Beyond Identification: The Use of Africans in Old Testament Poetry and Narratives

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Introduction

For so long the tendency in Old Testament scholarship has been to deny that African nations and individuals either play a role in the text of the Hebrew Canon or had an influence upon it. Sometimes the methods used to deny the presence of Africans within the text have been subtle. Other times they have been not so subtle.

One strategy for achieving this is seen in the fact that for the past century the thrust of biblical scholarship has been on Mesopotamian and ancient Near Eastern studies.¹ This is most dramatically seen as one peruses the various current introductions to the Old Testament and

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histories of Israel, especially the sections dealing with geography. In so doing, one gets the impression that other than Syria-Palestine, the Arabian Peninsula, and Mesopotamia, there is no other part of the ancient world to be considered in relation to the history of ancient Israel. In reference to Egypt, there is usually only a token paragraph or two, and this is still in the section on the Near East, as opposed to Africa.

Similarly, when one looks at maps of the “Bible Lands” one confronts the same tendency of de-Africanization. In other words most maps either show only Syria-Palestine or that region and areas to the east. If there is any depiction of Africa it is usually restricted to Egypt. This was especially the case in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for maps that purported to depict “all the places named in the Bible” but that often omitted the African nations of Cush, Put, Cyrene, and the like. On the other hand, there were maps that located Cush, ancient Ethiopia, outside of Africa, especially when depicting the so-called Garden of Eden. In modern maps, the de-Africanization takes place in presenting a map labeled the “Near East”; these maps include African territories.


One would expect that identifying the African nations mentioned in the Hebrew Canon would be easy. All one would need to do is look at a map of the ancient world. The problem with such a strategy is that we do not currently possess maps that were drawn during biblical times. Rather we have maps that have resulted from examination of written documents. In other words, place names mentioned in the Bible are situated on a map as a result of the exegesis of the biblical text and the use of other sources, such as archaeological investigations and travel reports. See, for example, the explanation given in the foreword to Oxford Bible Atlas, ed. Herbert G. May, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 5.

4. See, for example, Joseph Erwin Wilson, “Maps of the Rivers of Eden” (1877). Such maps are based upon the text of Gen. 2:10-14, which gives the “location” of the “garden” in relation to four rivers and four other geographical landmarks. The last two of these four are designated as being in an east-west relationship. Thus, one would suspect that the first two are in a north-south relationship. Therefore, Cush, the second place mentioned in the passage, must be functioning in this passage as the southern or African “border” of the “garden.” It appears, however, that suggesting that Africa was a landmark for the ancient Israelites is unthinkable for some cartographers.
thereby suggesting that these are not to be considered part of the African continent, but rather part of the Near East.5

With regard to the dictionaries of the Bible, one notes a similar tendency to exclude and minimize exploration of the subject of African influence. For example, while the treatment of Cush in The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible6 has increased from one-eighth of a column to one and one-half columns in the Supplementary Volume,7 the focus of the increase has been on arguing for two locations of Cush, one in Africa and the other in the Arabian Peninsula. Once this second location is established within the scholarly set, de-Africanization occurs. In other words, within commentaries the location of Cush is argued to be either ambiguous or in Arabia.8 This latter option is particularly the case in exegeting units in which an individual from Cush plays an important, positive role in the narrative or is associated with a major character.9

The treatment of Egypt is another example of this tendency to minimize African influence on the Hebrew Canon. This has been achieved by a twofold strategy. On the one hand, there are those efforts to move Egypt out of Africa by arguing for a sharp distinction between Sub-Saharan Africa and Egypt. On the other hand, there are those efforts that argue that the Hamites were not Africans. Because the latter theme is taken up elsewhere in this volume,10 here I will briefly focus upon the former.

One of the more graphic examples of attempting to remove Egypt from Africa is found in The Image of the Black in Western Art. Volume 1 begins with an article that discusses the portrayal of blacks in Egyptian art. It should immediately strike one as strange to see Egyptian art depicted as Western. This puzzlement is resolved by the writer maintaining throughout the article that there is a classic differentiation between Egypt and Africa. Thus, the message of the chapter is that ancient Egypt should be considered Western and that the existence of blacks (= Africans) there

5. See, for example, maps in Oxford Bible Atlas, 54–55, 92–93. The maps in that book are often used in study editions of Bibles and in histories of Israel. One exception to modern cartographic de-Africanization is the map found on the inside cover of Bernhard Anderson’s Understanding the Old Testament, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1986), which not only locates Cush in Africa but also labels the whole continent, including Egypt, as Africa.
8. In this regard it should be noted that the underlying assumption in such argumentation is that ancient “Arabia” was not populated by Africans but rather by the “forerunners of our modern-day Arabs”; ancient “Arabia” is thereby de-Africanized.
9. The treatment of the Cushite wife of Moses, mentioned in Num. 12:1, is an example of this argument that Cush was non-African.
10. See the discussion on the “New Hamite hypothesis” in Charles Copher’s essay in this volume.
was unusual.\textsuperscript{11} Another example of this minimizing tendency is seen in Hubert Huffman’s article on Egypt in the Harper’s Bible Dictionary. In it Huffman admits that Egypt is in Africa but then goes on to claim that “Egyptian cultural influence on Palestine was modest.”\textsuperscript{12}

This bias in modern scholarship to either remove ancient Egypt from Africa or to suggest a minimal influence of Africa on ancient Israelite culture and religion is also noticeable in the work of church historians and theologians. For example, most treat the Alexandrian and other north African churches as a subunit of the Western church.\textsuperscript{13} Similarly the whole basis of the idea of the Fertile Crescent as the cradle of civilization that extends from Egypt around through Syria-Palestine and on to the Tigris River appears to be an attempt to claim that Egypt is not part of Africa but rather part of the West.

\textit{The Purpose of This Study}

Due to the aforementioned tendency within scholarship to deny or dilute African influence on the biblical text (i.e., to de-Africanize), the subject before us is one of immense importance, primarily in terms of the future development of and redirection for the biblical field. It is also important in terms of challenging and correcting previous distortions and omissions in scholarship. There have already been several exciting and provocative studies on the presence of Africans within the Hebrew Canon.\textsuperscript{14} The objective for the current investigation is to take these stud-

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\item \textsuperscript{12} Harper’s Bible Dictionary (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 248, s.v. “Egypt.” While this argument has been emphasized primarily in modern scholarship, there had been a tendency to accomplish the same objective in Midrashic and Talmudic literature (see Charles Copher, “Three Thousand Years of Biblical Interpretation,” Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center 13 [1986]: 225–46). Similarly the Midrashic treatment of Egyptian words within the Hebrew Canon was to shift the emphasis away from Egyptian to Greek explanations of these terms (see G. Vermes, “Bible and Midrash: Early Old Testament Exegesis,” in The Cambridge History of the Bible, vol. 1, From the Beginnings to Jerome, ed. Peter R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970], 203–5).
ies the next step, namely to examine the significance of the presence of African individuals and nations within the text. The current investigation, therefore, considers two very crucial questions. The first is: What do the references to ancient African nations and individuals tell us about how ancient Israel perceived these people? The second is: How do these perceptions help us to understand better the intention of the writers of the Hebrew Canon in utilizing these people?

I shall begin this study by identifying the particular African nations in question. Next I shall examine poetic passages in the prophetic, psalmic, and wisdom literatures that mention these African nations. This will lead to a grouping of characteristics of ancient Israel’s perceptions of ancient Africa. The study will then move to narratives in which individual Africans appear, with a focus on their function(s) within the particular narrative. Integral to this investigation, therefore, will be an examination of the values undergirding the story/narrative—that is, those foundational human values that help the narrative make sense. In this regard I will demonstrate how the principles and characteristics of ancient Israel’s view of ancient Africa, which are discovered in the poetic sections, are operative in the roles performed by and ascribed to these individuals within the narratives.

In examining these narratives I will first focus upon those in which the significance of the character is readily apparent by virtue of the narrator’s comments. Next, I will direct attention to those passages where narrative clues are absent. My task will be to provide fresh insights into such texts.


15. Many of the prophetic statements regarding the subject appear either in the “accusations” segments of judgment speeches or in oracles against the foreign nations. On first reading one might get the impression that the view of ancient Africa was solely negative, as depicted in these units. However, the assumption in reading these passages must be that that which the prophets decry has its basis in the actions of the people. Thus, in many instances it will be necessary to reinterpret these statements in terms of what they imply about Israel’s normative behavior and perceptions of ancient African nations.

16. In many respects this work is similar to the method advocated and performed by Phyllis Trible in her seminal article, “Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41 (1973): 30–48; also relevant is Trible’s concept of “clues in the text,” discussed in her *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, Overtures to Biblical Theology, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978). In fact there are many similarities between the work of reclaiming African influence and the tasks undertaken by women in “reclaiming the text” from interpretation fostered by Eurocentric male interests. By the same token we are drawn to some of the same passages. In these instances there is the chance for complementarity in the assault upon racist, classist, and sexist oppression.

17. It should be noted at the outset that many of these poetic and narrative passages have a *history of interpretation* that appears to be grounded more in modern Western racial views than in Israel’s perception of ancient Africans. These interpretations will be challenged on the basis of the evidence provided by this study.
Identification of the African Nations

I will begin by focusing upon those African nations with which ancient Israel came into contact. In this study the term African refers to those nations that are located on the continent of Africa and that ancient Israelites designated as related to them. In order to make the study manageable, therefore, the major nations to be considered are Egypt, Cush, and Sheba.18

Genesis 10 is the major starting point for the identification of ancient African nations that had a relationship to ancient Israel. In using Genesis 10, however, the reader must keep in mind that this chapter is a composite of at least two different sources, J and P.19

The J passages are generally designated as 10:8-19, 24-30. The P passages are generally designated as 10:1-7, 20-23, and 31-33.20 On the one hand, one sees from this breakdown that the chapter begins and ends with P, while the J passages are interpolated into the P passages. On the other hand, if one examines the differences in the formulaic ways the J (X became the father of Y, who built . . .) and P (the sons of X) passages speak of these nations, it becomes clear that the writers had different intentions in their listings. The picture is further complicated in that Egypt and Cush appear in both the J and P passages, but the relationship of Egypt and Cush to each other is different in the two sources.

According to J, Egypt,21 Cush,22 and Canaan hold major influence over various nations/city-states throughout Asia Minor, the Mediterranean, and on into Africa. This is seen by the formula "X was the father

18. See the studies listed in note 13, above.

19. Standard source-critical investigations of the composition of the Pentateuch argue that at least four writers or schools of thought are represented. J, or the Jahwist (usually dated in the mid-ninth century B.C.E. and viewed as a polemician for the monarchy during the time of Solomon), and P, the Priestly Writer (usually dated in the fifth century B.C.E. and viewed as a polemicist for the theocracy in postexilic times), are found in Genesis 10.


21. In the listing in 10:13-14 there is reference to Egypt having "influence" over European territories. This is consistent with other ancient migration theories (see Martin Bernal, Black Athena: The Afro-Asiatic Roots of Classical Civilization [New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University, 1987]).

22. The J passage on Cush in Gen. 10:8-12 is used to argue for a second Cush in Arabia or Mesopotamia, since Cush is listed as having relationship with Babel, Accad, and Nineveh. It should first be noted that the passage states that Cush begat Nimrod, a mighty warrior who built these locations. By the same token the passage does not say Cush was in these places. Thus, it appears that the writer is speaking more of an economic and political influence of Cush on Mesopotamia. For further discussion of this African influence see Modupe Oduyoye, The Sons of the Gods and the Daughters of Men: An Afro-Asiatic Interpretation of Genesis 1–11 (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987), 24–27.
of Y," with Y being various city-states of little influence in the tenth century B.C.E. It thus appears that J is bespeaking the extent of the political and economic influence of these nations within these territories. This is in line with what J does in arguing for the foundations of cities and territories in Genesis 4 and 11. This also fits Solomonic times when these are the major nations on the scene.23

It is widely recognized that the P passage of the Table of Nations lists Egypt as one of the "sons of Ham" along with Cush, Put, and Canaan (vv. 6-7). This is buttressed by the Psalmists' designation of Egypt as being in the "land/tents of Ham" (Pss. 78:51 and 105:23). Unlike in J, however, these African nations are not the major nations; rather they are depicted only as elements within one branch of humanity, that of Ham. In addition, while the J passages in Genesis 10 bespeak political influence, the P passages seem only to list genealogical relationships. Thus, while J presents a picture of primary African influence within the world, P depicts a world in which African influence is diminished, which would be the case under Persian rule.

These observations are important for two reasons. First, they demonstrate that throughout ancient Israel's history the writers had to depict the African nations' influence upon and relationship to Israel. Second, they show us that Israel always viewed Egypt and Cush as African nations, and never viewed them as other than that. What the ancient writers differed on was the amount of importance these nations had in the overall scheme of things, which admittedly varied through the centuries.

Finally, the location of Sheba is much in dispute. Most geographers place it in the Arabian Peninsula because it is mentioned in the records of Tiglath-Pileser IV and because of similarities between the names Sheba and Sabaeans.24 A case can be made for locating it in Africa on several grounds. It should first be noted that in Genesis 10 Sheba appears in both J and P (vv. 7 and 28). In the first notation it is listed as Hamite. In the second it is under Eber, which P secondarily connects with the line of Shem. Even there, however, it is listed next to Ophir, which many have speculated to be in Africa and which is also mentioned in 1 Kings 10 as a distant land with which Solomon traded from Ezion-geber.25

Second, Psalm 72:10 notes Sheba in connection with Seba. This is significant for two reasons. First, both locations are in parallelism with Tarshish, giving the sense of expanse from Europe on the north to Africa on the south.26 Second, Seba is mentioned in Isaiah 43:3 as being in the

23. Note that 10:14 assigns the Philistines to the Egyptian sphere of influence.
24. IDB, 4:311-12, s.v. "Sheba, Queen of."
25. IDB, 3:605-6, s.v. "Ophir."
26. This understanding of the reference to Sheba in Ps. 72 is in contrast to that of A. A. Anderson, Psalms 1-72, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans,
area of Cush and Egypt. We can conclude that Sheba in several contexts is associated with the Hamite line and/or other nations within Africa.

Thus it appears that the designation of Egypt, Cush, and Sheba as African nations holds. The attempts to argue for Arabian Peninsula locations for the latter two can be understood as instances of the de-Africanization tendency.

**African Nations in the Poetry of the Hebrew Canon**

I now take up the investigation of how Egypt, Cush, and Sheba are utilized in the poetic passages of the Hebrew Canon. The first way in which they are used is to designate the *farthest places to the south*. This appears to be the intention of the writer of Esther 1:1, which lists the extent of Ahasuerus’s territory as being from “India to Ethiopia.”

We also find these African nations in the list of the places where the Israelites and Judeans in the diaspora are found. Such is the case in Isaiah 11:11, which states, “On that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant which is left of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Cush.” By the same token Zephaniah 3:10 states,

> From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia  
> my suppliants, the daughter of my dispersed ones,  
> shall bring my offering.

In both of the above instances it appears that the writers refer to distant points in Africa as a way of depicting the full extent of the return. In other words, the return from the south is going to be not just from Egypt, but from Pathros, which Jeremiah 44 suggests is in southern Egypt, and also from Cush, which is below Pathros.

There is an interesting twist, or double-sidedness, to this first characteristic usage of these African nations. On the one hand, for Israel they represent the southernmost borders of the “world.” On the other hand, their usage in this way, when related to the return from exile, suggests that the deity’s power goes all the way to the “ends of the earth.” In other words, the ancient hearer/reader of these words would have been immediately struck by how far-ranging was this power of return.


Second, Egypt is depicted as a political hope for military assistance and protection for both Israel and Judah. This is seen in passages such as the following:

Ephraim is like a dove,
silly and without sense,
calling to Egypt [Hos. 7:11].

"Woe to the rebellious children," says the Lord,
"who carry out a plan, but not mine;...
who set out to go down to Egypt,
without asking for my counsel,
to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh,
and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt" [Isa. 30:1-2].

Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help
and rely on horses,
who trust in chariots because they are many
and in horsemen because they are very strong....
The Egyptians are men, and not God [Isa. 31:1, 3; italics mine].

And (Egypt) shall never again be the reliance of the house of Israel [Ezek. 29:16; italics mine].

Similarly, Ezekiel 30:13-19, another “oracle against a foreign nation,” not only uses the destruction of the Egyptian military and political might as the main metaphor for destruction, but it also couples this with the divine self-revelation formula, “Then they will know that I am Yahweh!” As these citations suggest, this Israelite trust in and respect for Egyptian political might were conditions that lasted over the centuries from preexilic times on through exilic times. This reliance was based upon Egypt’s ability to withstand external invasion and its long history of independence.

The vehemence of these objections to Israel’s dependence on the Egyptians bespeaks the extent to which these prophets felt they had to struggle against this tendency. Most scholarly attention given to these diatribes against trusting on Egypt for military and political support has been in the direction of establishing the historical background of the judgment speeches.28 Scholars tend to ignore the implications this

reliance has for highlighting the role of Africa in the history of Israel. Jeremiah calls the Egyptians "those in whom you trust" (2:37), and Ezekiel refers to Egypt as "the reliance of the house of Israel" (29:16); these epithets suggest the high regard that Israel had for African nations.²⁹

A third way in which these poetic passages refer to the African nations is in terms of their wealth. Such statements appear from several different centuries. Often these statements come as instances of simile, metaphor, or contrast, in order for the writer to make a point about another matter. In the eighth century Isaiah made note of the economic state of Egypt by referring to its "workers in combed flax... weavers of white cotton" (19:5).³⁰ During the exile Ezekiel observed that Egypt was a place of "fine embroidered linen" (27:7),³¹ while Deutero-Isaiah, a contemporary of Ezekiel, remarked on the "wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Ethiopia and the Sabeans, men of stature" (45:14).³²

During the postexilic period the writer of one of the discourses of Job, in attempting to demonstrate the importance and value of wisdom, noted that "the topaz of Ethiopia cannot compare with it" (28:19).³³ Even during Maccabean times the writer of Daniel referred to the "treasures of gold and of silver, and all the precious things of Egypt and the Libyans and the Ethiopians" (11:43).³⁴

The Psalmist also makes reference to African wealth. Psalm 68:28-35 speaks of foreign nations bringing tribute and worshiping Yahweh in

²⁹. The prophetic fight against this Israelite reliance upon Egypt and Cush for military protection could also explain the extremism and bizarre quality of some of the prophets' actions and speeches against Egypt. For example, the symbolic act of Isaiah mentioned in chapter 20, when he is reported to have walked nude for three years, and the use of sexual innuendo by Ezekiel in referring to the Egyptians in chapter 16 could have been necessitated by the prophets' attempt to combat a well-entrenched attitude of the people.

³⁰. Watts, Isaiah 1-33, 253-54.

³¹. Walther Eichrodt calls this the best type of sailing gear (Ezekiel, Old Testament Library [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970], 383). Zimmerli observes that such luxury was characteristic of the New Kingdom (Ezekiel 2, 58).


³³. Given ancient Israel's high regard for African wisdom (see below) this comparison is full of symbolism. Interestingly, while Norman Habel points out that the "source" (maggam) of gold and silver referred to in 28:1 is to be understood as Ophir and Sheba, he neither connects these with Africa nor mentions the irony in the metaphor of verse 19. See Habel's The Book of Job, Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 146-49; idem, Job, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 395-98. See also Gustavo Gutiérrez, On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987), 38.

the Jerusalem sanctuary. In depicting this, however, only two nations are listed: Egypt is to bring bronze and Cush is to "stretch out her hands," in other words bring its possessions (v. 31). Since there are only these two nations mentioned as bringing tribute to Yahweh, the Psalmist must be implying that the mention of these two bringing "wealth" would suffice in making the point of how far-reaching (geographically) and how rich (economically) will be this universal appeal of Yahwism. Thus, the people of that day must have viewed these nations as wealthy.

Along with their wealth, these African nations were respected for their wisdom, which is a fourth type of reference to these nations. As Isaiah 19:11-15, one of the "oracles against Egypt," attests in the section announcing the punishment:

The princes of Zo'an are utterly foolish;
   the wise counselors of Pharaoh give stupid counsel. . . .
Where then are your wise men?
   Let them tell you and make known
   what the LORD of hosts has purposed against Egypt.
The princes of Zo'an have become fools,
   and the princes of Memphis are deluded.

Thus, the sign that destruction will come on Egypt is given in terms of the confounding of the wise. In other words, the prophet appeals to the aspect of this nation that Israel holds in high esteem, wisdom, to portray graphically how great the devastation will be.

One reason for these references to African wisdom as a paradigm for destruction/punishment could be the heavy reliance of ancient Israel upon ancient African wisdom. Scholars have long pointed out the strong similarities between Israelite wisdom literature and that of Egypt. Thus, it could very well be that again the intensity of the prophetic attack upon this dimension of the life and culture of Egypt could be in direct proportion to its esteem in ancient Israel.

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35. Anderson (Psalms 1–72, 497) notes that bronze was usually imported into Egypt; thus the reference here must not be to the natural resources of the area. Rather it speaks to the materials that were held high and that the rich were able to buy.

36. So Dahood, Psalms II, 229; and Anderson, Psalms, 498. It should be noted that this text has a long history of interpretation within the African American religious community, most especially in antebellum preaching, although not usually in the sense of African wealth.


38. As has been noted above, this line of argumentation is based upon the understanding that the function of the details found in the announcement of punishment within the various judgment speeches in the prophetic literature is to depict in the most graphic
A fifth way in which these poetic passages speak about these African nations is in terms of their being the norm for valuation. One of the earlier such statements is found in Amos 9:7, in which Yahweh states, "Are you not to me like the Cushites, O Israel?" There has been much argument as to the intention of this statement, namely whether it reflects positively or negatively upon the Cushites. Most scholars have argued that it is negative as regards the Cushites. Gene Rice has shown that these arguments seem to be based more in the exegesis' own negative view of Africans than in the sense of the text. He has also argued convincingly that the statement is to be taken as reflecting positively upon the Cushites.

Further, Regina Smith has argued that, on the basis of a historical reconstruction of the eighth century, Cush was in control of Egypt and one of the major political and military forces of Amos's day. Thus, this statement must be understood as a positive reference to Cush.

Similarly, Jeremiah's famous set of rhetorical questions in 13:23,

Would the Cushite change his skin, or the leopard his spots?
So also you who have learned to do evil could do good!
[translation mine]

has been the subject of much debate as to their positive or negative intention. Most of the negative interpretations of this passage appear to stress the use of ykl, "to be able, can," in the concluding part of the terms possible the nature of the destruction. In order to accomplish this task, the prophets appeal to the image that is the most potent in the life of the people. For a further discussion of this characterization of the use of motifs in the announcement of judgment in prophetic judgment speeches, see P. Riemann, "Desert and Return to Desert in the Pre-Exilic Prophets" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1964).

39. The treatment by James L. Mays is characteristic. He states, "Precisely why Amos chose the Cushites for comparison with Israel must unfortunately remain somewhat obscure... On the evidence one can say no more than that the Cushites were a distant, different folk whom Israelites knew mostly as slaves... What the comparison does is to humiliate Israel completely" (Amos, Old Testament Library [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976], 157; italics mine).


42. It should be noted that the Hebrew uses a hé-interrogative with the imperfect, hýhpk, as the verb in this first clause, which is also understood for the second clause. There is no use of ykl, can, in this part of the verse. Thus, the clause should be translated as either "The Cushite change his skin...?" or, as I have proposed, "Would the Cushite change his skin...?" As I argue below, this is more in line with the argument the prophet is making.

43. This sense of being contrary to fact is noted with the gam-correlativum in the first part of the clause (see IDB, 169c).

44. Carroll calls this an argument "charged with ideological matters" (Jeremiah, 305), but he never makes clear what they are. Likewise, Thompson states, "A negative answer must be given" (Jeremiah, 374). Neither of them, however, speaks to the unthinkable nature of the claim; nor do they discuss why the example is chosen by Jeremiah.
accusation. This is seen in the fact that they usually add the word can to the beginning of the rhetorical question (i.e., “Can the Cushite...?”) although it is lacking in the Hebrew. Because the implied answer to the rhetorical questions of changing is no, they conclude, therefore, that the passage bespeaks negative or unfortunate situations of inability to change.

In so doing these exegetes ignore the basis of Jeremiah’s charge, namely that the people of Judah, the addressees in this diatribe, are lmdy hr, “learners of evil.” Thus, what is being charged is that the Cushite and the leopard have learned the advantages of being who they are, rulers of territories who are respected by and awesome to their neighbors. In a similar manner, those who have lived the life of sinning have learned the advantages of being sinners. In other words, Jeremiah’s argument—namely, that there is no incentive for change on the part of the people—can be recognized only if we understand that this is the case for the Cushite. To Jeremiah and to his listeners, it is unthinkable that the Cushites would want to change the way they look. Thus, the use of the Cushite in this passage suggests that Israel should use the Cushites as “yardsticks” for assessing themselves.45

Another such passage that cites Africans as the basis for valuation of Israel is Isaiah 43:3. Within the oracle of salvation, Deutero-Isaiah is trying to convince the people of Israel how much Yahweh loves them. One of his proofs is the actions of Yahweh in ransoming Israel with the three African nations, Egypt, Cush, and Sheba.46 In this instance, not only does the motive clause in verse 3b (“Because you are precious in my sight”) make this clear, but the dynamics of the situation also bespeak it. In other words, the mention of these three nations being used as “ransom for Israel” could only be of comfort to Israel if these nations were highly valued.

Similarly, the Psalms contain the notion that when Cush accepts Yahwism, a high point will be reached. This notion is seen in Psalm 68:31 where Egypt and Cush are specifically listed as bringing gifts to and worshiping Yahweh. In other words, true universalism will have

45. Bishop Dunston’s treatment of this unit is classic. He claims that it proves beyond a doubt that the desire for blacks to be white is unnatural (see The Black Man, 47).

46. While McKenzie notes that this passage is intended to show that Israel is “highly valued to Yahweh,” he finds it strange that Egypt should be used here and in Ezek. 29:17-20 as the medium for exchange (Second Isaiah, 50–51). What becomes apparent from the current study is that it is the value that Israel places upon these African nations that is at the basis of the argument of Deutero-Isaiah.

Another clue to the correctness of this reading is seen in the use of prophetic reversal by the writer in the treatment of these African nations. Isaiah of Jerusalem, in chaps. 19–20, used the prediction of the downfall of these nations as a sign to Judah that its basis of hope in their military might was hopeless. In this passage, Deutero-Isaiah uses the same motif; the fall of these African nations is the symbol of Israel’s salvation. In this prophetic book, prophetic reversal is also used in the treatment of “wilderness” and the like.
been achieved when these two nations come to accept Yahweh as their deity.

Thus, one sees that throughout the poetic sections of the prophetic, psalmic, and wisdom literatures there are numerous references to Egypt and Cush that seem to cite these nations as standards against which to evaluate Israel. Whether it is to give the example of the vastness of territory to be considered, military might and power, wealth, wisdom, or as a point of comparison for Israel in which its esteem is boosted, these nations are cited as paradigmatic. In this one sees that not only is there African presence within the Hebrew Canon, but the significance of this presence appears to be that Israel utilizes these nations as the "yardstick" for comparison.

**African Individuals in the Narratives of the Hebrew Canon**

It is now time to turn our attention to the appearance of African individuals and nations within Hebrew Canon narratives to see whether the paradigms uncovered in the poetic passages are operative there also. Since there is neither time nor space in this study to examine all such narratives, I will simply review a few examples in this context. I will not explore examples that have received special treatment elsewhere in this volume, unless my treatment offers something new to the discussion.

There are several narratives in which an African functions to raise the esteem of an Israelite. One such instance is the stories in Genesis 16 and 21 that feature Abraham (or Abram), Sarah (or Sarai), and Hagar. In these stories Abraham’s wife, Sarah, has an Egyptian servant, Hagar, working for her. In the first narrative, since Sarah is barren, she offers Hagar to Abraham as a way to fulfill Yahweh’s promise that Abraham will have many descendants (Gen. 15:5b). On the one hand, the reader must assume that Hagar is the very best person Sarah can find to help fulfill the promise. To assume otherwise misses the significance of the union between Abraham and Hagar.

On the other hand, this story must be understood within the context of the writer speaking about the prehistory of the nation Israel. Given the political and economic realities of ancient Egypt and ancient Israel, both in the time the story was written (tenth century B.C.E.) and in the time it is describing (nineteenth to seventeenth centuries B.C.E.), the Israelites’ having an Egyptian as a servant was most uncommon. In addition, since Abraham and Sarah are depicted as nomads, having a servant at all is most unusual. The premise of the story, then, is that the forebears of the nation Israel were rich enough to afford an Egyptian servant. Thus,

Another Pentateuchal narrative that makes mention of an African is Numbers 12:1-10, the passage in which Moses’ Cushite wife is mentioned. This passage is controversial and frequently misinterpreted. This is because most exegetes hold 12:1 to be a totally separate argument unrelated to verses 2ff. Most of the expositions of this passage revolve around either of two themes. The first is the attempt to de-Africanize this woman, to argue that she must come from some Cush other than the Cush in Africa.\footnote{See Martin Noth, Numbers, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968).} The other type of argument, which affirms this woman’s African heritage, concentrates on the conflict between Miriam and Moses in regard to this marriage and views it as a racially motivated conflict.\footnote{For example, see Cain Hope Felder, Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989), 42, and Phyllis Trible, “Bringing Miriam out of the Shadows,” Bible Review 1 (1989): 21–22.}

Verse 2 of this passage concerns the different status of Moses over against his siblings. Miriam asks, “Hasn’t Yahweh spoken not only through Moses but also through us?” The implication is that Moses views himself as having a higher status than his siblings. The response of the deity to this complaint, found in verses 6–8, confirms that Moses is indeed of a higher status than Miriam and Aaron.

Placed in this light, it would appear that the reference to the Cushite wife in verse 1 is the first piece of evidence offered by Miriam in her charge that Moses has an inflated position. In other words, she claims that Moses’ marriage to the Cushite woman may increase his social status, but it should not increase his status before Yahweh. After all, Yahweh also speaks to Miriam and Aaron. Read in this light, Miriam’s reference to the Cushite wife is not a racist claim against this woman; rather it is a disclaimer that association with the Cushites is not the prime way to gain status. The prime way is to be addressed by Yahweh.
This interpretation appears to be sound on two grounds. First is the fact that the punishment meted out to Miriam as a result of this challenge to the status of Moses is that she is turned “leprous, white as snow” (v. 10). Thus, the punishment for complaining about Cushites as a means of status makes her the exact opposite of the Cushite, white as snow.50 This ironic twist could not be accomplished unless verse 1 were part of the unit. Second, the interpretation rests upon the understanding that in the Hebrew Canon to be white as snow is a curse.51

Another set of passages that rely on the association with Africans as a way to establish the positive status of a biblical character is the fourfold reference to Solomon marrying the “daughter of Pharaoh.” In the first instance (1 Kings 3:1), the mention of the marriage comes on the heels of the notice that the kingdom was established in the hands of Solomon (2:46b). The impression is that the marriage is one of the first major official acts of the king. The second notice (1 Kings 9:16) is a parenthetical interpolation into the details of the forced levy of Solomon and is used to explain how Gezer became part of his territory. Interestingly, the notice is in conjunction with a mention of Egyptian military might and of the fact that Pharaoh gives conquered territory to Solomon as part of his daughter’s dowry. The third notice of the marriage (1 Kings 9:24) is used to illustrate Solomon’s wealth and building activities, while in the fourth instance (1 Kings 11:1) the marriage begins the list of foreign wives in the Deuteronomic negative evaluation of Solomon.

Most researchers have concentrated on the identification of the Pharaoh who made such an alliance with Solomon.52 They also note that while the practice of the Egyptian Pharaohs was to consolidate their power through political marriages, this always occurred through their sons and not through their daughters. In fact the Amarna letters53 attest to the fact that such marriages as the one credited to Solomon were forbidden.54 Surely such was known to the readers of the day. Thus, one must ask, what function is served by having such notices of Solomon marrying an Egyptian princess?

50. So Felder, Troubling Biblical Water, 42.
51. Such is seen in the oft-mistranslated Isaiah 1:18. In this verse, part of a judgment speech, the charge begins with the word “m, “if.” Thus, the prophet proclaims, “Come to judgment, if your sins are as scarlet [= negative], then they will be made white as snow [= the punishment].” Since all other instances of “m found in this unit are read as “if,” there appears to be no reason, other than the desire to keep the phrase “white as snow” as a blessing, to translate it here as “contrary to fact, though,” as do most exegetes.
53. These letters, found at Tell el-Amarna in Egypt, contain diplomatic correspondence between the kings of the city-states in Syria-Palestine and the Pharaohs of Egypt during the eleventh century B.C.E., when Egypt controlled that territory.
It would appear that in stressing this marriage these writers are making a twofold claim. On the one hand, the writers are making the claim not only that Solomon adopted the governing practices of the Egyptians, political alliance through intermarriage, but also that he was able to achieve what other nations could not, in this instance the marriage to an Egyptian princess. Therefore, Solomon’s esteem is raised through this association. He can achieve the impossible. On the other hand, he is portrayed as one who can take the Egyptian governing model and perfect it; in other words, he can play their game better than they. Thus, this fourfold notice of Solomon’s marrying an Egyptian princess functions as the prime example of Solomon’s diplomatic genius. This is especially seen in that while all of his other wives are listed in terms of their nationality (11:1b), this woman is listed in terms of her gentillic relationship.\(^{55}\)

Another narrative in which Solomon’s esteem is established in terms of his relationship with an African woman is found in 1 Kings 10 in the visit of the Queen of Sheba. Again, while most research has focused on the historical questions of the visit and the visitor,\(^ {56}\) the question of esteem and valuation appears to be foremost in the minds of the writer and final editor of these materials.

As one looks at the narrative it appears that there are several keys to the question of valuation. First is the fact that the writer is trying to establish, or further ground, Solomon as one who is wise. The vehicle used is that of having him pass the test of African riddles and wisdom. The assumption, therefore, of the narrator is that this is the most difficult test to be posed. The African queen states: “The report was true which I heard in my own land of your affairs and of your wisdom, but I did not believe the reports until I came and my own eyes had seen it; and behold, the half was not told me; your wisdom and prosperity surpass the report which I heard” (vv. 6-7). To the ancient reader that speech was seen as true validation of Solomon as the wise and prosperous king. Thus, this narrative uses as its basis for argument the high value ancient Israel placed upon African wisdom. Similarly, its function is to firmly establish in the mind of the reader the importance or value of Solomon.\(^ {57}\)

\(^{55}\) When women are so identified, the intention of the writer is to stress the political aspect of her identity. See in this regard my argument on the genealogy of Bathsheba in 2 Sam. 11:3 (David in Love and War: The Pursuit of Power in 2 Samuel 10–12, Journal for the Study of Old Testament Supplement Series, no. 75 [Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990], 87).


\(^{57}\) It is most interesting that while there are three narratives in 1 Kings that serve the purpose of validating Solomon as a master of wisdom (3:3-15, 16-28; 10:1-10, 13), two of them rely upon women as the key characters posing the most difficult problems or tests to be passed. Similarly, in the arrangement of the Solomonic traditions, both of these sets
regard the location of Sheba in Africa has more grounding, since there was no ancient Israelite veneration of Arabian wisdom. In other words, the narrative makes sense only if one sees this woman as an African.

By the same token this narrative utilizes the motif of the wealthy African. The queen comes laden with “a very great retinue, with camels bearing spices, and very much gold, and precious stones” (v. 2a). When Solomon shows her his royal palace, possessions, and the Temple, she is described as being in such a state that “there was no more spirit in her” (v. 5b). As with the instance of wisdom, his wealth is placed in comparison to hers. Thus, her reaction is another case of the utilization of comparison between an African and an Israelite for the purpose of certifying that the latter is “able.”

As with the prophetic materials, most notably the treatment of Ezekiel, the Chronicler negatively utilizes the motif of the military might of the African nations to show the power of Yahweh. In redacting the Deuteronomic materials in Kings, especially regarding battles where an African nation appears, the Chronicler makes Africans the foil of Yahweh’s power. In the instance of Shishak’s attack upon Judah during the time of Rehoboam (2 Chron. 12:2-3; par. 1 Kings 14:25), the Chronicler adds key words, which are italicized in the following:

In the fifth year of King Rehoboam, because they had been unfaithful to Yahweh, Shishak king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem with twelve hundred chariots and sixty thousand horsemen. And the people were without number who came with him from Egypt—Libyans, Sukkim, and Cushites.

In this way the Chronicler makes the theological claim that apostasy is the explanation for the attack, not the prowess of the Africans, and by implication that Yahweh is in control of the African military force and can use it to punish Israel.

The converse of this situation is accomplished in the Chronicler’s redaction of the Asa materials. In this regard we read in 2 Chronicles 14:9-15 that “Zerah the Ethiopian came out against them with an army of a million men.... And Asa cried to Yahweh his God... so Yahweh defeated the Ethiopians before Asa and before Judah, and the Ethiopians fled.”

This battle is not mentioned in the 1 Kings account of Asa. In this instance of 2 Chronicles, loyalty to Yahweh can lead to the defeat of a mighty army like that of the Cushites, even during the lifetime of a king like Asa, who had to pay Benhadad for assistance because he was threatened by Baasha (1 Kings 15:16-24; par. 2 Chron. 16:1-6). In other words, given the latter details regarding the reign of Asa and the motif of the military might of the Ethiopians, it becomes clear that belief in

of narratives serve as brackets, separating the negative reports (chaps. 1–2 and 11) from the positive (the Temple building and governance reports).
and reliance upon Yahweh are all that is needed, or so the Chronicler
would like the reader to see.

Similar to the prophetic tendency to react against the influence of
Egyptian wisdom on Israel, the P writer redacts the plague narratives
in Exodus 7–10 in a most interesting manner. A characteristic of this
redaction is that after Moses or Aaron performs a “sign” to convince
Pharaoh to let the people go, the Egyptian magicians can at first replicate
it. Eventually this is not the case, demonstrating that Yahweh is even
more powerful than they. Thus, the Exodus motif not only gives Yahweh
the opportunity to establish an identity as God (Exod. 6:7), but one of the
main ways of doing this is the debunking of Egyptian wisdom. It thus
appears that one of the redactional aims of the P writer is to demonstrate
this point graphically. By the same token, the greatness of the feat of
the Exodus is better grasped when one views ancient Israel’s awe of the
Egyptian military prowess.

Conclusion

Africans not only have a presence in the Israelite poetic and narrative
materials—indeed, those materials show that Israel held African nations
and individuals in very high regard. On the one hand, these nations
represented the southernmost part of the world, as Israel knew it. They
symbolized military might, political stability, and wealth. Their wisdom
was highly regarded. These nations were utilized as a standard of mea-
surement for Israel, which reveals that the authors and redactors of the
texts viewed these nations and their leaders as having great value. If an
Israelite wished to show approval of something or someone, favorable
comparison to Africans was one way of doing that. Further, these African
nations and leaders were used as foils to reveal how great Yahweh was.

On the other hand, not all writers of the Hebrew Canon were fa-
vorably disposed to this tendency to utilize African nations as the
measurement of valuation and validation. Within the preexilic and some
of the exilic prophetic traditions we see a constant attempt to fight against
it. It appears that while the Deuteronomist readily utilizes the standard,
the Chronicler and P attempt to minimize it or to use it negatively. Fi-

58. See Exod. 7:8-13, 20-24; 8:5-7, 16-19. Interestingly, while Z. Zevit does an excellent
job in comparing the P redaction of the plague with the creation motif and its implications
for P’s portrayal of Egypt, he misses the structural implications noted here. The arguments
in both pieces are complementary in their regard of P’s anti-Egyptianizing (see Z. Zevit,
“The Priestly Redaction and Interpretation of the Plague Narrative in Exodus,” Jewish

59. See my treatment of this motif in more detail in In the Beginning: The Pentateuch’s
nally, we see that in both the attempts to utilize and those to minimize the influence of Africans and African nations, the motif is readily apparent.

The task that now lies ahead is to take these understandings of the use of Africans and African nations and apply them more systematically to other passages. In this way, new and possibly richer interpretations will be realized.