

BLACK HISTORY IS AMERICAN HISTORY (UNSUNG HEROS)



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Black History Month provides a valuable opportunity to explore the connection between the Bible and the rich history of Black Americans.

- Black history was as much about the retelling of American history in a culturally informed way as about revisiting the past and present accomplishments of Black peoples throughout the US and the African diaspora.

Bible's Influence on Black History:

Christianity was prevalent in Africa long before the era of slavery. Despite the Bible's complicated role during slavery in America, it also served as an anchor of hope and freedom for enslaved Africans who clung to their faith in God.

- While the Bible was sometimes misused to support slavery and segregation, its complete message leaves no room for doubt. It teaches that all people are created in God's image (Genesis 1:27), acknowledges our shared sinfulness (Romans 3:23), condemns sins like racism and violence (Matthew 22:36-40), and offers restoration through Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:28).

- Countless Black Americans, including figures like Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., found inspiration and guidance in Scripture during their fight for justice and equality.
- In honor of Black History Month, we remember and celebrate the powerful work of God in and through the lives of influential African Americans. From enslaved Christians and abolitionists through the Jim Crow era to civil rights figures, the believers featured in these articles served as leaders in the church and powerfully impacted society.
- ❖ These days Black history is in the news. People studying it, teaching it – even attempts to ban it. But Black history can't be banned. It's a history to remember.

1. How are most Bible Character displayed?

- Bible characters are usually portrayed as white and European, all except one of the wise men. But the spiritual history of Africa is imprinted in every book and chapter of the Bible beginning with Genesis. When God creates Adam out of the dust of the ground it contains the soil of Mesopotamia and the sun-warmed earth of Africa.
- But it isn't just earth and soil that indicates African presence in the Bible. It is the people themselves.

2. How important is the truth to you?

The Black community has long sought biblical heroes and heroines with whom to identify racially. Volumes of books have been published to determine which biblical characters are Black people. Too often this subject is approached as if Black presence in the Bible is a rarity, sparsely sprinkled amidst White biblical superstars, rather than the norm.

But Black presence in biblical history *is* the norm. I want people everywhere especially Black people to know the simple truth:

The people of the Bible, including Jesus, were Black.

In the book **THE BIBLE IS BLACK HISTORY**, Dr. Williams cuts through the complicated approaches to history as well as confusing anthropological debates to explain, in clear, lay terms, how the misrepresentation of biblical heroes has encumbered the average reader with misinformation about race that is unconsciously read into the biblical text.

In other words, just as there's a pattern of purposeful whitewashing of notable Africans throughout human history, the Bible itself has been whitewashed.

Using powerful, engaging prose backed with the rigor of academic research and theological evidence, **THE BIBLE IS BLACK HISTORY** makes a clear case not only for the reality that the people of the Bible were black, but for the influence of White Supremacy on the Bible and its messages. It explains that:

- The biblical story begins in Africa, making the biblical Hebrews immediate descendants of Africans.
- All of the events from the creation of Adam and Eve to their expulsion from the garden in Eden to the construction of Noah's ark took place somewhere in Southeast Africa, where, according to an analysis of biblical events, the garden in Eden is located.
- Colored skin was the norm for the biblical community; colorless skin was the pariah, as demonstrated by peer reviewed, anthropological research.
- Europeans, who were insignificant in the Bible until the appearance of Pontius Pilate in the New Testament, established White skin as the default color of the people of the Bible, whether they were Egyptian, Ethiopian, Arabian, Babylonian, Persian or Israelite.
- Jesus was a Black man. His lineage demonstrates this. Moreover, in the earliest known depiction of Jesus, discovered around the 3rd century A.D. in the St. Callisto catacomb in Rome, He is depicted as a dark-skinned man with an afro hair style.
- Through imagery, narratives and art including modern-day cinema, Europeans have been extraordinarily successful at co-opting the historical Jesus as a member of their race.

3. How important is the Land of the Bible?

- The lands of the Bible span the continents of Africa and Asia—both home to peoples of color.
- People of African descent, Asian descent, and of mixed descent—Afro-Asiatic—all lived in ancient Israel. In general, the people of Ancient Israel were probably more African than Asian, and they looked it.

4. Where Black people in the Bible called Hebrews?

- Consider the story of Joseph. Sold into slavery and taken down to Egypt he rises in the ranks of Pharaoh's government. While his brothers intend it for evil, God intends it for good; Joseph is able to bring his father and 11 brothers down to Egypt to escape a devastating famine.
- This means all 12 tribes of Israel and their descendants live in Africa for over 200 years until Moses leads them to freedom. They go down as 70 souls and they come back one and a half million strong. Through intermarriage, African blood flows freely through their veins.

- Even so, the people are called Hebrews, not Egyptians. Why? Not because of race or racism, that construct doesn't come into existence until the 1600s. It is because of the tribe. Tribal affiliation is what matters in the ancient world. Nevertheless: In the Bible, Hebrews and Africans are one and the same people. The first Hebrews are African, and many Africans are Hebrews.

5. When did Black people began to worship the God of the Bible?

- Long before slave ships bring Africans to American shores, many enslaved Africans already worship the God of the Bible.

The African presence in the Bible can be traced even deeper in the Bible. Moses, "The Prince of Egypt," is born of Hebrew slaves, but is raised by Egyptians. Remember how Moses' mother and sister put him in a basket in the Nile so that Pharaoh won't find him and kill him? But Pharaoh's daughter finds him, keeps him, and raises him in the royal palace right under Pharaoh's nose.

6. What's the issue in this story?

- Now if Pharaoh's daughter and Moses look all that different, it stands to reason that Pharaoh would take the baby and kill him. But he doesn't. Why? Probably because Moses fits right in, an Egyptian among Egyptians.
- Moses isn't the only one who fits right in. Here's where it gets really interesting. Remember how Mary and Joseph take Jesus and flee when King Herod wants to kill him? Where do they go to hide out? Where do they go to find sanctuary? Where do they go to blend in? Egypt.
- Now if Joseph, Mary, and Jesus look all that different from the native Egyptians, they would never pass. But they do. They too had African blood flowing through their veins. Even Jesus.

7. What is Critical race Theory?

Critical race theory (CRT) is the debate in America, and current efforts are underway in several states to pass bills that ban CRT from school curriculum. Many of these bills restrict lessons on Black history, but some of the bans extend to a broader set of concepts related to racial diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Studies show that teaching Black history in its proper context is beneficial, if not essential, to the success of Black children in school. According to sociologists Black kids excel inside and outside the classroom when they develop a positive view of their own racial-ethnic identity.

Dangers

Black history narrates forms of oppression so vile and brutal that they challenge the possibility of human dignity and rights. Socially, it's so damning that steps have been taken to ban its telling in public schools. The steady increase in book bans and curriculum modifications restricting the content and delivery of Black history.

8. THE FIVE BLACK BIBLE HEROES AMERICA NEEDS TODAY

Many have seen pictures of blonde-hair, blue-eyed Jesus? They're just wrong. Instead, the Bible is full of stories about, and from the perspective of, people of color. While most of the heroes of Scripture are ethnically Jewish, there are a number of black and brown men and women who have an astounding impact. In this moment in time, with our country in deep pain around racism, some should learn by following their example.

In the wake of police brutality, the world is taking a good long look in the mirror when it comes to race. One of my most important mirrors is the Bible.

There are many biblical voices that get plenty of amplification (Abraham, Moses, and David), so it's important to turn the spotlight on a few of the unsung black heroes of the Bible. Their influence and example are real.

1. EBED-MELECH

Jeremiah, a prophet of God to his people, was charged with delivering some very unpopular news: the king of Babylon was coming, and he would conquer Jerusalem.

For hundreds of years, God's people had been flaky with him. They'd worship Him and be devoted one minute and then be running off to worship and serve the false gods of their neighbors the next. God was fed up, and a conquering enemy king would be their punishment.

As is often the case with those who deliver bad news, Jeremiah wasn't very popular, especially with the king. Finally, having more than they can take, a few advisors of the king convince him that Jeremiah needs to be put to death. The king says, in effect, do whatever you want.

These royal advisors take Jeremiah and drop him down a well. There's no water in the deep hole, but there is plenty of mud. And to make sure starvation kills him instead of the fall, they lower him into this hole by rope. Jeremiah is left there, deep in the mud, with no food, water, or room to move.

Enter Ebed-Melech. The Bible says he was a **Cushite** servant of the King of Judah. Where is Cush? Many scholars associate it with the kingdom of ancient Ethiopia. Meaning? *Ebed-Melech was a person of color.* (In an earlier prophecy, Jeremiah asks if a Cushite can change his skin color, inferring Cushite's had dark skin. You can read it in Jeremiah 13:23).

Ebed-Melech, seeing this injustice, doesn't just sit on it. He goes to the king. Yep, the same one who gave the OK to throw Jeremiah in a hole, and petitions for the prophet's life. Ebed-Melech isn't a friend of the king. He's no crony or yes-man. He's a court official in the service of the monarch, willing to risk his reputation (and probably his life) in asking the king to reverse his

decision. A pretty passive guy, the king says, “do whatever you want,” and Ebed-Melech finds thirty men to help him rescue Jeremiah.

Led by Ebed-Melech, the prophet is pulled from the mud and certain death. God is pleased with Ebed-Melech’s efforts, announcing through Jeremiah that, though Jerusalem will fall, “I will rescue you on that day, and you will not be handed over to the men you fear.”

- ❖ The bottom line we learn from Ebed-Melech? I’m responsible for justice. When it comes to racism, white believers too often place the mantle of justice on the government, on elected officials, on the court system or someone of higher authority. Ebed-Melech risked life and limb to right a wrong. It’s time for us to do the same for our brothers and sisters of color.

Read Ebed-Melech’s story yourself in Jeremiah, chapters 38 and 39.

2. SIMON OF CYRENE

On the day of His execution, Jesus was brutally beaten. To add insult to injury, He was forced to carry his heavy cross through the streets of Jerusalem to the place of his execution. Three accounts of this day make a note of a man named Simon, who gave Jesus’ respite.

([Luke 23:26](#)) says, “[The soldiers] seized a man, Simon of Cyrene... and placed on him the cross to carry behind Jesus.”

Since [Cyrene is located in Northern Africa](#), it seems at least very plausible that [Simon was a man of color](#).

Simon disappears from the story as quickly as he appears, but the example is extremely powerful. On the most important day in history, he literally carries the cross of Christ.

- ❖ In America, it’s easy for those of us who don’t experience systematic racism to forget how prevalent it really is. It’s easy for us to ignore what makes us uncomfortable, or to choose our news sources based on what we want to hear, and not what we need to hear. Simon sets a powerful example many should try to follow. Even Christ accepted help carrying his cross. Our brothers and sisters of color have been carrying a heavy burden for hundreds of years. Now is the time for us to help shoulder it. Don’t wait for a passing Roman soldier to prompt you into action.

In Galatians, Paul, an early church leader, says exactly the same thing. “Carry each other’s burdens,” he writes, “and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ.”

You can read about Simon in Matthew 27:32, Mark 15:21, or Luke 23:26.

3. THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH

The New Testament portion of the Bible starts with four accounts of the life of Jesus. The next book, Acts, details what happens right after. It’s full of movement and excitement, as the church begins to form.

Near the beginning of Acts, we find the story of an unnamed man, known simply as the Ethiopian eunuch. The Bible says he was a court official of Candace, Queen of the Ethiopians. He was returning to his homeland, after a visit to Jerusalem, when he came across Philip, a disciple who had actually spent time with Jesus.

Directed by God to talk to him, Philip approaches the chariot of the eunuch and finds the man reading from an ancient prophecy, taken from the book of Isaiah. Philip asks the man if he understands what he's reading. His reply? "How can I, unless someone guides me?"

Philip climbs into the chariot and unpacks the ancient scripture, showing how it points to Jesus as the Messiah. The eunuch, overcome, cries out. "Look, there's water! What would keep me from being baptized?"

This is a watershed moment. The chariot stops, Philip and the eunuch get into the water, and the first non-Jewish believer in all of Scripture is baptized into the faith.

For all who dare to wrestle with his story, the Ethiopian eunuch sets a compelling example of asking, believing, and acting. As white American, it would be easier for them not to have conversations with their friends of color about what they're feeling right now. It would be less painful if they didn't hear their stories of oppression and injustice. But that's not the example set by the eunuch.

Before Philip appeared on the road, the eunuch was exploring a topic that was foreign to him—ancient Jewish prophecy. When he had a question, he asked someone who could answer it. And when he got an answer, he believed it and took action.

- ❖ If you're a white believer in Christ, it is so important for you to personally know someone who has experienced systematic racism in our country. And when you hear stories, whether in person or on social media, what would it look like if we just believed them? If we didn't rationalize away our responsibility? If we didn't look for a reason why the young man was shot? If we didn't say things like "All lives matter" or "If he didn't dress that way" or "Why was he out so late at night" or "He was probably resisting arrest" or.... or... or.
- ❖ What if we just believed our brothers and sisters when they say they are hurting? And what if, like the Ethiopian eunuch, we took action immediately? It would change the narrative in our country.

You can read the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8:26-40.

4. ZIPPORAH

Let's hear it for Moses' wife. Yes, that Moses. The Prince of Egypt. The deliverer of Israel. The man who actually saw the face of God. He was married to a woman named Zipporah, from the ancient land of **Cush**.

After being raised in the lap of luxury, as the adopted son of Pharaoh, Moses flees Egypt when he can no longer stomach the enslavement of his people (and because he killed a man). While

wandering around in the land of Midian, he meets a man named Reuel and ends up marrying his daughter, Zipporah.

Later, after the plagues and the parting of the Red Sea, Moses is leading God's people through the desert to the land God promised them when he faces a family crisis. His brother, Aaron, and his sister, Miriam, are helping him lead the people. They are seen by the Israelites as leaders... but not as important as Moses. This hierarchy of power doesn't sit well with them, and they begin to criticize Moses.

Numbers 12 says, "Miriam and Aaron criticized Moses because of the Cushite woman he married. They said, 'Does the LORD speak only through Moses? Does he not speak through us?' And the LORD heard it."

The breakdown in the family, and in leadership of the new nation, seems to at least have a racist bent to it. Aaron and Miriam, jealous of the influence of Moses, come against him for marrying a woman of color. And God doesn't let it go unpunished.

But Zipporah's lasting legacy isn't the harsh words of Moses' siblings, but the action she took to protect her family.

In Exodus chapter 4, as Moses is preparing to return to Egypt and rescue God's people, he's traveling with his family through the desert. In a passage that's hard to completely understand, it seems Moses neglected to circumcise his young son (an ancient sign of a covenant with God). This was a big deal, especially for the man who would be the mouth of God to His people. So big a deal, in fact, that God sought to kill Moses over it. But not on Zipporah's watch.

Exodus 4:25 says, "So Zipporah took a flint, cut off her son's foreskin, and threw it at Moses' feet."

Again, most scholars are confused about what all that means. But we do know this. Zipporah took ownership for her family when her husband would not—and rescued Moses, who would become the deliverer of Israel, from death at the hands of God before any miracle in Egypt ever took place.

- ❖ Zipporah teaches us that justice begins at home. If you are a parent, especially a white one, Zipporah compels you to have pro-active conversations around race and justice with your children. If you hear racism at a family function, Zipporah compels you to not just slide it under the table. If you know of oppression in your family line, Zipporah compels you to seek forgiveness—first from God, and then from those who have been wrong.
- ❖ A new nation, one that actually allows all people to be free, starts in the four walls of your home. Even with young children, Zipporah's example is pushing us to parent our kids in a different and more compelling way.

You can read about Zipporah's bold action in Exodus 4:21-26, and Moses' family quarrel in Numbers 12.

5. SOLOMON'S BRIDE

We read some of the Bible and not all. Listen to the words of Solomon—except for the Song of Solomon. It's an erotic love poem, so it makes sense.

Solomon, the son of David and king of Israel, wrote the song for a woman he was about to marry. In short: it's about how beautiful she is and how much he wants to explore her body. Anybody blushing yet?

The song alternates between lines spoken by Solomon and lines spoken by the unnamed object of his affection.

The first lines spoken by the soon-to-be-bride include, "*I am dark and lovely like Kedar's tents*, like Solomon's curtains." She goes on to explain that she has worked in the fields, and the sun has further darkened her skin.

While she appears a bit embarrassed at her skin tone, Solomon finds it beautiful. A few verses later, he bubbles over. "You are beautiful, my true love! Look at you! You are so beautiful."

We don't know the ethnicity or racial background of Solomon's wife. But we do know this: she had dark skin, she was beautiful, and she was worthy of one of history's greatest love poems.

Aside from an ode to love and the gift of sex, the Song of Solomon is also viewed as an image of the great love God has for his people, depicted most concretely in the person of Jesus.

- ❖ The bottom line? God says black is beautiful. For too long, people of color in our country have only heard that phrase from people who looked like them. If you're a white Christian in America, it's time for people of color to know that they are loved, appreciated, honored, revered, and wanted. Our words matter. Check in on your friends of color. Send them some encouragement and pray for our country. No one should feel dishonored because of their skin tone.
- ❖ As a white American, it's sometimes hard to know how to engage on the topic of racism. If you find yourself in that boat, lean into the example of these Bible heroes. Their justice, compassion, and willingness to make moves speaks through the generations. It changed history then, and it can change history now.

Conclusion:

- ❖ The Bible Is Black History Because the People of the Bible Were Black.