

Biblical Portrayal of Ethiopia as a Challenge to Western Perspectives of Africa

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ABSTRACT

Africa has been presented as underdeveloped and backward until the advent of colonial architects. Archaeological remnants and structures, some of which are still standing to date, portray a different reality seemingly echoed by the biblical account. The endowment of Africa with natural resources, evidence of processing abilities and references to established kingdoms occasionally used as instruments of divine punishment of Israel or provision of refuge suggests a much more advanced situation than has been routinely presented by historians. The biblical record which has been proven for its reliability and historicity provides us with the impetus to re-analyse key texts in order to re-examine the views that have been posited. The Western tendency to undermine Africa's advancements is well known. This article therefore considers the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch as a point of reference to African realities reflected throughout the biblical text.

KEYWORDS: Ethiopia, Western, Africa, Old Testament

A INTRODUCTION

Adamo's 2018 historical-biographical and theological reading of the portrayal of Africa and Africans in the book of Jeremiah provides the plausibility for the acceptance of the historicity of characters and the events in the book as non-fictional. Taking a cue from his 1998 publication, *Africa and the Africans in the Old Testament*, Adamo discusses Jeremiah's familiarity with Africans and his personal encounters with them. His study presents an image of Africa and Africans that disputes generic sentiments of the continent as undeveloped or that attempt to de-Africanise the positive accounts about Africa as Mesopotamian or Middle Eastern.¹ The view that Africa had no credible history prior to the advent

* Submitted: 28/04/2021; peer-reviewed: 30/07/2021; accepted: 30/07/2021. Sampson Ndoga, "The Biblical Portrayal of Ethiopia as a Challenge to Western Perspectives of Africa," *Old Testament Essays* 34 no. 2 (2021): 485 – 502. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2021/v34n2a11>.

¹ David T. Adamo, "The Portrayal of Africa and Africans in the Book of Jeremiah." *In die Skriflig* 52/1 (2018): 1–9; David T Adamo, *Africa and the Africans in the Old Testament* (San Francisco: International Scholars Publication, 1998), 1; cf. Edwin M. Yamuchai, *Africa and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2004), 206–207.

of colonialism² stands in stark contrast to Jeremiah's portrayal of Africa and Africans,³ Adamo reveals. His seminal study on the one hand, succeeds in showing biblical narratives as historically reliable in the rendering of African history.⁴ These narratives are confirmed by archaeological findings. On the other hand, African history itself is positively reasserted in Afrocentric biblical interpretation that Yamauchi⁵ describes as calling to attention neglected evidence of significant passages that refer to Africa and Africans such as Moses' Cushite wife, Pharaoh Taharqa of the (Cushite) 25th Dynasty, the Ethiopian Eunuch of Candace. Adamo notes that:

Despite the fact that many antiquarians have and continue to maintain the view that the ancient black people of antiquity were the earliest civilised people and were the first civilised inhabitants of ancient Egypt, some historians continue to ignore their findings and maintain the opposite view that black Africa has no history before the introduction of western civilisation by the Europeans.⁶

Adamo raises the prejudicial perspective similarly criticised by other African scholars such as the renowned Cheik Anta Diop of Senegal (1923–1986)

² J. Poncian, "The Persistence of Western Negative Perceptions about Africa: Factoring in the Role of Africans," *Academic Journals* 7/3 (2015): 72–80.

³ Writing for *The Guardian*, Robert Bates (2012) aptly presents the deliberate attempts by Europeans to assert their own superiority by depicting Africa and other regions of the world as backward. These perspectives were crystallised from the 17th century onwards with the advent of slave trade, racism and colonialism with sentiments that viewed the backwardness and savagery as biologically determined characteristics leading to the self-imposed conviction that subjugating Africans was for their own good. Armed with the social Darwinist views such as Herbert Spencer's and of eugenicists such as Francis Galton's, the articulation of Africa as a land of fantastical beasts, cannibals, backward races and so on were simply endorsed (see <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/nov/01/africa-history-western-eyes>).

⁴ The reliability of the Bible, which is not necessarily the focus of this study, nevertheless deserves mention as a source of perspectives on Africa that are not shaped by prejudicial agenda presented by the revisionists' corruption of the picture we derive from the scriptural records. The reliability of the Bible has retained scholarly interest with several recent additions to the discussion of which we only mention two to avoid being side-tracked here. See K.A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003); H.B. Pehlke, "Observations on the Historical Reliability of the Old Testament," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 56/1 (2013): 65–85; Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament: Countering the Challenges to Evangelical Christian Belief* (B&H Studies in Christian Apologetics; Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016); R. Martinez, "The Historical Reliability of the New Testament," *Journal of Biblical Theology* 2/2 (2019): 188–199; Gbenga A. Adeniyi, "A Defense of the Reliability of the Biblical Account," *Journal of Biblical Theology* 3/4 (2020): 141–150.

⁵ Yamuchai, *Africa and the Bible*, 213.

⁶ Adamo, *Africa and the Africans in the Old Testament*, 1.

in his book *African Origin of Civilisation* (1971) or Molefi Kete Asante in his more recent 1998 work, *The Afrocentric Idea* and the co-edited piece with Ama Mazama, *The Afrocentric Paradigm* (2003). These are works which western scholars tend to ignore. Adamo (1998:1) continues:

Still in these modern times, the assumption prevails that the ancient world in Africa was limited to Egypt and that sub-Sahara Africa had no historic past before the Portuguese colonisation. The aforementioned assumptions have affected the attitudes of not only modern man and historians, but also theologians in their examination of the Bible and Africa and Africans, to the extent that they have produced a doctrine of inferiority of black people all over the world.⁷

Thus, there is blatant denial of positive portrayals of Africans in the Bible exacerbated by the hegemonic hold of western scholars on biblical and theological studies. Recent calls to regard decoloniality as an approach to the (re)reading of biblical texts bears witness to scholarly attempts to rid itself of some of the inherent imbalances long seen by Adamo:

My examination of the biblical texts that mention Africa and Africans (Cushites and Egypt) has shown that the ancient biblical world was not prejudiced towards black people in their midst. Prejudice towards people with black skin colour is certainly post-biblical and alien to ancient Israel. Africans or Cushites were never racialised by the authors of the Bible ... The use of black Africa as valuation for Israel's action demonstrates the great value attached to them during the biblical period. The frequent mentioning of Cushites and Egyptians demonstrates the deep knowledge, familiarity and respect the biblical and ancient people, in general, have for them (Adamo).⁸

Adamo's views are echoed by Bueno who observes the tendency to Europeanise all peoples in the Bible, which he refutes:

The Old Testament mentions the peoples of the African continent in countless accounts, and, even in passages that exhort them, the reprimands and exhortations have nothing to do with racial matters. We do not consider, therefore, that there are theological foundations in the Old Testament for racial prejudice.⁹

This article builds on the foundation laid by Adamo's Afrocentric interpretation of the biblical portrayal of Ethiopia. Derived from the Afrocentric method, the approach espouses the agency and central participation of Africans

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ David T. Adamo, "The Portrayal of Africa and African in the Book of Jeremiah," *In die Skriflig* 52/1 (2018): 9.

⁹ D.R. Bueno "The African Continent: From Protagonist in Spreading the Gospel to Enslaved in the Name of God," *Journal of Latin American Theology* 141 (2019): 122.

in the analysis and presentation of views as opposed to relegating Africans to the marginal or periphery of deliberations.¹⁰ As a theory of social change, Afrocentricity redresses black disorientation and de-centredness through the promotion of African ideals and values as a function of knowing rather than merely doing. Central to the method, as espoused by Asante who is credited with coining the methodology,¹¹ is the quest to uncover the mask behind the rhetoric of power, privilege and position in order to establish the principal myths that are in place. Already noted in this essay as a source of concern are the dominant western views about Africans that for a while had been promulgated without challenge or change. By the same token, then, Afrocentricity is a cultural criticism that examines the uses of words and terminologies in order to identify the source of the author's location. Location embeds system of thinking, attitudes and language of the phenomenon, be it in text, institution or event. Certain locations simply breed certain perspectives. The Afrocentric idea, as a theoretical perspective focusing on the agency of African peoples, leads to analytic Afrocentricity which is the application of the methodology to textual analysis, Asante submits.¹²

From this brief description, the following emerge as crucial to the Afrocentric exercise:

- Africans engaging with African accounts (autobiographical)
- African criticism of non-African views on African accounts

B ETHIOPIA IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Ethiopia is mentioned variously in every major division of the Hebrew Bible and used interchangeably with Cush,¹³ and it was later identified with Nubia and Aksum.¹⁴ In its broader sense, the name Aethiopia should not be equated with

¹⁰ M.K. Asante, "Afrocentricity," 2009,

<http://www.gesafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Afrocentricity.pdf>.

¹¹ R. Anderson, "Molefe Kete Asante: The Afrocentric Idea and the Cultural Turn in Intercultural Communication Studies," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 36/6 (2012): 760.

¹² Asante, "Afrocentricity"; cf. Yamauchi, *Africa and the Bible*, 206–207.

¹³ Torah references are Gen 2:12; 10:6, 7, 8 and Num 12:1. Notably, Cush is a transcription of the Hebrew whereas Ethiopia is a rendering of the LXX. *Nevi'im* references are 2 Sam 18:21, 22, 23, 31,32; 2 Kgs 19:9; 1 Chron 1:8, 9, 10; 2 Chron 14:9; 12:3; 14:12–13; 21:16; Esth 1:1; 8:9; Isa 11:11; 18:1; 20:3–5; 37:9; 43:3; 45:14; Jer 13:23; 36:14; 38:7, 10, 12; 39:16; Ezek 30:9; Dan 11:43; Amos 9:7; Nah 3:9; Hab 3:7 and Zeph 1:1; 2:12; 3:10; Ketuvim references are Job 28:19; Ps 68:31 and 87:4.

¹⁴ George Hatke, *Aksum and Nubia: Warfare, Commerce and Political Fictions in the Ancient Northeast Africa* (New York: Institute for the Study of the Ancient World: New York University Press), 14–15; cf. F.S. Jabini, "Witness to the End of the World: A Missional Reading of Acts 8:26–40," *Conspectus* 13 (2012): 52–53.

Ethiopia of today which was designated in 1885.¹⁵ All the lands south of the Sahara or inhabited by black people represent the vast extent of ancient Ethiopia.¹⁶ Gage and Beck state that Ethiopia means black in complexion (Jer 13:23)¹⁷ or as Jabini says,¹⁸ land of the people with burnt faces, which is not a derogatory but descriptive reference to the negroid features¹⁹ of the inhabitants which the Graeco-Roman world found fascinating, according to Hatke.²⁰ While Egypt, the most mentioned African kingdom, is well known to ancient geographers, Ethiopia mentioned less frequently is described by Hubbard²¹ in close proximity to Egypt which saw territorial conflicts/control. Ethiopia was dominated by Egypt for nearly 500 years beginning with Dynasty 18 (c. 1500 BC) hence the Kushite elite modelling their art, architecture and religious ceremonial life on Egyptian prototypes or vice versa.²² Adamo regards Kush as a reference to the whole southland up to the Cape of Good Hope.²³

¹⁵ The Berlin Conference spanned almost four months of deliberations to avoid conflict over the scramble for Africa by the colonial powers, from 15 November 1884 to 26 February 1885. By the end of the Conference, the European powers had arbitrarily shared Africa amongst themselves, drawing the boundaries of Africa, more or less, as we know them today. Traditional boundaries were not considered, causing irreparable damage to the continent. See G.N. Uzoigwe, "Reflections on the Berlin West Africa Conference 1884–1885," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 12/3–4 (1985): 9–22.

¹⁶ Elliot A. Green, "The Queen of Sheba: A Queen of Egypt and Ethiopia?" *Jewish Biblical Quarterly* 29/3 (2001): 151–155.

¹⁷ W.A. Gage and J.R. Beck "The Gospel, Zion's Barren Woman and the Ethiopian Eunuch," *Crux* 30/2 (1994): 35.

¹⁸ Jabini, "Witness to the End of the World," 52.

¹⁹ G.A. Reisner, "Recent Discoveries in Ethiopia," *Harvard Theological Review* 13/1 (1920): 23, asserts that "the people of Ethiopia are usually called *nehsi* which is translated inaccurately "negro" and *nehsi* are represented in the monuments as typical woolly-haired black men. But it is clear from the pictures of men from Ethiopia and from the skeletons found in the ancient cemeteries that Ethiopia was inhabited by a race, dark-skinned it is true, but easily distinguished from the true negro."

²⁰ Hatke, *Aksum and Nubia*, 52.

²¹ D.A. Hubbard, "Ethiopia" in *New Bible Dictionary* (ed. D.R.W. Wood et al; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 355.

²² Hatke, *Aksum and Nubia*, 20. According to Reisner, "Recent Discoveries in Ethiopia," 25–26, the "history of Ethiopia falls into three great periods previous to 1000 B.C. — (a) that of the Egyptian trading caravans, from before the Fourth Dynasty (2900 B.C.) to the Middle Empire (2000 B.C.); (b) that of the Egyptian occupation, from the Twelfth Dynasty to the Hyksos period (2000 to 1600 B.C.); and (c) that of the Egyptian Viceroyalty, from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Dynasties (1550 to 1100 B.C.). In all these periods Egypt was the determining factor in the life of Ethiopia, and the interest of Egypt lay largely in the trade with the south, but in the third period in the exploitation of the gold mines as well."

²³ Adamo, *Africa and the Africans in the Old Testament*, 3.

Kartzow and Moxnes²⁴ indicate that Ethiopia was located in upper Egypt, at the 6th cataract of the Nile, in present day Sudan, where the name was associated with the kingdom of Meroë. Admittedly, the "borders of Ethiopia were never clearly defined, even by the Egyptians, so the territory may be regarded as extending to some indeterminate point in the Sudan beyond Meroë."²⁵ The designation of people at the world's end would therefore be an appropriate appellation (cf. Jabini) alongside the term "The Southern Lands."²⁶ Apparently, it was not until the reign of 'Ezana (330–370 CE) that the Aksumites appropriated the name Ethiopian for themselves,²⁷ although the concept was already in popular use. As a result, early maps of Africa all the way through to the 1700s had the eastern South Atlantic commonly dubbed the "Ethiopian Ocean" (or Sea) extending from the South Atlantic into the western Indian Ocean, to give us an idea of the vastness of the land in question. Perhaps the best clue there can be gleaned from Ezek 29:10 and 2 Chron 14:9 on the size of the army.

A full appreciation of ancient Ethiopia can be gained from the biblical account and archaeological findings as the ancients had the notoriety of making remarkable inscriptions on key developments of their times. Various studies have been undertaken to review the available evidence which confirm what is recorded in the biblical account. Interestingly, most of these scientifically derived studies will refer to African history as "civilisations" given the undeniable evidence. For example, Connah's book *African Civilisations: An Archaeological Perspective* (2001) focuses on the archaeological research that interrogates key aspects of urbanism and state formation over the last four thousand years, in seven main areas of Africa: Nubia, Ethiopia, the West African savannah, the West African forest, the East African coast and islands, the Zimbabwe Plateau and parts of Central Africa. The researched areas coincide with the cross-section of ancient Ethiopia and reveal advancements which only come to light now as demonstrated by findings from Casely-Hayford's *Lost Kingdoms of Africa* (2013). Casely-Hayford discovered fresh insights on African history through archaeological sites that are simply a statement of architecture that rivals the Great Wall of China, ancient universities that predate European establishments, kingdoms with extraordinary resources, artistic traditions that are replicated in contemporary arts, religious sites that surpass the Vatican, and a country with more pyramids than Egypt that could only suggest a south to north

²⁴ M.B. Kartzow and H. Moxes, "Complex Identities: Ethnicity, Gender and Religion in the Story of the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26–40)," *Religion and Theology* 17/3–4 (2010): 191.

²⁵ W.A. Elwell and P.W. Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Tyndale House 2001), 450.

²⁶ Jabini, "Witness to the End of the World," 52; Reisner, "Recent Discoveries in Ethiopia," 23.

²⁷ Hatke, *Aksum and Nubia*, 52.

influence. With specific reference to Ethiopia, the archaeological studies confirm the biblical statements which reveal the following realities.

1 Abundance of Natural Resources

Africa in general is endowed with inestimable natural resources (Gen 2:13 cf. 25:18; Isa 43:3; 45:14; Ezek 29:19–20; 31:1–9). It is not surprising, therefore, that Ethiopia's resources are mentioned in Job 28:19 and Dan 11:43. Hatke²⁸ notes that commercial contact between Ethiopia and Egypt predates the earliest written records. Egypt, according to his account, imported obsidian from Ethiopia. There is evidence of the use of incense, trees producing aromatic gum. An inscription found in Egypt from 1700 BCE implying that Egypt would have acquired sailing abilities over long distance makes reference to a kingdom called Kush with stilted huts entered by ladders.²⁹ If the identity and location of the Queen of Sheba who visited Solomon in 1 Kgs 10:1–13 retains the traditional African origin espoused by Josephus,³⁰ as opposed to the Arabian Saba,³¹ the gifts she presented are consistent with the Ethiopian resources described above.³² Although not itemised in 2 Chron 14:13b, in Judah's war with Ethiopia, it is stated of the Israelites that "they carried away very much spoil," indicating how well-endowed the Ethiopian army was.³³

Such vast natural resources necessitated trade and interactions with the outside world and inevitably diplomatic ties. Meroe situated some 75 miles NE

²⁸ Ibid., 14–15.

²⁹ Ibid., 17.

³⁰ P.A. Etoughé, "The Land of the Queen of Sheba," *Valley View University Journal of Theology* 4 (2017): 1–9; B. Kribus, "Arabia or Africa: Where Is the Land of Sheba?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 42/5 (2016): 26; J. Fellman, "The Solomon and Sheba Story in Ethiopia," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 35/1 (2007): 60–61; Green, "The Queen of Sheba," 151–155.

³¹ Both Jewish and Islamic traditions have stories of the Queen of Sheba. Cf. Green, "The Queen of Sheba,"; Fellman, "The Solomon and Sheba Story,"; Krisbus, "Arabia or Africa." These accounts must be read alongside the African traditions that are mostly ignored by mainline scholars. Both the Arabian Saba and the African Sheba have scriptural support. Therefore, further inquiry into whether אֲרָבָא and אֲרָבָא refer to the same place would be helpful.

³² In the war against Ethiopians in 2 Chron 14:13b, the description of the plunder reflects such vast resources which speak to the status of Ethiopia at that time. Technically, it must be added, that Israel could not have defeated Ethiopia had it not been for the divine intervention.

³³ The term אֲרָבָא (*šālāl*) refers to objects taken over by the victor after a battle or war and these were usually possessions of value. When armies went to war they would have been well prepared. The spoil from the Syrian siege against Samaria recorded in 2 Kgs 6:24–7:20 changed Samaria's situation of hyperinflation to abundance overnight (cf. 1 Sam 30:16). The text of 2 Sam 8:1–14 summarises David's victories over his enemies and the acquisition of plunder highlights his success.

of Khartoum was strategic for trade routes into inner Africa for gold, ivory, ebony, leopard skin and incense.³⁴ There is evidence of imported jewellery, vases and wine from Rhodes.³⁵ Hatke also refers to inscriptions of Kushite kings, portrayed wearing Egyptian attire, in contact with South Arabia via the Red Sea.³⁶

2 Military Might

Ethiopia's vast resources also implied that the kingdom was militarily well resourced. Perhaps the most telling text is 2 Chron 14:9–15 (cf. 2 Chron 16:8) in which the Ethiopian army under Zerah was a million soldiers (אַלְפֵי־מֵי), a number not used in any other text.³⁷ In comparison, Israel's army was around 600 000 (Num 1:46; 26:51) and other numbers do not seem to exceed this (cf. Josh 8:3; Judg 5:8; 20:2). Other armies mentioned in the Old Testament include the Philistine army in 1 Sam 13:5 with 30 000 chariots, 6 000 horsemen and an innumerable number of foot soldiers described by the phrase כְּהוֹל אֲשֶׁר עַל־שָׁפָתָהּ דִּיָּן which is imagery for considerable figures (cf. Josh 11:4; Judg 7:12). The Syrian army defeated by David in 2 Sam 10:18 had 700 charioteers (the Chronicler records the number as 7 000)³⁸ and 40 000 of the horsemen were killed, while the rest of the army fled implying the damage done had such a debilitating impact that the Syrians would not render assistance anymore to their allies (2 Sam 10:19). The Egyptian army similarly attracts some attention because it specialised in horse breeding (Deut 17:16; 1 Kgs 4:26; 2 Kgs 7:6; 2 Chron 1:16–17; Isa 31:1), which is quite a remarkable achievement for an African kingdom in terms of status in the world of that time.

Coming back to the Ethiopian army, chariots and horses were the elite procurements of that time suggesting association with military prowess. The heavenly military might displayed in the Old Testament account in 2 Kgs 6:16–

³⁴ Yamauchi, *Africa in the Bible*, 165.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

³⁶ Hatke, *Aksum and Nubia*, 22.

³⁷ I am aware of the scholarly reservations about the interpretation of large numbers in the Old Testament registered in a number of studies, which in my view are mostly hermeneutical and not necessarily theological. See John William Wenham, "Large Numbers in the Old Testament," *Tyndale Bulletin* 18 (1967): 19–53; J. Barton Payne, "The Validity of the Numbers in Chronicles," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 136/543 (1997): 206–220; D.M.A. Fouts, "Defence of the Hyperbolic Interpretation of Large Numbers in the Old Testament," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40/3 (1997): 377–387; Aaron J. Goldstein, "Large Census Numbers in Numbers: An Evaluation of Current Proposals," *Presbyterion* 38/2 (2012): 99–108. Given the vastness of the Ethiopian army surmised here, the implied size has to be quite remarkable to attract the comment in 2 Chron 16:8.

³⁸ See 1 Chron 19:18; the discrepancy is discussed fully by Fouts, "A Defence of the Hyperbolic Interpretation of Large Numbers," 377–387 and his plausible explanations are not rehearsed here.

17 depicts the "hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha." From a military perspective, therefore, Ethiopia was not a pushover and in fact was used as an instrument of divine punishment against Israel (2 Chron 12:1–4; 2 Kgs 19:9). As great as Egypt was, Ethiopia successfully invaded it in mid-to-late 8th century BCE and ruled the 25th Dynasty until 663 BCE when driven out by the Assyrians.³⁹

3 Reading and Writing Technologies

Cushites are presented in administrative positions in foreign governments which shows their professionalism and trustworthiness (Jer 36:14, 21–23; 38:8–9, 12; 39:15–18). Jehudi, whose ancestry is perhaps deliberately traced by Jeremiah (36:14) to his African great grandfather "the son of Nethaniah, the son of Shelemiah, the son of Cush," highlights the prophet's deliberate depiction of the significant role he played in the precarious episode associated with the developments at that time. Jehudi, referred to as the "African prince" by Adamo,⁴⁰ is entrusted with reading the sensitive scroll of Jeremiah to King Jehoiakim and in doing so it must not be missed that he was actually reading! Hakke⁴¹ states that Kushites wrote in Meroitic, a language of unknown origin, using a simplified form of hieroglyphics and later a cursive script, while the Ethiopians (c150 BCE) wrote in Ge'ez an Ethiosemitic language suggesting contact with South Arabia and perhaps Israel. Hatke concludes that:

For its part, Ethiopia, having long interacted with its Arabian neighbours across the Red Sea and having already adopted semitic speech of the latter, borrowed many aspects of South Arabian culture, such as writing, art, monumental architecture, in the first half of the first millennium BCE.⁴²

In a recent book, *Semitic Languages in Contact*, Butts⁴³ analyses twenty case studies of various contact situations between Semitic languages such as Akkadian, Aramaic, Classical Ethiopic, Hebrew, Phoenician and Ugaritic and modern ones including languages/dialects belonging to the Modern Arabic, Modern South Arabian, Neo-Aramaic, and Neo-Ethiopian branches of the Semitic family. Among other things, this association explains Jehudi's familiarity with Hebrew, the language that Jeremiah would have used for his writings. Similarly, Hendrickx's⁴⁴ account of Ethiopian-Axumite kingship as reflected in various inscriptions also point to the reading and writing

³⁹ Hatke, *Aksum and Nubia*, 22.

⁴⁰ Adamo, "The Portrayal of Africa and Africans," 3.

⁴¹ Hatke, *Aksum and Nubia*, 20.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 167.

⁴³ A.M. Butts, *Semitic Languages in Contact* (Leiden: Brill Studies, 2015), 16–32.

⁴⁴ B. Hendrickx, "The Image of Ethiopian-Axumite Kingship as Reflected in the Greek Axumite Royal Inscriptions (2nd–6th Centuries)," *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 10/1 (1999): 128–136.

technologies that had been developed and that were in use especially among the elite. This enabled the passing on of such abilities and other important ideals almost intact from one generation to the next, as Tamrat's studies shows.⁴⁵ This goes against the grain of sentiments that attempt to present Africa as uncivilised in spite of this glaring evidence to the contrary:

There may also have been a possible racial prejudice against Blacks on the part of some scholars who could not conceive or did not wish to conceive of Blacks acting as benevolent rulers and as taking part in the progress of ancient civilization. Such a prejudice should, of course, be unacceptable in scholarship.⁴⁶

4 Yahwism and Monotheism

The pointers to the humanity and morality of Africans reveal commitments at par with the standards of the Mosaic code. After the prophet Jeremiah was imprisoned and confined to inhumane conditions for his forthrightness (Jer 38:5–6), it took the intervention of Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian to spare the prophet's life (Jer 38:7–13).⁴⁷ His intervention commands divine attention in Jer 39:15–18 where his actions were endorsed as an example of trust in Yahweh. Some knowledge of Yahweh seemed to be well established within Cushite references. If the Queen of Sheba referred to above is seen as African rather than Middle Eastern, then her commitment to Yahweh as an African is equally documented

⁴⁵ T. Tamrat, "Process of Ethnic Interaction and Integration in Ethiopian History: The Case of the *Agaw*," *The Journal of African History* 29/1 (1998): 5–18.

⁴⁶ Green, "The Queen of Sheba," 154; R.L. Huizing, "Identifying Leaders: The African Eunuch as a Model of Christian Leadership," *Neotestamentica* 50/1 (2016): 247–267. The comment by Kartzow and Moxnes, "Complex Identities, Ethnicities, Gender and Religion" 192, is quite revealing. They write that, "Chief characteristics of the physical descriptions of Ethiopians were that they were black, had woolly hair and thick lips. The Greek doctor, Galen, second century G.E., has a detailed description of Ethiopians 'with these physical characteristics. Blackness was not just a physical aspect, colours were also commonly associated with moral character, and black mostly carried a negative sense. Blacks and Ethiopians and Egyptians who were black were used in writings to symbolise immoral behaviour and vices. Black was also associated with foe demonic, and demons were depicted as Ethiopians, Egyptians and Blacks. And it is apparently an old stereotype that Africans are regarded as sexually active and attractive, there are several examples of Ethiopians as sexual objects and subjects."

⁴⁷ The narrative in 2 Sam 18:19–33 relates Joab's preference for an unnamed Cushite to take the news of the demise of Absalom back to King David even after Ahimaaz son of Zadok had volunteered that role (.). It turns out that even after the faithful Cushite was given the task, Ahimaaz insisted on running after the Cushite, whom he outran, to bring the news to David. However, he presented a non-committal account especially when asked about Absalom whom he knew was dead. On the contrary, the Cushite's account was complete and forthright and when asked about Absalom, his response reflected his tact in sharing bad news: "May the enemies of my lord the king and all who rise up to harm you be like that young man."

(2 Chron 9:8; 1 Kgs 10:9).⁴⁸ Further endorsement of her commitment to Yahweh and possible African origin are almost undeniably framed in Matt 12:42 and Luke 11:39.⁴⁹ The prophetic denunciation of Jerusalem in Zeph 3:1–13 is therefore not surprising, as it envisions a remnant from “beyond the rivers of Ethiopia, my worshippers, the daughter of my dispersed ones shall bring my offering.” The remnant suggests the existence of worshippers in Africa as part of the nations that would be divinely gathered in the wake of Jerusalem’s rebellion and pollution. Therefore, the presence of staunch African Christians in the New Testament should also not be surprising. Central to that depiction of the ideals highlighted above is the Ethiopian Eunuch to whom we now turn our attention.

C THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH (ACTS 8:26–40)

Firstly, the identity of the man whom Philip is directed by the Holy Spirit to meet is crucial to the Afrocentric biblical reading strategy. He is identified as a man of Αἰθίοψ (*Aithiops*), hence, Ethiopian which underscores obvious distinctions of race and dress (Jer 13:23).⁵⁰ Yamauchi disputes that the eunuch was from Ethiopia, preferring to identify the location as Meroe, which is African in any case.⁵¹ It is widely accepted that the eunuch was from modern-day Sudan, which

⁴⁸ Jabini, “Witness to the End of the World,” 55, writes that ‘Ethiopia’ included “ancient Nubia and part of the Axumite Empire” (which included present-day Ethiopia). According to him, Ethiopian sources indicated that the Queen of Sheba begot a son from Solomon (1 Kgs 10). He was called Menelik I and he established the Solomonic dynasty in Ethiopia that lasted until the reign of Haile Selassie (pp. 171–172). Jabini notes that there were people in Ethiopia, who were monotheistic and associated with Judaism through the line of Menelik I, before Christ was born.

⁴⁹ In the reference to the Queen of Sheba, two locators are delineated namely “queen of the south” and “the ends of the earth” which would favour Africa, in particular from the perceived linking of Cush with Sheba in Gen 10:7 and 1 Chron 1:9 (cf. Isa 43:3; Jer 6:20). Josephus (*Ant.* 8:6. 5–6) refers to her as “a woman Queen of Egypt and Ethiopia” which means that there is precedence for associating both Egypt and Ethiopia with Sheba (see Etoughé, “The Land of the Queen of Sheba,” 2. Most scholars accept the view that the Queen of Sheba was from South Arabian Peninsula or from a kingdom northwest of Yemen (Hatke, *Aksum and Numbia* 19. This would barely fit the two locators above. On the contrary, the Queen of Sheba would have counterparts analogously in Cleopatra of Egypt and Candace of Ethiopia. Moreso, the legendary accounts that come out of Ethiopia hold that the Queen of Sheba had a son with Solomon. S. Gillmeyer-Bucher, “‘She Came to Test Him with Hard Questions’: Foreign Women and Their View on Israel,” *Biblical Interpretation* 15/2 (2007):137, argues that though this account is downplayed by historians, there was an even stronger bond between Jerusalem and Sheba.

⁵⁰ Jeremiah 13:23 should be read rather with certainty, affirming an irreversible reality as in the swarthy complexion of the Ethiopians which is consistent with their constitution (see Adamo, “The Portrayal of Africa and Africans,” 4.

⁵¹ Yamauchi, *Africa in the Bible*, 161–181.

in the first century was the Nubian kingdom⁵² known broadly as Ethiopia. The kingdom had its centre in the capital of Meroe between the fifth and sixth cataracts of the Nile and was a significant African power as early as 540 BCE and as late as 339 CE.⁵³ The eunuch is also identified in what should be read as a phrase εὐνοῦχος δυνάστης, "an eunuch of great authority" whose physiological connotations associated with castration would exempt him from accessing the Jewish Temple as per scriptural stipulation (Deut 23:1 cf. Matt 19:10–12).⁵⁴ The narrative states clearly that he "had come to Jerusalem to worship." This seems to imply access to the temple; otherwise, he would not have made such a long journey. The concept is also used with specific reference to him as a government official (cf. 2 Kgs 20:18; Isa 39:7; Jer 29:2; 34:19; 38:7; 41:16; Dan 1:3, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 18). Shauf suggests that the phrase above is better translated as "chamberlain," as in a court official, which makes sense given that the eunuch is "of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury."⁵⁵ Not only was he a man of African descent, he was a highly respected administrator, like Jehudi and Ebed-Melech (Jer 36:14, 21–23; 38:8–9, 12; 39:15–18). Shauf aptly writes:

The eunuch's story itself does not highlight any social isolation caused by his physical status. His geographical and social location is much more the key. There is no evidence in the text that the eunuch—this eunuch, at least—occupies a despised place in the world. In fact, Luke emphasizes just the opposite: the eunuch is from a revered ethnic group; he is a high official of a queen; he owns a chariot and a scroll of Scripture; he commands a driver; and he has the leisure to travel all the way to Jerusalem. Thus, the story also does not function well as a fulfilment of Isa 56:3–5—the eunuch seems to be neither a "dry tree"

⁵² A.J. Spencer, *Egypt and Africa: Nubia from Prehistory to Islam* (London: British Museum Press, 1992), 149; A. Weissenrieder, "Searching for the Middle Ground from the End of the Earth: The Embodiment of Space in Acts 8:26–40," *Neotestamentica* 48/1 (2014): 127–128; B. Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 295.

⁵³ Huizing, "Identifying Leaders," 252.

⁵⁴ The discussion of the possible meaning and implication of the term "eunuch" is adequately presented by Williamson (2013:46–57) and will not be rehearsed here. Weissenrieder (2014:134–135) questions the plausibility of interpreting the term εὐνοῦχος as a "court official" and would therefore not refer to the sex or gender of the Ethiopian because most passages listed in the Old Testament suggest the contrary. However, there is no evidence that this was a widespread practice in Ethiopia and that eunuchs dressed in ways or had other physical indicators that gave them away. Even if that were a possibility, why would he risk going to Jerusalem knowing that he could not access the temple?

⁵⁵ S. Shauf, "Locating the Eunuch: Characterization and Narrative Context in African Acts 8:26–40," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71/4 (2009): 765.

nor an outcast." It is not surprising, then, that Luke does not make use of the Isaian passage.⁵⁶

Secondly, the idea of treasury, γάζα (*gaza*), refers to the financial resources of a kingdom which can be surmised from references to the vast natural resources that Ethiopia was endowed with and the international trades. The title Κανδάκη (*Kandakē*) Candace is unanimously seen as the official designation of the queen or the female ruler of Ethiopia and served as a titular distinction like Pharaoh of Egypt or the Roman Caesar. Thus, it was handed down from one generation to the next.⁵⁷ Given that trade between Ethiopia and the rest of the world had been ongoing from time immemorial, the resources in question at the time of this narrative had to be quite significant.⁵⁸ Weissenrieder comments:

We do not have any additional description of his appearance or his clothes, but we can suppose that these were suitable for his function. This function of a treasurer makes sense for Meroe: numerous ancient authors report on the invaluable wealth of Meroe, whether they speak about the great gold deposit as described by Herodotus and Dio Chrysostomos, the iron deposit as mentioned by Pliny and Polybius, or about ivory as mentioned by Seneca and Heliodorus, among others. To Philostratus, the Ethiopians, and particularly Meroe, exceeded the wealth of the Greeks by far.⁵⁹

This account confirms that African kingdoms were prosperous and commercially connected to significant players of that time. That the eunuch's status reflected his wealth can be seen from the fact that he travelled in a chauffeured chariot and owned a personal copy of at least Isaiah's scroll which was one of the longest scrolls and was not easily available to the average person at that time.

Thirdly, the eunuch was a worshipper. The concept προσκυνέω (*proskyneō*) is a verbal adjective viewed as an expression of attitude possibly by position of one's allegiance to and regard for deity.⁶⁰ To appreciate further the depth of commitment here, Zhodiates explains:

To worship, [means to] do obeisance, show respect, fall or prostrate before. Literally, to kiss toward someone, to throw a kiss in token of

⁵⁶ Ibid., 772.

⁵⁷ J.P. Louw and E.A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 480.

⁵⁸ The Queen of Sheba, if her African identity is plausible, gave Solomon "one hundred and twenty talents of gold, spices in great quantity, and precious stones." The narrator noted that her contribution of abundance of spices which was never surpassed indicates unrivalled resources. Depending on which measure is used, a talent of gold ranged from 20 to 40 kg.

⁵⁹ Weissenrieder, "Searching for the Middle Ground from the End of the Earth: The Embodiment of Space in Acts 8:26–40" (1967): 133.

⁶⁰ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 539.

respect or homage. The ancient oriental (especially Persian) mode of salutation between persons of equal ranks was to kiss each other on the lips; when the difference of rank was slight, they kissed each other on the cheek; when one was much inferior, he fell upon his knees and touched his forehead to the ground or prostrated himself, throwing kisses at the same time toward the superior. It is this latter mode of salutation that Gr. writers express by *proskunéō*. In the NT, generally, to do reverence or homage to someone, usually by kneeling or prostrating oneself before him.⁶¹

The concept of worship here indicates some depth of commitment to Yahweh corresponding to the requirements of Judaism hence the Ethiopian's investment in the journey on a treacherous desert road which was in such a bad condition that Philip could outrun the chariot (Acts 8:29–30). At the point of contact, Philip found the official with the book of Isaiah, yet another indication of the commitment to Yahweh, as other state matters should have preoccupied him at this point. Additionally, to be released for months from this journey by the queen given the significant position the official occupied in Ethiopia also reflects the kingdom's appreciation of his investment. Clearly, the Ethiopian kingdom was invested in Yahweh in line with the sentiments of the prophet Zephaniah (3:1–13). God-fearers existed in Ethiopia long before the introduction of Christianity. It is not surprising then that the early Church Fathers who were responsible for shaping Christianity were stationed in Alexandria and were African.⁶² In Western dominated studies, one cannot walk away with the impression that these influential men were African.

Fourthly, and related to the above is the fact the eunuch was found reading. Whether his copy of the scroll was in Hebrew or Greek (LXX), he had reading abilities, as earlier on seen in Jehudi in Jer 36:14, which is indicative of widespread accomplishment particularly among the elite. His level of engagement with the Isaiah text goes beyond morbid curiosity to seeking resolution. Davidson interrogates the strategy of reading out loud employed here. He regards the Ethiopian official as an active reader:

⁶¹ S. Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Libronix Resources: Electronic, 2000).

⁶² Thomas Oden's account, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity (Early African Christianity Set)* (Grand Rapids: IVP Academic Press, 2009), shows that the writing fathers such as (Tertullian, Minucius Felix, Cyprian, Lactantius, Optatus of Milevi, Augustine) who belonged to the African Church of the first five centuries of Christianity were credited with the shaping of the Christian mind of that time and they are cited to date. J.N. Amanze, "The African Foundations of Christianity: Myth or Reality?" *Scriptura* 77 (2001): 273–286, demonstrates the plausibility of the founding of Christianity in Africa and the history of laying the bedrock on which this faith thrives to show the readiness of the continent.

This Ethiopian official functions as an active reader. His engagement with the text appears all too real here in this passage. Long before Philip appears on the scene, he reads Isaiah. Long before his mention in the book of Acts his people hold texts like Isaiah and Genesis and the Psalms as sacred scripture. Long before Philip's interruption of his public reading, he reflects and interacts with Isaiah. As they sit together, he immediately asks Philip a question that scholars have been puzzling over up until now. Of whom does the prophet speak, himself or someone else? The question reflects curiosity and interest not so much from a confessional stance but rather from a deep human interest.⁶³

The literacy skills demonstrated here supersede that of 95 percent of the then-known world particularly Europe, indicating the strides already made besides other advancements.⁶⁴ This narrative demonstrates such accomplishments and revises the view of African as uncivilised in ancient times.

In writing the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, Luke's scheme of following the movement of the gospel as outlined in Acts 1:8 seems disrupted here. Theologically, the conversion of Cornelius in Acts 10 represents the breakthrough into the Gentile world. There is a massive shift in the location of Cornelius within Israel as opposed to the Ethiopian who was on his way out. The coming into the church of Cornelius has immediate implications for the church and that of the Ethiopian does not play out the same way. The factors highlighted above show the disruption necessitated by the Holy Spirit to bring into the fray the African church ahead of Europe. This is a remarkable development worth noting.

D CONCLUSION

Afrocentric lens has been employed in reading the biblical portrayal of Ethiopia, firstly, from a perspective that highlights African ideals and secondly as a critique of the tendency to overlook Africa's historical achievements. The biblical text shows that Ethiopia and Ethiopians were not viewed negatively or discriminated against, even though the focus of the text is on Israel, the nation chosen for divine purposes. Ethiopia, unlike other nations that came into contact with Israel, seemed to have adopted a serious piety that allowed her high-ranking officials to participate in Jewish worship long before the advent of Christianity and Europe. The Ethiopian eunuch's narrative represents a window of opportunity to decipher the portrayal of this kingdom which is consistent with the general biblical view. The emphasis of the narrative is the status of the

⁶³ S.V. Davidson, "Sermon: Reading out Loud," *Anglican Theological Review* 93/3 (2011): 380–381.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 380.

Ethiopian who represents an African civilisation balanced with piety and politics which are not inseparable in conducting one's duties.

Reading these accounts this way may seem to diminish the greater picture of seeing beyond the geographic, ethnic or racial barriers that the gospel permeates but it actually helps to acknowledge the fertile soil on which this possibility stood—in Ethiopia and Africa. The reading allows us to review the presentations of Africa from an African perspective and revisit the reintroduction of the gospel by European missionaries from an inquirer's perspective to determine what happened to the thriving kingdoms and the church before 500AD.

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