African Heritage Study Bible* sums up this point of view.

Somewhere in Western history, a fraudulent view emerged, a view that sought to recast not only Mary but almost all biblical characters in a distinctly European light. Scholarly research has now demonstrated that, unlike typical European culture, the biblical ethos was without color prejudice” [7].

3. The Bible and African Origins

One of the most obvious aspects of Biblical scholarship that provides clear proof and evidence of an African genesis and heritage in the Bible is the analysis of Biblical geography and the part that this geography plays in an understanding of the Biblical texts. An important example in this regard is that of Ethiopia. However, before discussing the Ethiopian context it is firstly important to understand the larger context of the geographical and historical context of the Bible and how this is related to an Afrocentric interpretation. As many critics have pointed out one cannot adequately understand Biblical

history, especially the history of the Old Testament if one does not take into account geographical factors that are intimately linked with cultural as well as ethnic factors. As these commentators have pointed out, one has to take into account the original designation and historical context of the name Africa. “First of all, the name “Africa” was given to the Continent by Romans. Africa was also called Kemet, Libya, Ortegia, Corphyne, Egypt, Ethiopia and/or Sedan, Olympia, Hesperia, Oceania, and Ta-Merry” [8]. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the ancient name for Africa was “Akebu-Lan”, which is translated as ‘mother of mankind’ or ‘Garden of Eden’ and it was this name for Africa that was used by the Moors, Nubians, Numidians, Carthaginians and Ethiopians [9]. This places ancient Biblical heritage soundly within an African mythical and geographical context. There are many Biblical references that can be cited which place the early events and history of the Bible in an African context. For example, Genesis 10:6-20 describes the descendants of Ham as being located in North Africa, as well as in Central Africa and Asia. In Psalm 105:23 the “Land of Ham” in Egypt is referred to: “Then Israel came to Egypt; Jacob sojourned in the land of Ham”. In Genesis we have a reference to Nimrod, the son of Cush, whose name means ‘black’. And in Genesis 11, we read that “Abraham was from Ur of the Chaldees, a land whose earliest inhabitants included blacks” [10]. These examples all attest to the African background and heritage of the Bible and the events therein. Furthermore, these and many other Biblical references that have led a number of commentators to assert that there is a deep and intimate link between early Judaism and Africa. Some commentators have even gone so far as to suggest that “Judaism is the African way of life” [11]. This point of view is supported by the following argument.

Judaism was the religion developed in Africa by African people. It was adopted and adapted in a similar fashion to the Yoruba Orisha worship (Vodoun, Santeria, Lacumi, Condomble, etc.) and is still being co-opted and altered by non-Africans today. To speak of an African influence on Judaism is like speaking of an African influence on Orisha Worship [12]. There are also numerous references in the Old Testament to Ethiopia. The books of the Old Testament in fact cite Ethiopia more than forty times. Both Egypt and Ethiopia are referred to many times in the Old Testament and this usage is seen as a common reference to Africa [13]. Among the reasons given to support the view that Egyptian people were of Black heritage is the fact that, “The Romans didn't get to Egypt until 300 BC. There weren't any white people present before the Rome invasion” [14]. The assumption that the origins of Christianity were Roman or Greek are therefore seriously questioned and deconstructed. This has led to the counter view that the original Christians were in fact Black people living in Africa in the Ethiopian and Egyptian regions. This is contrary to the conventional view of the Eurocentric dominance in common Biblical interpretations. As one critic asserts; “We have been told Christianity came from Rome. Does everything come from Europe? That is what we have been led to believe” [15]. The importance of the African continent however becomes even more obvious if we consider the Book of Genesis in more detail. In Genesis 2: 10-14, we read the following.

A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. 11 The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. 12 (The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin [a] and onyx are also there.) 13 the name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. [b] 14 the name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Asshur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates ^[16].

The Garden of Eden is therefore situated according to the text above in relation to four rivers. Both the Pishon and the Gihon are associated with ancient Cush - which refers to Ethiopia in the Hebrew ^[17]. This term, according to some scholars also refers to the 'burnt - faced people', which clearly indicates an African origin in the situation of the Garden of Eden. Taking into consideration the positioning of the other rivers mentioned in the Biblical text, one commentator goes on to state that, "... the ancient land of Canaan was, culturally and geographically, primarily an extension of the African land mass" ^[18]. In essence this means that the origins of the Bible are strongly related to the African continent, which also suggests many other Afrocentric associations. There are numerous other examples from the Bible that can be cited. The point being made is that a close analysis of the Biblical texts strongly suggests that the original people spoken of in the Bible resided in Africa. As another study clearly indicates, "...the Bible provides extensive evidence that the earliest people were located in Africa..." ^[19] and that "Although Europeans (Greeks and Romans) began to feature in the more recent biblical narratives. The fact remains that the earliest biblical people...would have to be classified as blacks; they were of African descent and possessed African physical features" ^[20]. It is important to remember in an analysis of this nature that the African and multicultural reinterpretation of Biblical text is not in any sense intended as a 'racist' or ideological endeavor. As a book states; "...the Bible reflects a genuine multiculturalism. Its pages are laced with racial and ethnic diversity" ^[21]. This is a central aspect that has already been referred to and should be kept in mind throughout this exploration of Afrocentric and multicultural perspectives in the Bible.

4. Biblical Figures

Besides the view that the original people referred to in the book of Genesis were Black, there are many other biblical figures that can be identified as being of African heritage. There is therefore a common misconception that many of the central biblical figures were white, including Noah, Abraham, Mary and Joseph. However, there are also numerous studies that suggest the opposite.

Apart from the fact that Moses was trained in African, Zipporah, Moses' Midianite wife was an African. According to one commentator "This means that Zipporah's father, Laban was also black" ^[22]. Another very obvious example from the Bible would be Lucius' comrade in Antioch, Simeon, who was known as Niger. As Gilmer states,

Niger simply means "black". African nations and African people are quite prominent in biblical times. To say that the Bible is the white man's holy book or to suggest that it is European in origin or nature, is simply not taking into account the facts ^[23].

There is also compelling evidence that the Queen of Sheba was a Black African. (1 Kings 10:1). One could also refer to her passage from Psalm 68, which reads; Envoys will come from Egypt; Cush [h] will submit herself to God. Psalm 68: 31) there is a plethora of archeological and historical evidence of the early African origins of the Bible that can be cited. For example, the ancient Sumerians were linked to the Elamites, who were the first group of Semitic people cited in the Old Testament. (Gen. 10:22) ^[24]. this is significant as

The Elamites were a black-skinned and woolly-haired people as the colorful glazed artwork on the royal palace walls of the ancient Persian city of Susa clearly show. Thus Abraham, the native of Sumerian and the founding father of the Israelite nation, was a black man ^[24].

The Black origins of the Patriarchs of the bible are a fact that has been neglected or purposely dismissed in most common contemporary textual reference and analyses of the Bible. These biased views have however been challenged by many contemporary historians and theologians who suggest a radical re-visioning of Biblical history to ensure that the ethnic identity of the early Hebrews is clarified. This will also become clear and will be explored in the following sections of the present study. Another argument as to the ethnic heritage of the Biblical figures in the Old Testament is that when Abraham and his twelve sons migrated from Canaan to Egypt, their stay in Egypt and the expansion of the number of their community to more than three million people strongly suggests intermixing with the Egyptians, who were a Black people. As One commentator notes,

During their sojourn in Egypt the Children of Israel multiplied from being a family of 70 souls to a nation of over 3 million people at the time of the Exodus which took place in 1612 B.C. This astounding number of people in so short a time can only be adequately explained by intermarriage between the family of Jacob and the native Egyptian populace. It is an established fact that the ancient Egyptians were a black African people. Thus, even if the Hebrews were not black before they arrived in Egypt, which is unlikely given Abraham's background, they were definitely black by the time they left Egypt under Moses ^[26].

The above is quoted at length as it seems to provide a very cogent and clear proof of the African and multicultural origins of many of the central Biblical figures - which tends to contradict Eurocentric views and perceptions. There is also proof of this view from other historical sources; for example, the historian Tacitus stated that, "... it was a common opinion among the Romans that the Jews "were an Ethiopian race" ^[27]. And "In Roman times Palestinian Israelites were classed among Black Africans because it was almost impossible to tell them apart" ^[28]. From a biblical - historical perspective many experts claim that, "Christianity in Africa is so old that it can be rightly described as an indigenous, traditional and African religion. In other words, this would suggest that Christianity has much deeper roots and origins in Africa than is commonly suggested by conventional interpretations of the Bible. This can be further substantiated by the fact that the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch described in the Book of Acts "...predates the Apostle Paul's first missionary journey into Europe by a number of years" ^[29].

The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet

talking about, himself or someone else?"

Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. (Acts 8:34-35).

This also leads to an analysis of the significance of the growth and spread of early Christianity in African regions such as Ethiopia, and to the assertion that, "There is growing evidence that the long-standing presence of Christianity in the Nile Valley and in present-day Ethiopia provided a base for the introduction of Christianity in Southern and Western Africa"^[30]. This view would therefore contradict the stance that Christianity is a religion that is essentially or even exclusively white or Eurocentric. As one critic emphasizes; "The Christian heritage in Africa goes all the way back to the days of the Bible itself"^[31]. One of the most compelling indications of the Black origins of Biblical reality is the documented existence of what is termed the Black Hebrew Israelites. As one commentator suggests, "Black Hebrews have existed since biblical times. In fact, they are the original or proto-typical Hebrews"^[32]. The historical and archeological evidence for this assertion refers to the view that that "... the earliest inhabitants of southern Mesopotamia were members of the "Brown Race," i.e., the Negroid branch of humanity"^[33]. The issue of a multicultural and more inclusive approach to Biblical interpretations can also be taken further in a study of the Black Jews of Ethiopia. The origins of the Black Jews of Ethiopia are not clear and there are many different theories about their heritage. One of these theories is that they were Jews who arrived in Ethiopia after the Egyptians Exodus. Another theory refers to their emigration from Israel after the time of the destruction of First and Second Temples^[33]. These Jews were known as the Falashas and tended to isolate themselves from others in their society. Their Judaism is also somewhat different in that it is based only on the Written Torah and "Their sacred texts are not in Hebrew, but written in Ge'ez - the Amharic language"^[34].

5. Conclusion: The requirement for reassessment

The above discussion has chosen just a few of the most important references to the African and multicultural beginnings of Biblical history and translation. This investigation conveys to the fore the acknowledgment of the requirement for a reassessment of an excessively Eurocentric perspective of Biblical writings. This position is underscored in the works of Marcus Garvey Jr., who puts the importance of Africa and Biblical history into another and conceivably more credible light.

The above discussion has selected only a few of the most important references to the African and multicultural origins of Biblical history and interpretation. This analysis brings to the fore the realization of the need for a reassessment of an overly Eurocentric view of Biblical texts. This stance is emphasized in the writings of Marcus Garvey Jr., who places the significance of Africa and Biblical history into a new and possibly more authentic light.

The great progenitor of the Hebrew race and the founder of their religion, sought refuge in Africa from the ravages of famine. We read in Gen. XII, 10, "And there was a famine in the land; and Abram went down into Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was grievous in the land". Jacob and his sons were subsequently saved from extinction in the same way. In

Africa, the Hebrew people from three score and ten souls multiplied into millions^[35].

This quotation reiterates some of the points mentioned above. The overarching perception that is evident from this exploration of the validity of African and multicultural Biblical origins is that there has been a systematic attempt to deny certain ethnic groups their rightful place in Biblical history. This has therefore led to a concerted effort from theological historians other experts to reassess and reestablish the African Biblical Heritage. It was for this reason that *The Original African Heritage Study Bible* was published in 1993 by James C. Winston Publishing Company. The intention of this publication was to "...interpret the Bible as it relates to persons of African descent, hoping to foster an appreciation of the multiculturalism inherent in the Bible"^[36] Among the facets that make this Bible version so important for a re-visioning of the place of Black people in Biblical history, is its focus on the African origins of Eden and references to the Biblical figures of African Descent. This work is based on the King James Version of the Bible but emphasizes the imports and even pivotal role that the African people and culture played in the history of Christian and Judaic religion. To this end James W. Peebles, president of Winston-Derek Publishing House, brought together an ecumenical panel of scholars and experts from various denominations of Christianity. This panel was instrumental in drawing from a wide range of Christian denominations to author articles supplementing the KJV text on topics such as multiculturalism in Scripture and the role African women and Scripture^[37]. The intention of this Bible version is not to force an African interpretation in place of a Eurocentric version of Biblical truth, but rather to stress the diversity and multicultural reality and ethos of the Bible. It is also intended to redress the imbalance that has until comparatively recently been predominantly white and Eurocentric. The view mentioned above, that some feel that an Afrocentric interpretation and assessment of the Bible is something that is threatening is based on mistaken bias and a misinterpretation of what Afrocentrism wishes to achieve. The Afrocentric interpretation of the Bible is actually "...deeply liberating for us all"^[38]. The concept of Afrocentrism should not be misread to mean a biased ideological claim to the Bible. What becomes evident from the extensive literature on this subject is that there is a need to balance perceptions and remove prejudicial views of the Bible in order to provide for those ethnic groups that have been marginalized from their rightful religious and Biblical heritage.

In conclusion, the following central points have emerged from the present study of the literature.

- It is clear that the role and importance of The African origins of Biblical history have not been fully recognized and accepted until comparatively recently.
- The significance of an Afrocentric view or interpretation of the Bible and Biblical history has, it seems, been in many instances purposefully avoided or suppressed.
- This suppression of African voices and influences is linked to attempts to reduce the importance and significance of the African people and is also closely linked to wider political and social factors, such as the aims and goals of colonialism.

- It has been suggested by many pundits that the reduction of the Afrocentric viewpoint can be directly related to a desire to impose a Eurocentric view of reality and salvation- which in turn provided a form of moral validity to various forms of oppression.
- One of the most significant aspects of the denial of an Afrocentric viewpoint is that it reduces African self-esteem and the right to an equal part in the history of Christian faith and enlightenment.
- These views and attitudes are changing. The advent of reinterpretations and reassessments of the Bible from a more Afrocentric perspective have allowed for a more realistic and inclusive view of Biblical history, which attempts to provide for a more correct and balanced view of the reality of the origins of Judaism and Christianity.
- In the final analysis the Afrocentric view of the Bible is not intended as an exclusive view that refers only to Africa but stresses the fact that the Bible and scripture is multicultural, multiracial and, most importantly, is intended for the enlightenment of all humanity and not just a few.

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