

## ‘A Negro, Naturally a Slave’: An Aspect of the Portrayal of Africans in Colonial Old Testament Interpretation

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### ***ABSTRACT***

*The essay analyzes how Old Testament references to black people – the so-called ‘Cushites’ – are portrayed in colonial Old Testament interpretation. The point of departure is an Edinburgh commentary from 1899 on the Books of Samuel, where a Cushite officer in King David’s army (cf. 2 Sam 18) is described as ‘a negro (naturally, a slave)’. Based on a discussion of various hermeneutical approaches to the relationship between ‘Africa’ and the Old Testament, it is argued that the term ‘naturally’ reflects a late nineteenth century, colonial understanding of Africans.*

### **A INTRODUCTION**

The context is biblical interpretation. The question is how western Old Testament interpretation a century ago was influenced by its colonial context in relation to Africa. And the key word is the ‘naturally’ in the phrase ‘a Negro, naturally a slave’, which is a quotation from a late Nineteenth Century Old Testament commentary on Samuel.

Let us start in Edinburgh,<sup>2</sup> where the publisher T. & T. Clark in 1899 published Henry Preserved Smith’s commentary on the books of Samuel in its International Critical Commentary series. In his analysis of 2 Sam 18 and its reference to a Cushite warrior – that is a black or African warrior – in King David’s army, Smith refers to this Cushite as a slave. Or, to be more precise, because this Cushite is a black African, he is ‘naturally’ a slave (Smith 1899:359). I think Smith’s remark about the Cushite in 2 Sam 18 as ‘naturally’

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<sup>2</sup> The first version of this essay was presented in a research seminar at the University of Edinburgh in 2007, hence its repeated references to Edinburgh. A popularized – and Norwegian – version of the essay will be published in a Festschrift for the Norwegian missiologist Tormod Engelsviken: K. O. Sannes et al. (eds): *Med Kristus til Jordens ender: Festskrift til Tormod Engelsviken*. Trondhjem: Tapir, 2008.

a slave is more than an accidental mistake. Rather, I would tend to argue that it reflects an interpretative context where the idea of an asymmetric power relationship between whites and blacks, or between the West and Africa, is taken for granted. Smith's interpretative context is a context of colonialism, as his commentary originates in the geographical and historical centre of western colonialism vis-à-vis Africa: geographical centre, in the sense that the author is American and the publisher is British; and historical centre, in the sense that the commentary is published at the climax of a four or five hundred years history of western colonization – in a broad sense of the word – of Africa.

The following is a case study of Smith's remark about the Cushite, in relation to its interpretative context. I will approach the relationship between Africa and the Old Testament in colonial Old Testament interpretation from two perspectives. First, the Old Testament in Africa, that is the interpretation of African cultural and religious expressions assumed to be related to the Old Testament. Then Africa in the Old Testament, that is the interpretation of Africans referred to by the Old Testament. Against this background I will return to Smith and his assumption that a black African appearing in texts of the Old Testament 'naturally' should be interpreted as a slave.

## B THE OLD TESTAMENT IN AFRICA

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, far-away and exotic Africa was 'discovered' – geographically, politically and culturally – by western explorers, merchants, colonialists, and missionaries. What these western expatriates encountered in Africa, however, was not necessarily that far-away and exotic (Holter 2006a). Rather, many of them could feel and express some sense of *déjà vu*, as they back in a western context, in the midst of their own social and cultural upbringing, had experienced something quite similar to what they now met in Africa: in their 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century school and church experiences with the Old Testament. To many of those early, western expatriates who eventually managed to go beyond the coastline and get into the African continent, the Old Testament provided the main literary source of examples of non-western culture and non-Christian religion, and the Old Testament therefore served as an interpretative grid for their approaches to African culture and religion. I will exemplify this from two perspectives. First, from the perspective of culture and religion, where I will discuss the interpretative role of the Old Testament in a couple of early 20<sup>th</sup> century ethnographic studies of the Maasai of East Africa and the Ashanti of West Africa. Then from the perspective of material culture, where I will discuss the interpretative role of the Old Testament in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century western interpretation of the ruins of Great Zimbabwe in Southern Africa.

First, the perspective of culture and religion. An illustrative example here is the German colonialist M. Merker's (1867-1908) book *Die Masai: Eth-*

*nographische Monographie eines ostafrikanischen Semitenvolkes* (published in 1904), which is an early ethnographic study of the nomadic Maasai of East Africa. The book includes a substantial comparison between the Maasai and ancient Israel. Merker's main idea is the existence of a number of religio-cultural parallels between ancient Israel and the Maasai; parallels including central aspects of anthropology and cosmology, but also a number of similar aetiologies and rituals. Merker's interpretative approach to these parallels is then to claim that the Maasai and the ancient Israelites once back in history constituted one single people (Merker 1910:338-344).

A second illustrative example has been provided by the American ethnographer and historian of religion J. J. Williams (1875-1940). His book *Hewbreisms of West Africa: From Nile to Niger with the Jews* (published in 1930) advocates the idea that a high number of assumed parallels between life and thought in ancient Israel and traditional West Africa – especially amongst the Ashanti of Ghana – reflect an historical interaction between the two. Parallels are identified in all areas of life, from sociological structures to narrative traditions, and from ritual expressions to theological concepts; even the Old Testament name of God, Yahweh, is said to have an etymological parallel in the Yame of the Ashanti. Williams' interpretative approach to these assumed parallels is then that ancient Israel represents the historical source whereas West Africa and in particular the Ashanti represent the receiver, and that the phenomenon as such reflects a gradual diffusion of the religion and culture of ancient Israel into Africa (Williams 1967:340ff.).

At first sight, Merker and Williams may seem to express quite opposite attitudes towards the idea of seeing the 'Old Testament' in Africa. Merker, the German colonialist, thinks in categories like elect people and blood relations, whereas Williams, the American ethnographer, thinks in categories like historical interaction and cultural diffusion. However, a closer look reveals that the basic concept, and I would say the basic *colonial* concept, is the same in both cases. It all has to do with the relationship between Africa and a non-African source of (assumed) higher culture. As far as Williams is concerned, he argues that whatever the Ashanti and West Africa have of cultural and religious values, these have been received from the outside, from ancient Israel. These values may have been partly destroyed on their long journey from the Nile to Niger, but they are still recognizable. And likewise, as far as Merker is concerned, whatever the Maasai represent of cultural and religious values in East Africa, it reflects their non-African background, as they originate from the same people as ancient Israel. Nevertheless, in consequence with his focus on race rather than cultural diffusion, Merker has a much more negative attitude towards the neighbouring ethnic groups of the Maasai than what Williams has vis-à-vis the neighbours of the Ashanti. Merker idealizes the Maasai's nomadic way of life, against the agricultural life of the neighbours. And he emphasizes the military

strength of the Maasai as a means to keep their race clean and free from the degeneration that would follow intermarriage between this Semitic people and the neighbouring Negroes (Merker 1910:347-351).

Second, the perspective of material culture. An illustrative example here is the interpretative role of the Old Testament in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century western interpretation of the ruins of Great Zimbabwe in Southern Africa (Holter 2006b). The German geologist K. Mauch reached Great Zimbabwe in September 1871, and the building structures he observed there reminded him of the Old Testament narrative about the Queen of Sheba visiting King Solomon in Jerusalem. One part of the Great Zimbabwe ruins is a copy of Solomon's temple, Mauch argued, and another part is a copy of the house that the queen had been living in during her visit to Jerusalem. The building complex is then a result of Phoenician workers, brought to Africa by the Queen of Sheba for this purpose.

Mauch's interpretation of the Zimbabwe ruins was the first in a series promoting the idea that the ruins are a result of an ancient colonization of Semitic origin. An illustrative example is the German explorer and colonialist C. Peters' books *Das goldene Ophir Salomos* (1895) and *Im Goldland des Altertums* (1902). According to Peters, Great Zimbabwe and its surrounding areas with a large number of ancient goldmines can be identified as the legendary city of Ophir, known from the Old Testament as Solomon's source of gold and precious stones. Even the root of the geographical terms Ophir and Africa is the same, Peters claims, and the term Ophir has thereby survived in the name of the African continent. The Phoenicians and Sabeans – with whom Solomon is said to have interacted (cf. 1 Kings 10:1-13.22) – were trading gold in these areas, and Solomon is therefore supposed to have become part of this trade. The area was able to produce large quantities of gold, and Mauch takes the Old Testament texts to say that Solomon had a continuing trading route there. The Phoenicians, Sabeans and Israelites colonized the area, and as such the late 19<sup>th</sup> century western colonization is therefore but part of a very long colonial tradition (Peters 1895:60-64 and 1902:325-327).

The colonial aspects of Mauch and Peters are quite obvious (Holter 2006b). Particularly important is the paralleling of the western colonialists and Old Testament Solomon. The cultural and technological level of the colonialists, as well as their political and military supremacy, echo the wisdom of Solomon. The Old Testament Solomon narratives emphasize his wisdom as divinely instituted (cf. 1 Kgs 3:4-15, 2 Chr 1:3-13), and the very plot of the Old Testament version of the Queen of Sheba narrative is that she had to leave her own context – let us say that it is Africa – and go to Solomon in Jerusalem to find wisdom there (1 Kgs 10:7-9, 2 Chron 9:5-8). Accordingly, the paralleling of Solomon and the western colonialists on the one hand, and Africa – in the early first millennium B.C.E. or the late second millennium C.E. – on the other,

shows two colonizers ('the West') representing an unquestionable wisdom that transcends whatever cultural expressions the colonized ('Africa') is able to come up with. Further, the two colonizers are depicted as representing a political power that is divinely instituted and legitimized to lift colonized Africa up to the cultural level of Israel in the days of Solomon or the West in our days.

### C AFRICA IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Although the idea of searching for 'Africa' in the Old Testament currently receives increasing attention from African and African American Old Testament interpreters (Holter 2000:93-106), this is something traditional western Old Testament interpreters hardly are familiar with. Nevertheless, the idea of searching for national entities is not entirely foreign to us; we are not least used to search for Israel in the Old Testament, and we know something about the tension between historical sources and contemporary concerns. In recent years we have learned that this is an enterprise where we should distinguish between at least three different 'Israels'. One is literary Israel, another is historical Israel, and a third is the Israel of Old Testament interpretation; the latter combining the two former and interpreting them from certain ideological perspectives (Davies 1992:11).

In consequence with this, we should acknowledge, I think, that also a search for 'Africa' in the Old Testament should distinguish between at least three different 'Africas' (van Heerden 2006:506). One is 'literary Africa', that is the peoples and individuals of African background referred to by the Old Testament. Another is 'historical Africa', that is the peoples and individuals who inhabited Africa in the first millennium B.C. And a third is the 'Africa' of Old Testament interpretation, that is an 'Africa' which combines literary and historical aspects, an 'Africa' where these aspects indeed are being interpreted from certain ideological perspectives. It is the latter 'Africa' which will be focused on here, an Old Testament 'Africa' being interpreted from colonial perspectives.

As a case I will use the Old Testament references to Cush, or Ethiopia, as the Septuagint and many other translations render it. My choice of Cush partly reflects the Old Testament portrayal of the Cushites in ways many modern readers would intuitively refer to as typically African, but partly also the attention the Cush texts have met in Africa throughout the centuries; first in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, then in other 'ethiopianist' African churches, and recently also in academic Old Testament studies in Africa (Adamo 1998, Lokel 2006, cf. also Lavik 2001). The more than fifty Old Testament references to Cush portray a people – or individuals of this people – who is 'tall and smooth-skinned', living in 'a land divided by rivers' (Isa 18:2), that is along the Nile, south of Egypt (Ezek 29:10). They may have a 'strange speech' (Isa 18:2), and they 'cannot change their skin' (Jer 13:23), but they represent military skills (2

Sam 18:19-32, 2 Chron 14:8-14, 2 Chron 16:8) and economic power (Isa 45:14, Job 28:19), and they will eventually worship Yahweh in Jerusalem (Isa 18:7, Ps 68:32).

Let me draw your attention to two Cush texts; Amos 9, representing a group of texts where the term Cush is used to refer to a collective, the Cushites as a nation, and 2 Sam 18, representing a group of texts where Cush is used about an individual, a single Cushite in the service of King David. The first text, Amos 9:7, not only refers to Cush as a collective, it even compares this Cush and Israel:

Are you not like the children of the Cushites to me,  
O children of Israel? says Yahweh  
Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt,  
And the Philistines from Capthor and the Arameans from Kir?

The comparison in the first half of Amos 9:7 has a remarkably divergent history of interpretation (Holter 2000:115-118). On the one hand, there is a strong tradition of seeing it as a word of judgement. Israel is nothing more to Yahweh than the Cushites, a word of judgement which then is supposed to correspond with the overall tone of judgement in the Book of Amos. On the other hand, however, there are also some who would see it as a word of salvation. Israel and Cush are in the hands of Yahweh, in parallel with portrayal of Israel in relation to the Philistines and the Arameans in the latter half of the verse.

A typical example of how this relationship between Israel and Cush was interpreted during colonial times, is found in W. R. Harper's Amos and Hosea commentary, published in the T. & T. Clark International Critical Commentary series here in Edinburgh in 1905. According to Harper, the point of the comparison between Israel and Cush is utterly negative (Harper 1905:192):

Israel, says the prophet, is no more to me than the far-distant, uncivilized, and despised black race of the Ethiopians; cf. Je. 13:23. No reference is made to their Hamitic origin or their black skin; and yet their color and the fact that slaves were so often drawn from them added to the grounds for despising them.

The portrayal of the Cushites as 'uncivilized' and 'despised' has no exegetical support as far as the Old Testament is concerned. Neither has it any substantial support from other classical sources. On the contrary, at least in Greek sources, there is a positive attitude towards the so-called Ethiopians. Harper's negative characteristics can nevertheless be found echoed in exegetical literature throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The second text, 2 Sam 18, represents a group of texts where Cush is used about an individual, a single Cushite in the service of King David. The

chapter represents the climax of the David-Absalom narrative. Absalom's rebellion against his father David has to come to an end, and it is David's general Joab who – against the explicit request of the king – decides to kill Absalom. Joab then had to decide whom to send to bring David the news about the death of his son, and amongst his men he picks out a Cushite.

I have already referred to Henry Preserved Smith and his Samuel commentary as a typical example of how the Cushite in 2 Sam 18 was interpreted in colonial times. The Cushite is a 'Negro', and therefore 'naturally' a slave. Smith is not alone to make such a judgement. A number of contemporary and subsequent interpreters take for granted that the Cushite is a slave, often interpreting his black skin as a symbol of his negative message. Nevertheless, the degree of historical certainty about the slavery connection seems to be decreasing; from Smith's 'naturally a slave' (1899:359), to for example G. B. Caird's 'probably a slave' (1953:1142) and J. M. Ward's 'perhaps a slave' (1962:751), and even up to Sadler (2005:114), who a couple of years ago portrayed the Cushite – politically correct in our days – as 'a loyal and faithful officer'.

These examples of how texts like Amos 9 and 2 Sam 18 were interpreted during colonial times, should serve to illustrate, I hope, the close connection between critical biblical scholarship and the colonial – that is political, economic and cultural – concerns of their context. From an early 20<sup>th</sup> century western perspective, Africans were 'slaves', they were 'uncivilized' and they were 'despised'. And what is more, they were 'naturally' so. There was a need for Africans to be slaves, uncivilized and despised, in order to legitimize the western political, economic and cultural colonization of Africa. The Old Testament scholars were children of their time, and they lacked the kind of hermeneutic filters that could have prevented them from reading contemporary colonial concepts of Africa and Africans into the texts.

#### **D AND BACK TO THE KEY WORD 'NATURALLY'**

I have above made an attempt at drawing some lines in colonial Old Testament interpretation. From the perspective of the Old Testament in Africa, I have discussed examples of African cultural phenomena being interpreted as imported from ancient Israel, in parallel with colonial concepts of the relationship between western and African culture. And from the perspective of Africa in the Old Testament, I have discussed examples of interpretations of Cush, where typically colonial concepts of Africa are read into the Old Testament texts. Let us, against this background, return to Henry Preserved Smith and his Samuel commentary where he argues that the Cushite 'naturally' is a slave. I would have liked to say more about his discussion of the role of the Cushite, but there is hardly more to say. Smith does not make any attempt to elaborate or legitimize his interpretation of the Cushite; rather, when he encounters a Cushite in

the text, this Cushite – or ‘Negro’, in Smith’s vocabulary – is to him ‘naturally’ a slave. There is no need for further discussion of the fact that Negroes are slaves! Still, a few things should be said about the author and his academic guild.

Henry Preserved Smith was born in Ohio in 1847, he studied theology in Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1869-1872, in Berlin in 1872-1874 and in Leipzig in 1876-1877. From 1877 he served as Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament; first in his alma mater, Lane Theological Seminary, and from 1893 in various other American seminaries. Smith was considered a leading American Old Testament scholar a century ago, he even served as President of the Society of Biblical Literature in 1909 (cf. Saunders 1982:117). Admittedly, in the early 1890s, he was taken to court for his interpretation of the Old Testament; not because of his interpretation of Cush, though, rather because he had claimed that the Books of Chronicles contain ‘errors of historic fact’. In spite of this, or perhaps even because of this, the editors of the International Critical Commentary series considered Smith a suitable representative of the international guild of critical scholarship, and he was asked to write the Samuel commentary.

Smith’s many years at Lane Theological Seminary are important, as Lane in the 1830s had experienced strong discussions as far as the slavery question was concerned (cf. Fletcher 1943:150-166). More important, though, is the simple fact that he, being born in 1847, grew up in a context familiar with Africans as slaves. So, when he wrote his Samuel commentary in the late 1890s and came to the Cushite in 2 Sam 18, he drew the obvious conclusion that the black African is ‘naturally’ a slave.

There is hardly any reason to believe that his interpretation of this particular Cushite offended anyone in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries academic guild of Old Testament scholarship, in spite of its claim of being ‘international’ and ‘critical’. Rather, the examples that have been outlined above seem to indicate the contrary. As far as the T. & T. Clark International Critical Commentary series is concerned, it took only six years from Smith’s remarks about the Cushite in 2 Sam 18 as ‘naturally’ a slave, to Harper’s portrayal of the Cushites in Amos 9 as ‘uncivilized’ and ‘despised’. And Harper’s humiliating portrayal of the Cushites actually echoes a commentary published a few years earlier by a scholar who happened to be the Old Testament editor of the International Critical Commentary series, S. R. Driver (Driver 1897). Moreover, even the examples referred to above coming from the margins of the guild should be taken into account. The identification of Great Zimbabwe with Ophir, for example, eventually made its way into biblical dictionaries. And even the monograph claiming that ancient Israel and the Maasai once constituted a single people was given an acknowledging preface by a well known professor of Semitic languages in Berlin when it was republished in 1910.

In other words, the international guild of critical Old Testament scholarship seems to have shared the contemporary, colonial concepts of Africa. And here, of course, lies the basic hermeneutic problem. The critical guild lacked a critical distance to itself and to its own political, economic and cultural presuppositions.

## E CONCLUSION

In this essay I have presented some aspects of colonial Old Testament interpretation. Some *aspects*, that is, I do not claim to have covered the whole picture. I will still claim, though, that what I have presented is fairly representative of Old Testament interpretation in colonial times.

If we are to learn from history, I would like to argue that the experiences of colonial Old Testament interpretation ought to be shared with subsequent generations of scholarship. Its lack of a critical distance to itself and to its own political, economic and cultural presuppositions, poses a challenge to our own scholarship and our own academic guilds. And as far as 'international', 'critical' scholarship is concerned, we who belong to the traditional western guild will have to realize that the term 'international' today includes more than the North-Atlantic, and that the term 'critical' must include an awareness of the context of the interpreter.

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