

THE CURSE OF HAM

RACE AND SLAVERY IN EARLY
JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY,
AND ISLAM

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INTRODUCTION

Blackness and Slavery

The sons of Noah who went forth from the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Ham was the father of Canaan. These three were the sons of Noah; and from these the whole earth was peopled. Noah was the first tiller of the soil. He planted a vineyard; and he drank of the wine, and became drunk, and lay uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it upon both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness. When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, he said, "Cursed be Canaan; a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers."

(Gen 9:18–25, RSV)

THIS BIBLICAL STORY has been the single greatest justification for Black slavery for more than a thousand years. It is a strange justification indeed, for there is no reference in it to Blacks at all. And yet just about everyone, especially in the antebellum American South, understood that in this story God meant to curse black Africans with eternal slavery, the so-called Curse of Ham. As one proslavery author wrote in 1838, "The blacks were originally designed to vassalage by the Patriarch Noah."¹

This book attempts to explain how and why this strange interpretation of the biblical text took hold. It does so by looking at the larger picture, that is, by uncovering just how Blacks were perceived by those people for whom the Bible was a central text. What did the early Jews, Christians, and Muslims see when they looked at the black African? Clearly, the biblical interpretation is forced. How, then, did the biblical authors view Blacks and what were the postbiblical forces that wrung such a view from the Bible?

This is a book about the ancient link between black skin color and slav-

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ery. It is, thus, a study of perceptions, symbolic associations, and historical ramifications. It explores how dark-skinned people were perceived in antiquity, how negative associations attached to the color black were played out on the stage of history, and how the connection between blackness and slavery became enshrined in the Curse of Ham.

In 1837 the painter and theorist Jacques Nicolas Paillot de Montabert wrote:

White is the symbol of Divinity or God;
Black is the symbol of the evil spirit or the demon.
White is the symbol of light . . .
Black is the symbol of darkness and darkness expresses all evils.
White is the emblem of harmony;
Black is the emblem of chaos.
White signifies supreme beauty;
Black ugliness.
White signifies perfection;
Black signifies vice.
White is the symbol of innocence;
Black, that of guilt, sin, and moral degradation.
White, a positive color, indicates happiness;
Black, a negative color, indicates misfortune.
The battle between good and evil is symbolically expressed
By the opposition of white and black.²

De Montabert wrote these words in a manual for artists. For us, they starkly demonstrate how deeply and in how many varied ways black-white symbolism is part of Western culture.

Some scholars argue that these associations were the cause of Black enslavement for centuries. They claim that the negative value of blackness—whether due to a psychological association of darkness with fear of the unknown or due to some other cause—underlies the negative sentiment toward dark-skinned people that resulted in Black slavery.³ The historian Winthrop Jordan especially assigns a great deal of weight to the Africans' skin color. The associations of black and white as symbolic of evil and good, sin and purity, and the like, Jordan argues, were transferred to human beings when the light-skinned English came into contact with the dark-skinned Africans.⁴ Speaking of the slaves in antebellum America, Toni Morrison put it this way:

The distinguishing features of the not-Americans were their slave status, their social status—and their color. It is conceivable that the first would have self-destructed in a variety of ways had it not been for the last. These slaves, unlike many others in the world's history, were visible to a fault. *And they had*

*inherited, among other things, a long history on the meaning of color; it was that this color "meant" something.*⁵

"Color meant something." Indeed, it meant a great deal. And it conveyed the same negative associations in many different cultures. The same black-white color symbolism seen in Western traditions is found in China and South Asia.⁶ It has been found among the Chiang (a Sino-Tibetan people), the Mongour (a Mongolian people), the Chuckchees of Siberia, and the Creek Indians of North America.⁷ It is in Sanskrit, Caledonian, and Japanese, as well as Western, literature.⁸ Indeed, according to many anthropology reports, the phenomenon is common even in black Africa.⁹ It appears that the symbolism of black-negative and white-positive is widespread among peoples of all colors.¹⁰

The same associations of black and white are also found in our earliest written records in the ancient Near East and the classical world.¹¹ In Christianity these associations played a large role in the meanings given to light and darkness. "There is continual conflict between the world of darkness, that is sin, error and death, and the figure of Christ who is light, truth and life."¹² Jesus is "the light of the world" (John 8:12, 9:5). "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). It played an even larger role when the church fathers in the third century began to allegorize the scriptural Black (the "Ethiopian") as sin, as we shall see later. The common patristic depiction of devils as Ethiopians was of one cloth with this symbolism in the service of exegesis.

The negative symbolism of the color black may indeed have influenced how the light-skinned European came to perceive the dark-skinned African. Some sociologists, however, have questioned whether black-white symbolism "must necessarily transfer to social relations"; to see blackness as a metaphor for negative values, they claim, is not the same as seeing black people negatively.¹³ We cannot so easily jump from abstract metaphor to human reality.

Whether or not the negative value of blackness was the cause of anti-Black sentiment, and whether or not anti-Black sentiment led to Black slavery, it is clear that already by the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade in the fifteenth century Black and slave were inextricably joined in the Christian mind. Over and over again one finds Black enslavement justified with a reference to the biblical story of the curse of eternal servitude pronounced against Ham, considered to be the father of black Africa.

This book looks at the relationship between color symbolism and color prejudice and asks whether the former must lead to the latter, and whether color prejudice, strictly defined, must lead to ethnic prejudice. It seeks to uncover that point in time when blackness and slavery were first joined and it tracks the Western justification for the join in an evolving biblical inter-

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pretation. The focus of the study is on those civilizations that accepted the Bible as a basis of life.

It begins the investigation by examining the ancient Jewish world. This is not accidental. If a biblically rooted Western civilization came to exhibit anti-Black sentiment over many centuries, could the origin of such sentiment lie in the Bible? If Christian exegesis from the earliest centuries interpreted the scriptural Black as sinner and understood the devil to be an Ethiopian, could these interpretations derive from Christianity's cradle, ancient Judaism? The question takes on even greater importance in light of recent writings by scholars and nonscholars alike who have concluded that there is indeed an underlying anti-Black sentiment in early Jewish society.¹⁴

Was Jewish antiquity where anti-Black attitudes originated and became fixed in Western civilization? To answer this question I examine how Jews of the ancient world perceived black Africans over a fifteen-hundred-year period, from about 800 B.C.E. until the eighth century C.E. after the appearance of Islam. What images of Blacks are found in Jewish literature of this period and what attitudes about Blacks are implicit in those images? How did Jewish society of the biblical and postbiblical periods relate to darker-skinned people, whether African or not? The examination of the ancient Jewish world will provide the necessary framework in which to examine and understand the biblical Curse of Ham text and its later interpretations in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic exegesis. If the biblical Curse reflects an anti-Black sentiment, that sentiment should be found elsewhere in early Jewish literature. If it is not, then we must account for the development of such sentiment and for its expression in the various biblical interpretive traditions.

From Exegesis to History

The importance of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) for Judaism, Christianity, and even Islam is obvious and can be gauged by the enormous quantity of biblical interpretation and expansion generated by these three faith-cultures and their offshoots. More than the quantity, it is most striking how the same interpretive traditions with and without variation are so widely disseminated among these monotheistic faiths. How can one account for this melting pot of biblical interpretation? Of course, when Christianity and Islam accepted the Jewish Bible as part of their heritage, they inherited as well some of Judaism's interpretations of its sacred text. It is often noted that the Qur'an and later Islamic stories about biblical personalities and events (*isrā'īliyyāt*) reflect much of ancient Jewish biblical interpretation. As the ninth-century traditionist, al-Bukhārī, wrote: "The Jews used to read the Torah in Hebrew and to interpret it to the people of

Islam in Arabic.”¹⁵ The same is true for Christianity in Asia Minor and the lands of the Near East. The Christian Syriac Bible translation, the Peshitta, has been shown to contain many Jewish interpretations embedded in its translation. The church fathers of the East, especially, but not only, Ephrem (d. 373), transmit Jewish midrashic explanations again and again. Origen (d. ca. 253), who wrote in Greek, not Syriac, lived in the Near East, first in Alexandria, then in Caesarea, and his works too contain many Jewish interpretations. So do the writings of Jerome, who lived in Bethlehem.¹⁶ Sometimes these church fathers quote a contemporary, usually anonymous, Jewish source (e.g., “the Hebrew”). Many times they transmit a Jewish interpretation without attribution.

Of course, there are uniquely Christian and Islamic biblical interpretations. Jewish midrash, for example, sees no foreshadowing (“types”) of Jesus or Muḥammad in the Hebrew Bible. But even many of the unique Christian or Islamic interpretations can often be seen to reflect earlier, Jewish, thinking. The concept of the *logos*, for example, which John 1:1–18 applies to Jesus (“In the beginning was the word [*logos*], and the word was with God, and the word was God. . . . Through him all things were made. . . . The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us”), is used by the Jewish philosopher Philo (b. ca. 25 B.C.E.) as a device by means of which the infinite, transcendent God was able to create a finite, real world—the way an immaterial God can make contact with a material world. Similarly, the metaphor of light and darkness used by the early Christians (“You are all children of light,” 1 Thessalonians 5:4–5; the Two Ways of Light and Darkness, *Barnabas* 18–20) is an echo of the dualistic theology of the Dead Sea sect (the “children of light” and the “children of darkness”).¹⁷ In other words, Hebrew Scripture together with its early Jewish interpretation became part of the common heritage of all biblically based cultures in the Near East during the first several centuries of the Common Era. If the church fathers transmit originally Jewish expansions and explanations without attribution, it is not because they want to hide their Jewish source, but because these interpretations had become part of the biblical package lived and studied by all, the way one read and understood the Bible. It was the vehicle of intellectual intercourse and commonality as much as the basis of, and impetus for, differentiation.

Whether Jewish, Christian, or Islamic, biblical exegetical traditions moved freely among the geographically and culturally contiguous civilizations of the Near East. It is precisely the fluidity of the various interpretations and legends that provides a unique opportunity for cross-cultural investigation. When we can determine the direction of a tradition, the very confessional permeability of biblical exegesis becomes a historical witness to changes in attitudes and perceptions. For as exegesis crossed denominational lines it took on new coloring reflecting its new environment. By

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recognizing “the interactive character of such inter-hermeneutic encounters,” we can “elucidate the dynamics by which religions incorporate, idealize, repress, deny, and otherwise remake their inheritance, as that inheritance is recreated.”¹⁸ “Tracing the threads” while tracking the changes provides evidence of the new attitudes and views conditioned by the new environment, just as within one culture exegetical changes over time reflect changes in attitudes due to different historical circumstances. In other words, following biblical interpretation synchronically as well as diachronically provides us a picture of changing views, opinions, and attitudes within and among the monotheistic cultures. By tracking exegetical traditions concerning black Africans across confessional lines, we can see how and why the original Jewish biblical interpretations change as they move into the different cultural orbits, and we can trace the trajectory as they move back into Judaism.

The main traditions on which I focus in this regard revolve around the biblical figure of Ham and the infamous Curse of Ham. I follow the exegetical changes in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic literature, showing the origin of this postbiblical idea, how and when it took root, and how it was exegetically integrated into the biblical text. In other words, I show how non-Blacks began to look at Blacks as slaves and how this new perspective was reflected in biblical exegesis. In a related section, I track a second group of traditions that reflect another change, one of far-reaching consequences still with us today, that is, a new way of categorizing humanity—not by language, or religion, or citizenship, but by physiognomy, especially skin color. In sum, in this book I attempt to uncover the origins and development of anti-Black sentiment in Western civilization as reflected in the Bible and in postbiblical exegetical tradition, and how biblical exegesis was used to justify Black slavery.

The Plan of the Book

The book is structured in four parts. In Part I, where the investigation focuses on early Jewish views of the black African, the material is investigated chronologically rather than thematically, that is, biblical evidence is looked at first and then the postbiblical texts. This approach allows us to see continuities and discontinuities more clearly. It also allows for an informed approach to later ambiguous material. A prime example of what can happen when this approach is not taken can be seen in the claim of a recent work that in a rabbinic text “black people are described as drunken people.”¹⁹ I show later in this work that this reading of the rabbinic text is based on a scribal error; that the manuscripts and first printed edition speak of blackness rather than drunkenness; and that the correct reading

was already incorporated into a number of modern translations.²⁰ The text, in other words, describes Blacks as being black, not drunk. What is of importance here is that had the author considered the chronologically prior material, he would have found nothing to indicate that such a perception should appear in the rabbinic corpus. That conclusion would have led him to question the text as he understood it and, perhaps, to discover the correct reading. As a West African saying puts it, “If you do not know where you are or where you have been, you cannot know where you are going.”²¹

This study documents several such examples of misreading of the sources, many of which cases are ultimately due to an assumption that the way things are now is the way things were in the past. The tendency is strong to read the past from the perspective of one’s own time and place. It is especially important, however, to avoid this mistake when dealing with the topic of this book, for our perceptions of the Black have been conditioned by the intervening history of centuries of Black slavery and its manifold ramifications. Unfortunately, in too many cases we shall see that that mistake has not been avoided by those who attempt to read the past with the limited tools at their disposal.

In Part II, I move the inquiry from Black as an ethnic group to black as a color, and examine Jewish views of, and attitudes toward, dark skin color. The question is necessarily broader than asking about attitudes toward black Africans. Dark- and darker-skinned people are found in a variety of ethnic groups, and within the same ethnic group. Do we find in the Jewish sources disapproving attitudes toward dark skin color irrespective of the ethnic group? Does ancient Jewish literature exhibit a particular sentiment toward the color of one’s skin?

Part III steps back from the examination of Jewish perceptions and attitudes and asks a more general and more concrete historical question: how early can we date Black slavery? Here I seek to determine if and when the black African became identified as slave in the Near East. The question is important for this study because an identity of Black with slave would be expected to influence views and opinions of the Black found in the literature. If we find no such influence in the Bible, it would indicate that such an identification did not take place in the biblical period. If it can then be demonstrated, as I believe it can, that an identification of Black and slave occurred in the postbiblical period, we should expect to find reinterpretations of biblical literature to coincide with the new historical situation and view of the black African as slave. Such reinterpretation, of course, happens in every age to every people who seek to live by the Book.

Part IV focuses on the reinterpretation of the Bible that occurred as a result of this new historical situation, that is the identification of Black with slave. The primary interpretive enterprise reflecting the new historical sit-

uation concerns the Curse of Ham. I track the exegetical changes in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic literature, showing how these interpretations became historically possible, how they were textually implemented, and what views and attitudes underlie the exegesis. Methodologically, this section is the heart of the study. It shows how postbiblical literature, even if informed by the biblical world and even if formally structured around the Bible, nevertheless greatly reflects its own world. The Bible is not so much a framework, conceptual and structural, into which all subsequent thinking must fit (conform), as it is a grid upon which postbiblical thinking asserts itself, and in the process changes the biblical blueprint. The metaphor is equally applicable to all Bible-based religions. Judaism, Christianity (west and east), Islam, and even Samaritanism all refashioned the biblical grid, which, when read carefully, becomes a network of historical data. By looking at how the Bible is reinterpreted at different times and places we can detect shifting *mentalités*, and under them we can delineate historical changes. Conversely, if we know when and where crucial historical changes occur, we can explain how and why the interpretation-shaping attitudes began. Playing the two sides of the equation against each other, I show how history and exegesis are intimately related and how the exegetical mirror can act as a lens focusing on historical changes.

The set of views, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes regarding black Africans and how they have been perceived has a long and complex development. The history of Western perceptions of the black African has many tributaries, and we today are the most recent inheritors of this long accumulating history. In this sense, the results of this study are diametrically opposed to the view expressed by John Ralph Willis in his study “The Image of the African in Arabic Literature.” Willis wrote that “there is no need to dwell on the unpleasant statements in Arabic literature regarding peoples of African descent. . . . The matter which concerns us here is the origin of the unfavorable attitude. . . . Those Arab writers showing antagonism to people of dark color echoed the external traditions of the Jews, Greeks and perhaps others.”²² As if discovering origins will reveal Truth. As if the support mechanisms that keep an idea in place over millennia are irrelevant.²³ Given the body of common Near Eastern traditions and the permeability of each culture in admitting and transmitting these traditions, to speak of origins, even were it possible, is not enough.

The Question of Racism

Throughout my research for this book I have had two models in mind, Frank Snowden’s *Blacks in Antiquity* (1970) and Lloyd Thompson’s *Romans and Blacks* (1989). The question both authors sought to answer was

whether the world of classical antiquity was racist. Snowden was not the first to address the question, but he was the first to do so comprehensively. His attempt to examine every reference to black Africans, both literary and iconographic, in that world remains unsurpassed. With this magisterial work in mind, I have aimed for the same type of comprehensiveness in the Jewish world of antiquity. Thompson's contribution was to bring greater methodological nuance to the question of racism in antiquity. The main critique that has been leveled against Snowden was that he closed his eyes to obvious expressions of anti-Black sentiment in a world in which he believed there was none. Where Snowden refused to see anti-Black sentiment, Thompson saw it but explained it not as racism but as "ethnocentric reactions to a strange and unfamiliar appearance," and "expressions of conformism to the dominant aesthetic values."²⁴ Snowden saw this distinction too, but Thompson made it an important methodological basis of his work: "[Racism is evidenced by] reactions to an ideologically ascribed, and so almost infallibly predictable, social significance of a given set of somatic characteristics," whereas ethnocentrism, "a natural and universally evidenced human response," would allow for negative reactions to a strange and unfamiliar somatic appearance.²⁵ Ancient Roman society was indeed ethnocentric, but it was not racist.

The conclusion, shared by both classicists, that the ancient world was not racist hinges on their acceptance of the definition of racism as a socially defined creation. Racism exists when social structures assign "inferior and unalterable roles and rights" to a specific group; when this group cannot, practically speaking, assume the superior roles and rights of the dominant group; when a belief system or ideology supports these social structures; and when the group is defined by biological descent and perceptions of somatic and cultural identity. Looked at from the other direction, racial prejudice defines a set of attitudes that underlie discriminatory social structures. It is an attitude "that rests on an ideological perception of the individual as necessarily possessing particular desirable or undesirable qualities by virtue of his or her membership in a given socially defined group, in a social context in which the individual can do nothing to alter the basic situation."²⁶ This definition assumes two crucial differences between racism and ethnocentrism: biology and socially embedded discrimination.

Not everyone, however, agrees with this definition of racism. Others would consider any kind of social discrimination to be racist. Not biological hierarchy, but any hierarchy defines racism, for example, the cultural hierarchy of citizen-barbarian practiced in the Greco-Roman world, what others call ethnocentrism—in other words, institutionalized discrimination of any sort.²⁷ Still others would keep the biology and remove the social structures. To them, racism is "an ideology based on the conception that racial groups form a biogenetic hierarchy" period. Attributing inferiority or su-

periority to people on the basis of biological traits, “congenital inferiority” in the language of philosopher Harry Bracken, is the essence of racism.²⁸

It seemed to me that if I would try to determine whether ancient Jewish society was racist, I would soon be up to my neck in theoretical quicksand. As an African American student once said in my class, racism is like obscenity, with which it is closely related: you know it when you see it, although it may be hard to define. When dealing with the Jewish material, therefore, I decided not to ask whether ancient Judaism was racist but instead to ask a simpler question: how did ancient Jewish society look at the black African? Only in the concluding chapter do I come back to the issue of racism to see how the answer to this question does or does not accord with various definitions of racism. I reasoned that to approach the topic this way would in any event lead to richer results, for it would attempt to describe in all its colors how Jews of antiquity, and then Christians and Muslims, perceived Blacks.

Some Remarks on Sources and Terminology

The Nature of the Evidence

The first half of this study explores the images of the black African found in Jewish society of the biblical and postbiblical periods. What is the nature of these images? As opposed to the Greco-Roman, and then Christian, world, they are not iconographic. There are some examples of representational art in early-century mosaics and in the wall paintings of the third-century Dura-Europas synagogue, but these depictions (mostly biblical scenes) contain no Blacks and thus provide no evidence for our purposes. Our images are all literary, starting with the Hebrew Bible of ancient Israel, continuing with Jewish writings in Greek, apocryphal and pseudepigraphical works, and the Dead Sea (Qumran) literature in the Hellenistic-Roman periods, and concluding with the rabbinic corpus (Talmud and Midrash) composed during the first seven or eight centuries C.E. The Bible consists of several different genres of literature, from the creation epics in Genesis to the love poem of Song of Songs, from the national founding narrative of Exodus to the universal wisdom of Proverbs. These many different genres and topics were gradually brought together and canonized as the core document of Judaism. But even before canonization occurred, and even while there were variant versions of some of its parts, this body of literature assumed a deep centrality in Jewish society. As a consequence, the vast majority of postbiblical Jewish literature consists of interpretation, expansion, commentary, discussion, and paraphrase of the Bible. Whether pseudepigraphic expansion or rabbinic interpretation, whether Philo’s allegory or Pseudo-Philo’s paraphrase, postbiblical Jewish literature generally takes the Bible as its starting point and its focus.

Determining a society's attitudes and perspectives from its literary remains is fraught with methodological difficulties. As Lloyd Thompson put it, "We depend almost entirely on the surviving remarks of a few long-dead people, none of which remarks was made in response to any carefully-worded question put to them by us."²⁹ Not only may the remains not properly represent the society, or even one group in the society, but the attitudes and views may never have been put into literary or iconographic form. In addition to these general methodological problems, much of postbiblical Jewish literature has its own set of difficulties for the historian, especially when we seek to uncover ideas and attitudes. This is particularly the case with regard to rabbinic literature, for the nature of this literature is such that it does not present systematic expositions of ideologies or attitudes. Such expositions may or may not have occurred in the rabbinic academies or study circles, but what we have in the extant literature does not record them. Furthermore, rabbinic literature is transmitted in a uniquely rhetorical discourse that presents barriers to historical inquiry.³⁰ The rabbinic medium does not allow for individual expression of the type that we find in the contemporaneous Greco-Roman world.³¹ We do not find a parallel to Juvenal who would express his prejudices and preferences without mediation or mitigation.

Nevertheless, any interpretation of the biblical text will be influenced, however unconsciously, by the time and place of the interpreter, even as it attempts to explain or expand (also an interpretation) the text it is interpreting. Depending on the literary genre, the reflections of the interpreter's world may be explicit, like the *peshet* commentaries of the Dead Sea Scrolls or the homilies of the modern-day rabbi or preacher, or they may be implicit and hard to detect. Sometimes the influences of the interpreter's world may not be found in the content of the interpretation at all but only in the choice of one interpretation over another, or sometimes in the choice of one biblical verse to be interpreted over another. But the interpreter's world will surely be reflected in his work, one way or another.

And that world is not as narrowly defined as we tend to think from our perspective two thousand years later. The Jews of antiquity and late antiquity did not live in a vacuum but were part of a larger society and culture, a point abundantly reflected in the literature. The Hebrew Bible and the Hebrew-Aramaic Talmud and Midrash are suffused with foreign words and ideas. Rabbinic literature contains thousands of Greek loanwords that became part of the Jewish lexicon, reflecting social, literary, economic, and even theological influence. The opening chapters of the Bible are a uniquely Jewish theological statement fashioned from, and on the framework of, common ancient Near Eastern (Mesopotamian) material. The idiom, linguistic structure, and underlying concepts of Psalms, to take another example, are part and parcel of a larger ancient Near Eastern (Ugaritic) literary world. And, of course, Jewish literature written in Greek is thoroughly

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Hellenistic. Two thousand years ago, as today, the Jewish world was constantly creating its world within a world, drawing on and reshaping foreign ideas. If Jewish literature, therefore, is a mirror of Jewish thought, as it is, then Jewish thought is a lens through which we may also perceive the non-Jewish surrounding environment.

Rabbinic Literature and Terminology

Much of the rabbinic source material used in this study will be unfamiliar to many readers. For this reason I have included a Glossary in which I briefly present the dates, place of composition, editions, and translations of the material, as well as definitions of unfamiliar terminology. Where available I have used critical editions of ancient texts, in which case the text is cited by the traditional section division, followed by the page number of the edition in parentheses. Thus *GenR* 36.7 (p. 341) refers to section 36.7, which is on p. 341 in Theodor and Albeck's edition of *Genesis Rabba*. For many of these texts, dating cannot be precise and is often given within the parameters of one or two centuries. Rabbinic texts and traditions chronologically belong either to the period of the *tannaim* (70–220 C.E.) or the *amoraim* (220–500). Beyond that gross classification, dating of rabbinic traditions is notoriously difficult, because anonymous early traditions may appear in works that were redacted much later than the traditions themselves. Even traditions that are attributed to named authorities may be much earlier than these authorities.³² On the other hand, some scholars, emphasizing the role played by tradents and redactors of rabbinic traditions, accept the only certain date as the one of the final document in which the tradition is embedded.³³ My practice in this study is to date a tradition to the time of the authority in whose name the tradition is recorded. For our purposes, however, it matters little whether a tradition can be dated to, say, the year 135 or to the tannaitic period in general. Chronologically broad strokes in this regard will suffice. If the tradition is recorded anonymously, then I assign it the date of the redaction of the composition in which the tradition appears. An exception is made in the case of anonymous statements preceded by introductory markers of the tannaitic period, for example, *tanya*⁹ (“it is learned”), *teno rabanan* (“our Rabbis have taught”), and so on. Such traditions appearing in works of the amoraic period are regarded as being authentically tannaitic. All dates that appear in this study are C.E. unless otherwise noted.

The Rabbis

At times in this study I will speak of “the rabbinic view” of such-and-such a matter. This does not mean that all Rabbis over more than four hundred

years agreed on a particular point. That would be unlikely were it even possible to ascertain a full documentation of rabbinic opinions. It means rather, in the words of Jay Harris, “that there is a certain conception of the past that finds expression in a number of rabbinic documents, that is not explicitly challenged and that serves as the basis for other discussions in the literature. . . . [It] shows the compatibility of certain claims and the broader culture.”³⁴ The results of my research claim that there are indeed certain rabbinic conceptions (and lack of conceptions) concerning the black African; that these conceptions and perceptions are in agreement with the antecedent Jewish cultures of the biblical and Hellenistic-Roman periods, as they are with Near Eastern cultures generally. Not until after the rabbinic period in the seventh century do these views begin to change.

Cushite/Kushite/Nubian/Ethiopian/Black/Black African

The area south of Egypt descending into central Africa and extending east to the Red Sea was known to the ancient Near Eastern cultures as Kush. This is the name found in the Hebrew Bible. In Greek writing the name for this land was Ethiopia. We also find the name Nubia in the earlier sources. A more general term for the sub-Saharan inhabitants of Africa is Black or black African, terms commonly used in Greco-Roman studies. In this study I use all terms interchangeably as called for by the context. My preference is to avoid the use of Ethiopia as much as possible because of the association of the name with the modern nation-state, which is not the same as the ancient land of Kush. The capitalization of Black is intended to distinguish individuals whose ancestry is from sub-Saharan Africa from other dark-skinned people. In most translations of the Bible the name Kush is written with a *c*: Cush. This is due to the influence of Latin, which acted as an intermediary between the ancient and modern languages. Today, however, more and more scholars are writing Kush, which reflects the original spelling of the name in pre-Latin texts. I prefer this for consistency, since the phoneme *k* in ancient Near Eastern languages is transliterated with *k* and not *c*. Sometimes (infrequently), to avoid confusion, I will change Cush to Kush in a quotation.

Israel/Palestine/The Land of Israel

Due to today’s political climate many scholars are reluctant to use the terminology of previous generations for the name of the Land of Israel in late antiquity and the rabbinic period. In the past “Palestine” was the term commonly used but the political connotations of the name today have led some to avoid it. “Israel” is linguistically the simplest alternative, and some have adopted the term, but the name is historically problematic since it

connotes the State of Israel, which came into existence only some fifty years ago. “The Land of Israel” (or its Hebrew counterpart “Eretz Israel”) is historically accurate but stylistically cumbersome. The same problem of terminology obtains for the rabbinic composition known as the “Palestinian Talmud.” Some use the alternative “Jerusalem Talmud,” an accurate translation of the Hebrew title of the work. But “Jerusalem Talmud” never did become universally accepted, even in the past, for good reason: this Talmud was created primarily in Tiberius. I have not shied away from using the chronologically inaccurate but reader-friendly “Israel”; nor have I totally avoided the mouthful “Land of Israel.” Nor, when dealing with the postbiblical period, have I rejected the older usage of “Palestine.”

Translation and Transliteration

Bible translations usually follow one or more of the English versions, as noted. Translations of other sources are my own unless otherwise stated. Hebrew transliteration generally follows a popular format, for example, Hebrew *shin* is rendered *sh* and not *ś*, vowel length is not indicated (*ham* and not *hām*; *kush* and not *kūsh*), nor are reduced vowels (*shaharut*, not *shah^arut*), nor doubled consonants and initial *alef* (*afriqiyim* and not *ʾafriqiyim*). But when the discussion moves to philological issues these indications are preserved and a modified system of scientific transliteration of the consonants is adopted (ʿ, *b* or *v*, *g*, *d*, *h*, *m*, *z*, *ḥ*, *t*, *y*, *k* or *kh*, *l*, *m*, *n*, *s*, *ṣ*, *p* or *f*, *ś*, *q*, *r*, *š*, *ś*, *t* or *th*). Arabic transliteration follows standard practice, and vowel lengthening and doubled consonants are shown. Syriac transliteration generally is shown without vowels. Other languages follow standard rules for those languages. Egyptian and Epigraphic Hebrew do not indicate vocalization, and when transliterating such texts, depending on the context, vowels may or may not be supplied: for example, *Kš* (*Kš*) or *Kuś* for Kush. Spellings of biblical names differ from English Bible translations only in having *k* and not *c* represent Hebrew *kaf*; thus Kush, Sabteka. Names not generally found in the Bible are transliterated (Yoḥanan, not Johanan), unless the names are commonly found in English, in which case the familiar spelling is used (Akiba, not ʿAkiva or Akiva).

ONE

BIBLICAL ISRAEL: THE LAND OF KUSH

HOW DID THE ancient Israelites view the black African? Our main body of evidence for ancient Israel is the Hebrew Bible. Although other evidence is also found, the Hebrew Bible is the main repository of information for ancient Israel, including its views of the black African. Indeed, the Bible refers to these people a number of times, which should not be surprising as they were part of the ancient Near East and played a role in its history. Of course, before we can say anything about biblical views of the black African, we must first know when the biblical text refers to black Africa and its people. This is not as easy as it seems. If we look at modern translations of the Bible, we often find the terms “Ethiopia” and “Ethiopian,” which go back to the early Greek and Latin translations of the original Hebrew. In the Greek- and Latin-speaking world of antiquity “Ethiopia” meant black Africa. These terms are always translations of the original Hebrew “Kush” and “Kushi,” but are they correct translations? Do Kush and Kushi in the Hebrew Bible always refer to “Ethiopia,” that is, black Africa? Our first task, then, will be to determine when the Bible means black Africa. Once we have done that, we will look at what the text says and try to determine what attitudes the Israelites had of this land and its people.

Kush was the Egyptian name (*kꜣš*) for the area to the south of Egypt extending deep into East Central Africa. Its border with Egypt ranged from between the first and second cataracts (waterfalls) of the Nile during the early Egyptian dynasties down to the fourth cataract in the biblical period. The name Kush, first found in Egyptian texts from the twentieth century B.C.E., was taken over into several languages of the ancient Near East, including Babylonian (*kūšu*), Assyrian (*kūsu*), Old Persian (*kūšā*), Old Nubian (*kas*), and Hebrew (*kūš*).¹ Some Christian fathers and onomastic lists give the meaning “darkness” or “blackness” for the name Kush.² This interpretation seems to go back to Origen, who is apparently dependent on Philo’s etymology of the name from the Greek word *χοῦς* ‘dust, dirt’.³ The name Kush, however, is not Greek, and its etymology therefore cannot be derived from Greek vocabulary.⁴ Contrary to what some moderns suggest,⁵ we do not know the meaning of the name. The Greeks usually called the area Ethiopia, sometimes Nubia. Between approximately 760 B.C.E.

and 320 C.E., Kush was the center of an empire and civilization, whose capital was first at Napata (near the fourth cataract) and then further south at Meroe (between the fifth and sixth cataracts). For about the first hundred years of this period the Kushite kings ruled Egypt and were known as the twenty-fifth or Ethiopian (or Nubian or Kushite) Dynasty.⁶

In the Hebrew Bible the term Kush usually designates this area in Africa south of Egypt including the lands bordering the Red Sea. So, for example, Ezek 29:10 indicates that Kush was geographically situated in an area south of Egypt, beginning at Syene (i.e., Aswan).⁷ The same information is provided by the Greek geographer Strabo (b. 64/63 B.C.E.).⁸ References to this African Kush in the Bible are common, especially where Kush is paired with Egypt (Isa 20:3–4, 43:3, 45:14; Ezek 29:10, 30:4, 9; cf. Dan 11:43; Nah 3:9; Ps 68:32).⁹ Similarly, the line from Jeremiah (13:23), “Can the Kushite change his skin?” refers to the dark-skinned Nubian. The Kushite dynasty of Egypt is referred to a few times in the Bible, most notably in 2 Kgs 19:9 (= Isa 37:9) where Tirhaqa, who reigned as one of the Kushite pharaohs of Egypt between 690 and 633 B.C.E., is called “King of Kush.”¹⁰

In several instances in the Bible, however, “Kush” seems to refer to a location not in Africa. The Table of Nations in Gen 10:7 (and 1 Chron 1:9) lists “the descendants of Kush: Seba, Havilah, Sabtah, Raamah, and Sabteka; the descendants of Raamah: Sheba and Dedan.” Are these descendants or locations in Africa, which would seem to be required, if Kush, the ancestor, is located in Africa? In regard to Seba there are indeed a number of indications arguing for a location in Africa. Isa 43:3 groups together Egypt, Kush, and Seba, thus pointing to an African location.¹¹ Isa 45:14 has the same grouping (Egypt, Kush, Sebaites) and characterizes the Sebaites as “tall,” which further points to an African location in view of Isa 18:1–2, “Beyond the rivers of Ethiopia . . . to a people tall and smooth.”¹² In addition, Josephus (first century C.E.) and Strabo locate Seba in Africa.¹³ Consider also the early Christian traditions that identify the queen of Sheba (= Seba) with the queen of Ethiopia, and the onomastic lists that define Saba, Sabaeans as “Ethiopians.”¹⁴ Some scholars have therefore concluded that Seba is indeed to be located in Africa.¹⁵ Despite this, there is general agreement that the other names of Kush’s descendants (according to some even Seba) correspond to names of peoples who inhabited areas not in Africa but in the southern and southwestern parts of the Arabian peninsula.¹⁶

This, however, does not necessarily mean that the descendants of Kush in Arabia and the African Kushites are of different ethnic stock, for historically there was always movement across the Red Sea and the Sinai peninsula between Africa and Arabia.¹⁷ The biblical conception informing the Table of Nations, therefore, that the people on both sides of the Red Sea

were ethnically related and descended from the same Kushite ancestor probably reflects the historical situation. This relationship between the peoples on either side of the Red Sea is, incidentally, paralleled in the field of linguistics, where scholars now see a relationship between the respective families of languages and refer to a parent family as Afro-Asiatic (formerly called Hamito-Semitic). “In recent years the feeling has grown in linguistic circles . . . that the linguistic criteria for dividing the Semitic and Hamitic languages into two distinct blocks do not exist. All these languages have certain common elements in vocabulary, morphemes and patterns of grammatical behavior (especially in verb conjugation), which are characteristic of the whole family.”¹⁸ Whether original Arabian Kushite tribes migrated into eastern Africa and gave their name to the land, or African Kushites migrated into Arabia, in the biblical view the peoples on either side of the Red Sea were regarded as of the same Kushite stock.¹⁹

Today we see the Red Sea as separating two distinct lands, Africa and Arabia. But in antiquity it was not seen that way. Indeed, in the world of classical antiquity, from Herodotus to Strabo, the term Arabia included the area across the Red Sea up until the Nile. It wasn’t the Red Sea but the Nile that constituted the boundary between Africa and Asia.²⁰ The same perspective may well lie behind the Palestinian Targums that associate Arabia with Kush in Gen 10:6 and translate “Arabia” for “Kush” in 1 Chr 1:8.²¹ It may also account for the Septuagint’s refusal to translate Kush in Gen 10:6–8 as “Ethiopia,” which is its translation everywhere else in the Hebrew Bible. Only here does the Septuagint simply transliterate the name of the land as Kush (Χούς). Lastly, note that in Herodotus’s description of the various ethnic units that composed Xerxes’ army, the Ethiopians and Arabs are grouped together in one unit under a single commander.²² These Greek and Roman (and, perhaps, Aramaic) sources point to the same phenomenon as do the ancient Near Eastern sources—that the Red Sea did not serve as an ethnic boundary and land on both its sides shared the same name, whether that name was Arabia in the Greek sources or Kush in the Bible (and perhaps, the Targum). Indeed, according to some Latin sources, “Ethiopia” extended eastward as far as the Indus.²³

In addition to Kush in Africa and South or Southwest Arabia, there is another people of that name known from the ancient Near East. A group of nomadic or seminomadic tribes located in the Negev or on the southern border of Israel identified as Kushu (*kwšw*) is mentioned in Middle Egyptian execration texts (nineteenth or eighteenth century B.C.E.), and possibly in other Egyptian sources as well.²⁴ Scholars have variously identified these bedouin people behind some of the biblical references to Kush or Kushite, such as Zerah the Kushite (2 Chron 14:8–14, 16:8), the Kushites who were “neighbors of Arabs” (2 Chron 21:16), Kushan in

Habakkuk 3:7,²⁵ and the Kushites in the service of the kings of Judah (2 Sam 18.21ff., Jer 38.7ff.).²⁶ It has also been pointed out that the biblical reference (1 Chron 4:40) to the area of Simeon's territory near Gedor (or Gerar) as having been formerly inhabited by descendants of Ham (*min ḥam*), would support the notion of a Kushite people in the northern Negev at the southern borders of Israel. Simeon's territory was located in the southern part of ancient Israel bordering on the Negev.²⁷ The existence of a Kushite people in this general area and references to it in the Bible have become well accepted in biblical scholarship.²⁸

Whether these Kushites were related to the African and Southwest Arabian Kushites is not clear. There may have been a Kushite migration to the southern border area of Judah.²⁹ Or there may have been no ethnic connection at all, and the same name was applied to northern Arabia because one had to pass through it to get to Kush in Africa or the southern part of Arabia, just as, for the same reason, the northern region of Arabia was called Miṣir or Muṣri (i.e., Egypt) by the people of western Asia.³⁰

Finally, there is yet one other Kushite people whose echo is found in the Bible: "Kush also begot Nimrod. . . . The mainstays of his kingdom were Babylon, Erech, Accad" (Gen 10:8–12). It is unlikely that this Kush, who is associated with the lands of Mesopotamia, is related to either an African or an Arabian Kush. Most scholars feel, rather, that the Nimrod Kush is associated with the Kassites (*Kaššu/Kuššu* in the cuneiform texts, Greek *Kossaioi*) of Mesopotamia who overthrew the first Babylonian dynasty in 1595 B.C.E. and ruled Babylon for the next 450 years.³¹ During this long period, Babylonia was known as the land of the Kassites. The biblical Kush who "begot Nimrod" of Mesopotamia is seen as a literary echo of these Kassites.³²

In sum, Kush in the Hebrew Bible usually refers to East Africa or Southwest Arabia, sometimes to North Arabia or South Israel, and, at least once, to Mesopotamia. The early Greek and Latin translations of the Bible do not distinguish between the different areas, translating them all as "Ethiopia," that is, Nubia. Through these translations the name Kush became exclusively identified with Africa.

Descriptions and images of the African Kush, preserved in the Hebrew Bible, will give us a picture of how the land was perceived by the Jews of antiquity. In only a few places does the Bible describe aspects of the topography, resources, and geographical location of Nubia. Gen 2:13 refers to a river called Giḥon, "that winds through the whole land of Kush."³³ Some claim that Giḥon is the Egyptian *gíyon*, which is the Amharic name given to the springs and waterfalls of the Blue Nile.³⁴ Isa 18:2 describes Kush as "*baz'u* by rivers." Some early versions (Old Greek recensions, Peshiṭta, Vulgate) translate "plundered," assuming a relationship to the Hebrew root *bzz*. A recent attempt connects the word to the Arabic *bazza* 'pull along forcibly', and renders the Hebrew "wash away."³⁵ Most modern

translations, however, assume that the word is related to the Syriac *bz'* 'to pierce, cleave' and translate the verse accordingly, giving the sense of the rivers dividing the land.³⁶ To his translation "cut through by streams" Wildberger adds that "everyone who visits the country is impressed by the way the southern part of Kush is crisscrossed with mighty rivers."³⁷ Indeed, Isa 18:1 mentions "the region of the rivers of Kush." The phrase "cut through by streams," however, may not be a reference to the crisscrossing of many rivers but to the division of the land into two by the Nile. This is precisely how Homer described Ethiopia according to Strabo. Homer referred to the Ethiopians "who dwell sundered in twain," which Strabo understood as meaning the division of the land by the Nile.³⁸

Job 28:19 indicates that gold and topaz (chrysolite) were among the natural resources of Kush/Nubia. Pliny parallels this report in regard to chrysolite, which, he says, Ethiopia exports.³⁹ Regarding gold, there is a plethora of evidence. Indeed, Upper Egypt and Kush had the richest gold mines in antiquity and Kush "was principally renowned for its gold production."⁴⁰ Gold was a major Kushite import to Egypt during the eighteenth to twentieth Dynasties (1570–1090 B.C.E.) and ancient Egyptian paintings show captured Kushites bringing gold to the pharaoh.⁴¹ Herodotus speaks about the gold wealth of Ethiopia (3.114), and he adds that prisoners in Ethiopia are bound with fetters made of gold (3.23, cf. 22; Mela 3.86). Agatharchides of Cnidus (second century B.C.E.) mentions the "many large gold mines, where gold is extracted in great quantity."⁴² If Sheba is to be located in Africa, the biblical story of the queen of Sheba bringing gold and precious stones to King Solomon (1 Kgs 10:2, 2 Chr 9:1) may be another indication of the wealth of gold in this area (see also Ezek 27.22 and Dan 11:43). As late as the first century C.E. we find Pliny referring to a district in Ethiopia that "produces a large amount of gold" and Strabo mentioning the gold mines of Meroe in Ethiopia.⁴³ It should also be noted that the name "Nubia," first attested in Eratosthenes in the third century B.C.E., may derive from the Egyptian word for gold, *nbw*—that is, Nubia is the Land of Gold.⁴⁴

One enigmatic passage in the Bible may also point to a Nubian natural resource, although it is not clear what that resource is. Apparently describing those who will recognize God and come to worship him, Ps 68:32/31 states that "*hashmanim* will come out of Egypt; Kush shall stretch out its hands to God."⁴⁵ The difficult Hebrew word, which occurs but once in the Hebrew Bible, has been translated as meaning either princes, nobles, envoys, or some sort of rich tribute (or those who bring tribute), such as bronze vessels, red cloth, or blue-green wool.⁴⁶ Although the *hashmanim* are said to derive from Egypt, not Kush, the parallelism of the two names would indicate an association between them, most probably placing the psalm at the time of the Nubian dynasty of Egypt.

The one perception of the land of Kush that has been very influential in subsequent depictions of Kush and its inhabitants is found in Amos 9:7. This verse has also been subject to, not coincidentally, serious misinterpretation. Certainly for this study, which attempts to examine ancient Israelite and Jewish attitudes toward the Kushites, a verse that states “Are you not like the Kushites to me, O Israelites?” takes on added significance.

What does Amos mean by this comparison? A common interpretation by Bible scholars until recent times claimed that the prophet meant to denigrate Israel. Just as the dark-skinned Kushites were held in contempt, so too were the Israelites. Take William R. Harper for example: “Israel, says the prophet, is no more to me than the far distant, uncivilized, and despised black race of the Ethiopians.”⁴⁷ How did Harper know that the Ethiopians were despised? “Their color and the fact that slaves were so often drawn from them added to the grounds for despising them.”⁴⁸ S. R. Driver can serve as another example: “The Kushites, or Ethiopians, are mentioned as a distant people, far removed from the grace and knowledge of God, despised on account of their dark colour (cf. Jer 13:23), and perhaps also on account of slaves being often drawn from them. Degenerate Israel is no more in Jehovah’s eyes than these despised Kushites.”⁴⁹ There is, however, no evidence from the ancient Near East in general or ancient Israel in particular that Ethiopians were “despised on account of their dark color. . . . There is, of course, no slightest suggestion that the colour of their skin is the point at issue; there is no warrant anywhere in the Bible for that kind of idea.”⁵⁰ Nor is there any warrant anywhere in the Bible that black Africa provided a disproportionate number of slaves in the ancient Near East or that black Africans were known to the Israelites “mostly as slaves.”⁵¹ It appears rather that Harper and Driver and others like them were interpolating the assumptions and prejudices of their time into the biblical text. “[The] statement reflects Driver’s own attitude rather than that of Amos . . . or the ancient Israelites.”⁵²

Harper and Driver were not the first to express these views. The negative interpretation of Amos 9:7 has a old pedigree. Two hundred years before them the Puritan Bible scholar Matthew Poole (d. 1679) explained the word “Ethiopian” in the text this way: “i.e. most vile and ignoble,” an explanation that ultimately goes back to early Christian exegesis.⁵³ For example, Augustine’s (d. 430) explanation of “Ethiopians” in Ps 72/71:9 as “the remotest and foulest of mankind” couples geographic and moral distance.⁵⁴ This kind of interpretation became so well established that even the scholar of Ethiopia in antiquity, Edward Ullendorff, accepted it.⁵⁵ Probably the most egregious examples of such an interpretation are those involving Bible instruction for the religious. Driver’s work was part of a series called *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*. Unfortunately, even in recent times we can find similar cases. In 1979 the American Bible

Society published *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Amos*, which explains our verse by virtue of the fact that the Ethiopians are a "despised people."⁵⁶

However, another interpretation is gaining ground among scholars of the Hebrew Bible today and appears dominant: the purpose of the verse is to reject the belief that Israel has a special status before God; the Israelites are just like any other people. The Kushim/Ethiopians are specifically mentioned as representative of the other nations because of their remote distance. "Are you not like the Kushites to me, O Israelites" proclaims, in other words, that the Israelites are no more special to God than the most remote people on the face of the earth. "Even the most inaccessible nation is still under God's surveillance and sovereignty, as is Israel."⁵⁷ This interpretation has much in its favor.

The idea that the Ethiopians, that is, the black Africans, are the most remote peoples in the world is commonly found in classical sources, as in Homer's description of them as "the farthestmost of men" (ἔσχατοι ἀνδρῶν).⁵⁸ The very term "Ethiopian" in ancient Greek sources, came to designate the remote southern peoples, just as "Scythian" came to designate the remote northern peoples.⁵⁹ These designations underlie a common topos in the classical world, that is, the use of a Scythian-Ethiopian pairing as a way to refer to the geographical extremes of the inhabited world. The topos is most frequently found in the widespread environmental theory of anthropological differentiation. The extremes of weather and environment in the remote north and south provided the explanation for different racial traits, including skin color. Since the peoples in the far north and far south were the lightest- and darkest-skinned people known to the Greeks and Romans, the Scythian-Ethiopian pairing came to be used to designate anthropological and racial, as well as geographical, extremes.⁶⁰ Sometimes other northern peoples (Thracians, Gauls, Saxons, Germans) were substituted, or "Egyptian" replaced "Ethiopian," but in general the Scythians and Ethiopians became the formulaic expression of racial extremes in the Greco-Roman world.⁶¹ "The Ethiopian-Scythian formula had appeared as early as Hesiod and had become a frequent, if not the favorite, Hellenic illustration of the boundaries of the north and south as well as of the environment theory."⁶² Thus from the earliest days of Greek literature, that is, as early as the eighth century B.C.E., the Kushim/Ethiopians were considered to be the most remote (southern) people on the face of the earth. It should not be too surprising that the same idea circulated in the eastern Mediterranean, in Israel, at the same time. The prophet Amos and the poet Homer are both said to have lived in the eighth century.

It would seem that this connotation of remoteness, which so defined the Ethiopians in the ancient world, underlies Amos 9:7. Not only do the classical sources support this interpretation, but so do some ancient Near East-

ern and biblical sources, in which Kush indicates the ends of the earth. The Assyrian usage of the name Meluḥḥa to mean Ethiopia, according to the regnant view, is due to the fact that Ethiopia was thought to be the most remote land.⁶³ An Aramaic text in demotic script dating from the fourth century B.C.E. pairs Ethiopia and Elam to indicate “the ends of the known world.”⁶⁴ Apparently the combination of Syria-Palestine (*Kḥzrw*) and Kush have the same meaning in a fourteenth-century B.C.E. Egyptian text, the Hymn to Aton.⁶⁵ The Persian king Darius describes the extent of his empire by reference to its geographic extremes in the north, south, east, and west: “Saith Darius the King: This is the kingdom which I hold, from the Scythians who are beyond Sogdiana, thence unto Ethiopia (*Kāšū*); from India (*Hidawv*), thence unto Sardis.”⁶⁶ This inscription, of course, is reminiscent of a similar formula found in the biblical book of Esther (1:1), “from India (*Hodu*) to Ethiopia (*Kush*),” indicating the great extent of Ahasueres’ kingdom of Persia.⁶⁷ It would appear that the connotation of remoteness also underlies the choice of Kush in Zephaniah’s prophecy against the nations (2:12), thus indicating God’s universal reach to the most remote parts of the world.⁶⁸ Similarly the names of “Egypt, Kush, and Seba” in Isa 43:3 and 45:14 were “probably chosen because they represent the most remote regions known to Israelites.”⁶⁹ Apparently the same may be said for Ps 68:32/31, “Kush shall stretch out her hands to God.” By the choice of Kush in this verse, the psalmist indicates that those from the farthest reaches of the world will come to know God. Compare also the NJPS translation of Isa 18:1–2, “Ah, land . . . beyond the rivers of Nubia! Go, swift messengers, to a nation far and remote, to a people thrust forth and away.”

This ancient view of the geography of the inhabited world probably also explains the two references to Ethiopians found in the Greek and Latin versions of Psalms but not in the Hebrew original. Psalm 72/71, “a prayer of David son of Jesse” concerning Solomon, entreats God that “the king” be endowed with righteousness, that he may champion the lowly, the poor and the needy who cry out. Verses 8–11 ask that the king be powerful and rule over a great empire:

Let him rule from sea to sea, from the river to the ends of the earth.
 Let desert dwellers kneel before him, and his enemies lick the dust.
 Let kings of Tarshish and the island pay tribute, kings of Sheba and Seba
 offer gifts.
 Let all kings bow to him, and all nations serve him.

Where the Hebrew has “desert dwellers” (*šyyim*) the Greek texts of the Septuagint, Aquila, and Symmachus, as well as the Vulgate have “Ethiopians” (*Aithiopes*).⁷⁰ Substitution of “Ethiopian” for “desert dweller” is a natural interpretation of the difficult Hebrew word because these verses

describe the “ends of the earth” from where all kings will come and pay tribute to the king of Israel. Furthermore, the combination of Kush, Seba, and Sheba occurs elsewhere in the Bible (Isa 43:3 and 45:14), as noted earlier.⁷¹ The substitution of “Ethiopians” for “desert dwellers” having been made, it was then automatically made again two chapters later for the same difficult Hebrew word (*šyyim*) in Ps 74/73:14, where we find *Aithiopes* once again in the Septuagint, the Vulgate, and other versions.⁷²

The belief that Kush is found at end of the earth lies behind the choice of an Ethiopian as the first gentile convert to Christianity (Acts 8:26–40). Nothing could more visibly indicate the universalist posture of the early church than the conversion of those from the most remote parts of the world. Indeed, Philip’s conversion of the Ethiopian became a symbol of Christianity’s conversion of the world, and in Christian metaphor (beginning with Origen in the third century) the “Ethiopian” became the symbol for the church of the gentiles. As Augustine said explaining “Ethiopians” in Ps 72/71:9, “By the Ethiopians, as by a part the whole, He signifies all nations, selecting that nation to mention especially by name, which is at the ends of the earth.” And Augustine explained that the same interpretation is to be given also to our verse in Ps 68:32/31, “Ethiopia, which seems to be the utmost limit of the gentiles.”⁷³ Given the evidence from classical, ancient Near Eastern, and biblical sources, it appears quite certain that the connotation of Ethiopians/Kushites as being the most remote southern peoples on the face of the earth is the key to Amos 9:7.⁷⁴

In summary, biblical references to the place Kush or the people Kushites, usually mean Nubia/Ethiopia and its inhabitants, including the territory and people on the (south or southwestern) Arabian side of the Red Sea, but may on occasion refer to the Semitic Kusu on the southern borders of Israel in the Negev and the North Arabian desert. In addition, the Kush who is the father of Nimrod is to be associated with the Mesopotamian Kassites. Whether or not the biblical author in compiling the genealogy of Kush in Genesis 10 “sought dexterously to explain” the existence of different peoples or geographical entities sharing the same name, it appears that the biblical references to Kush do not all indicate the same people or land.⁷⁵ The Bible knows that African Kush is “sundered in twain” by the Nile (and/or it is crisscrossed by a multitude of rivers); that it is a rich source of gold and topaz; and, most important, that it is the land at the furthest southern reach of the earth. The image of Kush as being at the end of the earth, we shall see, has important ramifications for the image of the black African that develops in the postbiblical period.

TWO

BIBLICAL ISRAEL:

THE PEOPLE OF KUSH

NOW THAT WE have determined when the Bible refers to Nubia/Kush, what the ancient Israelites knew about the land, and how they perceived it, we can begin our investigation into the biblical views of, and attitudes toward, the people of that land. Kushites are mentioned in a number of places in the Hebrew Bible, but we cannot, of course, restrict our investigation to the Bible. Ancient Israel's attitudes and perceptions must be located within the larger ancient Near Eastern context, of which it was part. In addition, as we saw in the last chapter, Greco-Roman perceptions of the Black can also help illuminate contemporaneous Jewish perceptions.

Numbers 12:1

One of the most interesting Kushite passages in the Bible is the reference to Moses' wife. Much has been written against and in favor of Blacks based on this passage. Some have seen this biblical event as the first recorded instance of racism; others, as a divine declaration for a color-blind brotherhood; yet others, as both; and still others, as neither.

Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Kushite woman whom he had married (for [*ki*] he had indeed married a Kushite woman); and they said, "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" (Num 12:1–2; NRSV)

The translation given, that of NRSV (similarly RSV and NEB), presumes that the clause "for he had indeed married a Kushite woman" is the narrator's parenthetical remark providing the reader with necessary background information.¹ As the medieval Jewish exegete Bekhor Shor (twelfth century) said: "Since nowhere were we told that Moses had married a Kushite, Scripture tells us 'for indeed he had married a Kushite.'"² This translation is commonly found in modern as well as medieval biblical commentators.³ Other translations are, however, possible. NJPS, based on Ibn Ezra's (d. 1164) statement that *ki* introduces direct discourse, translates: "Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Kushite woman he had married: 'He married

a Kushite woman.”⁴ It is also possible to interpret *ki* as indicating indirect discourse: “Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Kushite woman he had married, that he had married a Kushite woman.”⁵

Whether we understand the *ki* clause as explanatory, as direct discourse, or as indirect discourse, the complaint against Moses was that he had married a Kushite woman. Who was this woman and what was the reason for the complaint? Until recently biblical scholars had commonly understood “Kushite” in this verse to refer to the African Kushites. This understanding is not surprising. After all, that is the common biblical meaning of the name, and it has been enshrined in Bible translations since the Septuagint’s “Ethiopian” rendering of Num 12:1 over two thousand years ago. What is somewhat surprising, however, is the degree to which scholars—biblical and otherwise—have read their modern day assumptions and prejudices into the biblical text. Thus many have understood this incident in the Bible as an ancient example of racism, for it shows Aaron and Miriam’s disapproval of Moses’ marriage to a Black.⁶ Or, if Moses’ wife is not actually Black, Aaron and Miriam mean to insult her by characterizing her as one.⁷

Even more surprising is how some scholars have assumed that because Moses’ wife was a black African (as they think), she was therefore a slave. In Hastings’s well-respected *Dictionary of the Bible* (1911), D. S. Margoliouth remarked that the reason for Miriam and Aaron’s objection to Moses’ marriage is that the woman he married was a “black slave-girl.”⁸ Ullendorff, who wrote a book on Ethiopia and the Bible, also speaks of “the obvious interpretation that Moses had married an Ethiopian slave-girl.”⁹ The Bible, however, says nothing of the Kushite being a slave.

Many scholars became convinced of the Black or racist interpretation of Numbers because of the punishment of leprosy God inflicted on Miriam for speaking against her brother Moses (Num 12:10). The “snow-white” leprosy is seen as an apt response to a racist slur about a black African. This is a common interpretation of Miriam’s affliction, which is found in writings by both Blacks and non-Blacks, whether theologically or scholarly based, over many years.¹⁰ Biblicists, however, now generally agree that the Hebrew term (*šaraʿat*) used to describe the punishment of Moses’ sister is not leprosy, nor is it a category of diseases that includes leprosy. It is doubtful that leprosy even existed in the ancient Near East at the time of the Hebrew Bible. The evidence presented by the Bible indicates rather that *šaraʿat* is a disease or group of diseases that exhibit a flaking or exfoliation of the skin, symptoms that are common to several skin diseases (psoriasis, eczema, seborrhea, etc.). The biblical description of the disease in our passage and in others (Ex 4:6, Num 12:10, 2 Kgs 5:27) as “like snow” does not refer to the color of the disease but to its characteristic flakiness. The adjective “white” that accompanies the “like snow” description in various translations is *not* in the original Hebrew text.¹¹ The passage in Numbers actually pro-

vides evidence of a nonwhite color of the disease, as well as its flaky characteristic, for it describes the condition as similar to a “dead [fetus] when it comes out of its mother’s womb.” The color of a fetus that has died in the womb is reddish, which turns brown-gray after a few days out of the womb. As for its flaky condition, a dead fetus in utero sheds its skin in large sheets.¹²

Finally, even if *šaraʿat* did mean “snow-white” leprosy, why should that punishment be an apt response to a racist slur against black Africans? The disease is found in the Hebrew Bible as God’s punishment for different sorts of sins, none of which have anything to do with Blacks. Joab and his descendants are cursed with it for the crime of murder (2 Sam 3:29); Gehazi is afflicted with it for acting deceitfully (2 Kgs 5); King Azariah, for not removing the high places (2 Kgs 15:5); and King Uzziah for improperly offering incense in the temple (2 Chr 26:16–21).

In short, the interpretation of Num 12:1 that sees Miriam and Aaron deprecating black Africans is a product of modern assumptions read back into the Bible. Looking at the biblical sources without the skewing prism of postbiblical history provides no such reading of the text. There is no evidence here that biblical Israel saw black Africans in a negative light.

What then was the complaint against Moses, and who was the Kushite whom he had married? As we saw in the previous chapter, there was a people, or group of people, inhabiting the Negev and northern Arabia, known as Kushites. Now the prophet Habakkuk parallels Kushan with Midian: “The tents of Kushan . . . the dwellings of Midian” (Hab 3:7). Because Midian is located in the same general area as these Negev or North-Arabian Kushites, that is, northwest Arabia, and because the name Kushan is a lengthened form of Kush, scholars have therefore concluded that there is some historical connection between Kush(an) and Midian.¹³ It is generally thought that the Arabian Kushites assimilated among the Midianites, just as the Midianites later assimilated among the Ishmaelites, and the Ishmaelites among the Arabs. Thus, Kush(an) is the ancient name of Midian or the name of a tribe that had close ties to Midian.¹⁴

This identity of the Arabian Kush with Midian is the key to understanding the passage in Numbers that speaks of Moses’ Kushite wife. According to the earlier biblical narrative, Moses indeed had a wife, Zipporah, who was a Midianite (Ex 2:21). When the Bible says, therefore, that Moses had a Kushite wife, it is referring to the same Midianite wife Zipporah, but is using the ancient name of her people. “The Kushite” of Num 12:1 is just another name for the “the Midianite.” The identity of the names is found in Christian sources as early as the fifth century and in Jewish sources of the Hellenistic period and the later Middle Ages.¹⁵ It has become very well accepted among modern-day biblicalists.¹⁶

If the translations of RSV, NRSV, and NEB (“for he had indeed married a Kushite woman”) are correct, it would imply that at the time of the com-

position of these verses in Numbers, this ancient name for Midian was no longer so well known, and the biblical author therefore interjects the parenthetical remark, “for he had indeed married a Kushite woman.” If the direct discourse (Ibn Ezra and NJPS) or the indirect discourse translation is correct, I argue that the identification of Kush(an) with Midian may still have been known, and therefore occasioned no biblical explanation. In any case, the identification of Kush(an) with Midian allows the biblical narrative to make sense on its own terms and does not force us to posit events not provided by the narrative, that is, a second marriage by Moses.

Whether we understand “Kushite” in Num 12:1 as another name for Midianite or whether we understand the word to mean Ethiopian, the point of Miriam and Aaron’s complaint was that Moses had taken a non-Israelite wife. In having God punish Miriam for arguing against the marriage, the Bible implicitly acknowledges the acceptability of foreign marriage.¹⁷ The story of Moses’ marriage to the Kushite, then, is neither the first recorded instance of racism nor a divine declaration for a color-blind brotherhood. Still less is it both of these. Whether the Kushite is a black African or not, color is not the issue of concern in the text.

Isaiah 18:1–2 (18:7)

A passage in Isaiah (18:1–2; repeated in verse 7) describes one aspect of the land of Kush and several characteristics of the Kushites. In fact, these two verses contain the Bible’s most detailed description of the black African. While the passage, however, is reasonably clear regarding its description of the land of Kush, as we saw in the previous chapter, its description of the people of Kush is full of linguistic problems and has been the subject of a multitude of different interpretations. By way of illustration, to its translation of these two verses ICC (G. B. Gray) inserts six question marks, and even the more recent NJPS version provides an alternate translation to one line and admits “meaning of Hebrew uncertain” to two others. A sense of the difficulties may be gained by looking at two different recent translations, those of the Continental Commentaries series (H. Wildberger) and the New Jewish Publication Society.

Ha! The land of the winged boats
[which is situated] in the region
of the rivers of Kush,
which sends envoys on the river,
and [in] papyrus canoes on the water.
Go, you nimble messengers,
to a tall, smooth nation,

Ah, land in the deep shadow of wings,
Beyond the rivers of Nubia!
Go, swift messengers,
To a nation far and remote,
To a people thrust forth and away—
A nation of gibber and chatter—
Whose land is cut off by streams;

to a people feared far and wide, to a nation, which tramples down with muscle power, whose land is cut through by streams.	Which sends out envoys by sea, In papyrus vessels upon the water!
(CC) ¹⁸	(NJPS)

The historical context of these verses is an attempt by Kush-Egypt and Judah to join forces in an alliance against Assyria.¹⁹ At this time Egypt was ruled by the Kushite or twenty-fifth Dynasty, which had sent emissaries to Judah to discuss the possible alliance. Isa 20:5–6 also refers to attempts (either Judahite or Philistine) to make alliance with “Kush, their hope” against Assyria. In Isaiah 18 the prophet sends the delegation back to its own country with the message that it is not the right time for political alliances and military action against Assyria. In the first two verses Isaiah describes the land and the people who would make alliance with Judah.²⁰

LAND OF THE WINGED BOATS / LAND IN THE DEEP SHADOW OF WINGS;
 HEBREW *ŞILŞEL KENAFAYIM*.

The second Hebrew word, *kenafayim* ‘wings’, presents little problem. The difficulty is with the word *şilşel*, which has generally received one of four interpretations by moderns: the word is related to Arabic *şalla*, *şalşala* ‘to whirl, to rattle’; it is equated with *şyr* ‘a locustlike creature’; it derives from *şl* ‘shadow’; or *şilşel* ‘ship, boat’. Together with *kenafayim* ‘wings’, these interpretations inform most translations, ancient and modern. So we have “whirring wings” (RSV, NRSV), “buzzing insects” and “whirring locusts” (NAB and NJB); “deep shadow of wings” or “a most sheltered land” (NJPS, similarly KJV), following LXX and Targums; and “winged boats,” meaning either sailboats or speedy boats found in REB and some modern commentaries.²¹ Although the Hebrew *kenafayim* has generally not been the subject of dispute, this word too has not entirely escaped debate. A recent interpretation understands the word in the sense of “side,” one meaning it has in Hebrew, and translates the phrase “land of shadows on both sides”—that is, “near the equator, shadows fall on one side of an object during the summer and on the other during the winter.”²²

It seems to me that a translation “whirring of wings,” or something similar, is most likely correct. Not only is there an Arabic cognate to *şilşel*, as indicated earlier, but the word itself, although not found in Biblical Hebrew, is found in Tannaitic Hebrew as a reduplicated form of *şll* ‘to resonate, ring, tremble’.²³ Although this translation has an ancient tradition, being found in the Greek translation of Symmachus, and has been incorporated in RSV and NRSV, it has not become universally accepted.²⁴ A new find, however, may support the translation and help to explain its

meaning. A hieroglyphic stela dating from the end of the twenty-fifth (Kushite) Dynasty in Egypt was found in 1977 along a desert road in Egypt. The stela, dated to the years before the conflict with Assyria (i.e., just at the time when Isaiah gave his message recorded in Isaiah 18), describes the army of the Kushite king, Tirhaqa (690–664 B.C.E.): “[The army) is coming] like the coming of the wind, like falcons flapping the wings with [their] wings.”²⁵ The description “like falcons flapping the wings” may well be the intended meaning of Isaiah’s *šilšel kenafayim*, that is, “whirring of wings.”²⁶ It is not clear from the inscription precisely what action of the army is being compared with the flapping of falcons’ wings, but it may be a reference to the Kushites’ legendary running speed, to which Isaiah next refers. As Heliiodorus (fourth century C.E.) said of the Ethiopian Trog(1)odytes, “Their swift feet carry them like wings.”²⁷

GO, YOU NIMBLE MESSENGERS / GO, SWIFT MESSENGERS;
HEBREW *MAL'AKHIM QALIM*.

The Kushite messengers are characterized by their speed, an attribute of the ancient Ethiopians noted also in Egyptian and Greek texts. The stela of Tirhaqa, mentioned earlier, indicates that Kushites were known for their running ability. The inscription describes how Tirhaqa had commanded that his army run every day and how the king had gone out “to observe the running of his army”: “When the person of the king is on the way to the camp (*bj3*) to see the beauty of his army, [(The army) is coming] like the coming of the wind, like falcons flapping the wings with [their] wings.” It further describes how the army ran the fifty kilometer distance, from Memphis to the Fayum, in five hours, and how it was rewarded by the king.²⁸ Herodotus (fifth century B.C.E.) says that the “Ethiopian Troglodytes [cave-dwellers] are swifter of foot than any men of whom tales are brought to us,” and Pliny quotes Crates of Pergamum (second century B.C.E.) as saying that “the Troglodytes beyond Ethiopia are swifter than horses.”²⁹ Heliiodorus, a few centuries later, speaks about these same people saying that “they have from nature the gift of running swiftly, which they train from childhood.”³⁰ Given these attestations of Kushite speed, it may not be coincidental that Joab, David’s commander in chief (tenth century B.C.E.), employed a Kushite runner (2 Sam 18:21–23).

TO A TALL, SMOOTH NATION / TO A PEOPLE THRUST FORTH AND AWAY;
HEBREW *MEMUŠAKH U-MORAṬ*.

The first Hebrew word is apparently a passive participle of the root *mšk* ‘to draw’, but it is not clear what sense the word has. Some would see it as a reference to the famed Kushite ability with the bow, that is, “drawing [the

bow],” a sense the word has elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible.³¹ Others, such as RSV, NRSV, and REB, prefer “tall” (i.e., drawn out), a translation that is supported by the remarks of several classical authors about the Ethiopians’ height. Herodotus’s remark that the Ethiopians are said to be the tallest people in the world is often mentioned.³² This depiction is echoed by Pseudo-Scylax in his *Periplus* (fourth cent B.C.E.).³³ And the remark in the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (first–second century C.E.) that the inhabitants of the East African coast near Zanzibar are “big of body” (μέγιστοι δὲ ἐν σώμασιν), an expression that refers to stature, reminds one of Isaiah’s (45:14) comment about “Egypt’s wealth and Nubia’s gains and Sabaeans, men of stature” (*yegia’ miṣrayim u-seḥar kush u-seva’im anshe midah*).³⁴ Although Pliny’s description of the Ethiopian Syrobotae as being about twelve feet tall is fantastic, as is Diodorus of Sicily’s (first century B.C.E.) reference to the height (about ten feet) of those people south of Ethiopia near the equator, both writers clearly reflect reports of very tall Ethiopians.³⁵ Notice of the height of some East Africans is not restricted to the ancients. Medieval Muslim writers often noted this feature, as did some moderns.³⁶ Given this evidence, it would seem that the LXX translation of *memuṣakh* in Isa 18:2 by the word μετέωρον (lit. “raised up”) captures the same sense of height.³⁷

With the second word, *morat* ‘smooth’ or ‘burnished, polished’, some think that Isaiah was referring to the appearance of the Kushites’ skin after it has been rubbed with oil, “which would have been especially eye-catching when seen on the dark skin of the Kushites.”³⁸ This interpretation may perhaps be supported by observations made by ancients as well as moderns. Herodotus (3.23; cf. Mela 3.88) noted that the Ethiopians have shining skin, and the anthropologist Dominique Zahan described the body care practiced by men in some black African societies this way: “Great emphasis is placed on the smoothness and brilliance of the skin. Its luster and sheen are a sign of vigor and good health. Plant and animal fats are used to contribute to this exaltation of the skin and black colour. Often people use the remains of gray fat on their fingers to grease their thighs and legs.”³⁹ Other scholars understand the Hebrew word to have the same meaning that the Semitic root *mrt* has in cognate languages: “to pull out hair, to depilate,” a meaning that is commonly found in the Hebrew Bible and which is given to our passage by a number of biblicalists.⁴⁰ If this is the meaning, we may point to the notice of Diodorus of Sicily that those near the equator “have absolutely no hair on any part of their bodies except on the head, eyebrows and eyelids, and on the chin,” a report echoed much later by the Arabic geographer Dimashqī (d. 1327), who wrote that the black African “Zanj, the Sūdān, the Ḥabasha and Nūba and the like” are “hairless and smooth.”⁴¹ These writers describe a characteristic of black Africans that has been noted by scientists—that Negroids tend to have less body hair than Caucasoids.⁴²

These two possible descriptions of the Kushites as being “hairless” or “oiled” are not mutually exclusive and Isaiah may have had both ideas in mind when he said that the Kushites are *morat̕*, that is, “smooth” and “burnished.” Such an appearance may have made a favorable impression on the ancient Israelites. “There is no reason why the Hebrews should not have admired the burnished copper colour of the Ethiopians.”⁴³ “Isaiah would seem to have been struck by the fine physique of the ambassadors.”⁴⁴ Several biblical scholars have suggested that this may have been what Herodotus (3.20) had in mind when he described the Ethiopians as the best-looking people in the world.⁴⁵ If this is Herodotus’s meaning, then his statement “The Ethiopians are said to be the tallest and best-looking (μέγιστοι καὶ κάλλιστοι) of all people” would parallel two of the Kushite features (*memušakh u-morat̕*) noted by Isaiah.⁴⁶

Wildberger’s translation “to a tall, smooth nation,” then, not only makes philological sense but is supported by extrabiblical evidence. On the other hand, the NJPS translation “to a people thrust forth and away” understands both Hebrew words *memušakh* and *morat̕* to be saying the same thing and to be referring to the distant land of the African envoys. This translation is apparently based on the work of H. L. Ginsberg, who translates “distant (in space) and thrust away,” noting the meaning of “distant in time” for *nimšakh* in Isa 13:22 and Ezek 12:25 and 28, and “thrust away” for *morat̕*, as derived from *yrt̕*, drawing attention to Job 16:11 and the Arabic *wrt̕*.⁴⁷ This translation has not found acceptance among biblical scholars today.

TO A PEOPLE FEARED FAR AND WIDE / TO A NATION FAR AND REMOTE;
HEBREW *EL ʿAM NORAʾ MIN HUʾ WAHALʾAH*.

“The invasions into Egypt, which led to the Twenty-fifth (Ethiopian) Dynasty seizing control over the land, would undoubtedly have brought with it a respect for Cush from the surrounding countries that was commensurate with its power.”⁴⁸ Not only this, but once Kush controlled Egypt it exhibited an aggressive geopolitical thrust northward. Among other events, in 701 B.C.E. Kush battled the Assyrian king Sennacherib to a standstill and a few years later engaged in military campaigns in Asia Minor. “The awareness of the strength and fighting potential of the Kushites which appears suddenly in the Bible (Isa 18:1, Jer 46:9, Ezek 38:5, [Isa 37:9 = 2 Kgs 19:9, Isa 45:14]) dates from these halcyon days of the 25th Dynasty dominion.”⁴⁹

No doubt the Kushites’ dominion over Egypt and their subsequent military activities brought in its wake a reputation of the Kushites as a power to be reckoned with, but Kushite fighting ability was respected even before the period of the twenty-fifth Dynasty. Egyptian literature and art from the

Middle Kingdom (ca. 2133–1786 B.C.E.) onward reflect a view of the Kushites as a powerful force in resisting Egyptian intervention into their land. “Nubia as a military power on the periphery of the Mediterranean world was by far the most prominent feature of the ancient profile of blacks.”⁵⁰ And Egyptians had a long history of recruiting Kushites as mercenaries from the First Intermediate Period (ca. 2258–2040 B.C.E.) down to the Hellenistic period.⁵¹ We find Kushites as mercenaries in the service of the Egyptian army in Canaan in the fourteenth and the tenth centuries B.C.E. The same is true after the period of the twenty-fifth Dynasty in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E.⁵² There were Kushite contingents also in the Persian army of Xerxes.⁵³

One aspect of the Ethiopians’ military prowess was particularly well known in the ancient world—their skill with the bow. Herodotus (3.21) tells the story of how the Ethiopian king defied the Persian king Cambyses, who had conquered Egypt and was preparing to invade Ethiopia. He sent Cambyses an Ethiopian bow with the message that when the Persians could draw the bow as easily as he does, then they might stand a chance against the Ethiopians (and even then only with overwhelming odds); until then they should thank the gods that the Ethiopians do not have it in mind to attack the Persians. These bows must have been very large, for Herodotus (7.69) describes them as being four cubits long—about six feet—and Strabo (first century C.E.), who also gives this measurement (17.2.3), says that they were used for hunting elephants with two men holding the bow and the third drawing the arrow (16.4.10).⁵⁴ It wasn’t only the size—and thus the power—of the bow that gained a reputation in the Greco-Roman world; it was also the accuracy of the Ethiopian aim. Pliny describes the “Ethiopian coast-tribes, the Nisicathae and Nisitae, names that mean ‘men with three’ or ‘with four eyes’—not because they really are like that but because they have a particularly keen sight in using arrows,” and he says that the Ethiopians are famous among all peoples for their archers.⁵⁵ Heliodorus later reports that the Ethiopians were able to hit their target right in the eye, an echo of which is found in the later Arabic term for their Nubian opponents as “pupil smiters.”⁵⁶ Strabo (16.4.9) refers to another Ethiopian people who “have the custom of setting up a contest in archery for boys who have not yet reached manhood.” These literary references have now been confirmed by iconographic evidence. A group of forty wooden figurines representing a troop of Nubian archers was recovered from an Egyptian tomb dated about 2000 B.C.E.⁵⁷ And these figures are only the most dramatic representation of Nubian archers, for the depiction of Nubians with bows (and arrows at times) is very common in Egyptian iconography.⁵⁸ One of the Egyptian names for the land to the south, Ta-Sety (*t3-stj*) Land of the Bow, may even derive from this famed ability.⁵⁹ It is interesting that this characteristic of the Kushites has continued into rel-

atively modern times. In 1790 James Bruce wrote about the Shankella at the lower end of the Blue Nile that “they are all archers from their infancy. Their bows are all made of wild fennel thicker than the common proportion, and about seven feet long.”⁶⁰

It is possible that the Kushites’ fame as archers is reflected in two biblical verses. In a description of the foreign contingents in the Egyptian army at the battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C.E., Jer 46:9 says: “Let the warriors go forth, Kush and Put who grasp the shield. And the Ludim who grasp and draw the bow.” Isa 66:19 may also have a reference to Put and Lud. Although the Hebrew reads “From them I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Pul, and Lud—which draw the bow,” several scholars, on the basis of the reading “Put” (פּוּט) in the LXX, as well as the association of Lud and Put elsewhere (Ezek 27:10, 30:5), would see an original “Put” rather than “Pul.”⁶¹ In any case, the Ludim are said to be practiced with the bow. Who are the Ludim? An ancient people by that name inhabited Asia Minor, and some earlier scholarship believed that Jeremiah and Isaiah have these people in mind.⁶² However, because Lud is grouped with Kush in Jer 46:9 and Ezek 30:5 and because Put, whether it is to be identified with modern Somalia or Libya, is in Africa, most scholars today agree that Lud too is in Africa.⁶³ And just as the bows, so too the shields of the Kushites must have made an impression. Apparently their striking feature was also their size.⁶⁴ Similarly, Strabo (17.1.54) mentions the Ethiopians’ long oblong shields.⁶⁵

The NJPS translation “to a nation far and remote” is that of H. L. Ginsberg, who refers to Ibn Janah and the Arabic *waraʿa* ‘to repel’.⁶⁶ However, Ibn Janah provides no support for his explanation except for the context in both Isa 18:2 and 21:1. This translation has not found acceptance among biblical scholars today.

TO A NATION, WHICH TRAMPLES DOWN WITH MUSCLE POWER /
A NATION OF GIBBER AND CHATTER; HEBREW *QAW-QAW U-MEBUSAH*.

The main problem in this line is the Hebrew word *qaw-qaw*, which occurs in the Bible only here (and repeated in Isa 18:7). The translation “a nation which tramples down with muscle power” understands the word as meaning “sinewy muscle power” on the basis of the Arabic *quwwa* ‘strength, power’ and *qawiya* ‘stretched tight, be strong’.⁶⁷ So also J. Blenkinsopp’s new translation in the Anchor Bible series: “a nation strong and conquering.”⁶⁸ Note Mela’s (first century C.E.) remark, ultimately deriving from Herodotus, that the Ethiopians are admirers of bodily strength and that their custom is to choose their leader partly on the basis of his strength.⁶⁹ The NJPS translation, “a nation of gibber and chatter,” on the other hand, sees *qaw-qaw* as semantically similar to the Greek *barbar*, which is tradi-

tionally understood as deriving from the sound of foreign and unintelligible speech on the ears of the Greeks who coined the word. The nonsensical repetition of the syllable was meant to mimic the sound of incomprehensible foreign speech. The same linguistic phenomenon is seen to be behind Isaiah's *qaw-qaw*.⁷⁰

Another translation is possible, which is based on the meaning of Biblical Hebrew *qaw* or *qāw* 'measuring line' or (possibly) 'measure'.⁷¹ Some commentaries and translations have thus rendered the text as "a nation of line by line," or "a nation meted out."⁷² Although these explanations don't make much sense, perhaps we may see an extended meaning of *qaw* in the difficult word *qaw-qaw* in the sense of "tall." Such a semantic development is found in the Syriac *mšwht*, which the Peshiṭta uses to translate both *qāw* in Isa 28:17, where the meaning is "measuring-line," and *anshe midah* in Isa 45:14 where the meaning is "tall men" (*gbr' dmšwht*). Our passage then would provide a parallelism between *goy memušakh* and *goy qawqaw*, assuming *memušakh* to mean "tall."

There is yet one other possibility for the word *qaw-qaw*. It is suggestive that the Arabic geographers, from the ninth century C.E. onward, commonly refer to a black African people and place by the name of Kawkaw or Qawqaw, "the greatest of the realms of the Sūdān" (Ya^cqūbī). Two objections might be raised to an identity of these people with Isaiah's *qaw-qaw*. The first is geographic: the name Kawkaw (Qawqaw) in the Arabic sources is identified with the toponym Gao, which, situated on the Niger, is considerably west of Kush. The second is chronological: the earliest references to a people and place called Kawkaw are geographers who lived more than fifteen hundred years after Isaiah. As far as the geographic objection is concerned, however, we must remember that biblical Kush (i.e., Isaiah's perspective) meant black Africa in general. On the other hand, from the Arabic perspective, al-Zuhrī (twelfth century) puts Kawkaw on the Nile and makes it the capital of Ḥabasha, that is, Kush.⁷³ I have shown elsewhere, as have others, that in the early centuries of the Common Era there was a lack of accurate geographic knowledge about Africa.⁷⁴ The chronological objection, on the other hand, does not mean that the Kawkaw did not exist before the Arab geographers wrote about them, or even before there was a place by that name. It is true that the name Kawkaw is similar to other reduplicated names by which the Arabs refer to distant peoples deep in Africa, such as Damdam, Namnam, and Lamlam, as Nehemiah Levtzion and John Hunwick observe.⁷⁵ But, once again, this does not mean that the Arab geographers of the ninth century invented those names. The names could have been long known among the Semites, whether heard from the Africans themselves or not, and Isaiah therefore could have referred to one of them as the Qawqaw people (*goy qaw-qaw*). Nonetheless, I would not push this theory too hard because it requires spanning more than

fifteen hundred years with conjecture. Since we have no evidence of a Kawkaw/Qawqaw people contemporaneous with Isaiah or for a long time after Isaiah, the theory must remain only suggestive.

The Hebrew word *mebusah* was translated with a negative nuance in the LXX and the Peshiṭta as “trodden down” (καταπεπατημένον and *dys* respectively) and is reflected in the KJV, which has the same translation. The negative cast has affected also the translation of the associated word *qaw-qaw* in these versions: “without hope” (ἀνέλπιστον) and “dishonored, disgraced” (*mškr*).⁷⁶ The translation of *mebusah* as “trodden down” assumes the word to be a passive form of the verb *bms*, but as scholars have realized, *mebusah* is rather a nominal form with the active meaning of “trodding down” or “trampling.”⁷⁷ Thus we have “conquering” in RSV and similarly in REB, NAB, NJB, *La Sainte Bible*, von Orelli, and so on.

A review of what Isaiah had to say about the Kushites indicates that they were considered to be a people feared for their military might with a reputation for conquest and prowess with the bow. They were known for their speed of foot, their height, and their smooth skin, which may have taken on a burnished appearance. They may have also struck Isaiah as a people with sinewy muscle power (or, alternatively, as a people whose language sounded strange). Finally, their nautical accomplishments were noted. Given this description it should not be surprising to find biblical scholars concluding, “In Isa 18:1–2 the Ethiopians are regarded with something akin to admiration,” or “One detects in [Isaiah’s] words a certain measure of admiration for this exuberant, youthful people, which had so recently entered on the stage of world history.”⁷⁸ The one characteristic that comes across most strongly in Isaiah’s words is military prowess, a feature for which the Nubians were apparently well known in the ancient world. Speaking of the First Intermediate Period in Egypt (2258–2040 B.C.E.), Henry Fischer said: “It . . . seems likely that the Nubians enjoyed considerable prestige among the Upper Egyptians at Gebelein on account of their prowess as hunters and warriors.”⁷⁹ As Strabo said (17.1.53), the ancients believed the Ethiopians to be warlike. Even the characteristic of swiftness is associated with this ability, as we saw in the Taharqa inscription and as we can see in Ps 19:6/5, “rejoicing like a warrior to his course.” Such an association goes back a long way, for several Egyptian inscriptions from about the First Intermediate Period, including one speaking of Nubians, link running speed with military prowess.⁸⁰

Jeremiah 13:23

No doubt the best-known line in the Bible about the Kushites/Ethiopians is Jer 13:23 “Can the Kushite change his skin or the leopard his spots? Just

as much can you do good, who are practiced in doing evil.” A straightforward reading of this verse cannot uncover any negative sentiment toward the Kushite, or toward black skin. Jeremiah is simply using the Kushite’s black skin as a metaphor for that which is unchangeable.⁸¹ Although Jeremiah’s perspective is that of a non-Kushite, who assumes that black is not the normal skin color, there is no value judgment implied in the use of the metaphor. However, less literal interpretations, more homiletical in nature, saw the prophet as playing on the color symbolism of blackness when he compared Ethiopians and leopards to sinners who “whether totally black or only spotted” are still sinners.⁸² With these kinds of interpretations, it is not surprising that an African American Christian author, Alfred Dunston, could say, “The passage . . . is almost always used to say that one must be content with the misfortune of being what he is. . . . [This understanding presents] the picture of the poor unfortunate Ethiopian who would most certainly change his skin if he could; but alas he cannot.”⁸³ Dunston refutes this meaning: “Jeremiah was not commiserating either with the Ethiopian or the leopard.”⁸⁴ Jeremiah’s rhetorical question implying nothing more than immutability has its parallel in an ancient Egyptian wisdom saying, “There is no Nubian who leaves his skin,”⁸⁵ as well as in the Greek proverb, “It’s like trying to wash an Ethiopian white.”⁸⁶

Jeremiah 38:7–13

In addition to Moses’ wife, another biblical personality identified as a Kushite is Ebed-melech. “Ebed-melech the Kushite” was in the service of the Judahite king Zedekiah (*‘ebed-melekh* literally means “servant, or vassal, of the king”) and saved the prophet Jeremiah’s life (Jer 38:7–13).⁸⁷ He is rewarded for this deed by God’s promise that he would survive the coming destruction of the kingdom: “You shall escape with your life, because you trusted Me—declares the Lord” (Jer 39:15–18). The Hebrew text calls Ebed-melech a *saris*, which may mean either “eunuch” or “palace official.”⁸⁸ In any case, the Bible presents him as a righteous man and casts him in a heroic role.

Jeremiah 36:14 (LXX 43:14), Zephaniah 1:1, Psalms 7:1

Aside from *kushi* as an ethnic designation (gentilic) for Moses’ wife (Num 12:1) and Ebed-melech (Jer 38:7–13), Kush or Kushi is found elsewhere in the Bible as a personal name. A Yehudi son of Nethanyahu son of Shelemyahu son of Kushi is employed by the royal court of Jehoiakim, king of Judah (Jer 36:14). The father of the prophet Zephaniah is named Kushi: “The word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah son of Kushi son of

Gedaliah son of Amariah son of Hezekiah, during the reign of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah” (Zeph 1:1). A psalm of David begins with the ascription “which he [David] sang to the Lord, concerning Kush, a Benjaminite” (Ps 7:1).⁸⁹

There are three opinions as to the origin of the personal name Kush or Kushi in the Bible. First, some say that it was originally a gentile indicating land of origin, which in time became a personal name. One might compare the name of Kashta, the second Kushite king known to us (reigned ca. 760–747 B.C.E.), which probably means “the Kushite,” or the names Kusaia, Kusaiu, Kusi, and Kusitu (feminine), all meaning “Kushite,” which occur in various Akkadian documents.⁹⁰ On the basis of this explanation, Roger Anderson has argued that the Kushi names in the Bible indicate that dark-skinned Africans (Saharan and sub-Saharan) had settled in some areas of Palestine, were incorporated into the mixed population of Syria-Palestine, and became accepted as members of Israelite society.⁹¹ The Bible scholar Gene Rice has gone further and attempted to pinpoint a specific historic incident for the arrival of some biblical Kushites. He thinks that as a result of the alliance between the twenty-fifth (Kushite) Dynasty of Egypt and the kingdom of Judah against Assyria, a number of Kushites came to Judah.⁹² Whenever their arrival, it is not difficult to conceive of Kushites or black Africans in ancient Israelite society. Evidence for such may be indicated from the “negro head” seals found in ancient Israel from as early as the thirteenth century B.C.E.⁹³

Second, some scholars are of the opinion that the personal name Kushi found in the Bible is a common West Semitic name found in several languages (Epigraphic Hebrew, Aramaic, Akkadian, and Phoenician) and has nothing to do with a land of origin.⁹⁴ Finally, a third opinion holds that the name could indeed mean “Nubian” but was given to a non-Nubian for other reasons, for example, for political purposes (to identify with the Egyptian-Nubian dynasty), or as a nickname referring to one’s work (a merchant, say, trading with Nubia) or one’s dark complexion.⁹⁵ A similar situation exists with the Egyptian name *P3-nḥsy*, familiar to us from its biblical form Pinḥas (Phinehas), which literally means “the Nubian.” The name may be used in Egyptian for someone whose skin is dark but who is not a Nubian.⁹⁶

To summarize the ancient Israelite perception of the black African, references to Kushites in the Bible fall into three categories: one comment about skin color, several statements about specific Kushites living among the Israelites, and Isaiah’s description of the people of Kush living in their own land. The comment about skin color is a proverb about immutability drawn from the permanent genetic dark skin of the African as opposed to the temporary dark skin acquired from the sun or from dirt. It implies no value judgment about the African’s skin color. Of statements about indi-

viduals, a few Kushites served in the Judahite royal court; one was a runner for David's army, another was a trusted attendant of the prophet Jeremiah, who is portrayed by the biblical author as a hero and is rewarded by God. If the name Kushi, father of Zephaniah, indicates an African origin, then one of the biblical prophets had black African ancestry. If the LXX translation of the Kushite in Num 12:1 as "Ethiopian" is correct, Moses had a black African wife. While we cannot be sure of the ethnicity of Zephaniah's father and Moses' wife, the fact that there is no biblical statement indicating a negative sentiment speaks loudly. No biblical writer thought it necessary to say of Zephaniah's father or Moses' wife, "but they were only Midianites; they were not Africans." No writer thought it necessary to comment about their skin color. That precisely is what is so noticeable by its absence in the Isaiah passage. The prophet reflects the Israelite perception of the black African as a militarily powerful people—a feared people with muscle power, fast of foot and accurate with the bow. Isaiah says that they are tall and good-looking. He mentions their accomplishments with boat construction. But in his descriptive catalog of these people, he "did not think it worth while to mention that their skins were dark."⁹⁷ Nor is skin color ever mentioned in descriptions of other biblical Kushites. That is the most significant perception, or lack of perception, in the biblical image of the black African.