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African American Traditions and the Bible

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(Jer. 36.14). The prophet *Zephaniah is called "son of Cushi" (Zeph. 1.1) in his genealogy, which extends back to Hezekiah.

Solomon as patron of wisdom opened the door to Egyptian proverbs and poetry as evidenced in segments of the book of *Proverbs modeled upon the Egyptian "Instructions of Amen-em-ope" (Prov. 22.17–24.34), and in Psalm 104, which echoes an Egyptian hymn to Aton. Hezekiah, who aligned himself with the Cushite Dynasty, is also listed as a royal patron of Israel's proverbial wisdom (Prov. 25.1). The maiden in Song of Solomon 1.5 proclaims, "I am black and beautiful, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon." The dual imagery is clear: dark hue is paralleled by the black goat-skin tents, and beauty is matched by the sumptuous royal curtains. (The Hebrew connector *wē* is taken in its normal sense as a conjunctive "and" rather than the less usual disjunctive "but").

Africa in Israelite Worship and Messianic Thought. Among those known to God under the imagery of *Zion as mother of nations is Cush (Ps. 87.4), who also brings tribute to the Temple (Ps. 68.31). This concern for Cush and the other nations may extend from the formative experience of the *Exodus and wilderness sojourn, where Hebrews were accompanied by a "mixed multitude" (Exod. 12.38), including Phinehas (Exod. 6.25) and *Moses' Cushite wife (Num. 12.1).

In prophetic literature, after God's wrath is vindicated on the nations of the earth, God will change their speech so all can worship God, and "from beyond the rivers of Ethiopia my suppliants, the daughter of my dispersed ones, shall bring my offering" (Zeph. 3.10). This refers to the African diaspora, to Israelite exiles in Africa returning with gifts of thanksgiving to God. Africa then with its people seen as converts shall come to worship God in Zion, along with dispersed Israelite exiles. It is in this context of God's universal reign that the prophet Amos proclaims, "Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? says the Lord" (Amos 9.7). God is judge and ultimately redeemer of all nations.

The New Testament proclamation of Jesus as *Messiah continues in the early mission of the apostle Philip who baptizes the African official in Acts 8.26–39. It is significant that in this incident the term "messiah" is interpreted in light of Isaiah 53.7–8 as God's suffering servant. That the African was reading Isaiah suggests

that the emissary was a recent convert or a *proselyte.

In the light of the Psalms and the prophets, then, Africans can be viewed both as diaspora and as proselytes among Israel's dispersed people, and also as forerunners of the conversion of all the nations of the earth.

ROBERT A. BENNETT

African American Traditions and the Bible.

Introduction: Reading the Bible = Reading the Self and the World. African Americans' engagement of the Bible is complex and dynamic. It is a fascinating historical drama, beginning with the Africans' involuntary arrival in the New World. But as sign of the creativity and adaptability of the Africans and of the evocative power of the Bible, the drama continues to the present day, notwithstanding the complexity and controversies of intervening periods. Thus, there is in African Americans' engagement of the Bible potential not only for an interpretive history of their readings as a history of their collective self-understandings, visions, hopes, challenges, and agenda, but also—because of their singular experience at least in the United States—for significant, even singular challenges for critical biblical interpretation in the late twentieth century.

First Reading: Awe and Fear—Initial Negotiation of the Bible and the New World. From the beginning of their captive experience in what became the United States, Africans were confronted with the missionizing efforts of whites to convert slaves to the religions of the slavers. These religions or denominations—especially Anglicanism—were for the most part the establishment religions of the landed gentry; they did not appeal much to the slaves. Numerous testimonies from clerics, teachers, and missionaries of the eighteenth century register frustration and shock over the Africans' lack of understanding of and uneasy socialization into their religious cultures. The formality and the literacy presupposed by these cultures—in catechetical training and Bible study, for example—clearly frustrated the easy or enthusiastic "conversion" of the African masses. Not only were the Africans, on the whole, according to custom and law, deemed (and made) incapable of meeting the presupposed literacy requirements, but they did not seem emotionally or psychically disposed toward the customary sensibilities and orientations of the establishment religions. These missionary efforts were not very successful.

The Bible did have a place in these initial missionary efforts. But that place was not primary: its presence was indirect, embedded within catechetical materials, or muted and domesticated within doctrinaire or catechetical, and mostly formal, preaching. But it needs to be stressed that the Africans' introduction to "the Bible," or "the scriptures," by whatever agency, would have been difficult, according to available evidence. Cultures steeped in oral traditions at first generally find frightful and absurd the concept of a religion and religious power circumscribed by a book, then certainly difficult to accept and fathom; later, perhaps, they may find it awesome and fascinating.

Second Reading: Critique and Accommodation. It was not until the late eighteenth century, with the growth of nonestablishment, evangelical, and free-church and camp-meeting revivalistic movements in the North and South, that African Americans began to encounter and engage the Bible on a large scale and on a more intimate basis, minus the bewilderment. Finding themselves directly appealed to by the new evangelicals and revivalists in vivid, emotional biblical language, and noting that nearly the entire white world explained its power and authority by appeal to the Bible, the Africans could hardly fail to be drawn closer to it. They embraced the Bible, transforming it from the Book of the religion of the whites—whether aristocratic slavers or lower-class exhorters—into a source of psychic-spiritual power and of hope, a source of inspiration for learning and affirmation, and into a language capable of articulating strong hopes and veiling stinging critique. The narratives of the Hebrew Bible and the stories of Jesus, the New Testament's persecuted but victorious one, captured the collective African imagination. This was the beginning of the African American historical encounter with the Bible, and the foundation for the cultivation of the phenomenological, sociopolitical, and cultural presupposition(s) for its different, even conflicting historical readings of the Bible to come.

From the late eighteenth century through the end of slavery, the period of Reconstruction, and into the modern Civil Rights era of the 1950s and 1960s, African Americans continued their engagement with or readings of the Bible. These readings reflected major dynamics in the self-understandings and orientations of a major segment of African American culture, if not the majority. The founding of the independent churches and denominations beginning in the

late eighteenth century historically postdates and logically presupposes the cultivation of certain identifiable African diaspora religious worldviews and orientations. The Bible played a fundamental role in the cultivation and articulation of such worldviews and orientations. It was discovered as a type of language world full of drama and proclamation such that the slave or freedperson could be provided with certain powerful rhetorics and visions that fired the imagination.

The most popular reading of the Bible was one in which the Protestant *canon provided the rhetorics and visions of prophetic critique, the blueprints for "racial uplift," and social and political peace (integration) as the ultimate goal, in addition to steps toward personal salvation. This reading of the Bible reflected the dominant sociopolitical views and orientations among African Americans in this period. The "reading"—both of the Bible and of American culture—expressed considerable ambivalence: it was both critical and accommodationist: on the one hand, its respect for the Protestant canon reflected its desire to accommodate and be included within the American (socioeconomic, political, and religious) mainstream; on the other hand, its interpretation of the Bible was on the whole from a social and ideological location "from below," as it were, and reflected a blistering critique of Bible-believing, slave-holding, racist America. Important personalities—from Frederick Douglass to Martin Luther King, Jr.—are among the powerful articulators of the reading. But the popular sources, some anonymous, some by not-very-well-known individuals—the songs, conversion narratives, poetry, prayers, diaries, and the like—are a truer, more powerful reflection of history.

That this reading reflected considerable ambivalence about being in America on the part of a considerable segment of African Americans over a long period of history is indisputable. That it reflects class-specific leanings within the African American population is also indisputable. Those who continued to "read" the Bible and America in this way continued to hope that some accommodation should and could be made. Those most ardent in this hope on the whole saw themselves as close enough to the mainstream to make accommodation (integration) always seem feasible.

The great interest in the dramatic narratives of the Hebrew Bible notwithstanding, it was the motifs of a certain cluster of passages from the

New Testament, especially Galatians 3:26–28 and Acts 2 and 10:34–36, that provided the hermeneutic foundation for this dominant “mainstream” African American reading of the Bible—and American culture. These passages were important because of their emphasis on the themes centering around the hope for the realization of the universality of salvation and the kinship of humanity. The passages were quoted and/or paraphrased in efforts to relate them to the racial situation in the United States by generations of African Americans—from the famous to those known only in statistics, stereotypes, and generalizations, in settings ranging from pulpits and lecture halls to nightclubs and street corners, in the rhetoric of the sermon and in the music of the streets.

That this reading continues to reflect the ethos and orientation of a considerable number, perhaps the majority, of African Americans, can be seen in its institutionalization in most African American institutions and associations—from the churches to civil rights organizations. Further, some of the most powerful and influential voices among African Americans continue to accept the ethos reflected by the reading. This suggests the continuing power of the ethos, even if it be argued that it is no longer the singular dominant ethos.

Third Reading: Critique from the Margins. Another reading was cultivated in the early decades of the twentieth century, primarily in the urban centers of the North and South. It reflected the sentiments of displaced and disoriented rural and small-town residents who moved to the big cities in search of better job opportunities. These individuals formed new religious communities that gave them a sense of belonging and solidarity missing in the established “mainline” churches and communities. A very different reading of the Bible is in evidence among such groups, one that was also reflective of a different attitude about society and culture. It was a more critical, even radical attitude about America; there was little hope of full integration into the mainstream. America was seen as racist and arrogant; its “mainstream” religious groups—including the African American groups—were seen as worldly and perfidious.

The engagement of the Bible and of religious texts in general more clearly reflects and articulates this attitude. The latter was not held by one single group; it was held by a number of groups—the Garvey Movement, Father Divine

and the Peace Mission Movement, the Black Jews, the Nation of Islam, the Spiritual churches, the Pentecostal movement, among the most prominent. What they had in common were sensibilities, attitudes about the world, which were reflected not only in their more radical (Afrocentric or racist) interpretation of the (Protestant-defined and -delimited) Bible, but also in their acceptance of other esoteric authoritative texts that, of course, justified their sensibilities and agenda. Whether through the radical reading of the (Protestant) Bible, the rejection or manipulation of its canonical delimitations, or through acceptance of other esoteric authoritative texts, these groups expressed their rejection of the racist and worldly religious ways of America and of the accommodationist and integrationist agenda of the African American religious mainstream. Many of them focused, to degrees far beyond anything on record among the African American establishment churches, on the utter perfidy and hopelessness of whites (e.g., Nation of Islam, Garvey movement) as well as the destiny and salvation of African peoples (especially Black Jews).

Fourth Reading: Leaving Race Behind. Another African American reading of the Bible and American culture is emerging as a dominant one in the late twentieth century. It is in many respects a reaction to both the integrationist/accommodationist and the separatist readings discussed above. Its use of the Bible is a sharp departure from the traditional African American engagement of the Bible. To be sure, African Americans have historically been evangelical in their religious sensibilities, including the attachment of primary importance to the Bible as guide. But there has heretofore generally been a looseness, a kind of playfulness with the Bible. The letters of the Bible and its literal sense were less important than the evocative power of the stories, poetry, and prophetic proclamations. What generally mattered most was the power of the Bible to function as a language, even a language world, into which African American visionaries, prophets, rhetors, and politicians could retreat in order to find the materials needed for the articulation of their own and their communities' views. Now there are many African Americans whose engagement to the Bible is more doctrinaire and literal, even fundamentalist. And the hermeneutic foundation or presupposition, too, has shifted from historical and cultural experience, from being race-specific (as with the

mainstream groups) or radical (as with the "sects" and "cults"), to being (as it is claimed) "Bible-based," that is, focused upon true doctrine in the letters of the Bible, relativizing racial identity and experience.

In this reading of the (Protestant) Bible, which is considered the deracialized and depoliticized quest for the truth and salvation, the most radical criticism of African American religious communities and culture is expressed. Insofar as the Protestant canon is not questioned, and insofar as the foundation or presupposition for reading the canon is claimed to be other than historical experience, then a total rejection of African American existence is expressed. In much the same way that the rise of fundamentalism among whites in the early decades of the twentieth century represented a rejection of modernism, so within the world of African Americans a turn toward fundamentalism represents a rejection of African Americans' special historical experiences and claims. That in religious matters African American religious communities are being abandoned or are being transformed into fundamentalist camps on the order of white fundamentalist camps, that religious truth can now be claimed to be unrelated to experience, is a most significant development. The proliferation of new fundamentalist churches and denominational groups among African Americans, as well as the new alliances with white fundamentalist groups, is astounding.

The phenomenon begs further comprehensive investigation. But it is very clear that it represents a most significant turn in African American religious and cultural history.

Women's Reading. In evidence throughout this history of African American "readings" of the Bible are the special readings of African American women. From Phyllis Wheatley to modern "womanist" and other interpreters, women are part of each of the "readings" distinguished above. But across each of these readings, differences in historical periods, locations, classes, and other factors notwithstanding, collectively women have for the most part added special emphases. Especially poignant among them is the radical challenge of consistency in prophetic communal self-judgment as African American religious communities apply the moral imperative to define the universality of God's economy of salvation.

See also Africa; Slavery and the Bible.

VINCENT L. WIMBUSH

Afterlife and Immortality. *This entry consists of two articles on views of life after death within the historical communities of Ancient Israel and Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity. For related discussion, see* Death; Israel, Religion of.

Ancient Israel

Israelite views of the afterlife underwent substantial changes during the first millennium BCE, as concepts popular during the preexilic period eventually came to be rejected by the religious leadership of the exilic and postexilic communities, and new theological stances replaced them. Because many elements of preexilic beliefs and practices concerning the dead were eventually repudiated, the Hebrew Bible hardly discusses preexilic concepts at all; only scant and disconnected references to afterlife and the condition of the dead appear in the texts. A few passages from late-eighth through sixth-century sources are illuminating, however, because they attack various aspects of the popular notions about the dead during that period. With these data, a general though sketchy picture of Israelite views can be proposed.

Like all cultures in the ancient Near East, the Israelites believed that persons continued to exist after *death. It was thought that following death, one's spirit went down to a land below the earth, most often called Sheol, but sometimes merely "Earth," or "the Pit" (*see* Hell). In the preexilic period, there was no notion of a judgment of the dead based on their actions during life, nor is there any evidence for a belief that the righteous dead go to live in God's presence. The two persons in the Hebrew Bible who are taken to heaven to live with God, Enoch (Gen. 5.24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2.11), do not die. All who die, righteous or wicked, go to Sheol (*see* Gen. 42:38; Num. 16.30-33).

The exact relationship between the body of a dead person and the spirit that lived on in Sheol is unclear, since the Bible does not discuss this issue. Many scholars assume that the Israelites did not fully distinguish between the body and the spirit, and thus believed that the deceased continued to have many of the same basic needs they had when they were alive, especially for food and drink. Unless these needs were met, the dead would find existence in Sheol to be unending misery. Such a close connection between feeding the dead through funerary offerings and their happiness in the afterlife is well attested in Mesopotamia and Egypt. It is as-