

RELATIONS BETWEEN ISRAEL AND AFRICA IN BIBLICAL AND MODERN HISTORY

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Introduction

A common opinion held by some pagan people in Africa is that Christianity and Judaism are foreign religions that have nothing to do with Africans. Those who hold to this view claim that God revealed Himself to the Jews through Judaism, to Europeans through Christianity and to Africans through African traditional religions. However, from Genesis to Revelation we find many stories of how people of different races and ethnicities affected Israel, Judaism, and Christianity. The stories of the Bible took place in and around the geographical area we now call the Middle East. People moved in and out of it based on their relationship with the nations of ancient Israel and Judah. I've decided in this presentation to highlight a few biblical persons and lands of Africa and their relationships with Israel.

I must quickly note that the assertion that Africans are linked to the Bible is justifiable by linguistic and archaeological evidences. There is a strong tradition that some of the descendants of Noah through his son Ham were black or people of colour. Ham had a son named Cush, which means "black" in Hebrew. Cush is the most common term designating colour in reference to persons, people or lands used in the Bible. The Greek and Latin word for Cush is Ethiopia. In classical literature, Greek and Roman authors describe Ethiopians as black. Archaeology has found these people to be black.¹ The first African civilization after Egypt was the Cush Kingdom, a state of Nubia which existed in the region of modern southern Egypt and northern Sudan, along the Nile with a history going back 5,000 years in time.²

Genesis 10:6-20 describes the descendants of Ham as being located in North Africa, Central Africa and in parts of southern Asia. Psalm 105:23 mentions the "land of Ham" in Egypt, and Psalm 78:51 connect the "tents of Ham" with Egypt. From these evidences we are able to identify certain people in the Old and New Testaments as African.

Prominent African people in the Bible linked to Israel

1. **The Queen of Sheba:** The queen of Sheba is also referred to as the queen of the south by Jesus in Matthew 12:42. She is believed by some historians to be a woman of colour. Sheba is descended from Cush (Genesis 10:7), the son of Ham who founded Ethiopia. The queen of Sheba ruled a land known for its international trade in spices, gold, and precious stones (1 Kings 10) which is how she heard of Solomon. Some commentators locate the land of Sheba in East Africa while others suggest Southern Arabia. But most commentators agree that she

¹ Dan Rogers, "Evidence of Blacks in the Bible"; available from www.christianodyssey.com/bible/africans ;Accessed 28 April 2008

² Tore Kjejlén, "Nubia" in *LookLex Encyclopaedia*, an expansion of *Encyclopaedia of the Orient*; available from <http://lexicorient.com/e.o/index.htm>; Accessed 23 May 2008.

must have been a woman of colour.

2. **Ebed-Melech, the Ethiopian:** He served as a palace official during the reign of the Israelite king Zedekiah (in about 597-586 BC). In ancient times eunuchs were employed as keepers of the royal harem. He was responsible for the rescue of the Prophet Jeremiah from a muddy cistern after he was unjustly thrown there for his prophecies concerning Israel (Jeremiah 38:7-13).

The New Testament also contains ample evidence of African people interacting with Israel.

3. **Simon of Cyrene:** Cyrene was founded by Greek colonists in north-western Libya in 631 B.C. The Greeks often took the lands forcefully from these descendants of Phut, the son of Ham. But they also intermarried with them to form a mixed people of Africa.³ It is believed that some of the Jews fleeing from Babylonian invasion in 588-586 B.C eventually settled here as well. From these interracial marriages descended Simon of Cyrene who was forced by the Romans to relieve Jesus of the heavy load of the cross on his way to Golgotha. Simon was either a Cyrenian on a visit to the city for the feast or was perhaps a member of the Jerusalem synagogue of the Cyrenians.⁴

4. **Ethiopian eunuch:** He was a treasurer serving Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. The ancient kingdom of Ethiopia lay between Aswan and Khartoum, in Sudan. Most commentators maintain that ancient Ethiopia is not ancient Abyssinia but ancient Nubia.⁵ Documents belonging to the fifth century BC show that ancient Ethiopia existed south of Egypt as a colony of Egypt for 180 years. According to Tore Kjejlén "the name "Nubia" either comes from the Nubian word "nob", gold, or from "nugur" or "nub", meaning black. Nubia was in ancient times both a great producer of gold mainly for the Egyptian market and inhabited by blacks."⁶ Although little is known about the indigenous religious practices of the Nubians, it is recorded that "they built a temple of Yahweh at Elephantine and carried on a sacrificial ritual there similar to the one carried on at the Jerusalem temple."⁷ Candace was a title held by several queens of Ethiopia. This eunuch, a minister of state in charge of finance, served under the Candace that was reigning in 34 A.D. Luke's record suggests that he was a near proselyte to Judaism. He was returning from a religious pilgrimage to Jerusalem with a copy of the prophecy of Isaiah in his possession which would have been difficult for a non-Jew to get.⁸ Upon hearing the gospel behind the Messianic prophecy which he read from the Book of Isaiah, the Ethiopian believed and was baptized. It is widely believed that the born-again statesman witnessed in Nubia. It is recorded that the majority of the people of Nubia became converted to Christianity in the 6th Century AD.⁹

5. **Simeon called Niger:** An African who was named as being among the prophets and teachers at Antioch (Acts 13). He was one who ministered before the Lord with fasting and prayer. As a result, the Holy Spirit spoke to him and the others telling them to separate

³ Desmond J. Clark, et al., *The Cambridge History of Africa* (1975), pp.114-116.

⁴ Laurence E. Porter, "Luke" in F.F Bruce, *New International Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972), p. 1225

⁵ E. H Trenchard, "Acts" in F.F Bruce, *New International Bible Commentary* (1972), p. 1283

⁶ Tore Kjejlén, "Nubia" in *LookLex Encyclopaedia*

⁷ F.F. Bruce, *Israel and the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), p.112

⁸ Richard N. Longenecker, "The Acts of the Apostles" in Frank E. Gaebelin, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol.9 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), p363.

⁹ Tore Kjejlén.

Barnabas and Saul with the laying on of hands to be sent out from the church as missionaries.

I believe the Old and New Testaments show substantial evidence of Israel's interaction with different peoples of the world including Africans. The fact that God uses people of all races and backgrounds proves that although He has chosen Israel to be His treasured possession, He desires to be the Lord of all mankind.

African lands and Jews

Most people who have no contact with Jewish communities of colour picture Jews only as Europeans and Americans. Actually, the Jewish communities of Africa and Asia had dominated the Jewish intellectual and cultural scene in antiquity.

Egypt

During the time of Jesus, the largest Jewish community outside the land of Israel was in Alexandria, Egypt. Israelite tribes first entered Egypt during the reign of pharaoh Amen Hotep IV (1375-1358 BCE) and migrated from Egypt in the Exodus around the year 1220 BCE. During the time of the Babylonian conquest of Israel, many Jews who were not deported to Babylon fled to Egypt, as recorded in the book of the prophet Jeremiah. Large scale immigration began in 332 BCE when Egypt was under Greek rule. It was Alexandria's Jewish community that produced influential intellectuals such as Philo amongst many others. The first Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible called the Septuagint was also translated there. It was the Egyptian ruler, Ptolemy Philadelphus (293B.C. to 244 B.C.) who ordered the translation of the Old Testament into Greek because the younger generation of the Jews in Egypt were becoming more and more Hellenistic.¹⁰ The influence of the Alexandrian Jews on the early Church and surviving African- Jewish communities cannot be underrated.

Ethiopia

Ethiopia in East Africa represents one of the oldest Jewish communities in ancient times. According to one theory of their origin, Jews were brought to Ethiopia as prisoners of war by Ptolemy I. In 301 Palestine was conquered by Ptolemy 1 of Egypt and remained under his rule until 200BC.¹¹ Another tradition holds that they are the lost tribe of Dan.¹² The Falashas, the most famous of Black Jews in Ethiopia have been validated. In 1984 and 1985, Israel airlifted 10,000 out from Ethiopia in "Operation Moses" and 15,000 in Operation Solomon in 1992. They now are being integrated into modern day Israel as practising Jews.

Libya, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia

The presence of Jewish communities in North Africa west of Egypt dates back at least 2000 years. With Israel coming under Greek, Persian and later Roman rule, Jewish refugees set up communities in Egypt, Lybia, Nubia and Carthage. From Carthage they began to scatter into various Jewish communities south of the Atlas Mountains nearer to the modern day Mauritania, Niger, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Cameroon and Congo. Several Jewish nomadic groups also moved across the Sahara from Nubia and the ancient kingdom of Kush towards West Africa.¹³ Historian George Lichtblau holds that "most of the Jewish communities and

¹⁰ Kamani B. Kafang, *An Introduction to the Intertestamental Period*, (Kaduna: Baraka Press and Publishers, 2001), p. 68

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 67

¹² Kulana.org - an organization dedicated to finding and assisting lost and dispersed remnants of the Jewish people. Has articles on African converts and African societies believed to be descended from Israelite tribes.

Information also available from *MORESHET - Network of African Heritage Jews, Jews of Ethiopia links page, The Ethiopian Jewry Page.*

¹³ Jide Uwechia, "The Black Jews of Africa Part 2: Jews of Nigeria, Senegal and Congo", available from

nomad groups south of the Atlas mountains were either forced to convert to Islam or massacred; the remainder fled to North Africa, Egypt or the Sudan, and a few also to Cameroon and Southern Africa”.¹⁴ A Jewish Rabbi of Cameroonian origin has declared in an article published by the Jewish Telegraph Group of Newspapers UK that the Bassa tribe of Cameroon originated from Jews in Egypt 1200 years ago.¹⁵ Some Jewish rabbis in the UK believe him. This claim is being considered for investigation in Cameroon. The preliminary field research shows a strong belief in a Jewish origin in the oral tradition of the Bassa tribe.¹⁶

Southern and Western Africa

Jide

Uwechia has done very compelling research on the history of Black Jews of Africa. The following analysis contains much of his findings. Besides the Falashas of Ethiopia, various South and West African ethnic people lay verifiable claim to their Jewish ancestral heritage. The Lembas of South Africa, a Bantu tribe, have a legitimate claim to Jewish ancestry and heritage backed by solid genetic evidence i.e. the prevalence of the so-called Cohen modal J haplogroup. The Lembas as a group do not look different from other Bantu tribes, suggesting that most Bantus groups possess this archetypal Jewish genetic haplogroup. Thus Jide rightly states, “this implies that there are potentially more bloodline Jews on the continent of Africa than anywhere else including modern Europe and Israel”.¹⁷

Black Jews were fully integrated and became influential in many West African empires such as Songhai, Mali, Ghana and Kanem-Bornu empires. It is believed that the rulers of the Songhai Empire were of Jewish origins until Askia Muhammad came to power in 1492 and decreed that all Jews either convert to Islam or leave the region.¹⁸

Jews existed in Senegal from the early middle Ages up to the 18th century, when they were forced to convert to Islam. Some of these claimed to be descendants of the tribe of Dan. The name of an old Senegalese province called “Juddala” is said to attest to the notable impact Jews made in this part of the world. In addition to the Jewish tribal groups in Senegal who claim to be descendants of the tribe of Dan, the Ethiopian Jews also trace their ancestry to the tribe of Dan.¹⁹

The Tuaregs had a Jewish queen in early medieval times. Some Jewish Tuareg clans had preserved their adherence to judiasm in defiance of both Islamic and Christian missionary pressure, until the 18th century.²⁰

Some records indicate the presence of a West African Jewish community in the Ondo forest of Nigeria, south of Timbouctou. Interestingly, “this community maintained a Torah Scroll as late as 1930s, written in Aramaic that had been burnt into parchment with a hot iron instead of

www.africaresource.com; Accessed May 13 2008.

¹⁴ George E. Lichtblau, “Jewish Roots in Africa”, available from <http://www.kulanu.org/africa/africa2.html>; Accessed 1 May 2008.

¹⁵ See www.haruth.com/jw/JewsCameroon

¹⁶ For the interest of the church in Cameroon, I have designed a research project on the Jewish ancestry of the Bassa tribe in Cameroon. This project is intended to validate the Jewry of the Bassa tribe through academic research and possible genetic testing.

¹⁷ For more information on this subject, see Jide Uwechia, “The Black Jews of Africa Part 2:Jews of Nigeria, Senegal and Congo”, available from www.africaresource.com.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ See Litchblua, cited in Jide

ink so it could not be changed”.²¹ It is also reported that the Igbos of Nigeria, claim a Jewish ancestry “as borne out by their mores, laws, rituals and idioms which have a heavily accented Old Testament Hebrew flavour.”²²

Modern Israel and Relations with Africa

Theodor Herzl, the father of modern political Zionism in his book *Altneuland*, published in 1902, wrote that “once I have witnessed the redemption of the Jews, my people, I wish also to assist in the redemption of the Africans.”²³ Since independence in 1948, the state of Israel has indicated substantial concern for African countries.

Israel’s condemnation of Apartheid in South Africa in the 1960s demonstrated the country’s concern for Black African states. It was the goal of Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion to establish diplomatic relations with African states and to give aid. Historians have pointed out that Israeli aid to the African countries came without strings attached to it. President Decko of the Central African Republic, during his visit to Israel in 1962 made the following remarks concerning Israeli aid to Africa as follows: “You have not tried to create us in your image. Instead, Israel has contented itself with showing the new African nations its achievements, in helping them overcome their weaknesses, in assisting them in learning. In so doing you have conquered Black Africa.”²⁴ The first Israeli embassy in Africa was opened in Accra, Ghana, in November 1956. In 1958, a top Israeli diplomat, Golda Meir made a five week long tour of Africa and had the first high-level discussions with African nationalist leaders like Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, William Tubman of Liberia, and Felix Houphouet-Boigny of Ivory Coast. These contacts helped to show Israeli concern for the African liberation movements and also stimulated African interest in Israel.

Conclusion

God has a special plan for Africa and Israel. By His providence God continues to bring His chosen people in close contact with the Church and nations of Africa. The security and prosperity of the church and the nations of Africa depends on their commitment to love and pray for the people and nation of Israel. There is no greater way the African church can show true love for the Messiah and his salvation for the Gentiles than to turn to His own people for their comfort. In ancient times, God spoke to Abraham, the father of the Jewish people saying, *I will bless those who bless you ...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you (Genesis 12:3)*

against the 'doctrine of Balaam'. 2 Peter 2:15 mentions false teachers who 'follow the way of Balaam'. Jude 11 warns against those 'who have rushed for profit into Balaam's error'. R. Travers Herford¹ concludes that Balaam in the Rabbinic tradition is a codename for Jesus. Does this shocking fact prove that there is a deep rooted contempt among the Jews toward Christians? If you read Numbers 22:1 - 25:9 together with Jude, 2 Peter and Revelation, the question "Is it me, Lord, who betrayed you?" must be asked. Have we become followers of Balaam? How much responsibility do we as ministers of The Word need to take for this Rabbinic imagesetting when we acted - or rather abused - in Jesus' Name, the very acts these

²¹ Gonen Rivaka, *The Quest for the Ten Lost tribes of Israel: To the Ends of the Earth* (Northville, NJ: Jason Aronson, 2002), 180-181 cited in Jide Uwuchia

²² See Ilona R, *The Ibos: Jews of Nigeria*, volume 1 as cited in Jide Uwechia.

²³ Golda Meir, *My Life*, (NY: Dell Publishing Co., 1975), pp. 308-309, cited in Mittchel G. Bard, “The Evolution of Israel’s Africa Policy”; available from <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/Politics/africa.html>; Accessed 28 April 2008.

²⁴ Mordechai Kreinin, *Israel and Africa*, (NY: Praeger, 1964), p. 5, cited in Mittchel G. Bard.

