



AFRICAN HERITAGE SUNDAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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“...How long shall they kill our prophets, while we stand aside and look?”— Bob Marley¹

“...let Ethiopia hasten to stretch out its hands to God.” Psalm 68:31 (NRSV)

I. Introduction

Ethiopianism is a movement that celebrated with pride the “golden age of African Civilization.”² It was a movement for independence or maintaining independence. Kalu writes that it was not only rooted in the Bible (i.e. Psalm 68:31), but also black nationalism which “inspired generations who re-fashioned it freely” such as the Rastafarian movement and anti-slavery revolts.³

Ethiopian Emperor Selassie I and Ethiopianism influenced a political, cultural and spiritual movement that is directly linked to the people of Africa and clearly represented in scriptures such as Jeremiah 38. They also signify what McCray calls a “Biblical world presence,” demonstrating that Blacks in the Bible were not confined to one region or space in time.⁴ “Cush/Ethiopia as used in the scripture is not limited to defining a place or people limited to the African region south of Egypt. It is in fact an intercontinental designation including in its scope people living in Asia and Africa.”⁵ McCray lists Arabia, Elam-Persia, Mesopotamia, Greece, India, Phoenicia, Crete, Canaan, Egypt and Ethiopia (Cush) as places of “African and Cushite” presence.⁶

II. Word Etymology

Ethiopia/Cush/Kush/Kesh

McCray writes “‘Ethiopia’ comes from a Greek word meaning ‘dark faced’ or ‘burnt faced’” and is a “distinctly European” terminology that was not used by Africans to reference themselves.⁷

The Greek word for “burnt” is “Ethios” and the word for “face” is “ops” thus the root of the word Ethiops (Greek origin) or Ethiopia.⁸

McCray notes that neither ancient Egyptians nor the Hebrews used the term Ethiopian. Instead, the term “Kush” [or Cush or Kesh] epitomizes a more authentic or “indigenous Ethiopian term.”⁹ The term Cush could be indicative of geographic identification, an indicator of ethnic heritage or as in the case of Cushitic; it could speak to a variety of languages that could be found in a “Kush” region or territories.

III. Cultural Response to Text

I grew up wanting my MTV, BET and MP3. So when considering Rastafarianism, my outlook was limited to pop culture images of megastars with untamed locks rocking out on stage with an entranced crowd holding up lighters and dimming cell phones as they belted together Bob Marley’s “One Love.” In those days, I didn’t see the theological relevance and neither did I perceive the Diasporic significance of this faith practice as it relates to Africa and more specifically, Ethiopia.

Had I listened closely to the eloquence and lyrical genius of Marley, I would have heard the spiritual alongside the history, culture and the intentionality of his poetic interconnectedness with Mother Africa. Had I delved deeper, I would have learned of Haile Selassie I, a crowned emperor of Ethiopia, to appreciate not only the belief system of Rastafarianism, but also Ethiopianism.¹⁰

The crowning of this Ethiopian emperor (who was a Christian) had global consequences, as it ushered in the Rastafarian movement in Jamaica that recognized his original name, Ras Tafari Makonen, as a deity. He took on his new name and title as Emperor Selassie I when he came into power in November 1930.¹¹ Another famous Jamaican, Marcus Garvey, popularly known as one of the Fathers of Pan-Africanism helped to expand and revolutionize the Rastafarian [‘Back to Africa’] movement, according to Davies.¹² Davies writes, “Rastafarianism is widely considered to be a continuation (and natural evolution) of Ethiopianism which in a very fundamental sense is an interpretation of Psalm 68:31”¹³ which declares “...let Ethiopia hasten to stretch out its hands to God” (NRSV).

Garvey believed God to be a Lord of restoration. Perhaps this firm belief in the power of the divine allowed Garvey to discern the Psalmist to mean a revolution was on the brink for the people of African descent. For Garvey, Psalm 68 served as Mother Africa and her people’s redemption song of freedom and justice long before Marley struck the cords of his guitar. This is quite relevant to say the least about the foundational, long lasting and widespread influence of the Ethiopian/African presence in the bible on the world. The impact is so critical it continues to make waves in modern-day pop culture, inspiring a new generation in new forums (YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, Pandora, downloadable cell phone applications, etc.) to experience and investigate African Biblical Heritage. The story of Ebed-melech, an Ethiopian eunuch who rescues the Prophet Jeremiah is likewise influential and pertinent in pointing to the active and critical roles of Africans in biblical text and in the world.

IV. Teaching Suggestions for Pastors and Christian Education Personnel

A. Images of the Ethiopian Eunuch

In the week prior to African Heritage Sunday, prepare the congregation with biblical and historical facts on the social class and role of a eunuch. There are few images found of the Ethiopian eunuch rescuing the prophet in Jeremiah 38, but other images could be used.¹⁴

In developing the bible class, draw parallels between Ebed-melech's story and modern advocates for social justice.

- The Social Class of an Ethiopian Eunuch

Ebed-melech, an Ethiopian (also called Nubian or Cushite in some texts) played a significant role in influencing his modern-day culture by helping to bridge the gap between church and state when he urged King Zedekiah to intervene on behalf of the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 38:6-13, NRSV). Ebed-melech was lowly in class—a eunuch, a position that does not come with great social status. This made him quite dispensable, but also the most unsuspecting dissident. Ebed-melech, as a eunuch, would have been classified as one without influence or power.

Historically, eunuchs were males who were castrated and designated to work as government officials or protectors of women of a harem. Some men were made eunuchs because they were born with testicles that did not function properly, while others were selected to serve in that role and were then castrated. Additionally, some eunuchs were not physically castrated at all, but nonetheless submitted themselves to a lifestyle of abstinence and loyalty to the governing rule (Matt. 19:12).

Eunuchs would have been considered unclean and not presentable before God because of their “disfiguration” (Deut. 23:1). At the same time, because of their physical condition, they were not considered a threat and often trusted as loyal servants and had great access to the royal court. Ebed-melech, an immigrant Ethiopian eunuch, was an unsuspecting agent of God whose story is reminiscent of Queen Esther's ascension from lowly status to the royal palace, “for such a time as this” to act on behalf of her people (Esther 4:13-17; 5, 7, 8). He wasn't the only eunuch in biblical records with African heritage. Note the role of the eunuch in the book of Esther and the Ethiopian Eunuch found in Acts 8:27.

- Focus Points for Lessons

Ebed-melech is inspiring for so many reasons starting with the boldness of this Ethiopian—a foreigner, who counseled the king to go against his advisors and rescue Jeremiah from the wrath of the King's people. Second, pause to ponder what may have motivated Ebed-melech to take a chance in speaking out and then taking action. Raise questions and concerns on why today the marginalized may choose to take action and speak out. Did Ebed-melech also believe liberation was at hand for Africa and her people? Did he perceive that his freedom and that of all who were oppressed were bound up in the work of Yahweh's prophet? Is prophetic ministry still relevant in today's society?

Ebed-melech, a disinherited eunuch could have been killed or thrown in the pit to starve alongside Jeremiah. Undaunted, this Ethiopian decided to not remain silent. Ebed-melech is later rewarded by Yahweh for his boldness and faith (Jeremiah 39:15-18). Ebed-melech's obedience to God over the king and his advisors was a radical act of civil disobedience that not only rescued Jeremiah, but allowed Ebed-melech to witness the overthrow of his oppressors (Jer. 16-17). Ebed-melech was a subversive grass roots activist for justice and human rights!

- Modern Parallels

Think of the impact Ebed-melech, a man who was sitting in the backdrop of his society had on other "invisible" members of society like women, children, and the poor. Think of the way his actions gave voice to those who had no power or control over their bodies. Ebed-melech was a eunuch, a role that could require mutilation and physical and sexual oppression. He must have related also to the plight of women who were often powerless over their own bodies in a patriarchal society. Make an argument for how Ebed-melech shared womanist views and how his commitment to human rights pleased God (Isaiah 56:1-8).

Ebed-melech's alliance with the prophet Jeremiah should not be underestimated. Ebed-melech was referenced six times in the text (38:7, 8, 10-12; 39:16), underscoring the vital role of this Ethiopian eunuch who is likened to a slave.¹⁵ If the Psalmist's prose influenced nationalist movements, such as the Rastafarianism and Ethiopianism movements, then who knows what Ebed-melech, the Ethiopian eunuch, inspired because of his socio-political and theologically based stance. Here are four perspectives to keep in mind to envision the social relevance of a modern-day "Ebed-melech:"

1. Ebed-melech was Ethiopian—a foreigner or immigrant.
2. Ebed-melech was considered differently-able (a eunuch).
3. Ebed-melech was considered lower class and expendable. He had no rights.
4. Ebed-melech feared God more than the governing ruler.

B. Images of Revolts

Ebed-melech's actions could have caused a revolt or a class action law suit by those who were also marginalized because of status, class, orientation, location and the like throughout the African Diaspora. Consider the global impact of the *La Amistad* revolt of 1839 when captured Africans gained control of the ship of their capturers, killing members of the crew. The enslaved Africans earned an appearance before the United States Supreme Court where their lawyers petitioned for their freedom and won their right to return to their native Africa. Moreover, consider other revolts that created waves in the Diaspora when the oppressed faced their oppressors demanding justice like those who participated in *Nat Turner's* rebellion in 1831, the *Creole* revolt of 1841, the *Dred Scott* decision of 1857 or the *Haitian Slave Revolt* lead by Toussaint L'Ouverture which sparked a host of other revolts.¹⁶

Share with students images of Amistad survivors, Africans who stood up for justice just as Ebed-melech did. This can be done through artwork and or a video clip from the documentary *The Amistad Revolt: All We Want Is Make Us Free.*¹⁷ The video can be purchased from:

The Amistad Committee, Inc.
P.O. Box 2936
Westville Station
New Haven, CT 06515
Phone: 203-387-0370

C. Modern Issues of Oppression

Ebed-melech saw oppression and spoke out against it. In 2010, President Barack Hussein Obama signed legislation that would overturn the military policy of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” which discharged women and men from the armed services if their homosexual orientation was revealed. The policy was considered oppressive and unjust and the Lesbian and Gay community spoke out, rallied and placed great pressure on the White House and congressional representatives. Many believe the reversal of this discriminatory legislation will open the door for more civil rights and open and affirming policies to honor the human rights of same-gender-loving persons.

The Human Rights Watch Organization offers global resources, updates and action plans for advocacy on LGBTQI rights. It speaks to the plight of same-gender-loving persons in places such as South Africa, Senegal, and the United States. Create ribbons with Gay Rights colors intertwined with the colors Red, Black and Green or with the African Continent as its backdrop to wear on African Heritage Sunday.¹⁸

D. Transformative Learning Moments

Ebed-melech’s story could speak to the conditions of women and community violence that involve black on black crime. What is the role of the church in speaking out against sexism and self-degradation? Further, what is the role of the church when addressing the violence that impacts our brothers and sisters in the Diaspora? Ebed-melech was a foreigner, but still he used his position of influence to save the life of Jeremiah who was being tortured and left for dead by his own countrymen. How do we work toward being a Church that is (locally and globally committed) to others who are being oppressed? Consider the work of SaveDarfur.org.

- SaveDarfur.org (www.savedarfur.org) has an abundance of resources to speak out against genocide in the world and in particular, Darfur, Sudan. The site provides information on pending legislation, action steps for individuals and groups, creative arts resources, and steps for communal accountability for the lives of our brothers and sisters who are being raped, displaced and murdered. To see creative arts resources visit: [//www.savedarfur.org/pages/creative-community-visual-arts](http://www.savedarfur.org/pages/creative-community-visual-arts) to take action visit online location: <http://www.savedarfur.org/pages/actions>.

View YouTube ads by Save Darfur at online location: <http://youtu.be/frt2UurE7Cw>

These are only a few of the topics that can be explored through this text and can serve as transformative learning moments for your congregation. It is critical to make the connection

between our contemporary context and the historical context. Marcus Garvey found inspiration through the words of the Psalmist that lead to a movement of liberation for his people and faith practice. Through the means of pop culture and new media forums, modern-day society can also become enlightened by our African Heritage. Utilizing our African heritage and lifting up the black presence in biblical text can serve as a trajectory for how people of African descent chart our course for generations to come and take a stand for liberation, justice and human rights for all.

V. Personal Testimony

Eunuchs historically took on the name of the ruler they served. Consider how enslaved persons were forced to sacrifice their African names to take on the names of their oppressors when brought to America's shores against their will. (*Consider also the psychological castration enslaved African men were subjected to when the women in their lives were raped before them as they were chained, bound and unable to come to their aid.*) These "given" names may have linked them to their current geographical location and alerted others to whom they "belonged." Alex Haley's Roots may be a good resource for this illustration.¹⁹

- View YouTube clip of Roots film see the scene "Naming Kunta."
YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_A2o8ICcIQ

My family members are from the Sea Islands of South Carolina. Our last name is Middleton. There are at least two Middleton Plantations I am aware of in my community that carry this name. One could discern that my ancestors were from the coastal Low Country regions and that they labored as enslaved persons for one of the two wealthy and prominent producers of sugar cane, rice and or cotton from that area. The actions of my ancestors would be associated with the proprietors of the Middleton Plantation; unknown are all the ways that the enslaving Middletons and the enslaved Middletons impacted each other. Ebed-melech's name had great significance just as his Cushitic identity did and perhaps also served as a subversive weapon of protest. The actions of this poor, God fearing, immigrant eunuch would be far told and associated with the house of King Zedekiah.

VI. A Song That Speaks to the Moment

Bob Marley writes with eloquence about the suffering of the people. He speaks of how the prophets are killed because they recognize injustice. He asks the listener, "How long shall they kill our prophets, while we stand aside and look? His lyrics resonate well with today's lection as we witness an oppressed man, Ebed-melech—the Ethiopian Eunuch, not standing aside, but boldly saving the prophet Jeremiah's life. The song's imagery connects well with nationalist movements for freedom and justice such as Rastafarianism and Ethiopianism, both partly inspired by the African presence in Biblical history.

Redemption Song

Old pirates, yes, they rob I;
Sold I to the merchant ships,
Minutes after they took I

From the bottomless pit.
But my hand was made strong
By the 'and of the Almighty.
We forward in this generation
Triumphantly.
Won't you help to sing
This songs of freedom
'Cause all I ever have:
Redemption songs;
Redemption songs.

Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery;
None but ourselves can free our minds.
Have no fear for atomic energy,
'Cause none of them can stop the time.
How long shall they kill our prophets,
While we stand aside and look? Ooh!
Some say it's just a part of it:
We've got to fulfill the book.

Won't you help to sing
This songs of freedom-
'Cause all I ever have:
Redemption songs;
Redemption songs;
Redemption songs.

/Guitar break/

Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery;
None but ourselves can free our mind.
Wo! Have no fear for atomic energy,
'Cause none of them-a can-a stop-a the time.
How long shall they kill our prophets,
While we stand aside and look?
Yes, some say it's just a part of it:
We've got to fulfill the book.
Won't you have to sing
This songs of freedom? -
'Cause all I ever had:
Redemption songs -
All I ever had:
Redemption songs:
These songs of freedom,
Songs of freedom.²⁰

VII. Audio/Visual Aids

To aid in helping congregants envision the wealth and significance of Ethiopia/Mother Africa:

- **Display a Coptic Cross**
Before the procession of the choir and beginning of the worship service, denote the start of worship by placing a Coptic Cross of Ethiopia in a prominent place in the sanctuary. Inside your bulletin give information about the Coptic cross. Online location: <http://www.seiyaku.com/images/cross/ethiopian-large.png>
- **Include African Drumming and Dance**
Celebrate the contributions of our African ancestors by beginning worship service with drumming and African dance. Pour libation to honor those of the MAAFA and slavery. Pour libation calling out the names of African ancestors of biblical presence including Ebed-melech, the Ethiopian eunuch who rescued the prophet Jeremiah.
- **Do a Special Celebration**
Trinity United Church of Christ of Chicago, Illinois, annually hosts an Umoja Karamu celebration in November. The litany and rituals of this service can be applied to African Heritage Sunday. The rituals include songs and litanies of liberation, call and response, and libation. The ceremony was adapted from Edward Sims, Jr.'s Umoja Karamu: A Ritual for the Black Family.²¹ To learn more about Trinity UCC's Umoja Karamu ritual, DVD copies of the ritual may be purchased from the church's Akiba Bookstore. Online location: www.trinitychicago.org.
- **Bulletin Covers/Art for Screens**
Use artist Lois Mailou Jones's painting "The Ascent of Ethiopia (1932)" as a bulletin cover or clip art for use on screens in church. Online location: http://www.google.com/images?q=the+ascent+of+ethiopia+by+lois+mailou+jones&hl=en&rlz=1R2SKPT_enUS410&prmdo=1&tbs=isch:1&prmd=ivns0&source=lnms&ei=Fb0gTaLhK8Gs8AbkheWHDg&sa=X&oi=mode_link&ct=mode&ved=0CDEQ_AU.

Or, use images of the Ethiopian and Ancient Cushite Empire for bulletin inserts, covers or as clip art for screens in the church. Online location: <http://tseday.wordpress.com/2008/09/14/old-ethiopia-its-people/>
- **Do a Poetry Reading**
Have a congregant read Maya Angelou's poem "Africa"

Africa

Thus she had lain
sugarcane sweet
deserts her hair
golden her feet

mountains her breasts
two Niles her tears.
Thus she has lain
Black through the years.

Over the white seas
rime white and cold
brigands ungentled
icicle bold
took her young daughters
sold her strong sons
churched her with Jesus
bled her with guns.
Thus she has lain.

Now she is rising
remember her pain
remember the losses
her screams loud and vain
remember her riches
her history slain
now she is striding
although she has lain.

- **The Children's Moment**

Involve children in your service by dedicating a Children's Moment where the children and youth sing spiritual medleys that speak of Africa and reflect the faith of the enslaved African. Suggested songs include:

"Over My Head"	Traditional Spiritual
"Take This Hammer"	Traditional Work Song
"Kum Ba Ya"	West African Spiritual

- **Griots - Storytelling**

Have a griot or storyteller moment in the service where the griot, dressed the part, enters the sanctuary making an entrance by stomping a walking stick to capture the congregants attention. As the griot finds her or his way to the front of the sanctuary, he or she will tell the story "My Name is Not Angelica" by Scott O'Dell which tells of how a young girl named Raisha was kidnapped from Africa and renamed Angelica.²² Raisha reclaims her name and her freedom after the slave revolt of 1733. The story can be found in Susan Kantor's African-American Read-Aloud Stories.²³ This story could also be produced as a short skit children can act out during your worship service. Additionally, the dance ministry and drama ministry can collaborate in acting out this short story.

- **African Market**

Host an African Market following the worship service displaying and making available for purchase or barter African art, artifacts, traditional foods, music, head wraps and more.

Additional Reading on African Heritage

Aptheker, Herbert. Negro Slave Revolts in the United States: 1526-1860. New York, NY: International Publishers, 1939.

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Dash, Michael I.N. "The Bible and the African Experience." African Roots: Towards An Afrocentric Christian Witness. Chicago: SCP/Third World Literature Publishing House, 1994.

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Ogbonnaya, A. Okechukwu. Upon This Rock: African Influence in the Christian Church. Chicago, IL: Urban Ministries, Inc., 1999.

Phillipson, David W. Ancient Ethiopia. London, UK: British Museum Press, 1998.

Taryor, Nya Kwiawon. Impact of the African Tradition on African Christianity. Chicago, IL: Struggles Community Press, 1985.

Watson, Barrington. The Pan-Africanists. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 2000, (1999). This is a good book to teach youth and children about Pan-Africanism; great images are also included.

VIII. Conclusion

Ebed-melech was a daring voice and reminder of the Diasporic or global presence of African heritage represented in the Bible and cultures around the world. Further, Ebed-melech demonstrates the invaluable contributions of our ancestors in religious, cultural, social and historical narration. His story is not a footnote but a critical juncture in discerning ways African people and African religiosity has influenced movements around the world including Rastafarianism and Ethiopianism.

As we celebrate African Heritage Sunday, the story of Ebed-melech, the Ethiopian Eunuch can help us understand the subversive ways our ancestors worked to overcome oppression and stood for justice and liberation for all. He affirms quite clearly the presence of Africans in the bible and their critical part in religious history.

Notes

1. Bob Marley & the Wailers. "Redemption Song." Uprising. Long Island, NY: Island Records, 1980; Lyrics online location: www.Lyricsfreak.com accessed 8 December 2010

2. Kalu, Ogbu U. African Christianity: An African Story. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 2007. p. 233; "Ethiopianism." A religious movement among sub-Saharan Africans that embodied the earliest stirrings toward religious and political freedom in the modern colonial period. Encyclopedia Britannica Online. Encyclopedia Britannica, 2010. Online location: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/194224/Ethiopianism> accessed 8 December 2010; "Ethiopianism." A liberation theological movement independent of political influence or domination. Author's definition.

3. Ibid., p. 232.

4. McCray, Walter Arthur. The Black Presence in the Bible: Discovering the Black and African Identity of Biblical Persons and Nations. Chicago: Black Light Fellowship, 1990. p. 100.

5. Ibid., p. 103.

6. Ibid., p. 103.

7. Ibid., p. 101.

8. Phillip, Clyde F. Africa's Contribution to World Civilization. Miami, FL: Colonial Press International, 2002. p. 18.

9. McCray, Walter Arthur. The Black Presence in the Bible: Discovering the Black and African Identity of Biblical Persons and Nations. p.101.

10. Davies, Carole Boyce, ed. "Rastafarianism." Encyclopedia of the African Diaspora: Origins, Experiences and Culture, Volume 1. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2008. pp. 792-793.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Davies, Carole Boyce, ed. "Rastafarianism." Encyclopedia of the African Diaspora: Origins, Experiences and Culture, Volume 1. pp. 792-793.

14. For example see online location: http://multipleworlds.net/images/Phil_Ethio-705x453.jpg there is the image of an Ethiopian eunuch being baptized by Phillip (Acts 8:26-40).
15. McCray, Walter Arthur. The Black Presence in the Bible: Discovering the Black and African Identity of Biblical Persons and Nations. p. 27.
16. Aptheker, Herbert. Negro Slave Revolts in the United States: 1526-1860. New York, NY: International Publishers, 1939.
17. "Teaching With Documents: The Amistad Case" "United States v. The Amistad." National Archives, 2010. Teacher's resources, online location: <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/amistad/index.html> accessed 8 December 2010; The Amistad Revolt: All We Want Is Make Us Free. Dir. Evans, Karyl K. Online location: <http://www.capturedtimeproductions.com/films/amistad.html> accessed 8 December 2010
18. Learn more about action steps at the Human Rights Watch online location: <http://www.hrw.org/en/category/topic/lgbt-rights> accessed 8 December 2010
19. Hayley, Alex M.P. Roots. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1976.
20. Bob Marley & the Wailers. "Redemption Song." Uprising. Long Island, NY: Island Records, 1980; Lyrics online location: www.Lyricsfreak.com accessed 8 December 2010
21. Sims, Edward and Thomas G. Snowden. "Umoja Karamu: A Ritual for the Black Family." Black Family Rituals. 1977. Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2008.
22. O'Dell, Scott. My Name Is Not Angelica. New York, NY: Yearling, 1990.
23. Kantor, Susan. African-American Read-Aloud Stories. New York, NY: Black Dog & Leventhal, 1998.