

Min. Kenyatta R. Gilbert

People' Community Baptist Church

Tuesday Bible Study

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### **SESSION 3 – THE SCRIPTURE: Is the Bible a White Man’s document?**

Africans in the Americas were offered a form of Christianity during American slavery that did not comport with Holy Scriptures or their own indigenous traditions and religious sensibilities. Its primary intent was to erect a racial caste system to maintain the status quo and to foreclose any ideas about freedom (Barbara Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: The Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, 93). As Africans became literate and developed astuteness as interpreters of the Bible for themselves, they found that stories of the Hebrew Bible related to their own African cultural history in Africa. Of foremost importance, the New Testament proclaimed liberation for the captives and new life in Jesus Christ (Luke 4:16-21).

One of the most damaging misconceptions of the Bible is that it sanctions a curse on African people. “Ancient authors of biblical texts did not have a color consciousness (awareness of certain physiological differences) (Cain Hope Felder, *Race, Racism, and the Biblical Narratives*, 1-2). Yet, to justify oppression of African people, it has been taught for centuries by white western churches that Noah’s son Ham was cursed with black pigmentation of his skin due to laughing (mocking) his inebriated father, Noah. No such account exists in the Bible.

Ham’s son Canaan was the recipient of Noah’s curse in Genesis 9: 18-29. However, biblical criticism complicates a hard and fast interpretation of events surrounding this account. Ham is consistently referred to as Noah’s middle son, but Noah’s youngest son is the identified recipient. According to Old Testament scholar, Gene Rice, Genesis is not a book in the modern sense, but an editorial synthesis of different traditions of Noah’s family. Rice claims that there are two traditions. ( See Gene Rice’s *The Alleged Curse of Ham -GNB,144-147* ).

**Goal of Genesis account:** to establish that the “three of Noah’s sons,” Shem (Israelites), Ham (Canaanites), Japheth (Philistines), were the forebears of all people of the biblical world. All of whom were blessed (Genesis 9:1). Besides this, one has to be careful to not construe the sons of Noah as representing three different racial designations. The intent of the “Curse of Canaan” narrative is to provide theological justification for Israel’s Promised Land take over (Cain Hope Felder, *The Presence of Blacks in Biblical Antiquity - GNB, 124*).

***If there's no biblical basis for the curse doctrine, then how did it originate?*** It was not until the Middle Ages that Jewish, Christian, and Muslim authorities alike began generally to identify Ham as the one cursed. Martin Luther and John Calvin also name Ham as cursed, as well as Canaan. This focus popularized the notion that Ham was cursed and made it possible for racists to seize upon this passage and use it to justify oppression of African people (Rice, 153). As a point of fact:

The Bible emerges out of the ancient world that knew nothing of racial types like Caucasoids, Mongoloids, or Africaoids. These arbitrary and pseudo-scientific categories. . . constitute little more than fraudulent mythologies created to further the social construct of racism and the dubious notion of Aryan supremacy and so-called Africaoid inferiority” (Felder, 124).

**Key Claim:** “The theological heartbeat of the Bible is that we are all sons and daughters of God, that we are all related to one another as members of a family, that each one of us, whatever our race, ethnicity, and nationality, is special and precious to God, and that we were created for companionship with God.” (Rice, *GNB*, 139)

***Black Presence in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament:***

1. The term **Africa** is not found in the Bible. It was so named by the Romans. Thus, it is important to become familiar with biblical names of persons inhabiting areas of continental Africa.

**Nimrod, son of Cush** - “the world’s first great conqueror.” Nimrod is also credited with founding and ruling the principal cities of Mesopotamia (Gen. 10:8-12).

**Hagar, the Egyptian maid of Sarah** - (Gen. 16; 21:8-21). Plausibly, if Abraham had had his way, Hagar would have become foremother of the covenant people (Gen. 17:18).

**Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera** - priest of On, wife of Joseph and mother of Ephraim and Manasseh (Gen. 41:45), whom Jacob claimed and adopted (Gen. 48:38).

**Zipporah** - (Num. 12:1) Moses’ Cushite wife of the Kenite clan of Midianites (Exod. 2:21-23). Jethro, Zipporah’s father, was an African if Moses’ wife was Cushite. He was also a Midianite priest.

**The “large number of people” or “mixed multitude”** -- accompanied the Israelites when they left Egypt; undoubtedly include Afro-Asiatic people. (Ex. 12:38)

**Solomon’s Egyptian wife** - princess; Solomon sealed an alliance with Egypt (1 Kings 3:1; 11:1).

**The Queen of Sheba** - she ruled a kingdom that included territories in Arabia and Africa. Was accorded head of state status when she visited Solomon (1 Kings 10:1-13).

**Cush, a Benjamite** (heading to Psalm 7). The Talmud (rabbinic materials discussing meaning of Torah) identifies him as Saul.

**Zephaniah** - prophet who descended from King Hezekiah through Amariah, Gedaliah, and Cushi (his father). He was active in the 7th century and helped spark a religious revival in Judah.

### ***Black Presence in the New Testament:***

Just as the Romans and Greeks are notably represented in the NT, Africans, and persons of African descent, are fully represented. The celebrated passage in Psalm 68:31:

*Ambassadors will come from Egypt; the Ethiopians will raise their hands in prayer to God.*

African presence is not limited to the Old Testament. Felder explains:

many Jews of the first century lived in regions where Africans intermingled freely with other racial and ethnic types. We too easily forget today that miscegenation or interracial marriage was an explicit part of Alexander the Great's policy; he wanted all subjects to have Greek blood flowing through their veins" (Felder 131)!

### **Flight into Egypt**

In Matthew 2:13-18, this quotation from Hosea 11:1 is found, which reads:

*When Israel was a child, I loved him and called him out of Egypt as my son.*

The flight passage describes the way in which Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt to hide Jesus, whom King Herod feared would displace him. If the Holy Family looked like typical Europeans as depicted in nativity sets and pictured images, it's hard to imagine them "hiding" in Africa. Egypt has been and remains in Africa. In spite of Hellenistic influences beginning in 300 BC, people indigenous to Egypt were not European. But somehow in recent centuries Egyptians have been racially classified as "caucasians" (Felder, 131).

"For thousands of years, Africans have migrated out of biblical Ethiopia and Egypt and have passed through Palestine enroute to the Fertile Crescent or Mesopotamia. Thus the term **Afro-Asiatic** emerged as a fitting description of persons from Abraham to Jesus and his disciples" (Felder, 133).

"By modern standards of ethnicity, first-century Jews could be considered Afro-Asiatics (persons of color). . . and would certainly not Europeans" (Felder, 133). This point is

stressed because it is largely assumed that most people in the ancient world were all Europeans (Felder, 133).

The conceptualization of the world by early Christian authors of the New Testament times sparsely mentions sub-Saharan Africa and did not include the Americas or the Far East. For them, they saw Spain as the “limits of the West”; that is, the outer reaches of the Roman Empire. One has to factor in the Roman sociopolitical realities as well as language and culture of Hellenism (i.e., the influence of Greek culture).

Formal split of West and East occurred in 1054 A.D. Dispute over the authority of the Pope.

**Western Church or the West**– stems from Rome and connects to Protestant Reformation

**Eastern Church** – refers to Greek Christian orthodox churches - Syria, Russia, etc.

**Ethiopian Orthodox or Coptic** – pre-colonial Christian church which traces heritage from Philip the Evangelist (Acts 8:26 – 38).

Just as the Israelites attached sacred signature status to Jerusalem, the holy city of God, New Testament authors similarly accorded Rome, the capital city of the Gentile world, high status. (Felder, *Race, Racism, and the Biblical Narratives*, 34-35).

### **Acts of the Apostles - Luke**

Because the gospel writers worked within the Roman system, darker races outside the Roman Empire are marginalized by these early authors. **Simon of Cyrene** carries the cross for Jesus and the **Ethiopian eunuch** (Acts 8:26-40) becomes a disciple. These become rare and marginalized portraits in the Gospels. Quite possibly, though, a Nubian was the first Gentile convert to Christianity. The Ethiopian says, “See, here is some water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” In some ancient manuscripts, a variant reading follows this, which reads: “And Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may [be baptized].’ And the [Ethiopian] replied, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God” (Felder, 37-38). (Irenaeus cites the text as if the variant reading is part of the text.) Luke presents as a leader in the church at Antioch in Acts 13:1 one “Simeon who is called the black (Niger)” (Felder, 39).

**Process of secularization** - one takes into account the Roman-centered world’s sociopolitical realities and assumptions that influenced the theological frameworks of Luke. Luke 4 is a window into the gospel writer’s *universalizing vision*.

**Results according to Felder:** 1.) De-Africanization of the entire NT. 2.) NT scholarship limits itself to focusing on the Greco-Roman world. 3.) Modern readers of the Bible take it for granted that maps of the NT lands appropriately eliminate the continent of Africa. 4.) Even the modern creation of the Middle East can easily be

understood as an extension of the West to the disregard of Africa. Fraudulent historiography (map making) undergirds interpretive assumptions of Eurocentric Bible scholars 5.) Eurocentric translators and interpreters of the NT have tended to allow secularization to govern exegesis (interpreting what the text says) and hermeneutics (interpretation theory of textual meaning). Germans and French are leading proponents of such theological methods.

Systematic theories of race gain strength in constructed biblical interpretation. A point of fact: the biblical world predated any systematic notion of races and theories of racism (Felder, 43).

### **Resources for further reflection**

*Good News Bible: The African American Jubilee Edition* (TEV) \$30  
Essays in *GNB*: Cain H. Felder, “The Presence of Blacks in Biblical Antiquity” (Ch.6) and Gene Rice, “The Alleged Curse of Ham” (Ch.7)

Cain Hope Felder. *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family* (Maryknoll: New York, 1995). \$20

Cain Hope Felder. *Race, Racism, and the Biblical Narratives* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2002). \$10

*True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, Brian K. Blount, General Editor (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007). \$25

Barbara Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: The Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017).