

## **AFRICA AND AFRICANS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT SCHEME OF SALVATION<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

This article entails a critical investigation of the role of Africa and Africans in the scheme of Salvation in the Old Testament. It identifies the terminology used to refer to Africa and Africans in the ancient period, and critically examines the salvific events in which God used Africa and Africans to deliver the children of Israel.

**Key Words:** Africa, Africans, Ancient, Old Testament, Salvation,

### **1. Introduction**

Although the Old Testament (OT) is primarily a record of and a witness to the revelation of God within the history and experience of Israel, it also recognises God's involvement with other nations that had/have contact with them. This is because Israel had to struggle for her existence amongst other nations and because she was located in a strategic and exposed position, thus being subject to outside influence. They had to fight against the Amorites, Canaanites, Africans, and several other peoples. Even when the Hebrews arrived at the Promised Land, the struggle did not end. They came into contact with traders, soldiers, priests, and prophets of powerful nations such as the Philistines, Phoenicians, Assyrians, and Babylonians. The religions of these nations also became "a never-ending threat to Israel," forcing her to acknowledge the reality of

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God's plan for them. These foreign nations played a role in shaping Israel's understanding of God's salvation. Some of them played a secondary role in the economic, religious, political, military, and social history of ancient Israel, while others played a major one. Therefore, in order to understand the OT properly, it is important to understand the life and thought of the nations who played a major role in Israel's destiny.

While the role of most of these foreign nations has been investigated extensively (e.g Kaufman 1970; Kramer 1963; Hallo 1960:34-36; Rainey 1975:47-6; Oppenheim 1964; Luckenbill 1965), the role of Africa and Africans in OT scheme of Salvation has not been adequately researched. Thus, the purpose of this article is to critically investigate the role that Africa and Africans have played in God's scheme of Salvation<sup>2</sup> in the OT.

In light of the above, it is important to identify who the Africans and African nations were that played an important role in Israel's life during the time of the OT. In order to do that, I shall begin by briefly identifying the various terms used to refer to them in the ancient world. I will then *critically examine the salvific events in which God used Africa and Africans to deliver the children of Israel*

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<sup>2</sup> Von Rad correctly emphasises the fact that the OT is not a history book that gives an account of historical facts as they really happened, but rather one which tells of God's history with Israel, the nations and the world. It is salvation history (von Rad 1965:415).

## 2. Identification of Africa and Africans in the OT

### 2.1. *Egypt* (מצרים)

Africa and Africans are referred to more than 1417 times in the Bible, with Egypt being mentioned more than 740 times in the OT (Adamo 2006:21-36).

Egypt/Egyptians and Cush/Cushites are always mentioned together in the OT since they both belong to Africa. Egypt belongs to the northern part of Africa and to the so-called Ancient Near East (ANE). Despite the fact that the ancient Egyptians saw themselves as belonging to Africa, some Western biblical scholars have tried to deafricanize them, thus making Ancient Egypt to be a European nation instead of an Africa one (Adamo 2006:3). Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 (Volney 1890), opened Egypt up for archaeological discovery. The massive discoveries in Egypt and the development of the New Hamite Hypothesis, which was bent on debasing Negroes, could not permit Egyptologist to talk of the possibility that Negroes had developed the civilization of the Nile Valley. For example, as early as 1810 Blumenbach, a pioneer in racial classification, tried to prove that the ancient Egyptian-African Cushites were not Negroes (1865). However, following their examination of Egyptian Nile Valley representations, several Africanists (Rogers 1982; Jackson 1932; Diop 1974; Copher 1974), have held very strongly that the Egyptians and the people of Nile Valley are of one race - Negroes or Blacks.

Many other scholars such as Glenn Usry and Craig Keener have argued for the Africanness and blackness of Egypt and the Egyptians. According to them "most Egyptians were black by any one's definition" (Usry & Keener 1996:61). The Egyptians themselves considered Africa and not Asia as their origin. The inscription of Queen Hatshepsut attests to

the fact that they originated from Punt to which they made several expeditions (Adamo 2005: 14; MacCray 1990:112; Budge 415-416; Adamo 1986:29-30).

## 2.2 *Kush* (כּוּשׁ)

The most popular and the most frequently used terms which refer to Africa and Africans in ancient Egypt and the OT are “*Kash/Kaush/Kesh/Kush*”<sup>3</sup>.

The ancient Egyptian records always point to the south of Egypt when referring to “Kush”. Although there is yet no certainty as to the exact geographical limit of the kingdom of Kush, Kemp (1983:74) states that “the brick castle and the great tumuli” uncovered during the excavation at Kerma, on the east bank above the Third Cataract, is evidence that “the seat of the King of Kush” was there and became the place from which the whole “Kingdom of Kush” was ruled, at least, from the seventeenth and early sixteenth centuries BCE. Even though the term “Kush” ceased from use during the final period of Meroe and the decline of the “Kingdom of Kush,” the people of Kordofan and Farfur west of the Nile river still retained the name Kush (*Kas* or *Kaj*) up to the Christian era (Arkell 1961:80; Pritchard 1969:232). Pritchard (1969:31,228,419) also refers to Kames’ expedition to Hent–hen–nefer to overthrow the Kushites, which is mentioned in the inceptions of Kames, discovered in 1954 at Karnak.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Moses’ wife was from Kush (Num 12:1-5); a Kushite man reported the death of Absalom to David (2 Sam 18:21, 31-33); and Ebed-Melech, the Kushite in the palace of King Zedekiah, rescued the prophet Jeremiah from death (Jer 38:6-14, 39:16-18)

<sup>4</sup>Other texts of Ashurbanipal include the Cylinder B, C, and E inscriptions and Ashurbanipal historical tablet commemorating the rebuilding of the temple of Sin at Haran. Other monuments of Esarhaddon which used the word *Kusu* or *Kusi* include the inscriptions on the brick and vases which record his building activities, the Senjirli Stele which records his victory over Syria, and the Alabaster Tablets from Ashur which summarise Esarhaddon’s building activities in Ashur and Babylon (Lukenbill vol

In the OT, the terms Kush/Kushites are used to refer to Africa/Africans in terms of persons who came from Africa or whose ancestors are of African origin.<sup>5</sup> In terms of a geographical location, Kush is described as the extreme part of the world (Ezkl 29:10, Isa 45:14, Job 28:19). The inhabitants of Kush were described as a tall and smooth-skinned people. Their blackness became proverbial (Isa 18:12, Jer 13:23).

The Kushites' power was comparable only to that of the Assyrians. Judah depended on the Kushites and the Egyptians for deliverance from the Assyrians (2 Chr 12:3-9, Isa 18:2, 1 Kin 18:19-21, Chr 32:9-15, 3:8). However, despite their mighty power, the Kushites experienced defeat during their encounters with Zerah, Asa (2 Chr 14:9-15) and the the Assyrians (2 Kin 18:21).

Kush, like any other nation, was subject to God's judgement (Ezk 30:4). The prophet Zephaniah prophesied the conversion of the Kushites who would then bring tribute to Yahweh (Zeph 3:10). According to the Psalms, they will stretch out their hands to God (Ps 68:31) and become one of the nations which will acknowledge Zion as their spiritual home (Ps 87:4-5).

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2,1968:289).

<sup>5</sup>The term "Kush" and its gentilic appear some fifty-seven times in the OT. It is used to cover a wide area corresponding to Ethiopia of the classical period. Spatio-temporal concerns prevent me from discussing every passage in which Kush/Kushites are mentioned. I will thus limit the discussion to what I regard as some of the more important passages.

### 3. Africa's Role in the Salvific Events of the OT

#### 3.1 The meaning and nature of Salvation in the OT

“Salvation” and its derivatives are used about 353 times in the OT (Harris 1981:928). The words that are mostly used for salvation in the OT stem from the verbs *יָשַׁע* and *מָלַט*. This sub-section will briefly outline the meanings of these words.. *יָשַׁע*

In the OT, the verb *יָשַׁע* occurs approximately 143 times in the *hiphil*, and basically means “to save,” “to free,” “to help,” and “to make spacious” (Friedrich 1971:970; Renn 2006:849). In the *niphil* it refers to a space being given to the one who is confined. In most cases, it refers to various personal relationships through which deliverance, help, and salvation comes (Friedrich 1971:973).<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew word also means to be saved or delivered, to give victory, to be safe, to take vengeance or to preserve, rescue, or defend a cause (Harris, Archer & Waltke 1981:928). It means deliverance, help and salvation through humankind in dangerous situations. This deliverance may be wrought by means of war / military intervention (Hosea 1:17, Jdg 2:16,18; 3:9, 15,31) or the settlement of a legal difficulty (2 Sam 14:4).

*יָשַׁע* can also refer to deliverance, help, and salvation through and from Yahweh. As he delivers through human beings, he does so directly as the one who has all power and might to intervene. He is the one who is best equipped to intervene in the affairs of humankind. He protects the weak against their oppressors in the days of trouble. The idea of God as a king means he is a hero and a man of war (Isa 33:22; Ps 44:3). That is why ancient Israel can look

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<sup>6</sup>The root in Arabic means to “make wide” or “make sufficient” which connotes “freedom from distress,” and to move from distress needs deliverance (Harris, Archer, & Waltke 1981:928).

back to their experiences of help from Yahweh and called him “the Shield of thy help and the sword of thy glory” (Deut 33:29, KJV). In the book of Psalms, the word עִשַׁי is used almost 80 times to invoke and experience help of Yahweh against enemies (Friedrich 1971: 976).

#### לטפ

The *qal* form of the stem לטפ means “to get away” while the *piel* and *hiphil* forms mean “to bring to safety,” “to deliver” (Friedrich 1971:978). The words פָּלִיט and פְּלִיט, which occur only in the plural, mean those who are escaping, the fugitives/refugees, or the ones who have actually escaped from danger. The word לטפ mainly denotes the ones who are escaping from serious danger that might lead to death (e.g. Jdg 12:5, 21:17; Ezk 33:21; Gen 32:9, 2 Kin 19:30, and 2 Chr 12:7, 20:24).

The words פָּלִיט and פְּלִיט may also be used for those who have escaped divine punishment as a mortal threat (e.g. Isa 4:2, 10:20; Ezk 6:8; Obd 17; Ezr 9:8; and Neh 1:2).

#### מלט

In the *niphal*, מלט means “to escape./to find safety,” whereas in the *piel* it also means “to let escape,” “to save,” “to save oneself” (Friedrich 1971:979. See e.g. Jer 39:18; Jdg 3:29; and I Sam 30: 17 where it denotes complete victory over enemies). It also denotes escape from calamity before it strikes, as in Genesis 19:17-22. It may also be used to denote spiritual and material blessing.

Thus, מלט, like פלט, mostly means “to escape from threatening death”. It can be used for any situation in which a person is delivered from real or potential danger. It denotes a state of well-being as it refers to Yahweh’s action in delivering Israel from their enemies.

### **3.1.1 The nature of salvation in the OT**

The nature of salvation in the OT is historical. The actual goal of Yahweh's action in history is revelational, that is, for him to be known. In other words, revelation itself is historical. God's special saving acts, as recorded in the OT, are based on actual historical experiences, such as deliverance from Egyptian bondage, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Africans and other nations who desired to destroy Israel. The Israelites' experiences of Yahweh's acts of deliverance left their mark upon their whole existence and every part of the OT. God's salvific acts were preached about, recounted in songs, and re-enacted in Passover rituals (Pss 44:1, 78:105-106:136; Ex 12:1-20; and Deut 6:20-24).

Just as Yahweh used foreign nations such as the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and the Persians for Israel's punishment and salvation, so too did He use Africa/Africans for the purposes of His acts of deliverance.

### **3.1.2 Africa as a Place of Refuge/Deliverance in the OT**

Since the time of Abraham, the OT records Africa as a place of refuge:<sup>7</sup>

Genesis 12 records that Abraham and his family went to Africa for refuge during a time of famine.

In another important instance, Africa became a safe haven for the Hebrews during the time of Jacob and Joseph. Genesis 43 records how Joseph was sold to Egyptian slave traders so that he could eventually deliver his own people from famine. If not for their refuge in Egypt, the Hebrews may have been wiped out of existence.

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<sup>7</sup>As early as 3000 years, the Mesopotamians referred to Africa and Africans as Magans and Meluhhans. They came to Africa for refuge and for trade in gold (Adamo 2001:25; Stieglitz 1985:138)



During the 21<sup>st</sup> Dynasty of Egypt, when King David conquered Edom, Hadad, the Edomite Prince, was taken to Egypt for safety and given a royal Egyptian wife (I Kings 11:18-22).

Jeroboam rebelled against his father, King Solomon, and ran for his life to Egypt. He served in the Egyptian court for sixteen years until Solomon died (I Kin 11: 40. See further Adamo 2006: 58and Galphaz 1991:13-19).

During the Assyrians' destruction of the Northern Kingdom, many of the Samaritans fled to Africa for refuge.

When the Babylonians destroyed the Southern Kingdom (Judah) in 587/6 BCE, Gedeliah was chosen as the governor of Jerusalem. However, fanatical Jews assassinated him. Fearing that the Babylonians would take vengeance on them, they ran off to Africa for safety, taking the Prophet Jeremiah with them. Thus, Africa became a place of safety for one of the greatest prophets of ancient Israel and other important people.

From time immemorial, Africa has been a place of refuge for the Hebrews and other people. The author of Matthew is aware of this, which probably accounts for his emphasis on Jesus being taken to Egypt for safety.

### **3.1.3 Deliverance from Egypt**

Egypt which has been a place of refuge since the time immemorial had to experience the mighty power of Yahweh in delivering the children of Israel from their oppression.

The process of deliverance began with the confrontations between Moses and Pharaoh in Egypt. Exodus 7-11 relates the struggle between Yahweh and Moses on the one hand, and Moses and Pharaoh on the other. The story of the nine plagues is not only one of Israel's deliverance; it is also a story about the humiliation and defeat of the Egyptians.

These plagues affected not only the taskmasters and Pharaoh, but also the common Egyptians. The narrator indicates that Yahweh hardened Pharaoh's heart – perhaps a justification for the punishment that the Egyptians subsequently followed – and wrought great deliverance for the Hebrews.

### ***3.1.4 The Plagues and the Passover***

The Passover passage is another story of real salvation or deliverance that took place in Egypt (Africa). Death passed over the houses that celebrated the Passover, whose lintels and doorposts were marked with blood, while it smote the firstborn of the Egyptians (Exodus 12:24).

The interpretation of the plagues and the Passover has been a subject of controversy among scholars. The first point of controversy relates to the attempt to provide a natural background for the narrative in Egypt, in order to justify its historical basis (Lemmelijn 2007:396). It was claimed, for example, that each plague can be traced to a natural phenomenon within the Egyptian ecosystem. Other scholars, who are not concerned with the historicity of the account, maintain that the Egyptian environment only influenced the narrative, which was a “proclamation of theological core content” (Lemmelijn 2007:396) rather than a historical account. In other words, the narrative's core is neither natural nor historical. Rather, the narrative is a natural-literary description with a theological core (Freithem 1991:385-396; Miller & Hayes 1986: 64-65). Yet others believe that the narrative is only meant to offer “a theological message and does not contain any historical account” (Lemmelijn 2007:396). The basis of the theological teaching is that Yahweh is the Lord of creation and master over life and death. Yahweh brings liberation. He has demonstrated the highest divine power in the story of the plague and exodus.

### **3.1.5 The Crossing of the Reed Sea**

The story of the Red Sea Crossing became the narrative climax of deliverance in Exodus 13:17-18. When Pharaoh finally allowed the children of Israel to go, they took the longer, desert way toward the Reed Sea, instead of the shorter way, the way of Philistines<sup>8</sup>. The Reed see is the body of water between Africa and the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>9</sup> They avoided the shorter road not because of

the Philistines, but possibly to avoid the Egyptian patrols and border guards.

Although the account in Exodus 14 - one of most vivid and emotional narratives in the OT - does not identify the actual sea (whether the Gulf of Suez or Gulf of Aqaba), the hymn in Exodus 15:1-18 - one of the oldest poetry sections in the OT - mentions that Pharaoh's officers were sunk בַּיַם־סוּף. The latter passage also declares that Yahweh is a warrior – a common ascription to deities in the ANE – and that His power as a warrior has been demonstrated in his delivering the Hebrews from the powerful Egyptians, their slavery, oppression, and all manner of suffering.

Many scholars do not believe that the Exodus story is actually a historical fact as it is not supported by any archaeological or non-biblical sources (see Finkelstein 2007:52)<sup>10</sup>. Radford (2007:52), however, does not deny the

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<sup>8</sup> . The main, shorter road from Egypt to Canaan is called “the way of the land of the Philistine.”

<sup>9</sup>The translation “Red Sea” should read “Sea of Reed.” The term “Red Sea” derives from the LXX translation which was adopted by the Vulgate and passed on to most of the English translations. The expression is used several times in the Bible to refer to Gulf of Aqaba (I King 9:26), whereas in a few occasion it refers to the Gulf of Suez (Ex. 10:19).

<sup>10</sup> According to Mazar (2007:59), there is no direct evidence either of the Israelites' sojourn in Egypt or the Exodus, with the only evidence being circumstantial: The Israelites' sojourn in Goshen can be understood in the light of the rich evidence for the Semitic population in the second century BCE who found the 15<sup>th</sup> or Hyksos Dynasty in Egypt. Ramesses II, the

possibility that Exodus preserves an ancient memory of events that took place many centuries before. Finkelstein (2007:52) asks, rhetorically, “Is it possible that an old story on how a great pharaoh was humiliated and defeated by the God of Israel was used in order to send a message of hope to the people of Judah in the time of the authors?”

To my mind, however, the fact that the Exodus story became the founding myth of Israel’s origin, and that it is the most important story for the establishment of Israelite and Jewish identity, means that there must be some historical memory underlying this event<sup>11</sup>. It is repeatedly invoked over and over again not only in the Torah, but also in the Prophets, the Writings, and the New Testament. It should therefore not be dismissed as a mere story that does not have any historical basis. There is no doubt that the Exodus story also had a strong-possibly stronger-impact in exilic times. To put it in the words of biblical scholar David Clines (2007: 52), the bondage in Egypt is their own bondage in Babylon, and the exodus past becomes the exodus that is yet to be”..

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pharaoh of 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty built a new city called Pi-Ramesse very close to Avaris (Mazar 2007:59). The biblical story which refers to the Hebrews building the city of Ramsesses may indeed reflect this huge building operation in the thirteenth century. The story of the Exodus – the escape of a group of people to the Sinai Desert - was not unknown. Papyri described a small group of slaves escaping to the Sinai through eastern fortification system of Egypt. According to Mazar (2007:60), despite the few indirect pieces of archaeological evidence, the story of Exodus “cannot be accepted as an historical event” but rather “a national saga”. Eventually the story of Exodus was transmitted and adapted as a major pan-Israelite narrative. During several centuries of transmission, it was constantly changed and elaborated on until it received the form known to us from the OT (Mazar 2007:61).

<sup>11</sup> The hymn celebrating Yahweh’s defeat of the Africans (Egyptians) and the deliverance of Israel is too ingrained in the life and religion of ancient Israel and Judaism to be dismissed as fable. Scholars should be cautious in concluding that the Exodus events are mere fable. The future may yet produce archaeological evidence in support of their historicity.

Be that as it may, the most important aspect of the Exodus for the purposes of this paper, is that the narrator made Africa the setting of the story and that Africans (Egyptians) were important characters through which the salvation of Yahweh was wrought. Egypt/Africa provided the background for deliverance in Exodus, and the Egyptian bondage provided the opportunity for Yahweh's miracles and the Passover. It also provided the background for Yahweh's deliverance at the Sea of Reed, what is called the Exodus Proper. It would, therefore, be correct to state that the real salvation experience for the Israelite nation began in Africa. Unwittingly, Egypt taught the Israelites how to trust Yahweh for deliverance from the hands of their enemies (Exodus 14).

### **3.1.6 The African Military Man in King David's Army (II Sam. 18:21-32)**

As biblical scholars generally agree, the passages<sup>12</sup> to be dealt with below are concerned with events that took

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<sup>12</sup> The existence of tensions, repetitions, and parallel narratives in the book of Samuel (I and II Samuel?) has led some scholars to regard it as a product of the assembly of originally independent fragmentary materials (Forher 1965:217).<sup>12</sup> Even so, scholars have long considered II Samuel 18 (including the entire Court History of David) as a historical document, an "unequaled masterpiece of ancient New Eastern historiography" undoubtedly written by an eye-witness author (Forher 1965:222; Gottwald 1985:317).

A historical source equal in importance to the narrative of David's rise, has rightly been rated an unequalled masterpiece of ancient New Eastern historiography. Besides the realistic and true-to life portrayal of people and events, the artful and dramatic structure of the narrative contributes much to its success. The author was undoubtedly an eye witness to the events and a member of the royal court (Forher 1965:222).

place during the period of the united monarchy. Although the period of the so called "United Monarchy" (1020-922 BCE) was regarded as one of the most significant periods in Israel's history, it was marred by serious internal crises between Saul and Samuel, Saul and David, David and Eshbaal, David and Absalom, David and Sheba, Solomon and Adonijah, and Jeroboam and Rehoboam (Gottwald

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The belief in the Court History of David as a historical eyewitness account provided the linchpin for understanding the reign of David. Gradually, however, this view has been eroded because of various factors such as the passage's actual genre, its extensive use of conversations, and scenes which some scholars believe could scarcely have been eye witness accounts of David's life. In the light of this, five major interpretations have been advanced:

- (1) The document is political propaganda (Whybray 1968:50-55; Collins 2003:243);
- (2) It is narrative wisdom writing with the didactic purpose of teaching good virtues like friendliness, loyalty, judicious speech, and humility (Whybray 1968:56-115; Collins 2003:242);
- (3) It is a story, "traditionally or conventionally narrated as a work of art and for serious entertainment" (Gunn 1978:37-60).
- (4) The hand of the Deuteronomic editor is lacking in II Samuel 9-20, making it an insertion (Pfeiffer 1948: 387).
- (5) Although much of the David and Solomon biblical narrative cannot be "read as a straightforward historical testimony as traditionally perceived," David and Solomon are historical figures and there is good reason to accept many stories in the book of Samuel because they contain genuine, early historical memories (Finkelstein 2007:107-116).

These interpretations that consider the Court History of David as political propaganda, or didactic writing for teaching morals or as a work of art for entertainment, appear to me not to be convincing enough. The nature of the writing has no doubt supported the historicity of the passage as Fohrer, Gottwald, Mazar and other biblical scholars have rightly maintained (Fohrer 1968:222; Gottwald; Mazar 2007:117-139).

1978:294). The crises were so severe that many scholars have argued against calling that period “a United Kingdom” because the Kingdom was not really united.

Our main concern is with the tension between David and his son, Absalom (II Sam 16-18), which, brought an African man (אִשְׁכִּיזִי) to defend David and deliver him from Absalom. While some scholars have denied the existence of this African military man, others have accepted him but refused him any important status. This writer undoubtedly considers this military man as an African man who joined David’s army in order to deliver him from the death threat of his son.

The trouble began when Amnon raped Absalom’s sister, Tamar, and David took no action against him for about two years. Absalom murdered Amnon in cold blood (II Sam. 13:20-29) and was forgiven only after spending three years in exile in his mother’s country. Absalom went to Hebron, where he was anointed King over Israel. He marched to Jerusalem against David and his forces. David, caught by surprise, fled to the east of Jordan.

Eventually, David mobilized his forces under the command of Joab. Absalom met his death at Joab’s hand, in spite of David’s instruction that Joab should spare him. Ahimaaz who was anxious to deliver the news of Absalom’s death to David was restrained by Joab. Joab eventually permitted Ahimaaz to deliver the news of Absalom’s death to David after the Kushite had left. He overtook the Kushite and told David. The news of Absalom’s death caused David great sorrow for which Joab rebuked him. David was later restored to his throne.

Among these military men is a man referred to as “*Kushi*.” The majority of Western scholars agree that the *Kushi* referred to in the passage is a man of African descent (McKane 1963:267; Ackroyd 1977:172; Philbeck Jr 1970:129; Ullendorf 1968; Copher 1985:173; Smith 1910:359). However, his position or function is disputed. McKane (1963:267), Caird

(1953:1143), Ullendorf (1968:8), Philbeck (1970:129), and Smith (1910:359) regard the *Kushi* as David's negro slave from Africa, South of Egypt, whereas, Copher (1985:173) believes him to be an African mercenary who was recruited into David's army to deliver him. A careful examination of the passage shows that there is no basis for either of these opinions. Had the Kushite been a slave, he would not have been the right military man to send to the King. Had he been a slave or a mercenary, he would not have known the Court (diplomatic) language so well. Ahimaaz was only reluctantly allowed to go later after the African had been chosen. After much persistence on his part, Ahimaaz was allowed to go with the hope that he could not overtake the African. A careful comparison of the way that Ahimaaz and the African delivered the message of victory shows that Ahimaaz had not really mastered the Court language.

Ahimaaz answered, "When Joab sent your servant, I saw a great tumult, but I do not know what it was" - (18:29).

The Kushite man answered, "May the enemies of my Lord the King, and all who rise up against you for evil, be like that young man" (18:32). While Philbeck (1970:129) believes that Ahimaaz knew of Absalom's death but deliberately lied, Caird (1953:114-142) believes that Ahimaaz knew about the death of Absalom and wanted to break the news gently. However, unlike the African, he lacked courage when facing the king (Kaiser1980:639).

The African's courage to face the King and report the true situation, as well as his form of address support the view that this African was one of the royal military officers in the King's court and that he held a high position.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Another fact which supports the view that the African was not a slave or a mercenary can be seen in is the various meanings given to the Hebrew word *ebed* in various biblical passages. The word *ebed* which appears 799 times in the OT can mean a vassal (II Sam. 10:19), a tributary nation (I Chron. 18:2,6, 13), a person in the service of the King including all his royal officers, officials and ambassadors (Gen. 40:20, I Sam. 19:1, II Kings 22:12,



From the above discussion, the presence of an African in David's army is indisputable. It is also reasonably clear that he was not a slave or servant of the King in a literal sense, but a protector of the King of Israel. He was an example of courage and truth<sup>14</sup>

### 3.1.7. *Africans in Defence of Israel*

A close examination of Isaiah 18:1-7, 20:1-6, and 2 Kings 19: 9 shows that there were three occasions when Africans

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and Num. 22:18). Although this term could also mean slave or servant, it could as well mean reverence when used in addressing a superior (II Kings 8:13, II Sam. 9:8). This term could also have a messianic meaning as it is in the case of the servant passages of Deutero- Isaiah (Isa. 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13; 53:12). What this writer is saying is that the phrase "servant of the king" or "servant of the Lord," in the text does not necessarily mean that the bearer is a slave or literally a servant. McKane idea that the reason for Joab's refusal to send Ahimaaz to the King is that Joab knew that the King would take a violent action against the messenger and since he did not want the wrath of the King to fall on Ahimaaz, he chose a negro slave who was suitable for an unpleasant task, has no basis.<sup>25</sup> These scholars who have no regard for Ahimaaz who also ran to King David like the African to give the same report as a slave, but insist that the Kushite must be a slave because he was of African descent, are influenced by the presence of black people among them who were mostly slaves.

<sup>14</sup>Such virtues are characteristic of the African (Kushite) people as demonstrated by the biblical writers. When one of the most important prophets of the OT, Jeremiah, was thrown into a cistern to die, Ebedmelech, the African (Kushite) was the only person who had the courage to face King Jehoiakim, challenging the people before him for the evil they had committed. He was the one responsible for justice for the deliverance of the man of God (Jeremiah) from the cistern (Jeremiah 38:7-13; 39:15-17). In the days of King Hezekiah, when Assyrians threatened Israel, Israel had nowhere else to run, but to the Africans for protection. The biblical record mentioned the African King, Tirhakah as a defender in defence of Israel against Assyrian power (II Kings 19:9). Africans became the only hope for King Hezekiah (Isa. 20:1-6). The Annals of Sennacherib recorded how the king of Judah sent a message to Africa for a military protection.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, it is certain, that unlike some of the Western biblical scholars, the people of the ancient Near East, especially ancient Israel.

had to assist Israel against the powers which oppressed them, namely the invasions of Ashdod, Eltekeh, and Jerusalem. A brief reconstruction of the history of Israel at that point will further out understanding.

### **3.1.7.1. *The Invasion of Ashdod***

After the death of Shalmaneser V (722 B, C, E.), Sargon II scarcely mounted the throne when he was greeted with rebellion. Marduk Apal-idina (Merodach-baladon of the Bible) king of Babylon, Mita king of Phrygia Mushki, and the king of Urartu rebelled and had to be crushed to establish Assyrian authority. Around this time, Africans in Egypt experienced a radical change of leadership. After the collapse of the 24<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, a powerful leader from Africa south (Cush), Piankhi, overthrew Egypt and established the 25<sup>th</sup> Dynasty commonly called the Ethiopian or Cushite Dynasty (716 – 715 B. C.E.). He united Egypt and was ready to confront the Assyrian power. King Hezekiah look to this African power for deliverance (Isa 20:5–6). The King of Babylon sent a messenger to Hezekiah (2 Kin 20:12–19; Isa 39:1 8) not only to congratulate him for his recovery from illness, but possibly to persuade him to join the anti-Assyrian campaign. The people of Ashdod also sent a messenger to Judah for the same purpose. Considering these messages and the emergence of a powerful ruler in Africa, Piankhi, whom Hezekiah probably believed could equal Assyrian power, he believed that it was the most appropriate time to revolt against the Assyrians. He then sent secret messengers to the African king, Shabako, who succeeded Piankhi, with the hope that the prophet Isaiah would not know. Unfortunately, the prophet did and condemned the African messengers of Shabako (Isa. 20:1–6).

Eventually Sargon II turned to Palestine. He first destroyed Ashdod and went on to Jerusalem to punish King Hezekiah. The extent of the African participation in the

battle of Ashdod is not clearly known. However, Tadmor (1958:79-84) believes very strongly that Hezekiah participated in the revolt before he and the African military men were forced to submission by the terror of the Assyrians when Ashdod was destroyed.

### **3.1.7.2 The Battle of Eltekeh ( 701 B. C. E. Isa. 18 1 – 7 )**

Sennacherib succeeded Sargon II after the latter's death in 705 BCE. Immediately, he was on his way to crush the rebellion in Babylon and in the West by Philistia, Ashkelon, Ekron and Judah<sup>32</sup> Perhaps, while Hezekiah was contemplating what to do about it, the Africans under the leadership of King Shabako ( 710/696) sent envoys ( Isa. 18:1 - 7) to Hezekiah promising to help him fight the Assyrians.

At this point, it seemed as if a revolt should be successful. With the backing of the African army, King Hezekiah made an expedition to the country of the Philistines (2 Kin 18:8). In Ekron and Ashkelon, and knowing that the invasion of Sennacherib would surely come, Hezekiah embarked on further defences, building walls and raising towers upon them. He made weapons and shields in abundance and set commanders over the people (2 Chr 32:5–6). In case of a siege against Jerusalem, he embarked on the provision of water supply. He undertook a construction of a tunnel which brought water from the spring of Gihon underneath the hill of Jerusalem (2 Chr 20:20, 32:30) to the lower end of the city wall.

In 701 BCE Sennacherib attacked the land of "Hatti" (Assyrian term for the Western Countries) after defeating Marduk–Apal-idina. Going south, he destroyed Tyre, and the King of Sidon (Luli) fled to Cyprus where he died. In terror, Arvad, Byblos, Ashdod, Moab, Edom, and Amon quickly submitted. Meanwhile, the African army under the leadership of Shabako, upon whom Hezekiah placed his

trust for deliverance, marched to aid Ekron. Shabako, king of Meluhha, with his archers, numberless chariots and horses met the Assyrian forces in Eltekeh.

According to the annals of Sennacherib, which report the encounter (Pritchard 1969:287), the battle of Eltekeh was a total defeat for the Africans, with Sennacherib destroying Eltekeh and Ekron:

Upon a trust–inspiring oracle (given) by Ashuur, my Lord, I fought with them and inflicted a defeat upon them. In the middle of the battle, I personally captured alive the Egyptian charioteers with the (ir) princes and (also the charioteers of the king of Ethiopia. I besieged Eltekeh (and) Timhan ( Ta – am – na – a), conquered (them) and carried their spoils away. I assaulted Ekron and killed the officials and patricians who had committed the crime and hung their goodies on poles surrounding the city (Pritchard 1969:287).

Then Sennacherib turned to Judah. He reports that he captured forty six cities of Judah and deported their population, drove out ( of them) 200, 150 people young and old, male and female, horse, mules, donkeys, camels, big and small cattle beyond counting and considered (them) booty. Although not mentioned in the Sennacherib annals, Lachish was one of the cities destroyed (2 Kin 18:17 and 19: 8). While besieging Lachish, Sennacherib sent messengers to Hezekiah to surrender (2 Kin 18:14). Sennacherib demanded a heavy tribute from Hezekiah, who answered : “I have done wrong; withdraw from me. Whatever you impose on me I will bear” (2 Kin 18:14). The Assyrian king required from Hezekiah, “Three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold.” But in order for Hezekiah to pay all these levies, he had to give the King of Assyria “all the silver that was found in the house of the LORD and d in the treasuries of the king’s house.” He also gave Sennacherib “the gold in the temple and from the doorposts” (II 2 Kin 18:15-16).

### 3.1.7.3. The Battle of Jerusalem (2 Kin 19:9)

Although it is generally accepted that King Tirhakah was from the South and the successor of King Shabako, most scholars who accepted a single invasion of Sennacherib<sup>15</sup> consider the above passage as an “error” or anachronism and therefore, unhistorical. Pfeiffer (1948:400) is the most emphatic amongst them.

If this passage is not to be dismissed (as this writer and other biblical scholars believe), then Sennacherib invaded Palestine again after 701 BCE (Bright 1972:286-287). The fact that the whole of 2 Kings 18:17-19:37 (and probably Isaiah 36ff) fit very poorly into the event of 701 BCE, and that the international situation after 701 BCE favours a rebellion in Judah and another invasion by Sennacherib makes it reasonable to accept the two invasions hypothesis. After 701 BCE, Sennacherib had to deal with another opposition in Babylon. In dealing with this opposition he replaced the rebellious king, Belihni, with his own son, Asshur-nadin-shum (700 BCE). His son was killed in another rebellion in Babylon. The Elamites also rebelled, and by 691 BCE a coalition of Babylonians, Elamites and other people rebelled against Sennacherib. Since at this time it seems as if Sennacherib was losing his control over these people, Judah might have taken this opportunity to rebel, still trusting the powerful African King, Tirhakah, who probably was not ready to accept Assyrian defeat of Shabako, his predecessor. Perhaps, when Sennacherib was able to master one rebellion in Babylon about 609 BCE, he turned to Judah in 608 BCE, thus the event recorded in 2 Kings 18:17-19:37.

When Sennacherib was in Lachish, thinking that Hezekiah

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<sup>15</sup>One of the most vexing problems in the book of Kings is whether there is a single or double invasion of Sennacherib. This is beyond the scope of this paper.

would submit as he did earlier during the siege of 701 BCE, he sent the Tartan, the Rabshaken to Hezekiah (2 Kin 18:17–35). Unfortunately, this tactic did not work (18:36 – 19:7). Instead of submitting in terror, Hezekiah consulted the aged prophet (Isaiah) who assured him that Sennacherib would be defeated. As he was fighting against Libnah, he heard that the young energetic African king, Tirhakah, was on his way to defend Judah (19:8:-9). The king of Assyria, knowing he would have to fight on two fronts at the same time, tried once again to terrify Hezekiah to submission (19:9-13). This time he committed it in writing, probably to make sure that Hezekiah understood the seriousness of the matter. However, instead of submitting, Hezekiah opened the letter to Yahweh. Perhaps he also went to Isaiah who assured him again that Yahweh had heard his prayer.

While the king of Assyria was getting ready to besiege Jerusalem, three things happened that forced him to withdraw and return home as predicted by the prophet Isaiah.

He heard the rumour of insurrection - the insurrection that eventually led to his assassination.

It is very likely that he was attacked by the young African king, Tirhakah, while trying to besiege Jerusalem or heard a rumour of the advance of the African king and his forces, thus realizing the futility of fighting the Africans and Judah ( 2 Kin 19:9). Although there is no Assyrian record of the second invasion of Sennacherib, there is an Egyptian legend which tells of a great defeat which Sennacherib suffered at the hand of the Egyptians.<sup>16</sup> Although Africans were forced to submission in the battles of Ashdod and Eltekeh, they nevertheless defended Israel in those battles.

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If not for the assistance of the African king, Tirhakah, Jerusalem may have fallen to the Assyrians in 608 BCE, some twenty two years before 586 when Jerusalem was finally destroyed by the Babylonians. But Yahweh wrought great deliverance through the Africans.

### **3.1.8 Ebed-Melech and the Deliverance of the Prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 38:7-10, 12-13 and 39:15-17)**

Although King Jehoiakim was subjected to Babylonian rule after the Battle of Carchemish (605 BCE), he was not willing to give up his reliance on Africans (Egyptians) which had existed since the days of the Assyrian invasion (Bright 1972:327). Late in 601 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar, who succeeded his father after the battle of Carchemish, suffered a setback during a military encounter with the Egyptians (Bright 1972: 327). He returned home to reorganize his army. Encouraged by this, Jehoiakim revolted against Babylon (2 Kin 24:1). Although Nebuchadnezzar could not respond immediately, he eventually gathered some Babylonian contingents and marched against Jerusalem in December 598 BCE along with some guerrilla bands made up of Moabites, Ammonites and Arameans (Hyatt 1956:278ff). King Jehoiakim died in that very month and was succeeded by his eighteen-year-old son, Jehoiachin (II Kin 24:8). In 597 BCE, Jerusalem surrendered and King Jehoiachin, the high officials, and the leading men were carried off to Babylon (Pritchard 1969:564; Albright 1942:49-55).

Zedekiah, Josiah's son, was given the charge to lead his nation. However, King Zedekiah was a man unwilling to learn either from the past or from Jeremiah's strong warning that Yahweh was against Jerusalem and that they should surrender to the Babylonians. Soon Zedekiah revolted and Jerusalem was again under siege in 588 BCE. When the siege was temporarily lifted on the approach of the Egyptians (Jer 21:1-10; 34:1-22; 37:1-10),

the false prophets interpreted the lifting of that siege as a sign of peace for Jerusalem.<sup>17</sup> However, Jeremiah accepted the siege as God's judgment and interpreted it as temporary. Jeremiah counselled submission to the Babylonians.

At that time (588 BCE), when any criticism or opposition to the policy of the militant group of nobles which was determined to carry on the revolt was considered treason, Jeremiah continued to preach submission to Babylon and the destruction of Jerusalem. During this period, Jerusalem was dominated by militant nobles, who considered Jeremiah to be anti-Judah. As Jeremiah was leaving the city (probably to attend to some family business), he was arrested and charged with treason. The nobles demanded that Zedekiah put him to death (Hatti 1956:1075)<sup>18</sup>. Although Zedekiah was friendly with Jeremiah, he did not want to offend the militant nobles. He evaded his responsibility by leaving the whole matter to the nobles to do as they saw fit (Jer 38:5). Consequently they made use of the king's evasion of responsibility and threw the prophet into a cistern to die (Jer 38:6; Albright 1941:22; Cunliffe-Jones 19:223).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>When this siege was lifted temporarily, the Hebrew slaves who had been freed were immediately repossessed (Jer. 34:8-22).

<sup>18</sup>In ancient Jerusalem there existed many cisterns dug to catch rain during the rainy season of the winter to be stored for use during the rainless months of May to October. This might be the type of cistern where Jeremiah was thrown.

<sup>19</sup>The officials whose political position differed from that of Jeremiah continued their resentment against Jeremiah as their inevitable end predicted by Jeremiah drew nearer. Two of these famous officials were Jucal and Gedaliah who maintained persistently that Jeremiah must die for the following reasons: (1) he weakens the hands of the soldiers; (2) he was not seeking the welfare of the people but their harm; and (3) he was defecting to the Babylonians. Jer. 37: 11-15 and 38:1-4. Information in the Lachish letter states that almost the same charge was made in one of these letters against certain officials in Jerusalem. A letter written from the captain of an outpost to Ya'osh, the commander in Lachish says: "Who is



At this critical moment, when Jerusalem was under the Babylonian siege and Jeremiah was between life and death, an African called Ebed-melech, whose name literally means “king’s servant” made his appearance. When Ebed-melech the African heard of this murderous act, he immediately sought King Zedekiah who was at the Benjamin gate of the city. While the king was probably settling some legal matters or busy overseeing the preparation for the defence of the city, Ebed-Melech confronted him. He not only informed the king about the fate of the prophet, he also charged the people who were responsible for such an act with the great crime of attempted murder (38:8-9). This action was a risk for Ebed-Melech.<sup>20</sup>

Although King Zedekiah had evaded his responsibility when the aggressive nobles demanded Jeremiah’s death from his hand, this time, the challenge of Ebed-melech’s courage and sense of right made him act swiftly to save Jeremiah (Rice 1975:97).<sup>21</sup> The king put Ebed-Melech in charge of the men who were to rescue Jeremiah (38:10). Ebed-Melech, the African, got rags from the storeroom, carefully and gently let them down to the cistern and instructed Jeremiah: “Put the rags and clothes between your armpits and the ropes” (Jer. 38:12). So Ebed-Melech, the African, rescued one of the greatest OT prophets. When some scholars examined “Ebed-melech’s courage, dispatch, compassion, and his ability to bring out the best”

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thy servant but a dog that my lord has sent the letter of the king and the letters of the officials, saying, ‘pray read them?’ And behold the words of the officials are not good, but only weakened your hands and to slacken the hands of the men who are informed about them.

<sup>20</sup>The term “Ebed-Melech” is used for those who serve the royal family. Isaiah bears this title in II Kings 22:12 and 2 Chronicles 34:20 and was mentioned in connection with Shaphan the secretary.

<sup>21</sup>Jer. 39:17 shows that Ebed-Melech, from that time on, lives a life of fear of reprisal.

in one of the kings of Israel, they considered this story in Jeremiah 37:7-13 as “one of the fairest stories in the OT” (Smith 1929:281; Green 1969: 171). “Moved to save the life of another and acting without calculation or counting the cost, an unknown black man emerges ‘from obscurity to immortality (Hyatt 1958:81-82).”<sup>22</sup> Sometime after the prophet was rescued, he sent some words to Ebed-Melech (Jer. 39:15-18), promising that he will survive the fall and also be saved from those seeking his life. The basis for this prophecy, according to the prophet, was that he trusted Yahweh instead of following the popular opinion.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Despite the debate among scholars as to whether or not Ancient Israel existed and whether her history could be written or not (Davies 1992:168; Lemche 1994: 163-190; Whitelam 1996; Carrol 1997:101), a close examination of the history of Israel as written by biblical writers, reveals that Yahweh has used Africa and Africans in his scheme of salvation. Although archaeological discoveries sometimes are meagre or non-existing, there have been occasions when archaeological discoveries support the biblical accounts. Such occasions as mentioned above, includes the case of the mentioning of the “house of David,” the Assyrian testimony concerning the encounter of Assyrian king, Israel and Africans.

The implication of this is that Africa and Africans are not

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<sup>22</sup>It seems more logical that Jeremiah 39:15-18 which proclaims the survival and safety of Ebed-Melech should have followed immediately the account of the rescue in Jeremiah 38:7-13 instead of placing it in its present context. Scholars have rightly considered it out of place. Its present position and the presence of Deuteronomic theology of retribution have led several scholars to question its authenticity. Hyatt considered this as a later addition by the Deuteronomic editor who felt that Ebed-Melech should not go unrewarded.

idle spectators in the early history of ancient Israel, ancient Judaism, and ancient world. If Africa and Africans participated in ancient Judaism/ancient Israel, which is the background to Christianity, Christianity is therefore, not foreign to Africa and Africans as presented by Euro-American missionaries. Constantly Africa served as a place of refuge and Africans were instruments of refuge and deliverance in ancient Israel.

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