

## The Cushites in Herodotus and Chronicles: Revisiting the Asa Narrative

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### ABSTRACT

*The theme of "the Cushites" has been investigated in Chronicles by various scholars. The Cushites are mentioned in passing in various passages of the book, but more prominently in the first part of the Asa narrative (2 Chron 14–16). Herodotus has also given attention to them in Book III of his Histories. These ancient discussions of the Cushites are brought into interaction in this article. However, not only the different ways in which these historiographies use the Cushites as rhetorical trope, but also the issue of classical Greek influence on Yehudean literary development form the focus of this article.<sup>1</sup>*

KEYWORDS: Herodotus, Book of Chronicles, Classical Greek influence, Cushites, Asa narrative

### A INTRODUCTION

In a recent review colloquium titled "Prophets, Priests, and Promises: Reflections on Gary Knoppers' Posthumously Published Volume," Hugh Williamson of Oxford raised the issue of Hellenistic influence in Judean/Yehudean literature, as reflected in the work of Gary Knoppers.<sup>2</sup> Williamson anecdotally reflected on his own student days when he was wondering, on the occasion of a famous classicist lecturing students in ancient Near Eastern literature on Greek influence in the latter, what on earth classical studies had to do with pre-Hellenistic Hebrew Bible literature (i.e., literature from before 332 B.C.E.). Williamson remembers that he more or less kept that position of ignoring classical studies in his own scholarship until he was stunned by a 2003 publication of Gary Knoppers titled "Greek Historiography and the

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<sup>1</sup> I dedicate this article to a respected and appreciated colleague, Gerrie Snyman, who has shown keen interest in the book of Chronicles in his scholarship and who has also considered the Asa narrative in his work.

<sup>2</sup> Williamson's paper was titled "Greece and Jerusalem: The Method Behind Gary Knoppers' Use of Hellenistic Sources." The book that was reviewed at this colloquium is Gary N. Knoppers (†), *Prophets, Priests, and Promises: Essays on the Deuteronomistic History, Chronicles, and Ezra-Nehemiah* (ed. Hugh G. M. Williamson and Christl M. Maier; VTSupp 186; Leiden: Brill, 2021).

Chronicler's History: A Reexamination."<sup>3</sup> Examining mainly the genealogies in Chronicles, Knoppers comes to the conclusion in the mentioned article that there is enough evidence of west-east influence (and vice versa)<sup>4</sup> in periods long before the advent of Hellenism with Alexander the Great's military invasions from 332 B.C.E.<sup>5</sup> Knoppers concludes the following in his article:

Archaeological studies of the Levant carried out during the last decades have shed much new light on the history of this land during the Babylonian and Persian eras. Analysis of the material remains from ancient Palestine no longer supports the use of 332 B.C.E. as the threshold for Greek influence on Judah. Archaeological and written evidence for Greek contacts with the eastern Mediterranean predates the Macedonian conquest by centuries ... One could argue that Yehud was initially isolated from western influence, but it would seem hazardous to deny any contacts whatsoever, especially among the elite ... The fifth and fourth centuries were a time of rapid Hellenization ... Whereas the first bearers of the new cultural products seem to have been mostly the Phoenicians, later bearers included the Greeks themselves (soldiers, settlers, and traders). That western influences are present in the material culture of Samaria and Yehud is evident by developments in pottery, numismatics, weights, weaponry, fortifications, and glyptic art.<sup>6</sup>

Since the publication of Knoppers's article on Greek influence in Chronicles, our knowledge has expanded, not only firstly about the interaction

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<sup>3</sup> Gary N. Knoppers, "Greek Historiography and the Chronicler's History: A Reexamination," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122/4 (2003):627–650.

<sup>4</sup> See also Van Seters' claim that the Deuteronomistic History from Judah, as well as some other Pentateuchal traditions, might have been some of the earliest historiographies that exercised an influence on the classical Greek historiographers. He assumes that the influence did not only flow from west to east, but rather initially from east to west. See John Van Seters, *In Search of History: Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> In his presentation at the review colloquium, Williamson expressed his lingering scepticism that the writers of biblical literature in Jerusalem in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E. would have been informed about classical Greek literature. Williamson could not find a plausible link between the west and east in this period. Various participants in the discussion afterwards emphasised, however, that the Persians could have been the missing link. We know that there was regular military contact between Greece/Sparta and Achaemenid Persia as well as strong trade relationships with the Mediterranean world. We also have archaeological evidence that the Persians had an extensive road network across their empire and a very efficient postal system. Within the context of the expansive infrastructure of the Achaemenid Empire, one can plausibly argue that the Persians facilitated interaction across the Mediterranean, not only to the Persian heartland, but also to the satrapies and subjugated provinces where officials of the empire were based.

<sup>6</sup> Knoppers, "Greek Historiography and the Chronicler's History," 647–648.

between east and west during the Persian period, but also about Chronicles, the Cushites and Herodotus. The aim of this article is to revisit an earlier study of possible Greek influence in the Chronicler’s Asa narrative in light of some of these new developments in scholarship.

## B HERODOTUS ON PERSIAN-CUSHITE RELATIONS

Herodotus writes extensively in Book III of his *Histories* on the conquest of Egypt by Cyrus II “the Great” and particularly on the consolidation of Persian power in this region under Cambyses, the son of Cyrus.<sup>7</sup> From paragraph 17 of Book III he deals with Cambyses’ campaigns to consolidate the southern and western frontiers. These campaigns (mentioned in III 17,1) were directed against the “Carthaginians” (i.e., Carthage to the west of Egypt), against the “Ammonians” (i.e., the southern oasis of Siwa where there was a temple of Amun-Re) and against “the long-lived Ethiopians” (who had a presence over different periods from the second Nile cataract southwards to the sixth cataract; an area divided between the modern-day states of Egypt and Sudan).<sup>8</sup> The last-mentioned campaign, ἐπὶ τοὺς μακροβίους Αἰθίοπας,<sup>9</sup> concerns us here. Herodotus calls Nubia Αἰθίοπας throughout. This section of Herodotus thus deals with the region known as “Cush” in the Hebrew Bible. Although two different regions are associated with Cush in the Hebrew Bible,<sup>10</sup> there is no doubt, through Herodotus’ use of the term Αἰθίοπας that he referred to the region on the African continent to the south of Egypt.

Although there are many interesting – and disputed – details in Book III, including the dismal defeat that Cambyses suffered on this three-pronged campaign, I want to focus on sections 20–21 and 30 here. The text reads as follows:<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Herodotus II 1.

<sup>8</sup> Amélie Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period* (London: Routledge, 2013), 115–116. All English translations quoted here are also taken from Kuhrt’s publication, unless referenced otherwise.

<sup>9</sup> The Greek text used is from A. D. Godley, *Herodotus, with an English Translation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920). Online version accessed on 6 July 2021.

<sup>10</sup> See also the reference to “Cushan” in Hab 3:7, which probably refers to an area to the south and east of ancient Israel and that was often confused with “Cush” on the African continent.

<sup>11</sup> Translation of Herodotus, *Herodotus: Books III-IV* (ed. T. E. Page, E. Capps and W. H. D. Rouse; trans. A. D. Godley; vol. 2 of *The Loeb Classical Library*; London: William Heinemann; G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1928).

20. When the Fish-eaters<sup>12</sup> came from Elephantine at Cambyses' message, he sent them to Ethiopia, charged with what they should say, and bearing gifts, to wit, a purple cloak and a twisted gold necklace and armlets and an alabaster box of incense and a cask of palm wine. *These Ethiopians, to whom Cambyses sent them, are said to be the tallest and fairest of all men. Their way of choosing kings is different from that of all others, as (it is said) are all their laws; they deem worthy to be their king that townsman whom they judge to be tallest and to have strength proportioned to his stature.*

21. These were the men to whom the Fish-eaters came, offering gifts and delivering this message to their king: "Cambyses king of Persia, desiring to be your friend and guest, sends us with command to address ourselves to you; and he offers you such gifts as he himself chiefly delights to use." *But the Ethiopian, perceiving that they had come as spies, spoke thus to them: "It is not because he sets great store by my friendship that the Persian King sends you with gifts, nor do you speak the truth (for you have come to spy out my dominions), nor is your king a righteous man; for were he such, he would not have coveted any country other than his own, nor would he now try to enslave men who have done him no wrong. Now, give him this bow, and this message: 'The King of the Ethiopians counsels the King of the Persians, when the Persians can draw a bow of this greatness as easily as I do, then to bring overwhelming odds to attack the long-lived Ethiopians; but till then, to thank the gods who put it not in the minds of the sons of the Ethiopians to win more territory than they have.'"*

30. By reason of this wrongful deed, as the Egyptians say, Cambyses' former want of sense turned straightway to madness. *His first evil act was to make away with his full brother Smerdis, whom he had sent away from Egypt to Persia out of jealousy, because Smerdis alone could draw the bow brought from the Ethiopian by the Fish-eaters as far as two fingerbreadths; but no other Persian could draw it.* Smerdis having gone to Persia, Cambyses saw in a dream a vision, whereby it seemed to him that a messenger came from Persia and told him that Smerdis had sat on the royal throne with his head reaching to heaven. Fearing therefore for himself, lest his brother might slay him and so be king, he sent to Persia Prexaspes, the trustiest of his Persians, to kill Smerdis. Prexaspes went up to Susa and so did; some say that he took Smerdis out a-hunting, others that he brought him to the Red Sea and there drowned him (*my emphasis*).

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<sup>12</sup> In III 19, it is explained that the so-called "Fish-eaters" from Elephantine "knew the Nubian language and could, therefore, be sent to the 'Ethiopian' kingdom as spies" (Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire*, 116.)

Scholars point out that numerous problems are connected to this specific part of Herodotus’ histories.<sup>13</sup> First of all, the suggestion that Cambyses suffered defeat against the Ethiopians seems to be an untrue reflection of reality. Not only is “Nubia” mentioned among the subjugated peoples in the so-called Darius Testament on the tombface at Naqš-i Ruštam (DNA §3)—admittedly, this is a very ideological portrayal by Darius—archaeological evidence from the Dorginarti fortress on an island in the Nile, south of the second cataract (now submerged by the Aswan dam), also suggests that there was a Persian presence at least until the fifth century B.C.E. Some even suggest that the fortress could have been Persian in origin.<sup>14</sup>

Herodotus’ version, however, suggests that the Persians under Cambyses’ military leadership never conquered this area. This version of the story is also called in question by other classical sources. Strabo, who wrote his geographical description of the ancient world in the last century B.C.E. and first century C.E., shares the following information:

Moreover, when Cambyses conquered Egypt, he advanced with the Egyptians as far as Meroë; in fact, it is said, the name was given by him to both the island and the city, because his sister, Meroë (his wife according to some), died there (Strabo, XVII, 1.5).

Meroë is situated down south, between the fifth and sixth cataracts, that is, well into Nubian territory. Diodorus Siculus (I, 34.7), who also wrote in the first century B.C.E., offers a supporting view: “There are also (sc. in Egypt) many kinds of trees, of which that called *persea*, which was introduced from Ethiopia by the Persians when Cambyses conquered these regions, has an unusually sweet fruit.”

The second problem encountered in the literature is that some scholars doubt that Herodotus had ever been to Egypt.<sup>15</sup> The ground on which this theory is based is the far-fetched character of many of Herodotus’ narrations about Egypt. As Armayor states:

We tend to accept [Herodotus’] authority, because it purports to rest on his own experience of Egypt. Yet we have nothing more than Herodotus’ own word for his travels, in Egypt and elsewhere, and we can only assess them in the light of inadequate archaeological control.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> László Török, *Herodotus in Nubia* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Lisa A. Heidorn, “The Saite and Persian Period Forts at Dorginarti,” in *Egypt and Africa: Nubia from Prehistory to Islam* (ed. W.V. Davies; London: British Museum Press, 1991), 205–219.

<sup>15</sup> O. Kimball Armayor, “Did Herodotus Ever Go to Egypt,” *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 15 (1979):59–73.

<sup>16</sup> “Did Herodotus Ever Go to Egypt,” 59.

However, whether Herodotus had been to Egypt or not and whether the Persians did indeed suffer defeat and humiliation against the Ethiopians, we should remember that Herodotus was ideologically biased in his writings, as all other classical writers were.<sup>17</sup> Although he provides indications that he had consulted different sources and claims that he highlights different perspectives on events, it is well accepted that Herodotus presents a tainted version of Cambyses. We know that Herodotus lived ca. 484–425 B.C.E. and thus wrote his work during the fifth century B.C.E., that is, at least two generations after the time of Cambyses. Brown offers the following explanation for Herodotus' downplaying of Cambyses:

As time went on, and one Persian king followed another, the distinction [between Cyrus and Darius], particularly in the minds of the Greeks, became blurred between the empire founded by Cyrus and the empire as refounded by Darius. Cyrus continued to be admired, in fact he became the pattern for kingship among fourth century Greek writers. But Cambyses, the son of Cyrus, suffered from a *damnatio memoriae*. Regarded at best as incompetent he is usually depicted as tyrannical and vindictive, with a brutal contempt for religious traditions. And in this denigration Herodotus played a major role ...<sup>18</sup>

In our estimation of Herodotus' version of Cambyses' reign in Egypt, we should thus consider that his historical work is a literary creation that relates the historical events in such a way that the historian's own view of Persian politics could emerge.<sup>19</sup> Or, to put it in Kuhrt's words, his work "has been shaped by later history and the narrative techniques demanded by his story ..."<sup>20</sup> It is clear that he used certain military *topoi* to shape his version of the Persian past. The setting of the strongly shaped story about Cambyses is thus a series of military campaigns. In classical and ancient Near Eastern thought, military campaigns were often seen as useful literary figure to give a clear characterisation of rulers (as we will also see below in our discussion of the Chronicler's Asa narrative). Kuhrt thus states: "... [T]he campaigns described by Herodotus, form part of his portrayal of Cambyses as increasingly insane."<sup>21</sup> In order to do so, Herodotus

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<sup>17</sup> Truesdell S. Brown, "Herodotus' Portrait of Cambyses," *Historia: Zeitschrift für alte Geschichte* 31/4 (1982):387–403; Carolyn Dewald and John Marincola, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Robert Rollinger, B. Truschnegg, and R. Bichler, eds., *Herodot und das Persische Weltreich—Herodotus and the Persian Empire* (Classica et Orientalia 3; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Brown, "Herodotus' Portrait of Cambyses," 387–388.

<sup>19</sup> See the Introduction in David Asheri, Alan Lloyd, and Aldo Corcella, *A Commentary on Herodotus Books I-IV* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire*, 116.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

"sacrificed" some factual versions of events in favour of twisted versions of those events.

Another military motif which is used by Herodotus in his description of Cambyses (and of Smerdis) is the bow. Kuhrt remarks: "The ability to draw a mighty bow was associated with concepts of perfect kingship in Egypt ..."<sup>22</sup> The bow that the Ethiopian king gave to Cambyses' spies, was thus a sign of the king's strength, and of his kingship. None other than the Ethiopians had the ability to handle it properly, not even the Persian king Cambyses and his contender-brother Smerdis. This fine piece of artistry in Herodotus' literary work spells out contempt and mocks Cambyses for his inability as king.

Before revisiting the Chronicler's Asa narrative in light of this evidence, it is also necessary to take note of new insights gained through recent scholarship on the Hebrew Bible's portrayal of the Cushites.

### **C NEW INSIGHTS ON THE PORTRAYAL OF CUSHITES IN THE HEBREW BIBLE**

The presence of Cush and Cushites in the Hebrew Bible, that is, the equivalent of Herodotus' Ethiopia and Ethiopians, have been the focus of many studies in the past.<sup>23</sup> Numerous studies deal with the issue of race and racism in Bible interpretation. In particular, David T. Adamo has championed this line of scholarship from the African continent.<sup>24</sup> He sees in the mentioning of Cush,

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>23</sup> For a good overview, see Knut Holter, *Tropical Africa and the Old Testament: A Select and Annotated Bibliography* (Bibliography Series 6; Oslo: University of Oslo, 1996); Knut Holter, *Old Testament Research for Africa: A Critical Analysis and Annotated Bibliography of African Old Testament Dissertations, 1967-2000* (Bible and Theology in Africa 3; New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> David T. Adamo, *Explorations in African Biblical Studies* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001); David T. Adamo, *Africa and the Africans in the Old Testament* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001); David T. Adamo, "The Images of Cush in the Old Testament: Reflections on African Hermeneutics," in *Interpreting the Old Testament in Africa: Papers from the International Symposium on Africa and the Old Testament in Nairobi, October 1999* (ed. Mary N. Getui, Knut Holter, and Victor Zinkurati; New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 65–74; David Tuesday Adamo, "The Nameless African Wife of Potiphar and Her Contribution to Ancient Israel," *OTE* 26/2 (2013):221–246; David Tuesday Adamo, "The Task and Distinctiveness of African Biblical Hermeneutic(s)," *OTE* 28/1 (2015): 31–52; David Tuesday Adamo, "What Is African Biblical Hermeneutics?," *Black Theology: An International Journal* 13/1 (2015):59–72. See also Marta Høyland Lavik, "The "African" Texts of the Old Testament and Their African Interpretations," in *Interpreting the Old Testament in Africa: Papers from the International Symposium on Africa and the Old Testament in Nairobi, October 1999* (ed. Mary N. Getui, Knut Holter, and Victor Zinkurati; New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 53–63; Philip Lokel, *The Importance and Challenges of Finding Africa in the Old*

which he interprets as a reference to Africa in general, useful points of latching onto the Bible in indigenous contexts.<sup>25</sup> Some scholars from African-American contexts also deal with the occurrence of Cush in the Hebrew Bible, in order to formulate an African-American hermeneutic for interpreting the Bible and to come to terms with the functioning of the concept of "race" in different societies.<sup>26</sup> All these aforementioned studies therefore focus on the hermeneutical significance of Cush in the Bible.

Other studies also focus on the interpretation of specific texts of the Hebrew Bible that mention "Cush." The text of Jer 13:23 is quite popular in this regard and scholars from different scholarly contexts have grappled with the comparison of Cushites being unable to change their skin to a leopard being unable to change its spots.<sup>27</sup> The presence of "Cush" has also been investigated in other texts such as Amos 9:7,<sup>28</sup> Isa 18<sup>29</sup> and Wisdom Literature.<sup>30</sup>

The recent studies by O. Kevin Burrell however, have broken new grounds in the interpretation of the "Cush" in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>31</sup> Based on his

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*Testament: The Case of the Cush Texts* (University of South Africa, 2006); Philip Lokel, "Previously Unstoried Lives: The Case of Old Testament Cush and Its Relevance to Africa," *OTE* 19/2 (2006):525–237; Knut Holter, "Should Old Testament 'Cush' Be Rendered 'Africa'?", *The Bible Translator* 48/3 (1997):331–336.

<sup>25</sup> See Lavik's response to Adamo's work: Marta Høyland Lavik, "An African Presence in the Old Testament? David Tuesday Adamo's Interpretation of the Old Testament Cush Passages," *OTE* 11/1 (1998):50–58.

<sup>26</sup> See e.g., Stephen B. Reid, "The Changing Significance of Race: African-Americans and the Hebrew Bible," *Religion Compass* 2/4 (2008):484–498.

<sup>27</sup> See e.g., the following studies: Adamo David T., "The Portrayal of Africa and Africans in the Book of Jeremiah," *In Die Skriflig* 52/1 (2018):1–9, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v52i1.2259>; Adamo David Tuesday, "Reading Jeremiah 13:23 in an African Context," *Journal for Semitics* 23/2 (2014):500–530; Rodney S. Sadler, *Can a Cushite Change His Skin? An Examination of Race, Ethnicity, and Othering in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005); Rodney S. Sadler, "Can a Cushite Change His Skin? Cushites, 'Racial Othering' and the Hebrew Bible," *Interpretation* 60/4 (2006):386–403.

<sup>28</sup> Brent A. Strawn, "What Is Cush Doing in Amos 9:7? The Poetics of Exodus in the Plural," *Vetus Testamentum* 63/1 (2013):99–123.

<sup>29</sup> Marta Høyland Lavik, *A People Tall and Smooth-Skinned: The Rhetoric of Isaiah 18* (VTSupp 112; Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2007); Marta Høyland Lavik, *Are the Kushites Disparaged in Isaiah 18? Kush Applied as a Literary Motif in the Hebrew Bible, Jerusalem's Survival, Sennacherib's Departure, and the Kushite Role in 701 BCE* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2020).

<sup>30</sup> Friedemann W. Golka, *The Leopard's Sports: Biblical and African Wisdom in Proverbs* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993).

<sup>31</sup> Kevin Burrell, *'From beyond the Rivers of Cush': Negotiating Ethnic Identity and Cushite-Israelite Interrelations in the Hebrew Bible* (Ph.D. diss., University of Stellenbosch, 2018); Kevin Burrell, *Cushites in the Hebrew Bible: Negotiating Ethnic*



doctoral dissertation, his book *Cushites in the Hebrew Bible: Negotiating Ethnic Identity in the Past and Present* provides a fresh perspective on Cush and the Cushites in the Hebrew Bible. Although his primary aim is to investigate the presentation of Cush and Cushites in the Hebrew Bible, he admits that "... the study of Cushites in the biblical past cannot be adequately apprehended without a related investigation of the ways in which African identity has been constructed in the recent present."<sup>32</sup>

It is clearly witnessed in scholarship that, under the influence of Western philosophy and hegemonic imperial powers, a racial connotation was given to the Cushites, namely, that they are the ancestors of black Africans. There is also ample evidence in literature (and still in some practices) that the racial bias of modern scholars often leads to denigrating Africans to the status of slaves.

In Burrell's own study, he opts for the concept of "ethnicity," which is not biologically determined but socially constructed. In the case of Israelite identity in the Hebrew Bible, it is clear that the "ethnicity" of Israel was very strongly defined in religious terms. Burrell therefore opts to use the term 'ethno-religious' when discussing the identity of Israel. The same applies to Cush, according to Burrell. He concludes that the Hebrew Bible shows no systemic concern for "ethnicity" as it is defined today. Religious concerns rather stands prominent and the Hebrew Bible can therefore not be understood in this aspect when the wider theological outlook of the writers is not also contemplated.

Burrell also benefits from the recent flourishing of Nubian studies (as a separate field from Egyptology). He makes some important observations from this field of specialisation that relates directly to our endeavour to investigate how Cush is portrayed in Herodotus and in Chronicles. The first concerns its political history:

Nubian studies has demonstrated that Cush was *the* major political rival of Egypt in Africa for millennia, and further that Cushites were a permanent fixture within pharaonic Egypt, represented at all social, political, and economic levels of Egyptian society ... Cushites were never held in contempt because of their dark skin pigmentation ... Instead, the evidence showed that Cushites who acculturated to Egyptian mores were readily assimilated within Egyptian society and benefitted from all that it meant to be Egyptian.<sup>33</sup>

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*Identity in the Past and Present, Cushites in the Hebrew Bible* (Biblical Interpretation Series 181; Leiden: Brill, 2020); Kevin Burrell, "Representing Cush in the Hebrew Bible," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 46/5 (2020): 62.

<sup>32</sup> Burrell, "From beyond the Rivers of Cush," 4. Since a copy of his book was still not available to me at the time of writing this essay, I quote from Burrell's dissertation.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

A second finding from Burrell's study concerns the geographic horizon of the Cushite presence. Traditionally, there is the view that "Africans" are not related to the biblical world. However, the Cushite people were not confined to the African continent but intermixed with the populations all across the ancient Near East.

In light of these insights in the history and geographic presence of the Cushites, Burrell states that,

Cushites were active participants in the ancient Mediterranean world at all periods, and their contribution to the history of this region should no longer be ignored. The ancient Mediterranean world was a confluence of peoples of all hues, culture, and language and Africans fully participated in this social interchange.<sup>34</sup>

The most important result of Burrell's study is, however, his observation that Cush prominently functions as a military topos in some passages in the Hebrew Bible, particularly in Isa 18:1–7 and 2 Chron 14:9–15. In both these passages, the Cushites are involved in military activities. In the Isaiah passage, on the one hand, Cush functions as military ally of Judah against the threatening Assyrian force. In Chronicles, on the other hand, Cush is portrayed as an enemy with a huge military capacity. From archaeological evidence, Burrell also shows that Cush was a prominent trader of luxury goods such as ivory and an exporter of a breed of horses (also called "the Kushites") that were prominently used in military activities.<sup>35</sup> Thus, on account of the history and status of Cush in the early part of the first millennium B.C.E., one can deduce that in both these passages, the Cushites were included for rhetorical purposes and not necessarily as historical referent.

After a consideration of recent studies on Herodotus' portrayal of "the Ethiopians" as well as recent studies on Cush in the Hebrew Bible, we can proceed to revisit the Chronicler's Asa narrative.

## **D NEW INSIGHTS ON THE CHRONICLER'S ASA NARRATIVE**

In a 2006 study on the appearance of the Cushites in the Chronicler's Asa narrative (2 Chron 14:1b-16:14),<sup>36</sup> I departed from the assumption that the

<sup>34</sup> Burrell, "From beyond the Rivers of Cush," 301–302.

<sup>35</sup> For more information on Nubia/Cush/Ethiopia, see e.g., Lisa A. Heidorn, "The Horses of Kush," *JNES* 56/2 (1997):105–114; Robert Morkot, *The Black Pharaohs: Egypt's Nubian Rulers* (London: Rubicon Press, 2000); Robert Morkot, "Egypt and Nubia," *Empires: Perspectives from Archaeology and History* (2001):227–251; Robert Morkot, "From Conquered to Conqueror: The Organization of Nubia in the New Kingdom and the Kushite Administration of Egypt," in *Ancient Egyptian Administration* (ed. Juan Carlos Moreno García; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 911–963.

<sup>36</sup> Louis C. Jonker, "The Cushites in the Chronicler's Version of Asa's Reign: A Secondary Audience in Chronicles?" *OTE* 19/3 (2006):863–881. See also Louis C.

Chronicler's changes, additions and omissions to his *Vorlage* were mainly done for rhetorical purposes. Since no source text in the Deuteronomistic *Vorlage* attests to the same battle of Judah against the Cushites, I assumed that the inclusion of this nation was done for rhetorical purposes at the time of origin of Chronicles, that is, more or less in the middle of the fourth century B.C.E. (before the conquest of Alexander the Great had any significant impact on Jerusalem and its environs). This late Persian period thus forms the historical backdrop to the Chronicler's work and one could expect that the mentioning of Cush must have had some special connotation at that time.

It is clear that the Chronicler reconstructed the text of his *Vorlage* in such a fashion that it no longer communicates mere religious-cultic and political information (as in 1 Kgs 15:9–24), but rather formulates two theological-ethical alternatives. The turning point clearly comes between 2 Chron 15:19 and 16:1. Until the thirty-fifth year of Asa's reign, according to the Chronicler, there was no war (despite the earlier mention of the battle against the Cushites). However, for the next six years until his death in the forty-first year of his reign, all things spiralled downwards. When Baasha of Israel came against Judah, Asa decided to lobby the support of the Syrians to oppose the Israelite army. This turn of events is interpreted theologically by Hanani, the seer, who is also a novel addition to the narrative compared to the *Vorlage* text. Hanani conveys the following judgement:

Because you relied (שָׁעַן) on the king of Syria, and did not rely (לֹא שָׁעַן) on the Lord your God, the army of the king of Syria has escaped you. Were not the Ethiopians and the Libyans (הַכּוּשִׁים וְהַלִּיבִיִּים) a huge army with very many chariots and horsemen? Yet because you relied (שָׁעַן) on the Lord, he gave them into your hand. For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him. You have done foolishly in this, for from now on you will have wars (2 Chron 16:7-9, ESV annotated).

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Jonker, *1 & 2 Chronicles* (Understanding the Bible Commentary Series; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 221–227. For more recent studies on the Chronicler's Asa account, see among others, Gerrie F. Snyman, "Why Asa Was not Deemed Good Enough: A Decolonial Reading of 2 Chronicles 14-16," in *Texts, Contexts and Readings in Postexilic Literature: Explorations into Historiography and Identity Negotiation in Hebrew Bible and Related Texts* (ed. Louis C. Jonker; *Forschungen zum Alten Testament II* 53; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011); Pancratius C. Beentjes, "King Asa and Hanani the Seer: 2 Chronicles 16 as an Example of the Chronicler's View of Prophets and Prophecy," in *Prophecy and Prophets in Stories: Papers Read at the Fifth Meeting of the Edinburgh Prophecy Network, Utrecht, October 2013* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 141–151; Isabel Cranz, "Advice for a Successful Doctor's Visit: King Asa Meets Ben Sira," *CBQ* 80/2 (2018):231–246; Itzhak Amar, "Form and Content in the Story of Asa in 2 Chr 13:23b-16:14: A Diachronic-Synchronic Reading," *VT* 69/3 (2019):1–24.

It is clear that the first half of the narrative sketches a time of rest and peace, while the second part spirals down into "wars" (in the plural) and the death of King Asa. The seer's words explain that the difference in the two halves is that – in the battle against the הכושים והלובים – the king relied (שען) on Yahweh, while in the battle against the northern kingdom, he chose to rely on the Syrian king.

The critical question is, however, why did the Chronicler choose the Cushites and Libyans to feature as enemy in the first half of the narrative? To be sure, the Chronicler could have chosen any other nation without losing the effect of having two counterpoints in the narrative as a whole. The episode in 2 Chron 14:9–15 mentions only the הכושים and not the הלובים as in the back reference by the seer Hanani in 2 Chron 16. In 2 Chron 14:9, Zerah the Cushite came out against Judah. In the previous verse it is mentioned that Asa had a total of 580,000 men of valour in his army. In contrast, the Cushite leader (the text does not mention whether he was a king or military commander) had one million men plus 300 chariots. It is clear that these figures are not exact indications but rather metaphoric descriptions of the huge power disparity between Zerah of Cush and Asa of Judah. Sara Japhet states that:

The depiction of Zerah's army, with its 'million' troops and a disproportionately small unit of chariots, can hardly be accepted as historical. These extraordinary features should be seen as part of the schematic-theological interpretation of the actual battle.<sup>37</sup>

The further narration indicates that Asa prayed to Yahweh for help and that Yahweh acted as warrior who slayed the Cushites, so that all Cushite soldiers were murdered and that they could be utterly plundered.

The identity of the Cushites in this narrative has been disputed in commentaries. The major commentaries agree that the Zerah mentioned here might have some link with Osorkon I. Japhet puts it as follows:

'Zerah the Cushite' is here presented as the ruler of a major world power, launching a military offensive on the grandest scale, with an army of a million soldiers. This prompts us to seek this king among the Egyptian Pharaohs, and Osorkon I, whose name has some phonetic affinity to Zerah, has been regarded as the best candidate ...<sup>38</sup>

Klein offers a summary of four different views supported by scholars.<sup>39</sup> The first is that Zerah was a Nubian general in the time of King Osorkon I and that the

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<sup>37</sup> Sara Japhet, *I & II Chronicles: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 710.

<sup>38</sup> Japhet, *I & II Chronicles*, 709.

<sup>39</sup> Ralph W. Klein, *2 Chronicles: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 217–218.

former was sent to dismantle the military build-up of King Asa of Judah. A second option is to see Zerah as part of the cadre of Nubian mercenaries that were left at Gerar. A third theory is that Zerah was the leader of an Arab bedouin tribe. That also implies that Cush was not linked to Nubia but rather to Cushan on the Arabian Peninsula. The last option is to see the Cushite attack of Asa as a literary fabrication that was meant to illustrate what the outcome was when kings would rely on Yahweh.

All the above interpretations—maybe with the exception of the fourth one—assume some historical kernel in this narrative. The possible point(s) of reference is then some historical reality of Cush and Cushites, although the information was used for the Chronicler's own purpose. There were surely some older traditions about Cush that played into the Chronicler's usage. However, my contention is that some historical reality is not enough reason for the Chronicler to have included the Cushites here. One must also look for presentations of Cush which were known to the writers in Jerusalem during the late Persian period and which prompted some ideological usage of Cush.

At this point, Herodotus' writings and the historical references that Nubia/Cush/Ethiopia exercised huge military influence re-enter our consideration. The reputation of Cush as an unconquerable force does not seem to come from historical reality. We have referred to the DNA inscription that includes Cush under the list of conquered nations and to archaeological evidence from the Dorginarti fortress that there must have been Persian control south of the second Nile cataract at a certain stage. The reputation of Cush as an unconquerable force most probably had its origin in Herodotus' account of the failed Cambyses campaigns. The episode about the Cushite king's bow being sent to Cambyses and Smerdis and their inability to handle it effectively certainly contributed—even in a mocking fashion—to Herodotus' belittling of Cambyses, specifically, and of the Persian Empire and kingship, generally.

The Chronicler wrote about 80–90 years after Herodotus. This is certainly enough time for the Jerusalem literati to have been exposed to this classical Greek work. As Gary Knoppers has convincingly shown,<sup>40</sup> Herodotus' work might even have been the template on which the Chronicler constructed his own literary creation. With the very effective communication system—between the imperial heartland and its satrapies and provinces—that was established during the Achaemenid period, it is highly likely that the literati in Jerusalem could have been familiar with Herodotus' historical work.

However, after establishing where the Cushite reputation comes from, we furthermore have to explain why the Chronicler used this Cushite reputation in his own work. We have seen above that Herodotus used his construction of the Cushites as a mocking gesture in the direction of the Persian imperial force, with

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<sup>40</sup> Knoppers, "Greek Historiography and the Chronicler's History."

special reference to Cambyses. It is highly likely that the Chronicler took over not only the image of the unconquerable Cushites from Herodotus but also the rhetorical method employed by the Greek historiographer. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>41</sup> the Chronicler's work was intended to function on different communicational levels. One of these levels was the overarching imperial level. There are numerous indications in Chronicles that the writer often included elements that functioned as subtle polemic against the Persian Empire. We know that the Persian Empire mostly appointed governors from the local leadership. The Chronicler's account, duly influenced by a prominent Greek historiographer, was directed at the leaders who acted on behalf of the empire in Jerusalem in order to mock the Persian Empire. The reminder that the Cushites could not conquer Judah but that Judah's god Yahweh conquered the mighty Cushites, would have carried clear polemical overtones. It would also have been a subtle reminder that Yahweh is on the side of his people in Jerusalem.

## E CONCLUSION

Not only has this study confirmed an earlier interpretation of the Cushite presence in the Chronicler's Asa narrative, it has also shown that recent scholarship on Herodotus' portrayal of the failed Cambyses campaign against Cush as well as on the history of Nubia corroborates the earlier conclusion that the Chronicler could indeed have latched on to the classical Greek historiography of Herodotus. Scholarship of the past years have also shown that Gary Knoppers was probably right to assume some classical Greek influence in Chronicles before the advent of the Hellenistic period under Alexander the Great. Chronicles thus stands in a continuum of historiographic literary works that connect the classical Greek traditions with those from post-exilic Yehud as well as with later Hellenistic and Jewish histories.

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<sup>41</sup> See especially Louis C. Jonker, "The Chronicler's Portrayal of Solomon as the King of Peace within the Context of the International Peace Discourses of the Persian Era," *OTE* 21/3 (2008):653–669; Louis C. Jonker, *Defining All-Israel in Chronicles: Multi-Levelled Identity Negotiation in Late Persian Period Yehud* (Forschungen zum Alten Testament I 106; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), chap. 3.

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