

# Is the Bible just a white man's book?

By Dan Rogers

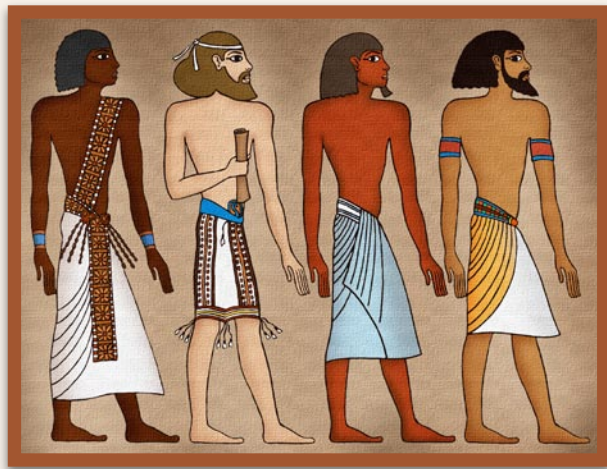
“What an incredibly politically incorrect thing to ask,” I can almost hear some say. “What are you thinking, even considering such a question?” I had better give you a little bit of background.

Back in 1992, I took a class at Emory University in Atlanta called Introduction to the Old Testament. As I read the various required textbooks for the course, I saw something I had not noticed before. Many Old Testament scholars, particularly European scholars of the 18th, 19th and early 20th century had written their books and commentaries on the Old Testament from the perspective that there were no people of color mentioned in the Scriptures.

Puzzled, I began to look into the topic more deeply. I studied intensively for about a year, attending lectures and interviewing scholars. I began to realize that this was a particularly difficult and controversial subject, and it has caused much hurt. Thankfully, times have changed, but some of the wounds remain. So let's look at it, and put to rest once and for all this biased and unfair distortion of the Bible.

Let me apologize in advance for some of the terms that I will need to use as we discuss this topic. They are not the terms we would prefer today, but they are terms that historians, ethnologists and Bible commentators of past centuries, and even the 20th century, have employed to explain their ideas about the origin of blacks. These ideas, steeped in racial prejudice, were alleged to provide a biblical justification for black slavery and the subjugation of black peoples.

When I first read about these concepts, they brought tears to my eyes. As a white person in a predominantly white country, I also began to gain a better understanding of and a greater appreciation for the black experience in the United States.



Is the Bible a book by a white God for white people? Of course not. God is spirit and does not have “color” in our human and earthly sense. There is nothing in the Scriptures to indicate that people are excluded from God's saving grace on the basis of ethnic origin or skin color. God is “not wanting anyone to perish” (2 Peter 3:9). Jesus is the Savior of all peoples. Nevertheless, it is a fact that the majority of European artists and Bible commentators painted and described all biblical characters, including God, as white. This had the effect of excluding blacks from being a part of Scripture and has led some people of color to question the Bible's relevance to them.

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Exclusion was only one side of the problem. Where the presence of blacks in the Bible *was* admitted, primarily among uneducated whites, outrageous myths and fables abounded. This was especially true among white Christians living in the southeastern United States prior to the Civil War. These denigrating tales were believed to support the racist (and unbiblical) notion that the

Bible supported a white subjugation of black people.

### What do we mean by “black”?

There are several difficulties surrounding any discussion of this sensitive topic. Some are obvious; others are less so. Not least is the question, what do we mean by “black” people? In America today, we mean African-Americans—those with African ancestry and dark skin color. But is that how the people who lived when the books of the Bible were written would have thought?

There are differences between ancient and modern concepts of what “black” means when it is applied to people. For example, in the table of nations in Genesis 10, the word used to describe the people descended from Ham in the ancient Hebrew, Akkadian and Sumerian languages is related to the color black. But what does this mean? Our traditional understanding of the Old Testament is influenced by the ancient rabbinic method of interpretation, known as *Midrash*. These interpretations sometimes take precedence over the literal meaning of the text being interpreted. They also belong to another time with other socio-economic conditions and concerns. When ancient rabbinic literature mentions black people, does it mean ethnically “Negro” or just people of generally darker skin?

Let me give you a modern example. In a congregation I once pastored were two families with the surnames

ancient Egyptians and Ethiopians picture some people as black in color. But this was a highly stylized art form, and may have nothing to do with their actual skin color.

Some black people are much fairer in skin color than some we classify as “Caucasians.” There are also social and legal definitions, based on the percentage of African or “Negro” blood people have in their ancestry. It was not so long ago that certain states had laws that stated that someone was a “Negro” if the person had even a single black ancestor. Physical appearance did not matter.

These are some of the difficulties of trying to determine if people in the Bible are what today we consider black. It is therefore irresponsible to draw superficial conclusions either for or against a black presence in the Scriptures. But this did not stop scholars and theologians (who surely should have known better) from suggesting that *all* people in the Bible were white, and that the Bible record excludes the Asian and “Negro” races, a conclusion that is not true.

But suppose it were true? What difference would that make? The Bible account focuses on what we now call the Middle East, and in particular the rags-to-riches-to-ruin story of ancient Israel. It is specific to geography and to a historical period. Other people are mentioned as they pertain to the unfolding of that story. So Eskimos (or Inuit) are not included, nor are Koreans. Yet no one seriously believes that they are excluded from the human race.

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Black and White. The Whites were black and the Blacks were white. Mr. Black, who was white, used to talk about his lovely white grandchildren who were Blacks. And Mr. White talked about his lovely black grandchildren who were Whites. Imagine what someone a thousand years from now would think if they read that.

Just because some people are called by a term meaning “black” does not necessarily prove they were what we now call black. Of course, it does not mean that they were *not* “people of color” either. In ancient times, just as folks did in the old frontier societies of our country, people often were given names that reflected their personality, where they were from or their appearance. But names like “Slim,” “Tex,” “Kid,” “Smitty” or “Buffalo” tell you nothing of a person’s ancestry.

Some ancient writers say that the Egyptians and Ethiopians were black. But what do they mean? How “black” were they? Were they merely darker than those doing the writing? The wall paintings and hieroglyphics of the

But when it comes to the alleged absence of black people, we encounter a web of cruel deceit that makes a mockery of the true biblical record. Only when you understand this can you begin to get a glimmer of what it has been like to be black in America.

### Several views

Among those who have accepted the presence of black people in the Bible, several different views as to the origin of blacks were postulated. Let’s look at some of these.

**The pre-Adamite view** argues that blacks, particularly so-called “Negroes,” are not descended from Adam. This view appears to have its origin in the works of such authors as Paracelsus in 1520, Bruno in 1591, Vanini in 1619 and one of the most prolific writers, Peyrère, in 1655. It reached a high level of development with the 19th-century scholar Alexander Winchell in his book, *Preadamites; or a Demonstration of the Existence of Men Before Adam*, published in 1880.

These writers (all of them white), argued that blacks belong to a race created before Adam and from among whom the biblical villain Cain found his wife. Cain, by marrying one of these pre-Adamic peoples, the reasoning goes, became the progenitor of all black people. Therefore, it was rationalized, black people, especially “Negroes,” are not actually human, because they did not descend from Adam but from some pre-Adamic creation, having entered the human race only by intermarriage, and that with a notorious sinner. As non-humans, therefore, they did not have souls, but were merely beasts like any other beast of the field. And since the Bible says God gave humans dominion over the beasts, it was concluded that these soulless creatures exist to do work for the humans.

This preposterous theological premise was preached in churches across the United States, particularly in the Southeast, to reassure people that slavery was not only acceptable, but the very will of God, rooted firmly in a “proper” understanding of the Bible.

**The Cainite view** argues that Cain was born white, but after his unacceptable sacrifice and the murder of his brother, Abel, he was turned black as punishment and became the progenitor of all black people. According to some of the rabbinic *Midrashim* (in both the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud), because Cain offered an unacceptable sacrifice, the smoke from this unacceptable sacrifice blew back on him, turned him black and caused all of his children to be born black. In another Talmudic story, a rabbi says that God beat Cain with hail until he turned black. Stories vary, but it became a common Euro-American belief that God cursed and marked Cain by turning him black.

**The Noahite (or old Hamite) view** can be traced to writings suggested in the Talmud and later adopted by Jewish and Christian interpreters (especially among white southerners in the pre-Civil War United States). In this view, Ham violated God’s supposed prohibition against mating on the ark. Because he could not resist, he was turned black. Yet another teaching was that Ham and/or Canaan were turned black as a result of Noah’s curse in Genesis 9:24-27. In this view, because God cursed Canaan, that curse was to go on all of Canaan’s descendants and the curse was, first, that they would all be turned black, and second, that they would be servants to white people. Again, we see here a blatant attempt to interpret the Bible in a way that justifies the institution of black slavery.

**The New Hamite view** is a 19th-century view that holds that Hamites were all white rather than black with the possible exception of Cush. (Cush is a Hebrew term that means “black one.”) Scholars, particularly in 19th-century Germany, said that even if Cush were black in color, he must be regarded as a *Caucasoid* black. Why? Because, in their view, Negroes were not within the pur-

view of the writers of the Bible. Even some modern biblical scholars hold this view. For example, Martin Noth, considered to be one of the most respected Old Testament scholars of all time, states on page 263 of his book *The Old Testament World* (Fortress, 1966) that the biblical writers knew nothing of any Negro people.

Understandably, there has been a reaction among black theologians and black people to these ideas. Some have tended toward the opposite extreme, arguing that *everyone* in the Bible was black. Dr. Charles B. Copher, professor of African American Studies at Interdenominational Theological School in Atlanta, says this view is patently outlandish. He believes that this notion is an overreaction that can lead to another kind of extremism.

**The Adamite view.** The Adamite view is the orthodox Jewish, Christian and Islamic view. It is based (for Christians) on Acts 17:26, which states that God made all people from one original bloodline, or one source. This, we emphasize, is the *only* view that is consistent with the true message of Scripture. Nevertheless, these other hideously distorted ideas have been promulgated, and some still have a degree of influence even today.

### So what?

So, where does that leave us? Feeling slightly nauseated, I hope, over the amazing ability we have to delude ourselves and bend the word of God in any direction that suits our purposes.

The overall and surely indisputable message is that God has created us *all* in his image and has included all members of the human race in the saving work of his Son. Nowhere does the Bible give any indications that black people, or any people, whether “of color” or not, are outside the embrace of his love. But the fact remains that people have believed and taught this error, and sadly, it has been a teaching that still affects the way many of us think about each other, and perhaps even ourselves. The Bible does not focus on skin color as any form of criterion. All have sinned, all have fallen short of the glory of God, *and all are recipients of his grace through Jesus Christ.*

But what about the question of whether black people are mentioned in the Bible? Admittedly it is difficult to build a definitive case, based on textual evidence, to prove beyond all doubt that black people are mentioned in its pages. But why should we have to? Let’s turn the question around. There is no evidence whatsoever that black people—or any people for that matter—are excluded from the purview of the writers of the Bible. Let us put the burden of proof on those who would teach otherwise.

The fact is, we do have evidence that some of the people mentioned in the Bible were black. We’ll look at that evidence in part two, which will appear in our next issue. ●

*To be continued...*