

Kroeger, C.C. (1992, Winter) Black is Blessed: A Study of Black/African Women and Men in Scripture. The Pricilla Papers, pp. 6-13.

OVERVIEW

This article highlights the witness of many people in the Bible who were of African heritage. Although this article is a selective study of particular people, it focuses upon an element of biblical interpretation that is not always noted in Western Christianity. The reality that many people described on the pages of scripture and those addressed by its narratives and teachings were of darker skin and have ties to the continent of Africa cannot continue to be ignored. Contemporary American media productions, such as the classic film “The Ten Commandments”, make it possible for one to assume that most biblical characters portrayed in the film were lighter skinned than they actually were. Is it fair to ignore this facet of biblical interpretation, especially in the face of historical developments in the name of Christ that have sadly sought to degrade and make inferior, a people who are equally made in the image of God?

For those who don’t know the descent of those in the Bible, it is fascinating to see the evidence placed in full view for such biblical figures and their significant work within the history of God’s work of redemption. Kroeger eloquently provides readers the evidence to indicate that many people whom God chose to use were Africans of dark skin. Stating that the Bible clearly speaks of black as beautiful (Song of Solomon 1:5), Kroeger also finds that “...as I studied the black persons mentioned in scripture more carefully, I found another message—the Bible implies that black is blessed... These people had an unusual way of reaching out to God—finding him as their own, embracing Him and His ways, committing themselves to the truth of the Gospel. And God blessed them.” (p. 6) Although color is not a characteristic that the biblical writers always chose to include in descriptions of particular characters, land of origin is. “Ordinarily, but not always, people from Africa were black.” (p. 6) This premise necessitates a look at the lives of the following people as people of color within scripture.

Although at first glance, Hagar, the African slave maidservant of Sarah, is treated poorly and used in a way that seems degrading from some angles, God nonetheless uses her amidst the horrible actions of both Abraham and Sarah. Of particular importance, Kroeger points out that God’s actions on behalf of Hagar in the desert (where she fled in response to Sarah’s harsh treatment of her under Abraham’s authority in Genesis 16) were a first “for an ‘ordinary’ individual” (p. 7). Enmity between Sarah and Hagar continued and, as a result, God eventually gave Hagar (and Ishmael) the freedom she sought. She and Ishmael headed into the wilderness, where, after their water ran out, God responded to Hagar’s call and provided for their need. Kroeger writes, “...Hagar was the first person to have been led to water and to have been enabled to give it to another.” (p. 8)

Looking to the Exodus, Kroeger focuses upon the African women and men involved in this portion of the history of God’s people. Moses was cared for and educated in the African way, and, after fleeing his princely lifestyle, was met by several black girls. He eventually risks his life to help them. It was the family of Jethro—descendants from Ethiopia—who took Moses in and “helped him to a knowledge of God.” (p. 8) Moses’ Egyptian education was bolstered by this black family, and their presence in his life helped immensely during the Israelites’ time in the desert. His interracial marriage to Zipporah reveals that she clearly understood the importance of obedience to God.

Jethro also plays a significant role in teaching Moses how to fear God, as he also essentially trained Aaron how to sacrifice to God. Kroeger notes that all three God-appointed leaders—Moses, Aaron and Miriam—were influenced by Zipporah’s family. In fact it was Jethro, the “Ethiopian who set up the judicial and administrative system of Israel” (p. 10). “No, Zipporah did not have an easy life or an easy marriage, but she and her family were spiritual trailblazers in the history of God’s dealings with His people.” (p. 10) Toward the end of the Exodus, Jethro also left with the Hebrews his son Hobab, who helped Moses lead the Israelites to the Promised Land. Kroeger rightly indicates that he consented to stay with the Hebrews (Numbers 10:29 ff), and in doing so “black people were numbered among the heirs to the Promised Land.” (p. 10)

The queen of Sheba is also pointed to as a significant black woman who came from far away to visit Solomon for “...more than just a royal state visit—she came to him as to a spiritual advisor.” (p. 10) Her coming to probe the mind of Solomon about the ways and workings of God are a vivid example of God’s desire for his people to seek Him. That is why Jesus speaks of her in Matthew 12:42.

The beautiful black woman of the Song of Solomon is a wonderful example of the love between human beings, male and female. And Kroeger even shows that those who see this poem as an allegory of the love between Christ and his Church must also recognize that the Church He is in love with is black...and beautiful! The poem reveals God’s “pattern of human love at its most perfect.” (p. 12)

New Testament representation of black people can be seen in Simon of Cyrene who carried the cross for Jesus, along with the group of women who probably followed Jesus and Mary Magdalene into Jerusalem and to His crucifixion. A more specific example is that of the Ethiopian queen Kandice in Acts 8. She allows her high official to go and worship God. This Ethiopian man, after being converted by Phillip, is known to have returned to Ethiopia to start several powerful churches in Africa. Also in the New Testament, two prominent members of the Church at Antioch are shown to be black (Lucius of Cyrene and Simon the Black). Kroeger also discusses an archaeological discovery in Antioch of a mosaic depicting a black fisherman, evidence of acceptance of dark skinned people in that great city.

What is clear from Kroeger’s report of blacks in the Bible is that they undoubtedly existed and played significant roles in the history of redemption. Although they are not always apparent, and this viewing is selective by evidence of origin, the witness must nonetheless be seen as God’s intention for humanity. Christians who have sought to keep people of color down often associate those with dark skin as having the mark of Cain, and thus the slaves of many (Genesis 9). But what about these powerful examples that show people of color as equal partners in the revelation of God’s salvation? Kroeger rightly concludes her article:

Women and men of all colors must know that they are made in God’s image, that Jesus Christ died to redeem them, and that if they believe, He will be theirs and they will be his. Like Hagar, they need to know that God is ever-ready to hear, and like Zipporah they need to use all their gifts and knowledge of survival to help others. Like Jethro, they need to use their gifts of teaching and administration, and like Hobab, they need to be willing to help guide those in need. Like the Queen of Sheba, they need to enlarge and better their minds and souls. Like the beautiful black women of the Song of Songs, they need to love chastely with all-out commitment to their beloved. Like the Ethiopian high official,

they need to seek above all for God's truth and be ready to accept and act upon the answers God will provide those who seek Him. Like the men and women of Antioch, they need to go and give and pray...we all need to be a transforming influence for Jesus Christ. Black is blessed, and may God make the world ready to receive this blessing! (pp. 12-13).

LEADER PREPARATION

* Does knowing that many biblical characters had dark skin change your perspective on the Bible? If so, how? If not, why?

* How does knowing that God has worked through the lives of black people in scripture encourage you as a believer in the twentieth century?

* What implications does this evidence produce as you look back at how this country has treated blacks in the past?

* How should Kroeger's evidence and presentation affect present race (and gender) relations? Should this knowledge be an impetus for increased awareness of and work towards reconciliation?

IMPLICATIONS

* The biblical witness speaks loudly against people basing inferiority of blacks (or any people of color) on scriptural mandate.

* Christians are called to work together with people of all races whom God calls unto himself.

* Blacks in the Bible need to be recognized as such and given the attention needed to help people see how significantly God worked through such people to the glory of his name.

* Be encouraged and refreshed that God has continually called people from all nations unto himself, and although the Jews were the chosen people under the Old Covenant, that God's work of redemption established first in Abraham, recognized and was at work not only in the "chosen" race.

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