

AFROCENTRIC BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

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On October 12, 1994, the *New York Times* carried an article concerning Warner Sallman, whom it called the “best-known artist of the century” for his painting of the head of Christ, which has been reproduced more than 500 million times. Our earliest descriptions of the appearance of Jesus come from the middle ages. In an alleged report by Lentulus, which dates from the twelfth century, Jesus is described as follows:

He has wavy hair, rather crisp, of the colour of wine, and glittering as it flows down from His shoulders, with a parting in the middle of the head after the manner of the Nazarenes. . . . He has a beard abundant and of the same hazel-colour as His hair, not long, but forked. His eyes are blue and very bright.¹

This is quite obviously an imaginative Eurocentric portrait of Jesus.

Contrast this imagery with the recent portrayal of a black Jesus from a new Afrocentric Bible² that represents in photographic illustrations and textual commentary the conviction that all the Biblical figures from Moses to Jesus were black. The image of Christ as black appeared as early as 1700 when a Congolese girl, Beatrice Kimpa Vita, taught that

Christ appeared as a black man in Sao Salvador and that all his apostles were black. He was a Christ who identified himself with the Africans, who threw in his lot with that of the suffering, oppressed blacks as opposed to the white exploiters and oppressors.³

In a 1963 interview Malcolm X declared: “Christ wasn’t white. Christ was a black man.”⁴ The March 1969 issue of *Ebony* magazine depicted a kinky-haired, broad-nosed black Christ.

These diverse representations raise the issue of Eurocentric versus Afrocentric interpretations of ancient history in general and of the Bible in particular.

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¹ F. W. Farrar, *The Life of Christ* (London: Cassell, 1894) 664.

² *The Original African Heritage Study Bible* (ed. C. H. Felder; Nashville: James C. Winston, 1993).

³ D. J. Bosch, “Currents and Cross Currents in South African Black Theology,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 6 (1974) 1.

⁴ K. B. Douglas, *The Black Christ* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994) 1.

I. EUROCENTRIC INTERPRETATIONS

One could cite many examples of even recent interpretations of African history, written by white scholars, that are transparently racist and condescending. In *Africa and Africans in Antiquity*, which I have edited for Michigan State University Press, several of the contributors noted such interpretations. For example, we note the attempts by scholars from Zimbabwe to attribute the great stone structures in that country to either Solomon⁵ or Indians but not to the indigenous Bantu population. George Reisner of Harvard, the great archeologist of Nubia, was also disposed to ascribe innovations to newcomers and not natives. W. B. Emery posited a “dynastic race” for the flowering of archaic Egypt.

David Hume (d. 1776) wrote in his *Essays and Treatises*: “I am apt to suspect the negroes . . . to be naturally inferior to the white. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation.”⁶ Basil Davidson notes the coincidence that in 1830, when the colonial partition of the African continent began, Georg Hegel, the famous German philosopher, dismissed Africans as insignificant to history.⁷ Hegel wrote in his *Philosophy of History*:

It is manifest that want of self-control distinguishes the character of the Negroes. This condition is capable of no development or culture, and as we have seen them at this day, such have they always been. . . . At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit.⁸

A century later G. Seligman, who applied social Darwinism to African ethnography, formulated the “Hamitic hypothesis,” which held that Caucasian Hamites, including the Egyptians, created everything of value in Africa. He wrote in 1930:

Apart from relatively late Semitic influence . . . the civilizations of Africa are the civilizations of the Hamites. . . . The incoming Hamites were pastoral “Europeans”—arriving wave after wave—better armed as well as quicker witted than the dark agricultural Negroes.⁹

II. THE CURSE OF HAM

The most notorious and influential Eurocentric interpretation of a Biblical passage is the so-called curse of Ham, based on a widely popular inter-

⁵ See S. T. Carroll, “Solomonic Legend: The Muslims and the Great Zimbabwe,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 21 (1988) 233–247.

⁶ Cited in J. E. Harris, *Africans and Their History* (rev. ed.; New York: New American Library, 1987) 19.

⁷ B. Davidson, *Africa in History* (rev. ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1991) xxii.

⁸ Cited by Harris, *Africans* 19.

⁹ Cited by E. R. Sanders, “The Hamitic Hypothesis: Its Origin and Functions in Time Perspective,” *Journal of African History* 10 (1969) 521.

pretation of Genesis 9, combined with generalizations made from the Table of Nations in Genesis 10. There are many difficulties with the common assumption that all the peoples of the world descended from Ham, Shem and Japheth—the three sons of Noah, after a universal flood—issues that I have addressed elsewhere but will not deal with here.¹⁰

As most are aware, Gen 9:18–27 deals with Noah's drunkenness, the viewing of his naked body by his son Ham, and then the expression of a curse upon Ham's son Canaan who was to be subjected to servitude, along with blessings upon Shem and Japheth who did not participate in their brother's actions. Countless speculative articles have been written to explain a number of problems in this passage.¹¹ Allen Ross concludes:

It is unlikely that Canaan was picked out for cursing just because he was the youngest son of Ham. On the contrary, the Torah, which shows that God deals justly with all men, suggests that Noah saw in him the evil traits that marked his father Ham. . . . Even though the oracle would weigh heavily on Ham as he saw his family marred, it was directed to his descendants who retained the traits.¹²

Leon Kass, who characterizes the incident as the "first tale of intergenerational conflict," muses:

It may or may not be just, but it is almost inevitable that children suffer from the deeds of their fathers, and not because some willful or punitive God intervenes to guarantee it. On the contrary, the deeds and beliefs of the fathers shape the sons—whether by conformity or by rebellion—just as they shape the world that the sons will inherit.¹³

What is quite clear, as all scholars agree, is that the original curse uttered by Noah was specifically related to Canaan and not at all to Ham. But in the following centuries as black Africans came to be regarded as the descendants of Ham, the interpretation arose and became dominant that Noah's curse explained both the blackness and the servile status of Africans.

¹⁰ On the Table of Nations see B. Obed, "The Table of Nations (Genesis 10)—A Socio-Cultural Approach," *ZAW* 98 (1986) 14–31; E. Yamauchi, "Meshech, Tubal, and Company," a review of A. Custance's *Noah's Three Sons* in *JETS* 19 (1976) 239–247. On the flood see Yamauchi, "Critical Comments on the Search for Noah's Ark," *Near East Archaeological Society Bulletin* 10 (1977) 5–27. On the ethnography of the Biblical world see *Peoples of the Old Testament World* (ed. A. Hoerth, G. Mattingly and E. Yamauchi; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

¹¹ See F. W. Bassett, "Noah's Nakedness and the Curse of Canaan: A Case of Incest?," *VT* 21 (1971) 232–237; R. L. Bradley, "The Curse of Canaan and the American Negro," *CTM* 42/2 (1971) 100–110; H. Hirsch, *The Drunkenness of Noah* (Birmingham: University of Alabama, 1974); D. Neiman, "The Date and Circumstances of the Cursing of Canaan," *Biblical Motifs* (ed. A. Altman; Cambridge: Harvard University, 1966) 113–134; G. Rice, "The Curse That Never Was (Genesis 9:18–27)," *JRT* 29 (1972) 5–27; A. J. Tomasino, "History Repeats Itself: The 'Fall' and Noah's Drunkenness," *VT* 42 (1992) 128–130; G. Wittenberg, ". . . Let Canaan Be His Slave.' Is Ham Also Cursed?," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 74 (1991) 46–56.

¹² A. P. Ross, "The Curse of Canaan," *BSac* 137 (1980) 223–240.

¹³ L. R. Kass, "Seeing the Nakedness of His Father," *Commentary* 93 (June 1992) 45.

Such an interpretation seems to have originated in Jewish midrash. According to one midrash (5th century AD) Noah said to Ham, "You have prevented me from doing something in the dark (i.e. cohabitation), therefore your seed will be ugly and dark-skinned."¹⁴ According to another midrash "R. Hiyya said, 'Ham and the dog copulated in the Ark, therefore Ham came forth black-skinned while the dog publicly exposes his copulation.'¹⁵ Similarly, according to the Babylonian Talmud, "Our Rabbis taught: 'Three copulated in the ark, and they were all punished—the dog, the raven, and Ham. The dog was doomed to be tied, the raven expectorates [his seed into his mate's mouth], and Ham was smitten in his skin.'¹⁶

Benjamin of Tudela, after his visit to Egypt, reported:

There is a people . . . who, like animals, eat of the herbs that grow on the banks of the Nile, and in the fields. They go about naked and have not the intelligence of ordinary men. They cohabit with their sisters and anyone they find. . . . These sons of Ham are black slaves.¹⁷

This interpretation gained popularity with the development of the African slave trade in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.¹⁸ The KJV of 1611, incidentally, does not yet reflect this trade as it uses the word "slave" only twice.¹⁹ David Brion Davis comments:

In 1676 Edmundson had felt it necessary to attack the assumption that Negro slavery was a fulfillment of the curse of Canaan. The great attention Coleman devoted to this question may have indicated an increasing tendency of Americans to identify Negroes with the children of Ham.²⁰

Augustin Calmet wrote a four-volume dictionary of the Bible (1722–28) in which he stated: "Noah having cursed *Ham* and *Canaan*, the effect was, that not only their posterity became subject to their brethren, and was born, as we may say, in slavery, but likewise that the colour of their skin suddenly became black."²¹

The Genoveses remark: "Some southerners, including clergymen, tried to reconcile the biblical sanction of slavery with racism by arguing that the Canaanite and other non-Hebrew slaves of the Israelites had in fact been black Africans."²² How prevalent this so-called myth of Ham and Japheth

¹⁴ *Midrash Bereshith Rabbah* (London, 1939) 1.293.

¹⁵ *Midrash Rabbah, Genesis* (ed. H. Freedman and M. Simon; London: Soncino, 1939) chap. 36; also pp. 7–8, 293.

¹⁶ *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud* (ed. J. Schachter and H. Freedman; rev. ed.; London: Soncino, 1960), b. *Sanh.* 108b.

¹⁷ Cited by R. Hess, "The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela: A Twelfth Century Description of North-East Africa," *Journal of African History* 6 (1965) 17.

¹⁸ P. Frost, "Attitudes Towards Blacks in the Early Christian Era," *SecCent* 8 (1991) 10.

¹⁹ See E. Yamauchi, "Slaves of God," *BETS* 9 (1966) 31–49.

²⁰ D. B. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1966) 316–317.

²¹ Cited in T. V. Peterson, *Ham and Japheth: The Mythic World of Whites in the Antebellum South* (Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1978) 44.

²² E. Fox-Genovese and E. D. Genovese, "The Divine Sanction of Social Order: Religious Foundations of the Southern Slaveholders' World View," *JAAR* 55 (1987) 224.

became among southerners in the thirty years prior to the outbreak of the Civil War is the subject of a dissertation by Thomas Virgil Peterson.²³

Peterson points out that southerners, as Christians, could not accept the view of some anthropologists that Negroes were not descended from Adam. But they justified slavery as a necessary institution that could restrain the sinful disposition of blacks and improve them. John L. Dagg declared:

As the sons of Adam are bound to submit patiently to the curse which requires them to earn their bread in the sweat of their face, so the sons of Ham are bound to submit patiently to the curse which has doomed them to bondage.²⁴

John England also asserted that it was not against the divine law to use the service of the black race, since their ancestor had been cursed by God for his sinful conduct.²⁵

According to Samuel Baldwin, the prophecy of Noah was fulfilled “most sublimely in America”:

It is obvious in a universal and permanent trinity of races; in their political inequality of condition; in the Christianization of all the Japhetic nations, and of no others; in the occupation of the Shemitic wilderness of America by Japheth; and in the service of Ham to Japheth in the Southern States, in the islands, and in South America.²⁶

Peterson concludes:

Although one Southern clergyman repudiated the thesis that the blacks descended from Ham and a couple of others expressed reservations, white Southern Christians overwhelmingly thought that Ham was the aboriginal black man. Between 1831 and 1861 writings abound that made some allusion to the story of Noah and his three sons. The story was certainly among the most popular defenses of slavery, if not the most popular.²⁷

III. AFROCENTRISM

The cover of the September 23, 1991, issue of *Newsweek* featured the subject “Afrocentrism: Was Cleopatra Black?” In an understandable reaction to Eurocentric racist interpretations many African Americans have sought to reinterpret history and the Bible on an Afrocentric basis.

In growing numbers Afrocentric scholars have gained positions at such major universities as UCLA, Rutgers, Kent State, Temple, and City University of New York—to be sure, not in mainstream departments but in separate Afro-American studies departments with their small but committed clientele. Where their teachings have made a significant impact is at the

²³ Peterson, *Ham*.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 42.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Cited in *ibid.* 100.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 102. See also J. O. Buswell III, *Slavery, Segregation and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 16–21.

level of public education (and in some private academies) in major cities. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., reports:

Hilliard's African-American Baseline Essays were introduced into the school system of Portland, Oregon, in 1987. They have subsequently been the inspiration for Afrocentric curricula in Milwaukee, Indianapolis, Pittsburgh, Washington, D.C., Richmond, Atlanta, Philadelphia, Detroit, Baltimore, Camden, and other cities and continue at this writing to be urged on school boards and administrators anxious to do the right thing.²⁸

How did Afrocentrism develop, and what are its major tenets? Though there were earlier works such as Gerald Massey's *Ancient Egypt: The Light of the World* (1907), which anticipated the key claim that the cultural origins of humanity were to be traced to Africa, especially to what he called Old Kam (i.e. Egypt), the birth of the movement can be especially linked to the more recent development of black studies programs established at universities since 1965 at the demand of African-American students. Then in the 1970s the works of a seminal scholar, Cheikh Anta Diop of Senegal, began appearing in English translations. Diop (1923–1986), who came from a Muslim background, was educated at the University of Paris. He was both a scientist, who became the director of a radiocarbon laboratory, and a prolific author, who in numerous publications set forth his thesis that the Egyptian civilization was a black African one.²⁹ When in 1967 the Congress of Africanness sponsored by the African Studies Association met in his home city of Dakar, Diop was not one of the participants. But his presentation in 1974 in Cairo became a chapter in UNESCO's *General History of Africa*.³⁰ Though Diop was and still is ignored by mainstream scholars, he has gathered a devoted following among current Afrocentric scholars.

Molefi Kete Asante, who coined the word "Afrocentrism," states: "I am most keenly a Diopian, believing essentially that Cheikh Anta Diop has said quite enough on the theories of culture and history to inform most of what I write."³¹ The significance of Diop for Afrocentrism is highlighted in a preface to a collection of essays by Asante as follows:

Before the appearance of Cheikh Anta Diop's *African Origin of Civilization* (1971), African culture was typically examined by Western-trained scholars from a European perspective. Those scholars, often wrapped in the swaddling clothes of a fully emergent European ideology, were often incapable of understanding the unity of African culture. Diop's masterpiece, *African Origin of*

²⁸ A. M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993) 70.

²⁹ Among some of the works of Diop that have been translated from French into English are *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 1974); *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa* (London: Karnak House, 1989); *On Science, History and Technology* (New York: ECA Associates, 1990); *Civilization or Barbarism* (Brooklyn: Lawrence Hill, 1991).

³⁰ "Origin of the Ancient Egyptians," *Ancient Civilizations of Africa* (ed. R. G. Mokhtar; London: James Currey, 1990) 15–32.

³¹ M. K. Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge* (Trenton: Africa World, 1990), preface.

Civilization, and its companion, *Cultural Unity of Black Africa*, turned historiography around and provided the basis for an Afrocentric transformation.³²

Charles Finch has even declared: "Posterity will undoubtedly place him [Diop] in the company of Herodotus, Manetho, and Ibn Khaldun as an historian whose work not only changed the way we look at history but made history itself."³³

One must be careful to note that, according to Cain Hope Felder, there are three major types of Afrocentrism: (1) "There is Afrocentrism that stresses corrective historiography. Accordingly, Africa and persons of African descent are centered on as proactive in written history and not as passive stereotypes and objects of history."³⁴ (2) "For years, various proponents of Afrocentrism have argued for a common cultural heritage, world view, and ethos, suggesting variously that there were unique unifying factors."³⁵ (3) There is a Black Nationalist version represented by Al Cleague and Leonard Jeffries. "Here skin color determined by percentages of melanin provides a reverse racialist mode of valorization."³⁶

Felder himself maintains: "I remain skeptical about the second form of Afrocentrism and reject outright this third form as potentially damaging to the entire multiculturalist movement within America."³⁷

With some variations Afrocentrists maintain the following theses:

1. *There is a cultural and linguistic unity that unites all Africans.* Diop noted that ancient Egyptian had links with Wolof, a language spoken in Senegal. Indeed Diop and Theophile Obenga, a scholar from the Congo, argue for the genetic relationship of all African languages.

2. *Egypt is an integral part of Africa, and ancient Egyptians were black Africans.* Diop declared:

The oneness of Egyptian and Black culture could not be stated more clearly. Because of this essential identity of genius, culture and race, today all Negroes can legitimately trace their culture to ancient Egypt and build a modern culture on that foundation.³⁸

Diop and his followers have argued this from linguistics and the appearance of selected Egyptians. They also assume that the Egyptian word for

³² *African Culture: The Rhythms of Unity* (ed. M. K. Asante and K. W. Asante; Westport: Greenwood, 1985) 3.

³³ *Great African Thinkers I: Cheikh Anta Diop* (ed. I. Van Sertima and L. Williams; New Brunswick: Transaction, 1986) 227. Diop has been dubbed "the Pharaoh of African studies." See R. D. S. Tolbert, *Africa and the Bible* (unpublished M.A. thesis; Rochester: Colgate Rochester Divinity School, 1985) 5.

³⁴ C. H. Felder, "Afrocentrism, the Bible, and the Politics of Difference," *JRT* 50 (1993-94) 51.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.* 52.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Diop, *African Origin* 140.

their land—*Kemet* (“black”)—refers to the people and not to the land, as Egyptologists have held.³⁹ They also cite passages from classical writers such as Herodotus, who visited Egypt in the fifth century BC.⁴⁰

3. *Egypt provided Greece with all of its major intellectual ideas.* According to Diop:

The ancient Egyptians were Negroes. The moral fruit of their civilization is to be counted among the assets of the Black world. . . . Pythagorean mathematics, the theory of the four elements of Thales of Miletus, Epicurean materialism, Platonic idealism, Judaism, Islam, and modern science are rooted in Egyptian cosmogony and science.⁴¹

Diop also claimed that the ancient Egyptians developed metallurgy around 2700 BC and dispersed its knowledge through the continent, a claim that is not considered seriously by reputable scholars.⁴²

4. *Therefore blacks were ultimately the originators of most of western civilization.* Jeffries, who was for a time removed from his post at the City University of New York for anti-Semitic remarks, declares: “*The Greeks did not invent anything; they just inherited knowledge that was taught them by our African ancestors.*”⁴³

5. *Not only the Egyptians but also the ancient Sumerians were black.* Some would argue this from the designation “black-headed ones,”⁴⁴ though Sumerologists would take this as simply a reference to hair color. Certainly depictions of Sumerians do not support such an assertion.

6. *Diop claimed that the Egyptian Akhenaten was the originator of monotheism.* In an interview Diop asserted:

³⁹ See the comments of S. Sauneron in *Ancient Civilizations* (ed. Mokhtar) 50; cf. H. Kees, *Ancient Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961) 36: “the ‘black’ fertile soil which gave Egypt its name *Kemet* (‘the Black’).”

⁴⁰ Cf. W. L. Hansberry, *Africa and Africans as Seen by Classical Writers* (ed. J. E. Harris; Washington: Howard University, 1981).

⁴¹ Diop, *African Origin* xiv.

⁴² D. E. Miller and N. J. Van der Merwe, “Early Metal Working in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Review of Recent Research,” *Journal of African History* 35 (1994) 7: “Egypt does not appear to have had a direct formative influence on the advent of metallurgy elsewhere in Africa other than at Meroe.” For ancient metallurgy see E. Yamauchi, “Metal Sources and Metallurgy in the Biblical World,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 45 (1993) 252–259.

⁴³ L. Jeffries, “Afrocentrism vs. Eurocentrism: The National Debate,” *Afrocentrism vs. Eurocentrism: The National Debate* (ed. L. A. Hoskins; Kent: Institute for African American Affairs, Kent State University, 1991) 22. Cf. the title of G. G. M. James, *Stolen Legacy: The Greeks Were Not the Authors of Greek Philosophy, But the People of North Africa, Commonly Called the Egyptians* (ed. A. G. Hilliard; San Francisco: Julian Richardson, 1954 [reprint 1988]).

⁴⁴ E.g. C. B. Copher, “The Black Presence in the Old Testament,” *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (ed. C. H. Felder; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991) 154.

Once again, Egypt is the beginning of everything. Akhenaten's monotheistic thinking precedes Moses, so it precedes all Judaism, if we put aside all legend. If we search written history proven by documents in chronological order, Egyptian monotheism precedes all the other monotheistic religions which have existed since, in this case, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The revealed religions borrowed from this Egyptian thought.⁴⁵

But the view that Moses borrowed monotheism from Akhenaten, a thesis that was popularized by Freud and supported to a degree by W. F. Albright, is not really tenable.⁴⁶

Elsewhere Diop has suggested: "One needs only to meditate on Osiris, the redeemer-god, who sacrifices himself, dies, and is resurrected to save mankind, a figure essentially identifiable with Christ."⁴⁷

7. *Some would also maintain that all the Biblical figures in both the OT and the NT were blacks.* Diop declares: "Even the Blacks of Palestine, these Biblical cousins of the Egyptians, the Canaanites of the Bible, descendants of the Natufians of the Mesolithic period, opposed a fierce resistance in their different cities, which were all conquered and annexed to the Egyptian Empire."⁴⁸

IV. MARTIN BERNAL

The cause of Afrocentrism has received an unexpected boost from the publication of two volumes by Martin Bernal.⁴⁹ Grandson of the famous Egyptologist Alan Gardiner, Bernal is a specialist in the politics of the Far East. He writes that his interest in the thesis concerning the ancient traditions of Greek indebtedness to the Phoenicians and Egyptians was first stimulated by the works of Jewish scholars Cyrus H. Gordon and Michael Astour. He became convinced that earlier classicists had been motivated by anti-Semitism in rejecting the so-called ancient model and that contemporary classicists had also dismissed the ideas of Gordon and Astour for the same reason. Earlier European scholars had substituted the so-called Aryan model, which stressed the Indo-European roots of the brilliant Greek civilization.

Bernal proposes a revised model in which he suggests that archeological and linguistic arguments indicate the important contributions of the

⁴⁵ C. S. Finch, "Further Conversations with the Pharaoh (i.e. Diop)," *Great African Thinkers* (ed. Van Sertima) 233.

⁴⁶ See E. Yamauchi, "Akhenaten, Moses, and Monotheism," *Tell el-Amarna, 1887-1987* (ed. B. Beitzel and G. Young; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, forthcoming).

⁴⁷ Diop, *African Origin* xiv. For a critique of such comparisons, which were popularized by James Frazer, see E. Yamauchi, "Easter—Myth, Hallucination, or History?," *Christianity Today* 18 (March 15, 1974) 4-7.

⁴⁸ Diop, *Civilization* 94.

⁴⁹ M. Bernal, *Black Athena I: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilisation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University, 1987); *Black Athena II: The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University, 1991). The first volume won an American Book Award in 1990.

Egyptians and Phoenicians to the Greeks in the third and second millennia BC. He relies heavily on Herodotus' views of the Egyptian origin of Greek religion—for example, the derivation of Athena from the Egyptian Neith, stories that connect Greek mythological and legendary figures with Egypt, and claims that several Greek intellectuals visited Egypt.

There is indeed merit to his critique especially of German historiography in the classics tradition. But there are major problems with his interpretation of archeological and linguistic evidences. For example, his claim that the Egyptian elements in the shaft graves of Grave Circle A are evidence of Hyksos refugees has been undercut by the discovery of Grave Circle B. He relies heavily on the researches of Eric Cline, who has documented the extensive contacts between Egypt and the Aegean in the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries BC. But Cline himself concludes: "However, there is no archaeological evidence to support Bernal's contention that the Aegean was under Egyptian hegemony during this time."⁵⁰ For these reasons Bernal's thesis has had a generally hostile reception from classicists.⁵¹ On the other hand Afrocentrists have warmly welcomed Bernal's contributions, though they do not think he goes far enough.⁵²

V. CONCLUDING CRITICISMS

What shall we say about these differing points of view?

1. *The history of interpretation warns us to be aware of biases, both our own and those of others, in interpreting history.*

2. *There is clear evidence of a Eurocentric racist bias in certain interpretations that exalt whites and denigrate blacks.*

3. *The recently spawned Afrocentric interpretations have focused on some legitimate concerns.* The Egyptian language, once classified as Hamito-Semitic, has now been recognized by Joseph H. Greenberg as part of a broad range of Afroasiatic languages that include Berber, Chadic and Omotic. Egyptian has links not so much with Wolof, as Diop claims, but with Hausa, a dialect spoken in Nigeria, as pointed out by the linguist Carleton T. Hodge.⁵³

⁵⁰ E. H. Cline, "Contact and Trade or Colonization? Egypt and the Aegean in the 14th–13th Centuries B.C.," *Minos* n.s. 25–26 (1990–91) 35.

⁵¹ See the several articles responding to Bernal, published in a special issue of *Arethusa* (Fall 1989), and the review of volume 2 by S. M. Burstein in *CP* 88 (1993) 157–162.

⁵² E.g. Asante, *Kemet* 121.

⁵³ C. T. Hodge, "Hausa-Egyptian Establishment," *Anthropological Linguistics* 8/1 (1966) 40–57; "The Role of Egyptian within Afroasiatic (/Lislakh)," *Linguistic Change and Reconstruction Methodology* (ed. P. Baldi; Mouton: de Gruyter, 1990) 639–659. I am indebted to Hodge for the offprints of his articles.

4. According to Bruce Williams the roots of pharaonic Egypt may go back to Qustul in Nubia.⁵⁴ Other Egyptologists, however, do not attach the same significance to the Qustul finds.⁵⁵

5. But Afrocentric scholars as they have pushed their thesis to extreme conclusions have undermined their credibility by claiming one and all as "black" and therefore staking the claim of blacks to every imaginable cultural and intellectual achievement. For example, Walter A. McCray lists as black peoples not only Cush, Ethiopia and Egypt but also the Canaanites, Elamites and Hittites, and as black individuals not only Ebed-Melech the Cushite (Jeremiah 38–39) and Tirhakah (2 Kgs 19:9; Isa 37:9) but also Melchizedek, Ephron the Hittite, Rahab the harlot, and the Queen of Sheba.⁵⁶ John Henrik Clarke's claim that Cleopatra was black is buttressed by citations from Shakespeare and from Ripley's *Believe It or Not* and is illustrated by a painting by Earl Sweeney.⁵⁷ But the Ptolemaic dynasty, which ruled Egypt after Alexander, was Macedonian and believed so strongly in preserving the purity of the royal line that they adopted the Egyptian practice of consanguineous marriages—that is, marriages between brothers and sisters.

6. As to the question of whether the Egyptians were black, the answer is not so simple as Afrocentrists would assert. As Frank J. Yurco points out, the ancient Egyptians would not have thought in terms of a simple dichotomy:

The ancient Egyptians, like their modern descendants, were of varying complexions of color, from the light Mediterranean type (like Nefertiti), to the light brown of Middle Egypt, to the darker brown of Upper Egypt, to the darkest shade around Aswan and the First Cataract region, where even today the population shifts to Nubian.⁵⁸

Frank M. Snowden, Jr., a distinguished African-American classics scholar who rejects the identification of Egyptians as blacks, points out that the Greeks and Romans were well acquainted in art and text with blacks from the area especially of Meroe:

⁵⁴ B. Williams, "The Lost Pharaohs of Nubia," *Archaeology* 33/5 (1980) 12–21; cf. "Rescued Nubian Treasures Reflect Black Influence on Egypt," *The New York Times* (February 11, 1992) B5, B8.

⁵⁵ E.g. B. G. Trigger, B. J. Kemp, D. O'Connor and A. B. Lloyd, *Ancient Egypt: A Social History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1983) 62.

⁵⁶ W. A. McCray, *The Black Presence in the Bible* (Chicago: Black Light Fellowship, 1990) 27–28.

⁵⁷ J. H. Clarke, "African Warrior Queens," *Black Women in Antiquity* (ed. I. Van Sertima; New Brunswick: Transaction, 1988) 127.

⁵⁸ F. J. Yurco, "Were the Ancient Egyptians Black or White?," *BARev* 15/5 (1989) 24. Cf. B. G. Trigger, "Nubian, Negro, Black, Nilotic?," *Africa in Antiquity* (ed. M. Botwinick; Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum, 1978) 1.27: "On an average, between the Delta in northern Egypt and the Sudd of the Upper Nile, skin color tends to darken from light brown to what appears to the eye as bluish black, hair changes from wavy-straight to curly or kinky, noses become flatter and broader, lips become thicker and more everted."

This group possesses, among others, these characteristics: color varying from reddish-brown to deep brownish-black; tightly curled and wiry hair described as woolly, frizzly, or kinky; a broad, flattened nose; thick lips, usually puffy and everted; prognathism, often marked in the sub-nasal region.⁵⁹

Egyptians were in contact with the darker Nubians of the First and Second Cataracts already in the Old Kingdom period.⁶⁰ An increasing number of individuals, including some introduced into the royal harems, came from this region in the Middle Kingdom. The Egyptians made contact with negroid tribes of central Africa in the New Kingdom.⁶¹ These contacts are reflected in the clear depiction of black-complexioned and negroid types in Egyptian art. Snowden concludes:

Though not very numerous, the realistic portrayals of blacks in early Egyptian art are sufficient to illustrate the types of Kushites known prior to the New Kingdom and to show that *Nehesyu*, a word used of southerners as early as 2300 B.C., included peoples with Negroid features.⁶²

The Egyptians accurately depicted their enemies and their allies. They made a clear color distinction between themselves and the black Nubians, whom they rhetorically denounced with insulting epithets. Though the use of reddish-brown for men and yellow for women was conventional, one cannot simply dismiss this as a ceremonial color for blacks as Diop and his followers have urged.⁶³

7. *Cheikh Anta Diop, whom Afrocentrists have adopted as their intellectual star, is not a trustworthy guide either in linguistics or in history, as we have already indicated.*⁶⁴ He simply makes too many unsupportable statements. For example, in answer to a question as to when the truth about the beginning of world civilization was falsified, he responded as follows:

It's around 1,525 B.C. that Egypt was conquered by Cambyses, the Persian King. The command that Cambyses gave was to destroy everything that revealed the greatness of Egypt. The temples were torn down and the libraries were destroyed. . . . Cambyses also destroyed all of the Egyptian intelligentia. The Egyptian priests fled to western Asia.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ F. M. Snowden, Jr., *Blacks in Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1970) 8.

⁶⁰ R. A. Bennett, Jr., "Africa and the Biblical Period," *HTR* 64 (1971) 492: "In terms of physical racial characteristics the Egyptians of the ancient Near East were a brown-skinned people with long hair, whose history is the story of their contact and intercourse with darker, curly-haired peoples up the Nile in Nubia."

⁶¹ H. Junker, "The First Appearance of the Negroes in History," *JEA* 7 (1921) 121-132. Cf. W. S. LaSor, "Cush," *ISBE* 1.839.

⁶² F. M. Snowden, Jr., *Before Color Prejudice* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1983) 11-12.

⁶³ J. Brunson, "Ancient Egyptians: 'The Dark Red Race Myth,'" *Egypt Revisited* (ed. I. Van Sertima; New Brunswick: Transaction, 1989) 53-54.

⁶⁴ See the review article by W. MacGaffey, "Who Owns Ancient Egypt?," *Journal of African History* 32 (1991) 515-519.

⁶⁵ *Great African Thinkers* (ed. Van Sertima) 348.

Unfortunately almost everything about this statement is a false conclusion or is unsupported.⁶⁶

Despite these severe strictures, we can thank Afrocentric scholars for calling attention to the neglected evidence of significant passages that refer to blacks in both the OT and the NT, such as Moses' Cushite wife, the pharaoh Tirkah of the 25th (Ethiopian) Dynasty, and the Ethiopian eunuch of Candace.

⁶⁶ See E. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990) chap. 3.