

***Africa and the Bible* by Edwin Yamauchi**

Book Review

By Grant LeMarquand

Several writers have explored the exegetical significance of Africa and Africans in the Bible. The subject has engaged African American scholars, especially Charles Copher, who has spent many years on this subject (*Black Biblical Studies*. Chicago: Black Light, 1993). Scholars from Africa have also focused attention on texts having to do with Africa, the most thorough being the Nigerian, David Adamo (*Africa and Africans in the Old Testament*. Bethesda: International Scholars Publications, 1998). These scholars demonstrate not only the importance of African places and persons within the biblical world and text, but they also unearth a disturbing pattern within western scholarship of de-Africanizing the Bible in various ways. The 'discovery' of Africa within the Bible is perceived by African and African-American writers as an encouragement (since Africans are seen as an important part of God's story) and also as a challenge to western interpretative hegemony.

Within this context the book *Africa and the Bible* by Edwin Yamauchi makes an important contribution. Yamauchi is well known for his publications in the field of biblical archaeology and he now applies his expertise to understanding the presence of Africa and Africans in the Bible. The chapters are self-contained units, distinct essays on particular topics. The first four are new; the others have appeared previously and have been revised for this book. Nevertheless, the book does have a sense of unity, for the themes that run through the work enable the separate chapters to work together in a coherent way.

Yamauchi's purpose is to examine texts which are either about Africa or which have been perceived to be about Africa in such a way as to provide the reader with a description of the cultural, geographical, and historical background of each particular text. So, for example, in order to understand Simon of Cyrene (and others in the NT who are said to be from Cyrene), Yamauchi provides a description of ancient Libya, its peoples, its history, and an account of archeological work carried out there. In this case, his conclusion is that Simon, although 'African' because his home was a part of northern Africa, was probably not black: "in the case of Cyrene, the city was a Greek colony; Simon was no doubt a member of the Jewish community there." (186).

On the other hand, Yamauchi is aware of the legacy of Eurocentric interpretation that would read Africans out of the text. In a lengthy chapter on "Moses' Cushite wife", he provides a detailed history of Cush and its relations with Egypt during the OT period. This evidence leads him to conclude that there were "many Nubians in Egypt from as early as the Old Kingdom," that the intermarriage between Egyptians and Nubians was common and "we should not doubt the possibility of Moses' marriage to a Cushite or Nubian woman." (75). Archaeology, in other words, contradicts those scholars who would de-Africanize the Cushite wife of Moses. The author's examination of the historical and cultural context of other biblical Africans (Tirhakah, the Nubian Pharaoh, 2 Kings 19:9 and Is 37:9; Cushi, father of Zephaniah, Zeph 1:1; Jehudi, Jer 36:13-14; Ebed-Melech, Jer 38; the 'Sudanese' eunuch, Acts 8:26-40) is also illuminating.

Yamauchi also deals with two texts often associated with Africa, but which are probably not about Africa at all. The first is the so-called 'curse of Ham.' Yamauchi makes a strong case that the use of the curse on Canaan in Genesis 9:25 to justify oppression, is a complete misreading of the text. Likewise, the story the Queen of Sheba (in spite of Ethiopian tradition) was probably from southern Arabia. Yamauchi has, however, included a worthwhile study of the ways in which that story has been appropriated in Ethiopia.

Yamauchi attempts to walk a middle road. He rejects a Eurocentric approach that reads Africans out of the text or reads the text with racist intent. He also rejects certain Afrocentric readings that assume that all Africans were black or that everything of value has its origin in Africa. His contribution cannot be ignored by anyone who wants to take these texts seriously.

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