

A JUDE 3 PROJECT CURRICULUM

THROUGH EYES OF COLOR

A CONTEXTUALIZED GUIDE TO HELP YOU KNOW
WHAT YOU BELIEVE AND WHY.



JUDE 3 PROJECT

Chapter Two

BLACK PEOPLE IN THE BIBLE

I. Is Christianity a White Man's Religion?

There's a lot of debate today around the question: "Is Christianity a white man's religion?" But this is not a new question.

In his Jude 3 Project interview, Dr. Eric Mason explains that this question finds its beginnings in the teachings of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, who led the Nation of Islam from 1934 until his death in 1975.³ In his book *Message to the Blackman in America*, Muhammad calls for African-Americans to "throw off the shackles of Christianity."⁴ He writes, "There is no hope for us in Christianity; it is a religion organized by the enemies (the white race) of the Black Nation to enslave us to the white race's rule."⁵

3. Eric Mason and Howard-John Wesley, "Is Christianity a White Man's Religion?" [Audio podcast]. Retrieved from <https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/courageous-conversations-v-is-christianity-white-mans/id978012810?i=1000383272786&mt=2>. The Jude 3 Project (March 2017).

4. Elijah Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman in America* (Irving, TX: Secretarius MEMPS Publication, 1965 and 1975) 13.

5. *Ibid.*, 161.

Though Muhammad's conclusion is inaccurate, it's easy to understand how he got there. Muhammad was a black man who was only one generation removed from slavery and a leader of a religious and political movement during the Civil Rights era. He sincerely longed for his people to be free from every source of oppression. And unfortunately, at that time and decades prior, Christianity and the Bible was used by white men and women to justify their abuse of black people. The Bible was even used as a tool to "whip" black slaves into submission when they opposed their white masters.

This is incredibly sad and evil.

Muhammad's conclusion about Christianity and the Bible was a genuine response to white men and women's heretical interpretation and application of God's Word. The consequences of their misinterpretations serve as a reminder to be diligent in our study of the scriptures.

On one of the first days of His ministry, Jesus stood up in a Jewish synagocue and proclaimed that one of the distinguishing marks of His coming kingdom would be the setting free of the oppressed (Luke 4:17-21). It must've saddened His heart greatly to hear Muhammad say, "There is no hope for black people in Christianity," when He had come to bring hope and freedom to every person of every color.

Why do you think this question—Is Christianity a white man's religion?—has recently resurfaced among people of African descent?

How would you respond if asked, "Is Christianity a white man's religion?"

II. How Do We Contend Against the Lie?

There are several ways Christians can contend against the lie that Christianity is a "white man's religion." We can point out that Jesus was a Jewish man who likely had brown eyes, olive to brown skin, and short brown curly hair.⁶ There was nothing white about Him. Plus, it doesn't make much sense for a Jewish man to only provide salvation for white people.

We could also challenge the claim by drawing attention to God's promise to Abraham that "all the peoples on earth will be blessed" through him (Genesis 12:3 CSB). That's all peoples. Red, yellow, black, and white. They are all equally precious and will all equally be blessed through faith in Jesus Christ.

Read Romans 4.

What made Abraham right with God?

What makes a Jew right with God?

What makes a Gentile (a non-Jewish person) right with God?

6. Sarah Pruitt, The Ongoing Mystery of Jesus's Face. Retrieved March 27, 2019 from <https://www.history.com/news/what-did-jesus-look-like>.

In Romans 4, the Apostle Paul makes it clear that Christianity is neither a Jewish nor a Gentile religion. If this is true – and it is – there’s no way that Christianity is a white man’s religion!

Christianity is the proclamation that Jesus Christ has come into this world to save sinners and that all who would put their faith in Christ will be made right with God (Romans 3:23–26). As Rev. Walter Arthur McCray says in his book *The Black Presence in the Bible*, “For all people from every race and ethnic group ... have sinned and have fallen short of God’s glory ... [and] it is revealed in the Bible that every group of people are included in God’s redemption circle.”⁷

We are one of them.

One other way we can contend against this sad idea that “there is no hope for black people in Christianity,” is to uncover the presence of black people in the Bible. Because, let’s just be real: A story becomes way more appealing to someone when they have something in common with its characters. This is why so many black people flocked to movie theaters in their African attire to see Black Panther and continue to make Xs over their chests. (Wakanda forever!)

How much more will those who once believed there was no hope for them in Christianity because of the color of their skin flock to God when they hear that they have been a part of His story since the very beginning?

III. Where Does Black History Begin?

Brothers and sisters, our history doesn’t start with shackles, slave ships, and unjust labor. Our history finds its origins in the very first pages of the Bible.

Our history, along with that of every ethnic group in the world, begins in Genesis 10. Here we find what scholars refer to as the “Table of Nations”—a genealogical record of Noah and his three sons, and the nations birthed through each of them.

7. Walter Arthur McCray, *The Black Presence in the Bible: Discovering The Black and African Identity of Biblical Persons and Nations* (Chicago, IL: Black Light Fellowship, 1990) 30.

Read Genesis 10.

Genesis 10 may just seem like a list of names that are hard to pronounce, but this is the world’s family tree. Those of Jewish and Arab descent trace their origins to the sons of Shem.⁸ Those of European descent find their beginning in the sons of Japheth. And those of African, Asian, and Indian descent find theirs in the sons of Ham.⁹

Now, it may feel like a massive bomb has just been dropped, but there’s a great wealth of biblical, historical, cultural, anthropological, geographical, and linguistic (language) evidence to support these statements. If you would like to study this topic further (which by the way is strongly encouraged), please take a look at any of the resources cited in the endnotes or listed in the “Tools for Going Deeper” section. For this introductory study, we will only explore some of the evidence that has been uncovered.

IT’S ALL IN THE NAME

In the biblical world, names carried a great deal of meaning and were often used to describe a person or group. In the original Hebrew, for instance, “Ham” means “hot” or “warm.”¹⁰ Many scholars believe this to be a reference to the heat from the sun that produces darker skin.¹¹ Though this might seem like a stretch, the argument gets stronger when we take a closer look at the name “Cush.”

In the Bible, Cush is not only the name of one of the sons of Ham. It’s also the name of the place Cush descendants settled, which was south of Egypt and west of the Nile River. Over time, Cush’s name was changed to Ethiopia, and its people were no longer referred to as Cushites, but Ethiopians. Why the switch?

The Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible (BEB) explains: “The name Ethiopia was of

8. D. N. Freedman, G.A. Herion, F.D. Graf, J.D. Pleins, and A. B. Beck, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

9. W.A. Elwell and B.J. Beitzel, “Ham (Person),” in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988) 919. William Dwight McKissic, *Beyond Roots: In Search of Blacks in the Bible* (Wenonah, NJ: Renaissance Productions, 1990).

10. J. Swanson, J., *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament)* (electronic ed.). (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

11. Walter Arthur McCray, *The Black Presence in the Bible: Discovering The Black and African Identity of Biblical Persons and Nations* (Chicago, IL: Black Light Fellowship, 1990) 20.

Greek origin, and according to some interpreters meant 'burnt-faced,' as in faces that have been burnt/blackened by the sun."¹² This helps us understand why scholars have come to accept Ham's name as hinting at his blackness.

IT'S IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA

In *Biblical and Theological Issues on the Black Presence in the Bible*, Dr. Charles B. Copher presents a variety of archaeological data to support the presence of black people in Egypt and Cush (Ethiopia). Regarding historical writings, Copher shares that Herodotus (c. 484 BC–c. 425), an ancient Greek historian, describes those who were living in the "colony of Egyptians" as having "black skins and frizzled hair."¹³ As it relates to paintings, he mentions several paintings of Egyptians that depicted them as having reddish brown to black skin.¹⁴

IV. Who Are the Black People in the Bible?

Given our brief investigation of the evidence for black people in the Bible, we're now in a better position to identify some of them. Below you will find a few people that we can identify as black based on the kind of evidence we just reviewed.

Genesis

Ham (Genesis 10)

Cush (Genesis 10)

Egypt (Genesis 10)

Hagar (Genesis 16): Hagar, the slave of Abraham and Sarah, was an Egyptian woman.

Numbers

Moses' Wife (Numbers 12:1): Moses marries a Cushite woman.

Psalms

The words of the Cushite (Psalm 7)

12. W.A. Elwell and B.J. Beitzel, "Ham (Person)," in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988) 727–729.

13. Charles B. Copher, *Biblical and Theological Issues on the Black Presence In the Bible* (Chicago, IL: Black Light Fellowship, 1993) 23.

14. *Ibid.*, pg. 27

Manasseh and Ephraim (Genesis 41:50–52): the sons of Joseph and his Egyptian wife, Asenath.

1 Kings

Queen Sheba (1 Kings 10:1–13): Though there is some debate about where Queen Sheba is from, many scholars have come to believe she was a queen in Ethiopia and Egypt.

Songs of Songs

The Shulamite Woman (Songs of Songs 1:5–6): The Shulamite woman, who was the object of Solomon's affection, describes herself as being as black.

Mark

Simon of Cyrene (Mark 15:21): Though there is some debate, some scholars believe Simon was black because Cyrene had a significant population of black people in it.

V. Why Does This Matter?

Why does the presence of black people in the Bible matter?

Here are three additional reasons why the discussion of the presence of black people in the Bible matters:

Zephaniah

Zephaniah 1:1: Zephaniah's is the son of a man named "Cushi."

Acts

The Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26–40) Simeon who was called Niger (Acts 13:1): Simeon's nickname "Niger" literally means "black." Simeon was one of leaders at the church of Antioch; the church that commissioned Barnabas and Paul to preach the gospel to the Gentiles.

Lucius of Cyrene (Acts 13:1): Though there is some debate, a number of scholars believe Lucius was black because Cyrene had a significant population of black people. Lucius was one of leaders at the church of Antioch; the church that commissioned Barnabas and Paul to preach the gospel to the Gentiles.

The presence of black people in the Bible matters because the Bible is the inspired Word of God. Everything God does is intentional. There is not one word or one story in the Bible that was included haphazardly. Instead, God intentionally inspired the writers of Scripture to record particular stories. Who they were in regard to their ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status mattered to God. When we fail to pay attention to these things, we limit our ability to interpret and apply the meaning of these stories to our lives.

Read the story of the Ethiopian eunuch recorded in Acts 8:26 -40.

Philip, who was a disciple of Christ, received a message from the Lord to get up and head south to the road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza at a time when his ministry in Samaria was going very well. Why would God call Philip away from a successful ministry to go to a desert road to meet the Ethiopian eunuch?

Ph.D. student Marcus Jenkins explains in his Jude 3 podcast episode that as a black man and a eunuch, the Ethiopian man would have experienced a lot of humiliation.¹⁵ How do you think it impacted him to hear that Christ, whose appearance was also not desirable, had endured humiliation and injustice so that he could be made right with God (Isaiah 53:2)?

The presence of black people in the Bible matters because their stories give hope to people of color who have been often stripped of their dignity and intrinsic value.

Read the story of Hagar recorded in Genesis 16.

15. Marcus Jenkins, The Jude 3 Project. (2019, March). Black People in the Bible. [Audio podcast]. Retrieved from <http://www.jude3project.com/podcast/black> (March 2019).

Hagar is a passive participant in this story. She gets no say as to whether she's on board with Abram and Sarah's plan, yet she bears all the consequences of their decision. What kind of impact do you think it had for her to be visited by an angel of the Lord?

In this story, Hagar goes from not being seen by her slave owners to being seen by the living God! She is also the first person in the Bible to give a name to God: "El-Roi," which means "you are the God who sees." What does Hagar's story teach you about our God?

The presence of black people in the Bible matters because it reveals that God doesn't play favorites. We don't contend for the presence of black people in the Bible because of what it says about us, but because of what it says about God. As we see in the stories of the Ethiopian eunuch and Hagar, God wants everyone to come to a saving knowledge of Him through Jesus Christ. The idea that Christianity is a white man's religion defames God's character and distorts His plans.

Read Romans 3:21-31.

Use the five-step process for Bible study presented in the last chapter to unwrap the meaning of this passage and its implications for us.

Given what you have learned from this study, would you respond to the question, "Is Christianity a white man's religion?" be different? If so, how?

VI. TOOLS FOR GOING DEEPER

- Walter Arthur McCray, *The Black Presence in the Bible: Discovering the Black and African Identity of Biblical Persons and Nations* (Chicago, IL: Black Light Fellowship, 1990).
- William Dwight McKissic, *Beyond Roots: In Search of Blacks In the Bible* (Wenonah, NJ: Renaissance Productions, 1990).
- Charles B. Copher, *Biblical and Theological Issues on the Black Presence In the Bible* (Chicago, IL: Black Light Fellowship, 1993).