

The Theological Significance of Africa and Africans in the Bible¹

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ABSTRACT

The essay discusses the potential of the theological significance of the so-called “African presence” in the Bible, that is, biblical texts referring to entities that today would be labelled “African,” in particular, references to Egypt and Cush. The focus, therefore, is on the encounter between these texts and the socio-religious experiences and concerns of contemporary African biblical studies. The essay concludes that the presence of “Africa and Africans” has the potential of balancing the universalistic trajectory of the Bible. Without a concrete example such as “Africa,” universalism would be empty rhetoric and without a universalistic frame of interpretation, the “African presence” would face the danger of simply repeating—although this time from an Afrocentric perspective—the ethnocentric fallacy we have seen so much of by Eurocentricists in the past.

Keywords: Africa, Bible, Cush, Egypt, Ethiopia, hermeneutics, interpretation, theology

A INTRODUCTION

The title of this essay presupposes two interpretive claims—first, that there is some presence of “Africa and Africans” in the Bible and second, that this presence has “theological significance.” Let me, as an entry point to answering these questions, illustrate but also problematise the two claims by reflecting a little on the interpretation of one particular text in the Old Testament, Amos 9:7, which includes a famous comparison of the chosen people of Israel and a people located on the African continent namely the Cushites.²

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¹ The following reflections are dedicated to Professor Gerrie Snyman, a great scholar and a good friend, with whom I continue to learn about identity formation and identity challenges in relation to reading Hebrew Bible/Old Testament texts.

² For further discussion, see Knut Holter, “Being Like the Cushites: Some Western and African Interpretations of Amos 9:7,” in *New Perspectives on Old Testament Prophecy and History: Essays in Honour of Hans M. Barstad* (ed. Rannfrid I. Thelle, Terje Stordalen, and Mervyn E.J. Richardson; Leiden: Brill, 2015), 306–318.

Are you not like the children of the Cushites to me,
O children of Israel? says Yahweh.
Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt,
and the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Arameans from Kir?

First, when approaching this text, the question of the supposed presence of Africa and Africans in the Bible soon encounters some chronological problems. Admittedly, more or less, all academic studies of this text agree that its use of the term "Cushites" refers to an ethnic and/or political entity which is known from various ancient Near Eastern sources and whose heartland was located south of Egypt along the Nile. In other words, it is relatively certain that the text refers to an entity that historically was linked to the northeastern corner of the African continent. However, it should be acknowledged that the existence of a link between the Cushites here in Amos 9:7 and the geographical space we know today as the African continent does not necessarily make these Cushites an "African" people. The idea of "Africa" as a unified entity is of a much later date than the Amos text, presupposing cartographic and political/ideological concepts that were unknown not only to the first readers of Amos but to many generations of readers of biblical literature.

In other words, when we talk about "African" presence in the Bible, proceeding from its references to "Cushites" or other ethnic and/or political entities located on what we know today as the African continent, we should acknowledge that we are introducing a technical—and cartographic and political/ideological—term that is younger than the textual phenomena it is used to describe. Nevertheless, in the history of biblical interpretation, the term "Africa"—and its close relatives (in this historical literature) "Blacks," "Negroes," etc.—have indeed been used and, as such, they have their own interpretive history, often with quite negative associations of slavery and contempt. This problematic part of the use of the term(s) should not prevent us from seeing the concerns of contemporary African biblical scholars when they argue that biblical texts referring to such political and/or ethnic groups located on today's African continent should be identified as "African." What it should do, though, is to make us aware of some of the hermeneutical challenges that are created by such identification of "Africa" in the Bible.

Second, a glimpse into the history of the interpretation of Amos 9:7 shows that the question of the supposedly theological significance of its reference to "Africans" has been approached quite differently. Two illustrative cases may serve to demonstrate this point. The first case is Carl Friedrich Keil's mid-nineteenth century commentary on Amos, which argues that the comparison of Israel to the Cushites in 9:7 is theologically significant in that it tears apart Israel's "carnal security" on being a chosen people of God. Keil takes for granted that the comparison with the Cushites has an utterly negative function and he argues that "the blackness of their skin" was regarded, presumably by the ancient

Israelites, "as a symbol of spiritual blackness."³ Keil's interpretation is important due to the extraordinary influence of the commentary series to which it belongs. In the mid-nineteenth century, tension between historical-critical and more dogmatically oriented Old Testament interpretation, Keil and Delitzsch's commentary series on the Old Testament was seen as a moderate conservative yet a historically reliable series. Actually, the series still has a broad readership, as it is constantly being reprinted (last reprint: 2013) and made accessible in current Bible programs (such as Logos) and on the Internet.⁴ Nevertheless, what Keil does in his interpretation of Amos 9:7 is quite far from offering a historically reliable analysis. Rather, he turns out to identify the Cushites of the ancient Amos text with the kind of Africa and Africans he and his readers would know from their contemporary—that is mid-nineteenth century German or British and North American—interpretive traditions and contexts. Keil draws a line between the stereotypical concepts of Africa and Africans of his time and the supposed Africans of the text and this unconscious contextuality allows him to take for granted that the blackness of the skin of the Cushites serves as a symbol of their spiritual blackness.⁵

The other illustrative case is David Tuesday Adamo's late twentieth-century interpretation of Amos 9:7. Adamo, a Nigerian Old Testament scholar, rejects the negative interpretation of Keil and the relatively unanimous Western interpretive tradition. Instead, he focuses on the universalistic potential of the text:

The same God who guided Israel from Egypt also put the Africans where they were . . . God's special relationship is bounded by justice and righteousness. He is, therefore, not exclusively bound to one nation, but master of all and has a special relationship with all. . . . The comparison demonstrates that Israel is as precious as Africans before Yahweh.⁶

Adamo represents the first generation of African biblical scholars that rejects the negative interpretive tradition of the colonial time but, with a proud sense of being African, searches for constructive potentials of the African presence in the Bible. Adamo often mentions a reviewer for an academic journal

³ Carl F. Keil, *Biblischer Kommentar über die zwölf kleinen Propheten* (Leipzig: Dörffling & Franke, 1866), 232.

⁴ Cf. <https://www.studydrive.net/commentaries/eng/kdo.html>.

⁵ Knut Holter, "Relocating Keil & Delitzsch: Reading a Mid-19th Century Biblical Commentary from Germany with Early 21st Century Theology Students from Tanzania and Norway," in *Transkulturelle Begegnungen und interreligiöser Dialog* (ed. Uta André, Ruomin Liu, and Sönke Lorberg-Fehring; Hamburg: Missionshilfe Verlag, 2017), 279–288.

⁶ David T. Adamo, *Africa and the Africans in the Old Testament* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1998), 100. See also David T. Adamo, "Amos 9:7-8 in an African Perspective," *Orita* 24 (1992):76–84.

who advised the editor to reject one of Adamo's articles, accusing him of trying to "smuggle Africa into the Bible." However, there is no need to smuggle Africa into the Bible, Adamo argues, as Africa is indeed present in the Old and New Testament.⁷ What Adamo does in relation to Amos 9:7 is then to turn the traditional understanding of the relationship between the Cushites and the Israelites upside down. Whereas Keil and many with him used to see the comparison of the two as a word of judgment, Adamo sees it as a word of salvation. The theological significance of the text is not that of the Israelites being pushed down to the level of the Africans, it is rather that of the Israelites being lifted up to the level of the Africans.

Thus, we have seen that Amos 9:7, which is a text that in a sense can be said to express an African presence in the Bible, is read very differently by a mid-nineteenth century German scholar on the one hand (reading a spiritual blackness of Africans into the text) from a late-twentieth-century Nigerian scholar on the other (reading a proud sense of Africanness into the text). This preliminary observation should suffice for now to demonstrate that the requested theological significance of Africa and Africans in the Bible is not limited to biblical texts alone. It is also related to the interaction between the texts and the socio-religious experiences and concerns of their interpreters. Assuming that we actually do have a text or, rather, that we have some sets of texts that presumably feature the presence of Africa and Africans in the Bible, the question, therefore, is how does the encounter between such texts and the socio-religious experiences and concerns of the interpreters of these texts make room for a contemporary theological significance of the presence of Africa and Africans in the Bible? Let us approach this question in two steps—first, a reflection on the texts, focusing on which texts and why and second, a discussion of the theological significance of these texts, focusing on the interaction between the selected texts and the contemporary interpretive context.

B BIBLICAL TEXTS

Let us now proceed with a brief presentation of texts that are supposed to express the presence of Africa and Africans in the Bible.⁸ Such a presentation, however, is deemed controversial. On the one hand, there are those interpreters who in practice ignore any claim of African presence in the Bible. The perspective of a contextually concerned interpretation, being interested in the biblical understanding of such a "recent" concept as "Africa," is totally outside the interpretive horizon here. Much traditional Western scholarship belongs here not because the scholars are consciously negative to "Africa and Africans" but because they are simply not used to thinking in such contextually concerned

⁷ Adamo, *Africa and the Africans in the Old Testament*; cf. David T. Adamo, *Africa and Africans in the New Testament* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2006).

⁸ Knut Holter, *Contextualised Old Testament Scholarship in Africa* (Nairobi: Acton, 2008), 53–82.

categories. On the other hand, there are those interpreters who do not see the point of singling out particular “African” texts, as the whole Bible is a book about Africa and Africans. Influenced by various radical Afrocentric claims, they argue that more or less all those people—from Jerusalem to Athens and beyond—who laid the foundation of Western civilisation were in fact blacks of African origin.⁹ Hence, looking for “Africa and Africans” in the Bible is like looking for trees in the forest—the forest is nothing but trees.¹⁰

In between these two extremes, however, many biblical interpreters—Africans and non-Africans—try to combine a contextually concerned interpretation of the Bible in relation to Africa and a critical approach to rather dogmatic claims about a supposed African or black origin of Western civilisation. It is a question of definitions, we argue—a question of defining certain identifiers that for some reasons can be said to express “Africanness.” Historically speaking, two sets of such identifiers have been used to define the presence of Africa and Africans in the Bible. One focuses on texts and motifs that explicitly refer to geographical, cultural or ethnic entities that are located (or can be traced) to what we know today as the African continent; the main cases here are texts and motifs related to Egypt and Cush/Ethiopia. The other focuses on texts and motifs that *per se* have nothing to do today’s African continent but that have been associated with Africa and Africans in the history of biblical interpretation; the main cases here are texts and motifs related to slavery and colonialism.

Let us take a closer look at these two sets of identifiers and then start with the second set, the one in which certain biblical texts and motifs have been associated with Africa and Africans in the history of biblical interpretation. One example is the use of the Bible to justify the slave trade from West Africa. A key text here was Gen 9:20-27, which presents the so-called Hamitic curse. In spite of the obvious exegetical fact that it is Ham’s non-“African” son Canaan—and not his “African” sons (cf. Gen 10:6) Mitzrayim (father of the Egyptians), Cush (father of the Cushites) and Phut (father of the Libyans)—who is cursed to be “the slave of Japheth,” this text has played an extraordinarily important role in the Western justification of keeping Africans as slaves.¹¹

⁹ Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (London: Free Association Books, 1987); Wim van Binsbergen, ed., *Black Athena Comes of Age: Towards a Constructive Re-Assessment* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2011).

¹⁰ Walter A. McCray, *The Black Presence in the Bible: Discovering the BLACK and African Identity of Biblical Persons and Nations* (Chicago: Black Light Fellowship, 1990); Walter A. McCray, *The Black Presence in the Bible and the Table of Nations, Genesis 10:1-32* (Chicago: Black Light Fellowship, 1990).

¹¹ Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah’s Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (Religion in America; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Another example is the use of the Bible to justify the Western colonisation of Africa. It could be the justification of political colonisation of Africa such as when the Boers of Southern Africa interpreted their Great Trek from the Cape into the interior from the 1820s on in the light of the Book of Joshua and its narrative about how the Israelites conquered Canaan and drove away the Canaanites.¹² It could be also the justification of cultural colonisation of Africa such as when European adventurers and colonialists from the 1870s rejected the possibility that the "newly discovered" ruins of Great Zimbabwe could be built by Africans who, it was argued, were not capable of such sophisticated architecture. Rather, the colonialists interpreted the artefacts as the remains of a colonial enterprise of the past—that of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.¹³

One characteristic of these identifiers is that their concepts of Africa are generally negative—a provider of slaves and a continent in need of external colonisers. Another is that they reflect a time that is past. Both characteristics indicate that this set of identifiers does not deserve much attention in a context as ours, which searches for the contemporary theological significance of Africa and Africans in the Bible. Nevertheless, the influence of these interpretive traditions can still be observed, negatively, as reactions to African biblical interpretation and, as such, they deserve to be mentioned.

Far more important, though, when one is looking for the contemporary, theological significance of Africa and Africans in the Bible, is the first set of identifiers, focusing on texts and motifs that explicitly refer to geographical, cultural or ethnic entities that are located or can be traced to what we know as the African continent today. The main references here are to the two "nations" or ethnic and/or cultural entities neighbouring each other along the Nile, namely Egypt and Cush/Ethiopia. There are others as well, which will be mentioned below, but the references to Egypt and Cush/Ethiopia are the far most important, both numerically and in the history of biblical interpretation. Both Egypt and Cush/Ethiopia are well-attested in ancient Near Eastern and other classical sources. When it comes to the Bible, however, there are some major differences between the two, both at the textual level and in their respective histories of interpretation. The biblical references to Egypt are many, more than seven hundred, but traditionally these references have not played any specific role in Africa outside the Coptic—that is "Egyptian"—Orthodox tradition. The biblical references to Cush/Ethiopia, on the other hand, are considerably lower, less than sixty in total, but these references have received much attention in various parts of the continent and far outside the traditional attention given to them in the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition.

¹² Michael Prior, *The Bible and Colonialism: A Moral Critique* (The Biblical Seminar 48; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

¹³ Knut Holter, "Interpreting Solomon in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa," *Old Testament Essays* 19 (2006):851–862.

First, we consider the texts that refer to Egypt.¹⁴ In the Old Testament, there is a double portrayal of Egypt. On the one hand, Israel remembers that she experienced oppression in Egypt (which she calls, for example, a "land of slavery" in Exod 13:3 and an "iron-smelting furnace" in Deut 4:20). On the other hand, she also remembers having found asylum there in crises of famine and political trouble (Egypt is for example likened to "the Garden of the Lord" in Gen 13:10 and its "pots of meat" are remembered in Exod 16:2). Numerically speaking, the negative associations are in the majority, but the positive associations should still not be neglected. Turning to the New Testament, references to Egypt are found, for example, in the texts about Pentecost (Acts 2:10). Nonetheless, the most important reference to Egypt is the narrative about baby Jesus finding refuge in Egypt (Matt 2:13–23), a text that echoes a key motif in the Old Testament of Egypt as a refuge for Israelites fleeing political or economic oppression.

Second, the texts that refer to Cush/Ethiopia are also noteworthy.¹⁵ Cush, referred to as Ethiopia in the Septuagint and New Testament, has a much more diverse history. The Old Testament portrayal of Cush can be summarised from a fourfold perspective.¹⁶ Geographically, Cush is thought of as being far away. It is the huge land south of Egypt (Ezek 29:10), representing the very south in the Old Testament map of the world (Zeph 2:4–15.12), even being the border of the mighty Persian Empire, which stretched from India to Cush (Esth 1:1). Anthropologically, Cush is connected with black and tall peoples and a proverb asks rhetorically, "Can the Cushite change his skin or the leopard its spots?" (Jer 13:23). Politically, Cush is known for its military abilities, as it was said to be of assistance to Judah (2 Kgs 19; 2 Sam 18:21–32). Economically, Cush is associated with wealth; the merchandise of Cush is well known (Dan 11:43). Turning to the New Testament, the main text is the one about the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–40). However, the reference to the Old Testament narrative about King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (1 Kgs 10)—in the New Testament referred to as the Queen of the South (Matt 12:42; Luke 11:31)—should be mentioned, although the identification of the queen as an Ethiopian belongs to post-biblical tradition.

Third and lastly, the Bible also refers to other geographical entities than Egypt and Cush/Ethiopia. In the Old Testament, this third group includes references to geographical entities such as Put (that is, Libya or Somalia in Gen

¹⁴ Knut Holter, "Africa in the Old Testament," in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends* (ed. Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 569–581.

¹⁵ Holter, "Africa in the Old Testament."

¹⁶ Knut Holter, "Should Old Testament 'Cush' Be Rendered 'Africa'?" *The Bible Translator* 48 (1997):331–336.

10:6; Jer 46:9), Lubim (that is Libya in 2 Chr 12:3; Nah 3:9) and Pathros (that is upper Egypt in Gen 10:4, Jer 44:15). In the New Testament, we encounter Simon of Cyrene (in present-day Libya), carrying Jesus' cross (Matt 27:32, Mark 15:21, Luke 23:26) as well as other references to people from North Africa (cf. Acts 2:5-13; 2:37-41; 6:9; 11:20; 13:1; Rom 16:13).

In sum, a number of biblical texts refer to geographical, cultural or ethnic entities that are located or can be traced to what we call the African continent today. The question then is what theological significance do these texts have?

C THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The term "theology" refers to a constructive enterprise. "Doing theology," as we often say, is more than simply listing some more or less relevant texts from the Bible. Rather, doing theology is to construct a unified understanding of a topic, allowing, in our case, biblical texts and contemporary interpretive contexts to interact and mutually challenge each other.

The two entities that are to interact and mutually challenge each other in this case deserve a couple of comments. First, the biblical texts have to be delimited. They are supposed to express the presence of Africa and Africans in the Bible and the discussion in the previous section should have demonstrated some of the challenges of finding texts that express such a presence. I find the most relevant definition in the present search for contemporary, theological significance to be the one that focuses on texts and motifs that explicitly refer to geographical, cultural or ethnic entities that are located or can be traced to what we know today as the African continent, with Egypt and Cush/Ethiopia as the main cases. Nevertheless, the other definition also including texts and motifs that *per se* have nothing to do with what we know as the African continent today must receive some attention; not because I in any way agree with the way it has been used to humiliate Africa and Africans but due to its dominating history of interpretation.

Second, the interpretive context, too, needs to be delimited and I would like to point out two aspects that are crucial to the current search for the theological significance of Africa and Africans in the Bible. One is that it is not more than half a century or so since Africa went from a politically and culturally humiliating colonial situation to political and cultural independence. Half a century is enough to create an identity of pride in being African but it is hardly enough to change centuries of Western stereotypes about Africa and Africans. The other point is that Africa throughout the twentieth century has gone from being quite marginal as far as Christian presence is concerned to becoming a centre of gravity as far as Christianity is concerned. All statistics indicate that Africa south of the Sahara already is or at least soon will be *the* Christian continent. Internally, more than two-thirds of the population (of sub-Saharan Africa) are church members and the churches play significant roles on both local

and national levels. Externally, mainstream African churches already play key roles in global, denominational and ecumenical fora and African churches with Pentecostal or African Independent character are today heavily present all over Europe and the USA.

What then *is* the theological significance of the presence of Africa and Africans in the Bible? I will focus on two points and address them as two focal points in an ellipse, that is, two points that are distinct but still related to each other and to the same context.

The first focal point of the theological significance of the presence of Africa and Africans in the Bible is that Africa and Africans are actually there in the Bible and play positive and constructive roles. This may sound like a very meagre result after the discussion above but it is not. Taking into consideration the long history of the interaction between Western and African experiences and concerns in relation to the Bible, no interpretation should be taken for granted, not even the question of the presence of Africa and Africans in the Bible. I therefore agree with all those African readers of the Bible who at first are surprised but then are convinced and claim that we are there! There is indeed a presence of Africa and Africans in the Bible, and this presence has had and still has diverse consequences.

The presence of Africa and Africans—represented by Egypt and Cush/Ethiopia—in the Bible has been acknowledged for centuries by the Orthodox churches in Egypt and Ethiopia. As far as the biblical references to Egypt are concerned, they have played and continue to play a key role in Coptic Church life and identity. On the one hand, typically “negative” texts about Egypt, for example, those expressing judgment over pharaonic religion and politics, tend to be used in relation to the oppression the Copts have experienced as a religious minority in Egypt. On the other hand, typically “positive” texts about Egypt, for example, those portraying Egypt as a place of political refuge and the Egyptians as a people of God, tend to be used to express the Coptic self-understanding. The most important example is the New Testament narrative about the Holy Family finding refuge in Egypt (Matt 2:13–23), a narrative enabling the Orthodox tradition to develop a broad theological and liturgical focus on the presence of the Saviour in their land. Other key texts support this such as Isaiah’s reference to an altar to the Lord “in the heart of Egypt” (Isa 19:19). This text is seen as a prophecy about the role of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the land of Egypt, an interpretation that is substantiated by the prophetic blessing a few verses later—“Blessed be Egypt, my people”—which is a very frequently quoted biblical text.

Likewise, the biblical references to Cush/Ethiopia have played a key role in the life and identity of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The rendering of the Hebrew term “Cush” as “Ethiopia”—and then understood in a narrow sense—is crucial here and alternative renderings such as “Sudan” have not been

welcome.¹⁷ Overall, the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition demonstrates a particular closeness to Old Testament texts and traditions, for example, with regard to church architecture, liturgy and dietary prescriptions and regulations of ritual cleanness.¹⁸ The underlying rationale for the closeness to the Old Testament is found in the national legend *Kebrā Nagast* ("Glory of the Kings"), which links the establishing of the Ethiopian nation to the Old Testament narrative about King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. In this context, the Cush/Ethiopia texts fit hand in glove and texts expressing faith and conversion—not least Psalm 68:32—have been emphasised traditionally.

There are obviously many parallels between how the Egypt texts are used in Egypt and the Cush/Ethiopia texts are used in Ethiopia. Both express a kind of contextualisation of the Bible. The usages differ, though, from other examples of biblical contextualisation in that these two particular interpretive communities, with some justification, can claim to be present in the texts themselves. This enables them to use, although selectively, the texts in very intimate ways. The Coptic priest can say to his congregation that Jesus has been here—that is *here*—before and he is here today!, while the Ethiopian priest can say that God, as in Old Testament times, wants you—that is, you as an *Ethiopian*—to turn to him, now! However, this presence in the texts also raises some hermeneutical problems. The Coptic tradition faces the challenge that many of the texts about Egypt are negative. The adherents solve this hermeneutical problem by transferring the negative ones to the oppressing majority, whilst reading the "positive" ones in relation to their own church context. The Ethiopian tradition would in principle face the same challenge, though not as overwhelmingly as with the Egypt texts, as there are texts also about Cush/Ethiopia as enemies of Israel (for example, 2 Chr 14:9-15).

When it comes to the role of the Egypt and Cush/Ethiopia texts in other parts of Africa, the differences are more tangible. Apart from a few recent examples from scholarly circles,¹⁹ traditionally, the Egypt texts have not played any role outside Coptic or other Egyptian Christian contexts. Quite the contrary is the case of the Cush/Ethiopia texts, which have been used again and again in various parts of the continent. Two sets of cases should be mentioned here. The first is the so-called "Ethiopian" movements, that is, churches and Christian

¹⁷ Peter Unseth, "Hebrew *Kush*: Sudan, Ethiopia, or Where?" *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 18 (1999):143–159.

¹⁸ Edward Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

¹⁹ Tewoldemedhin Habtu, "The Images of Egypt in the Old Testament: Reflections on African Hermeneutics," in *Interpreting the Old Testament in Africa* (ed. Mary N. Getui et al.; Nairobi: Acton, 2001), 55–64; Ernest M. Ezeogu, "The African Origin of Jesus: An Afrocentric Reading of Matthew's Infancy Narrative (Matthew 1–2)," in *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Hermeneutics* (Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship 13; ed. Musa W. Dube et al.; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 259–282; Adamo, *Africa and Africans in the New Testament*.

groups emphasising an African or black presence in the Bible, mainly in opposition to European and white church hegemony. The movements are found both on the African continent itself (not least in South Africa) and in the African diaspora (North America and the Caribbean) and various forms have been developed (such as the Rastafarian branch), according to contextually based experiences. Nonetheless, they share a joint focus on "Ethiopia" and biblical texts on Cush/Ethiopia (like Ps 68:32) and they express a conviction that God has particular plans for Africa and Africans.²⁰ The second set of cases focusing on the Cush/Ethiopia texts outside Ethiopia is the interpretation of these texts in African theology and biblical studies. Key examples here are David Tuesday Adamo (Nigeria) and Philip Lokel (Uganda), who in their studies of the presence of Africa and Africans in the Bible, in particular, have pointed to the role of the Cush/Ethiopia texts, arguing that these texts demonstrate a particular focus on Africa and Africans in the Bible.²¹

The previous section mentioned a third group of biblical texts referring to "Africa and Africans" in addition to the references to Egypt and Cush/Ethiopia. Their number are few, however and traditionally they have not played any roles in the "Africa and Africans in the Bible" discourses. Recently, though, it has been pointed out that Africans were present at Pentecost (Acts 2:5–13, 2:37–41) and that Simon of Cyrene (in present-day Libya) was carrying Jesus' cross (Matt 27:32).

The history of the Bible in Africa is a multi-faceted narrative, stretching from the predominantly Christian North Africa in the first six centuries AD—fostering interpreters that continue to be reckoned as some of the most important in the history of biblical interpretation—and to present-day sub-Saharan Africa with its particular focus on relating the Bible to contemporary cultural and social challenges. Between the two, as a bridge (chronologically speaking, not genetically) are the Orthodox traditions in Egypt and Ethiopia, which have ensured the presence of the Bible in Africa throughout the centuries. As far as sub-Saharan Africa is concerned, the introduction of the Bible coincided in time with a Western expansion that was founded on colonisation and slave trade, as the Bible was used to legitimise various kinds of oppression in Africa.

²⁰ Bengt Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961); Martina Könighofer, *The New Ship of Zion: Dynamic Diaspora Dimensions of the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem* (Afrika und ihre Diaspora 7; Wien: Lit Verlag, 2008).

²¹ Adamo, *Africa and the Africans in the Old Testament*; Adamo, *Africa and Africans in the New Testament*; Philip Lokel, "Previously Unstoried Lives: The Case of Old Testament Cush and Its Relevance to Africa," in *Let My People Stay! Researching the Old Testament in Africa* (ed. Knut Holter; Nairobi: Acton, 2006), 177–189; Philip Lokel, "Moses and His Cushite Wife: Reading Numbers 12:1 with Undergraduate Students at Makerere University," in *Let My People Stay! Researching the Old Testament in Africa* (ed. Knut Holter; Nairobi: Acton, 2006), 191–201.

Eventually, however, Africa also experienced the Bible as a liberating tool. In our search for the theological significance of the presence of Africa and Africans in the Bible, this means that the material at hand (biblical texts and their interpretations) cannot escape the ambivalent experience Africa has had with the Bible. As a whole, though, the interpretive experiences of the presence of Africa and Africans in the Bible demonstrate that "Black people are not a modern-era addition to the story of salvation history. They were there from the beginning."²²

The second focal point of theological significance of the presence of Africa and Africans in the Bible is the interpretive function of this African presence in the Bible. It may of course be tempting to use the presence of Africa and Africans in the Bible to stress their particular importance at the cost of other nations referred to (or not referred to!) in the Bible. Actually, doing so is not only tempting, it is very understandable when we take into account the humiliation Africa and Africans have experienced over the centuries from Western interpreters of the Bible. Nevertheless, a better interpretation than stressing a supposedly particular importance of Africa and Africans in the Bible is to take these references as exemplifications of the universalistic line of thought that goes through the entire Bible. The opening chapters of the Bible (Gen 1-11, the Primeval narratives) are often taken as providing an interpretive framework for the following pages and books. In these chapters, Cush occurs three times—first, in Gen 2:13 where it describes the land through which one of the Paradise rivers is running, then twice in Gen 10:6-7, where it refers to one of the sons of Ham. In both cases, the rhetorical role of the reference to Cush is that of exemplifying an overall universalism. In Gen 2:10-14, the four Paradise rivers outline a global geography, connecting the Garden of Eden to the known world and it is hardly accurate to see the point of the text as that of locating the Garden of Eden geographically in Africa.²³ Likewise, the rhetorical role of Cush in Gen 10 is to be one in a long line of nations, again as an expression of universalism, as all these nations go back to Noah's three sons (Gen 10:32). In other words, the picture that is drawn of Cush in the initial frame chapters of the Bible is that of exemplifying the universalism of the book.

Perhaps the best illustration of this universalism and the role of Cush in it can be found in Amos 9:7, the text that was discussed at the beginning of this essay. Looking back at the text, we notice that verse 7a offers a peculiar comparison between Israel and Cush. The interpretive history of this verse and other biblical texts where the reference to Cushites occurs demonstrate beyond doubt that Western interpreters have very often read typically Western prejudices against Africa and Africans into the text, taking for granted that the comparison

²² Daniel J. Hays, "The Cushites: A Black Nation in the Bible," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (1996):396-409 (409).

²³ David T. Adamo, "Ancient Africa and Genesis 2:10-14," *The Journal of Religious Thought* 49 (1992):33-43.

of Israel with Cush should be interpreted as judgment. Nevertheless, the comparison between Israel and Cush in verse 7a should not be read independently of the parallel comparison between Israel, Arameans and Philistines in verse 7b (cf. Holter 2000).²⁴ From a structural perspective, the two half verses are characterised by some explicit comparative markers: verse 7a: "sons of Israel" || "sons of Cush"; verse 7b: "Israel from Egypt" || "Philistines from Caphtor" || "Arameans from Kir." From an exegetical perspective, therefore, two things are clear. First, the two half verses belong together; each with a set of structural comparisons and in both cases a comparison between Israel and another nation. Second, as the comparison in verse 7b has an obvious positive function (Israel's exodus from Egypt is doubtless a positive reference, here paralleled with the "exoduses" of two other nations), it is reasonable to conclude that also the comparison between Israel and Cush in verse 7a has a similar positive function. However, the focus on the Cushites in verse 7a should not be read independently of the similar focus on the Philistines and Arameans in verse 7b.

The theological conclusion we can draw from this is, as Adamo has argued, that the God who brought Israel up from Egypt also put the Africans where they are. As Adamo has aptly shown, "God's special relationship is bounded by justice and righteousness. He is, therefore, not exclusively bound to one nation, but master of all and has a special relationship with all."²⁵

D CONCLUSION

The Old Testament permits the African Cushites to demonstrate that the God of Israel is the God of all people. This is followed up in the New Testament, which presents an African, the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26-40), as the first non-Israelite to be baptised into the church.

What then is the theological significance of Africa and Africans in the Bible? The two focal points of the ellipse balance each other. Without a concrete example such as Africa, universalism would be empty rhetoric. Conversely, without a universalistic frame of interpretation, the African presence would face the danger of simply repeating—although this time from an Afrocentric perspective—the ethnocentric fallacy by Eurocentrists that we have seen so much of in the past.

²⁴ Knut Holter, "Is Israel More Worth to God than Cush? An Interpretation of Amos 9:7," in *Yahweh in Africa: Essays on Africa and the Old Testament* (ed. Knut Holter; New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 115–125.

²⁵ Adamo, *Africa and Africans in the Old Testament*, 100.

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