

Africa and Africans in the Books of Chronicles

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Pete Pero has been a pioneer among Lutherans of African descent in naming and claiming his spiritual and cultural heritage and in reminding us that the church transcends all cultures even as the gospel manifests itself in the particularities of every culture.

Ancient Israel lived in the land bridge between Africa and Mesopotamia and was involved in a complex network of learning from its neighboring cultures and distinguishing itself from them. Its relationships with these other cultures affected its own self understanding and the legacy it has left us in the Bible.

For the last twenty years or so I have been immersed in studying and writing an extensive commentary on the Books of Chronicles, composed in the fourth century BCE by a writer who focused on the past and future of worship at the temple at Jerusalem, but who also knew that his tiny community in the Persian province called Yehud was only a prototype of an all-inclusive Israel. His empirical Israel was part of the Persian Empire, with no prospect for liberation from that ancient super power. The Chronicler's Israel was chosen by Yahweh, but its life took place in the context of, and in interaction with, the whole world. This article cuts a cross section through the sixty-five chapters of Chronicles and asks particularly about the Chronicler's knowledge of Africa and Africans and how Africans related to and interacted with Israel in the Books of Chronicles.¹

¹ At the time of the Chronicler there was a Jewish military colony at Elephantine in Egypt, and many documents have been preserved from this colony that show interaction with Egyptians and with the authorities in Jerusalem. For general background on the question discussed in this article, see now Edwin

The Opening Genealogies

Instead of narrating the history of humankind, from creation to the time of King Saul, the Chronicler begins his work with nine chapters of genealogies, (a) that situate Israel within the family of nations (ch. 1), (b) that describe via genealogy the wholeness of the twelve tribes of Israel (chs. 2-8), and (c) that give a snapshot of the Israelite community at Jerusalem in the Chronicler's day (ch. 9).

In chapter 1, the Chronicler incorporates almost all of the genealogical material from Genesis, beginning with Adam, and ending, in 1 Chr 2:1-2, with the twelve children of Israel. While genealogies on the surface seem to talk about who was the physical parent of whom, they in fact are ways of expressing political, social, and economic relationships, often among clans, tribes, and nations more than individuals. These genealogies are fluid in that genealogies change as human conditions change; that is, as nations advance or decline, they move up or down the genealogical tree.

The human family after the flood is divided into the descendants of Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Ham's first generation descendants are Cush, Egypt,² Put, and Canaan. Cush³ is Nubia, modern-day Sudan, and Put⁴ may be Somalia or Libya. Canaan in this genealogy included modern Lebanon, southern Syria, and most of Palestine west of the Jordan—that is, in large part, Israel's homeland. The language of Canaan was Semitic and so we might expect Canaan to be descended from Shem, but the land of Canaan was one of three Egyptian provinces in Syro-Palestine and that is expressed genealogically by

M. Yamauchi, *Africa and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) and Peter T. Nash, *Reading Race, Reading the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

² Egyptian or the Egyptians are referred to twenty-seven times in Chronicles.

³ The descendants of Cush are in northeast Africa or Arabia. Sheba is a grandson of Cush in v. 9, but in v. 22 he is a grandson of Eber the great-grandson of Shem, and in v. 32 he is a grandson of Keturah the concubine of Abraham. Such fluidity is common in ancient genealogies.

⁴ Put is the only son of Ham who has no descendants. Put is mentioned in Jer 46:9; Ezek 30:5; 38:5. Nahum associates Put with Libyans (3:9).

making Canaan a son of Ham and a brother of Egypt. So the land of Israel has strong ties with Africa in Chronicles.

Chapter 1 runs through all the nations genealogically⁵ before coming to Israel, strongly implying, without actually mentioning the election of Israel. But it also implies that Israel is to understand itself within the circle of all the nations. This first chapter of 1 Chronicles emphasizes the diversity *and* the unity of the world. Israel understood its role within the family of nations and as a witness to all humanity.⁶ Among the seventy nations of the world, thirty are associated with Ham (Africa), more than Japheth (fourteen) and even Shem (twenty-six).

The genealogy of Judah in 1 Chr 2:3-4:23 is enormous and reflects the importance of the tribe of Judah in the post-exilic community. Judah, of course, is the ancestral tribe of David and the kings (1 Chr 3:1-24). There are also connections with Africa in the tribe of Judah. Sheshan in the tenth generation after Judah is the ancestor of a person called Elishama, fourteen generations later (1 Chr 2:31, 34-41). The length of this genealogy makes Elishama a very important person—only the genealogies of David, the high priests, and the descendants of Saul are longer in Chronicles. Sheshan had only daughters and to keep his line from dying out he married his unnamed daughter to Jarha, his Egyptian slave.⁷ Note that there is not a word of criticism of such a mixed marriage, in sharp distinction to Deut 7:3-4; 1 Kgs 11:1-13; Ezra 9-10; Neh 10:30; and 13:23-27. In fact, this openness to marriages with others is one of the most significant differences

⁵ Note that the sons of Noah are given as Shem, Ham, and Japheth in v. 4, but their descendants are listed in reverse order—Japheth, Ham, and Shem, putting Shem, and Israel his descendant in the last, favored position.

⁶ See Ralph W. Klein, “The Faith and the World,” *CurTM* 28 (2001): 335-340.

⁷ Israelite law makes descendants of such a marriage true heirs of Sheshan (Lev 25:39-54). If Jarha had been an Israelite slave, his descendants would not be credited to Sheshan.

between the Chronicler and the author of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Other mixed marriages reported *without censure* from the tribe of Judah include Judah himself with Bath-shua, a Canaanite (1 Chr 2:3); Jether the Ishmaelite with Abigail the sister of David (1 Chr 2:17); David with Maacah the daughter of Talmai king of Geshur (1 Chr 3:2); a Judahite Mered with Bithiah the daughter of Pharaoh (1 Chr 4:18);⁸ and some of the descendants of Judah's son Shelah with Moabites (1 Chr 4:22). The Chronicler omitted the indictment of Solomon's foreign wives from 1 Kings 11, and he included, without judgment, Solomon's moving his own wife, who was the daughter of Pharaoh, from the city of David to his palace (2 Chr 8:11//1 Kgs 9:24).⁹ Jarha, an Egyptian, in any case is an ancestor of a very important person named Elishama, remembered with reverence in the ancestral records of the tribe of Judah.

The Exodus

In Chronicles the Exodus tends to be downplayed or deemphasized.¹⁰ In Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple in 1 Kgs 8:21 and 8:53, the king refers to the Exodus. In 1 Kgs 8:21, the king mentions the covenant Yahweh made with the ancestors when he brought them out of the land of Egypt, but that becomes simply the covenant Yahweh made with the Israelites—with no mention of the Exodus--when it is cited in 2 Chr 6:11. The Chronicler does not include 1 Kgs 8:53 at all, but substitutes for it 2 Chr 6:41-42, which consists of quotations from Psalm 132, containing a dynastic promise to David and reporting David's efforts on behalf of the ark. The reason for the Chronicler's

⁸ It is difficult to locate this marriage chronologically since the Pharaoh's name is not given. Genealogically, this marriage shows a relationship of at least one clan of Judah to a counterpart clan in Egypt.

⁹ The Chronicler does not include the other passages from 1 Kings dealing with this queen (1 Kgs 3:1; 7:8; 9:16; 11:1). Kings reports that Solomon made a marriage alliance with the Pharaoh, and such alliances are regularly rejected by the Chronicler as evidences of trust in military power for defense rather than on the help of Yahweh.

¹⁰ But see 1 Chr 17:21; 2 Chr 5:10; 6:5; 7:22; 20:10.

reticence in regard to the Exodus is disputed.¹¹ It may be related to the fact that talk of such a revolution against imperial power would have been anathema to Persian ears, and the Chronicler had no desire to be detoured from his main agenda which was support of free and unfettered worship in Jerusalem.¹²

The Queen of Sheba and Hiram¹³ the King of Tyre

Solomon is portrayed in glowing colors in Chronicles as is fitting for the king who built the temple. His wisdom is shown primarily in his work on the temple, not as in 1 Kings in his judicial brilliance in solving the dispute between the two prostitutes (1 Kgs 3:16-28), his administrative abilities (1 Kgs 4:1-19), or his knowledge about nature or his composing of proverbs (1 Kgs 4:29-34). Solomon's high status is confirmed by his recognition by foreign kings. King Hiram of Tyre sent a letter to Solomon that read: "Because Yahweh loves his people he has made you king over them" and "Blessed be Yahweh the God of Israel, who made heaven and earth, who has given King David a wise son, endowed with discretion and understanding, who will build a temple for Yahweh, and a royal palace for himself" (2 Chr 2:11-12). Hiram is made to sound like an adherent to the Israelite religion and, most importantly, an international advocate of Solomon. According to 2 Chr 8:2, Hiram had ceded a number of cities to Solomon.¹⁴

While Hiram is, of course, a Phoenician king, his neighboring city of Sidon is related

¹¹ Japhet, *The Ideology of the Book of Chronicles and its Place in Biblical Thought* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1989), 104-105. Japhet argues that the Chronicler did not think that the people of Israel became the people of God through a single act at a particular point of time.

¹² At least some of the accusations made about the oppression of the Egyptians in the Old Testament may be projections on Egypt of afflictions suffered by Israelites under their own kings, such as Solomon. The accusations made against Egypt are about its misuse of imperial power, accusations that the prophets also made against Israel itself. See Rainer Kessler, *Die Ägyptenbilder der Hebräischen Bibel. Ein Beitrag zur neueren Monotheismusdebatte* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2002), 157-160.

¹³ This king's name is Hiram in Kings and Hiram in Chronicles.

¹⁴ The parallel text in 1 Kgs 9:11 reports that Solomon gave Hiram twenty cities, apparently in payment for help with his building projects or because he needed money for something else. The Chronicler may have been embarrassed because Solomon disposed of some of the land of Israel or because he was in debt.

genealogically to Canaan, the son of Ham the African (1 Chr 1:3). Tyre was considered part of Canaan in any case.

At the end of Solomon's reign he is also honored by a visit by the queen of Sheba, who came to Jerusalem to test him with hard questions.¹⁵ Modern historians believe her trip also involved securing trade relations with and through Israel and with guarding her trade with East Africa. The location of Sheba (ancient Saba) is disputed. Most would associate it with the region now occupied by Yemen in the southwest Arabian peninsula,¹⁶ although the Ethiopian church retains a legend of her as a person who bore a child to Solomon, who was the ancestor of Haile Salassie.¹⁷ Sheba in the genealogies is associated with both Cush (Nubia; 1 Chr 1:9) and Hagar, Abraham's Egyptian concubine (1 Chr 1:32). The queen of Sheba matches Hiram in her endorsement of Solomon: "Blessed be Yahweh our God, who has delighted in you and set you on his throne as king for Yahweh your God. Because your God loved Israel and would establish them forever, he has made you king over them, that you may execute justice and righteousness" (2 Chr 9:8). The queen of Sheba is also a person of fabulous wealth and generosity in Chronicles. She gave the king one hundred twenty talents of gold and incomparable spices and precious stones (2 Chr 9:9).

¹⁵ See Stephen D. Ricks, "Sheba, Queen of," *ABD*, 5:1170-1171. Note Jesus' reference to the visit of the Queen of Sheba in Matt 12:42/Luke 11:31. While Solomon is said to have had three hundred wives and seven hundred concubines, we only know the name of one of these women, namely, Naamah, the Ammonite, the mother of his son and successor Rehoboam (2 Chr 12:13).

¹⁶ K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 116. Kitchen doubts that she was a regnant queen, but supposes she was a queen by marriage. Cf. Isa 45:14; 60:6; Jer 6:20.

¹⁷ The earlier part of this claim is recorded in Kebra Negast, the national saga of Ethiopia (13th or 14th century CE). The saga claims that the queen, who was called Makeda, converted to Solomon's religion. Their son Menelik, as an adult, visited his father, stole the ark of the covenant, and took it home with him. The Selassie connection is a twentieth century phenomenon. When asked about his origins, Selassie said, "This is not a legend. It is based on the most universal book in the world—the Holy Bible." See discussion in Yamauchi, *Africa and the Bible*, 90-105. An offshoot of this tradition is the Rastafarian religion. The Jewish historian Josephus calls her Nikaulis, the Queen of Egypt and Ethiopia (*Ant.* viii. 165).

Hence foreign kings at the beginning and end of Solomon's reign, both of whom have connections with Ham/Egypt/Africa, attribute Solomon's kingship to Yahweh's love for Israel.

Wars with Africans

Two accounts of battles with the Hagarites are recorded amid the genealogies of 1 Chronicles 5. The Hagarites were a tribe that traced their ancestry back to Hagar, the Egyptian concubine of Abraham.¹⁸ These Hagarites had migrated to northern Transjordan where they were defeated by the Reubenites in the days of King Saul (1 Chr 5:10). On another occasion, the Reubenites, Gadites, and the half tribe of Manasseh defeated the Hagarites because they had prayed to God before this battle and because they trusted in him (1 Chr 5:19-20). The spoils of this victory were enormous: fifty thousand camels, two hundred fifty thousand sheep, two thousand donkeys, and one hundred thousand human captives. The Chronicler loves big numbers! These great numbers show the size of the God-given victory.

Benaiah, a war hero under David and later general of the army under Solomon, earned his reputation by deeds of valor (1 Chr 11:22-25//2 Sam 23:20-23). One of his victories was over an Egyptian, described as handsome in 2 Sam 23:21. According to the Chronicler this anonymous Egyptian was seven feet six inches tall and his spear was like a weaver's beam. People who know their Bible well would immediately see this as comparable to David's victory over Goliath, who was nine feet six inches tall (1 Sam 17:4)¹⁹ and whose spear was also like a weaver's beam (1 Sam 17:7).

¹⁸David's contact with the descendants of Hagar is seen in his appointing Obil the Ishmaelite to be over his camels and Jaziz the Hagarite to be over his flocks (1 Chr 27:30).

¹⁹The Septuagint and the Dead Sea Scrolls set his height at about six feet four.

The attack of Shishak (Shoshenq I, 945-925 BCE), king of Egypt, was recorded briefly in the Book of Kings (1 Kgs 14:25-28). There we learn that Shishak came up in Rehoboam's fifth year and raided both the temple and the royal palace. Special note is taken of golden shields made by Solomon which were taken by Shishak and had to be replaced by shields of bronze. Shishak (in Egyptian Shoshenq I, 945-924 BCE) founded the twenty-second Egyptian dynasty and hailed from Libya.

The Chronicler's account of this event is both longer and more theologically motivated (2 Chr 12:1-12). Shishak came in divine reprisal for the fact that Rehoboam had abandoned the law of Yahweh and had forsaken Yahweh (2 Chr 12:1-2). Thus the Chronicler drew a cause and effect relationship between the sins mentioned in 1 Kgs 14:22-24—false worship at high places and committing the same abominations that were practiced by the pre-Israelite inhabitants of the land—and the war with Shishak, the agent of Yahweh. The Chronicler provides information on the troops of Shishak—twelve hundred chariots and sixty thousand cavalry—and the makeup of his army—Libyans,²⁰ Sukiim, and Ethiopians. Shishak himself was a native of Libya, and his allies were the little-known Sukiim (probably from some Libyan tribes) and the Ethiopians, who are better understood as people from Nubia, modern Sudan. Shishak captured the fortified cities of Judah, a reference to the fortresses Rehoboam had built (2 Chr 11:5-10), thereby giving Israel a reminder that trust in military preparations do not necessarily make a nation strong. The prophet Shemaiah's one sentence sermon during this crisis drew a clear connection between Israel's abandonment of Yahweh and Yahweh's abandonment of them (2 Chr 12:5).²¹ Then both the king's officers and King Rehoboam himself

²⁰ Libyans also appear in the army of Zerah (2 Chr 16:8). See the discussion of Zerah below.

²¹ Other references to abandoning Yahweh occur at 1 Chr 28:9; 2 Chr 15:2; and 24:20.

humbled themselves (repented) and they confessed that Yahweh was right. A divine oracle through Shemaiah then granted them a partial reprieve: Jerusalem would not be taken although Shishak's attack and partial victory would show the clear difference between serving Yahweh and forced servitude to foreign kings. Serving Yahweh is not a burden and therefore it was really foolish for Rehoboam to forsake Yahweh (v. 1). Solomon eventually bought off Shishak by giving him the gold shields from the temple. Shishak (Sheshonq I) recorded this campaign on a temple wall at Karnak, listing cities in the north and in the far south of Israel, but conspicuously absent from this list is Jerusalem itself, indicating that his taking of booty from Solomon may have been sufficient to meet his military goals.

The Chronicler often divides his story of kings into good periods and bad periods. Late in his reign Asa, for example, did not call upon Yahweh, put Hanani the prophet in the stocks and treated the people cruelly, and sought physicians instead of Yahweh when he was diseased in his feet (gangrene? venereal disease?). His last years were plagued by unwinnable wars (2 Chronicles 16).

Early on, however, Asa did what was right in the eyes of Yahweh and got rid of foreign altars and high places (2 Chr 14:2-3). His seeking Yahweh led to his success in recruiting an army of some five hundred eighty thousand men (2 Chr 14:4-8). But then he was invaded by Zerah the Ethiopian/Nubian who brought along a million man army and three hundred chariots (2 Chr 14:9). The odds were enormously against Asa but he showed the nature of true strength by relying not on military equipment and number of soldiers, but solely on divine aid: "O Yahweh, there is no difference for you between helping the mighty and the weak. Help us, Yahweh our God, for we rely on you, and in

you name we have come against his multitude. Yahweh, you are our God; let no mortal prevail against you” (2 Chr 14:11). Asa’s victory was as easy as it was complete since Yahweh defeated the Ethiopians/Nubians and give Israel much booty from the battle (2 Chr 14:12-13). While the numbers for the armies on both sides are unrealistically large²² and while the identity of Zerah is quite uncertain,²³ the point of the story is clear: Reliance on Yahweh prepares one well for every challenge . By this victory Yahweh answered Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the temple: “If your people go out to battle against their enemies, by whatever way you shall send them, and they pray to you toward this city that you have chosen and the house that I have built for your name, then hear from heaven their prayer and their plea, and maintain their cause” (2 Chr 6:34-35). However modern scholars might reconstruct the historical circumstances behind this battle, the Chronicler’s fourth century readers would have seen it as another interaction with Africa.

Neco the king of Egypt makes his appearance during the reign of Josiah. This Neco is known to Egyptologists as Neco II, 610-595 BCE, from the twenty-sixth or Saite dynasty.²⁴ Neco was actually on his way to prop up the tottering Assyrian empire as a buffer against the rising power of Babylon (2 Chr 35:20). His intention was to help Asshurballit retake Harran from Babylonian troops (ANET 305).²⁵ This corrects the impression given in 2 Kgs 23:29 that Neco was going up to fight against the Assyrians at

²² A very large army in antiquity might number thirty thousand.

²³ There are at least four opinions defended in current scholarship: 1) He was in fact a Nubian general of the Egyptian Pharaoh Osorkon I; 2) Shisak had established a buffer state around Gerar, protected by Nubian mercenaries [the inhabitants of Gedor=Gerar in 1 Chr 4:40 are called Hamites], who eventually attacked Judah; 3) Cush does not refer to Nubia, but to an otherwise unknown bedouin group living in the vicinity of Judah (note the reference to tents, sheep, goats, and camels in 2 Chr 14:15); or 4) Zerah is largely fictitious but this battle may represent a skirmish in the vicinity of Mareshah in the post-exilic period.

²⁴ Neco’s capture of Gaza may be reflected in Jer 47:1-7. See Herodotus, *History*, 2.159.

²⁵ Egypt and Assyria were eventually routed by Babylon in 605 at Carchemish (cf. Jer 46:2-12).

the Euphrates. Modern historians conclude that the Chronicler has correctly understood Neco's strategy. In any case, Neco was intercepted by Josiah at Megiddo, leading to Josiah's death (2 Kgs 23:29-30//2 Chr 35:20-25). This death of Josiah is actually extremely problematical for the author of Kings, who had lavishly praised Josiah:

“Before him there was no king like him, who turned to Yahweh with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses” (2 Kgs 23:25). But if Yahweh rewards the righteous, why did Josiah die at Megiddo when he was only forty?

The Chronicler solves this theological problem and turns the African Neco into a type of prophet. Neco warns Josiah that God had commanded him to hurry toward Mesopotamia, and that Josiah should therefore cease from opposing Neco or he would be destroyed (2 Chr 35:21). Josiah tried to disguise himself during the battle (a detail not mentioned in Kings), and a trick that did not help him anymore than it helped Ahab, who had tried the same strategy in another ill-fated battle (1 Kgs 22:30). The Chronicler notes: “Josiah did not listen to the words of Neco from the mouth of God, but joined battle in the plain of Megiddo” (2 Chr 35:22). Josiah was *therefore* struck by archers and taken to Jerusalem where he died. Neco, like Hiram and the queen of Sheba before him, acknowledges the God of Israel, who sent him on a military campaign. Josiah gets his just reward for disobeying an oracle of Yahweh, delivered by Neco, and his death no longer raises questions about Yahweh's reliability. A few verses later Neco deposes Josiah's son Jehoahaz and replaces him with his brother Eliakim, whose name he changes to Jehoiakim (2 Chr 36:3-4).

Trade with Africa

The Egyptians were neighbors of Israel²⁶ and therefore the two nations were of economic importance to one another. Both Chronicles and Kings record international trade that involved both Israel and Egypt in the time of Solomon (2 Chr 1:16-17, and 9:28//1 Kgs 10:28-29).²⁷ We are told in these passages that Solomon imported horses from Egypt and Cilicia.²⁸ The royal traders of Solomon seem also to have been involved in ancient wheeling and dealing. They imported chariots and horses from Egypt and traded them on to the Neo-Hittite and Aramean kingdoms to their north and northeast.²⁹ Solomon seems to have included chariots in Israel's military arsenal whereas his father David hamstrung chariot horses that he captured in war (1 Chr 18:4//2 Sam 8:4).

Conclusion

Naturally we would like to know more about the relationship of Israel to Africa and Africans in the fourth century BCE. But the Chronicler does show that these neighbors were no strangers to one another, that genealogically at least their territories were related to one another (through Canaan the son of Ham), that God could use an Egyptian as his agent of judgment (Shishak) or as his mouthpiece (Neco), and that Egypt and Israel were economically dependent on one another (Solomon's trading with Egypt). The kingdoms that befriended Solomon—Tyre and Sheba--both had African connections.

The Chronicler needed information about Africa and Africans to tell his story about Israel completely. As Pete Pero has demonstrated many times, no one can tell the

²⁶ The borders of Israel were set from Lebo-Hamath or the Euphrates in the north to the Wadi of Egypt in the south (2 Chr 7:8; 9:26; 26:8). The latter is usually identified with the Wadi el Arish in the Sinai peninsula.

²⁷ Trade with Africa may also be involved in the references to Ophir (1 Chr 1:23; 29:4; 2 Chr 8:18; 9:10, but its exact location is quite uncertain. A major goal of Christopher Columbus's expedition was to find Solomon's Ophir (Yamauchi, *Africa and the Bible*, 89).

²⁸ The latter is a Neo-Hittite state in southeast Turkey.

²⁹ Ancient prices are hard to compare with modern money although it makes sense that a chariot was worth four times as much as a single horse (600 shekels to 150 shekels).

story of Lutheranism credibly either without including Africans and African Americans in the account.