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ESSAY REVIEW I

AFRICANS, THE BIBLE, AND CHRISTIANITY

Michael Omolewa

Keith Augustus Burton, *The Blessing of Africa: The Bible and African Christianity*. Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007. Pp. 294. Paper \$20.00.

The aim of the author is to dispel the view that Africa has merely been a recipient of the “civilizing” influences from outside, and to demonstrate that Africa has always played an active and leading role in the development of world civilization. Writing with passion, perhaps to mark the bicentennial of the abolition of British participation in the transatlantic slave trade, which the author notes in his acknowledgements, Keith Augustus Burton promises at the outset to seek to correct the “allegations of a cursed race . . . used to subjugate the peoples of Africa and other dark-skinned people for over a millennia.” He chose this topic because “Africa rarely comes to mind when most people think about the land of the Bible.”

In *The Blessing of Africa: The Bible and African Christianity*, Burton contends that Africa has always been a place for God’s “chosen people”; that Africa was included in the history of Abraham in the Old Testament; that the call of Abraham took place in biblical Africa; that Jesus Christ spent part of his life there; and that the promotion of the Christian religion took place in biblical Africa. The author examines the table of nations in Genesis 10 and notes that the name of “Ham,” a descendant of Noah has “the same root as the Hebrew terms . . . all of which denote warmth, heat, or tanned.” He then traces the territories occupied by the descendants of Ham, including Egypt, Ethiopia, the Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa. He observes that this “biblical Africa was where the Garden of Eden was located,” and that Cush “became the home to several clans with Semitic roots,” including the descendants of Abraham’s son, Ishmael, “who was born in Canaan to Hagar.” He observes that Ishmael later went with his mother to live in the Arabian section of Cush to the east of the Red Sea. He notes that Abraham married another woman, Keturah, after the death of Sarah and that “it is generally accepted that these non-Saranic sons of Abraham were the progenitors of the Arab people.” He describes

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Paul as a displaced son of Abraham, who “found solace after he encountered the Lord on the road to Damascus,” and that although the Bible did not confirm it, “some believed that Paul spent three years in Arabia being initiated into Apostleship.” He later draws attention to the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch, and some Moabites and Midianites who entered into a partnership with the chosen people of God. He notes that Keturah’s descendants at one point assisted Moses in organizing the Israelites when Jethro visited him during the exodus.

The author notes that Rahab, a Canaanite woman, was married to an Israelite and that she later went to assist those who were about to attack her city. Another Canaanite, whom he describes as “the unselfish woman [who] looked beyond her own desperate need and sought to satisfy the strangers’ thirst,” had helped Elijah during a drought. Burton also notes that during the life of Jesus Christ, Africans continued to play a role and that Simon of Cyrene was compelled to carry the cross of Jesus on his shoulder, and had “symbolically led the throng of mostly female mourners” to Calvary.

Burton defines biblical Africa as the center of commerce and military might, and although the Lord punished individual nations descended from Cush, he also had a soft spot for some of them just as he had for “his beloved Israel.” Burton explains that Yahweh is not a partial God, but loves the whole of his creation, and had once demonstrated this when he asked Israel, “Are you not like the Ethiopians to me?” (Amos 9:7). Moreover, Egypt was not just a place of bondage for the Israelites, it was also a place of sanctuary for God’s chosen people; Abraham found refuge in Egypt, his children again arrived there during the time of famine, and “as in the days of Abraham, Egypt was to again provide haven for Yahweh’s chosen family.” Burton notes that Israel’s descendants had a long stay of about 440 years in Egypt and “when Assyria attacked Judah, Hezekiah sent an envoy to Egypt to solicit support.” He observes that Canaan was generous towards the descendants of Abraham, accepted Esau’s marriage to local women, and allowed the patriarchs to live among the Canaanites “as long term guests.”

In the next section, Burton discusses the figures in the Bible who on the basis of heredity and location he identifies as Africans. He rejects the view that skin color and hair texture alone can be used for the demarcation of a people, and concludes that “it is safe to say that the descendents of Ham ranged from very dark-skinned individuals with curly hair to light-skinned individuals with straighter hair.” He also asserts that much of the Bible was written on African soil and the bulk of the stories were set in the assumed “land of Ham,” but that the main characters in the Bible were the descendants of the Semitic immigrants, whom, he agrees, “had been placed there by Divine command.” Burton then proceeds to explore the story of Christianity in Palestine, in Egypt, North Africa, and in Ethiopia. He writes about what he calls “Islam’s distortion of the biblical message” and the influence of the

Bible on the Koran. He observes that “anyone reading the Koran would quickly see that Mohammad had a high regard for the Bible,” concluding that “Mohammad’s collection of revelations is built on stories from the Bible.”

In addition, Burton discusses the place of Jesus in the Koran and the growth of Islam in Africa, and proceeds to tell a story of the Islamic mission and colonization in sub-Saharan Africa. For example, in discussing the role of the Portuguese explorers and traders from 1418, he notes that even before the Portuguese were given “unholy papal edicts,” which sanctioned Christians’ participation in the slave trade in Africa, “Muslims from Arabia had already perfected the logistics of slave trading.” Burton draws attention to the work of the Arab rulers of Tanganyika and Zanzibar who “continued the African slave trade with cruel capitalist greed” at the time that Christianity and commerce were being advanced in East Africa. He proceeds with the discussion of the roles of the Dutch, the English, and the indigenous Africans in the transatlantic slave trade; the transformation of parts of Africa by the European and American missionaries; and the eventual colonization and domination by European nations. Burton observes that even in the African liberation struggle in the 20th century the influence of Christian missionaries was evident as Africans were “responding to the liberating mandate of the scriptures.” He then rejoices that “the most radical demonstration of God’s Word . . . occurred at the fall of apartheid in 1994. The curse brought upon the land by Jan van Riebeeck and his European allies was finally broken.”

Keith A. Burton, president of Life Heritage Ministries, is eminently qualified to undertake this work given his training in theology and interest in cultural issues. The message of the book is clear: to acknowledge “the central roles of Africans in the divine drama”; that Africa has been blessed by its election; and that many of its offspring “are listed among the expanded family of God.” Burton affirms that Africa has had to cope with the challenges of Muslim and Christian missionaries, and that in the end, Africans used the liberation message of the Bible to challenge slavery, colonial rule, injustice, and oppression. But he also explains how Christianity was used in South Africa to introduce racial oppression. For other parts of Africa the book draws attention to the economic and political strategies that contributed to Africans’ continued impoverishment. Quoting Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, the author recalls, “When the missionaries came to Africa, they had the Bible and we had the land. They said ‘let us pray.’ We closed our eyes. When we opened them, we had the Bible and they had the land.”

Burton spends some time discussing the initiative of Africans who decided to introduce music and dance and other elements of African culture into Christian worship services; they fiercely rejected “imperial Christianity” and began the independent African Church movement. One of these was a Baptist missionary, John Chilembwe, who in 1915 in Malawi “claimed that God had ordered him to

revolt against British domination and to establish a National African Church.” And he is also quick to note that throughout the whole history of Africa, “committed to the integrity of the Word, African Christians [have] not only fought against the oppressor, but have served as prophetic voices to their own corrupt leaders during the postcolonial era.”

It is imperative to commend *The Blessing of Africa*, which is based on extensive review of the literature by the author who provides the sources for his arguments and analysis. The author has also successfully demonstrated the point that Africa can by no means be ignored in the study of the history of the chosen people in the Bible, and that Africans have not been mere recipients, but also participants in the evolution of the history of Christianity. However, there are a number of concerns about this book. The first is that it has, and perhaps understandably, depended almost exclusively on secondary sources. But even here it would have been helpful for the author to consult some of the standard “General Histories of Africa,” such as the eight-volume *UNESCO General History of Africa* (1981–1993).¹ The absence of the use of primary source materials other than the Scriptures themselves certainly undermines some of the more controversial assertions the author makes.

While Burton offers a controversial definition of “biblical Africa,” he does not attempt a definition of “Christianity,” the key subject in the study. It is important to note that Christianity means “the followership of Christ.” This means that the adherents accept *by faith* the “Word of God” found in both the Old and the New Testaments about the creation and fall of man, the choice of Abraham as the founder of a distinct people, and the emergence of Israel as the chosen people of God; the prophesy about the birth, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus; and the continuing power in the name of Jesus, for healing, deliverance, security, and salvation. Every Christian is expected to accept the core teaching that Jesus is the Son of God with all authority given to Him (Matthew 28:18). Moreover, Christianity promotes the basic values of self-denial and self-sacrifice because that is the message of the Cross: Jesus Christ came into the world to die for the sins of all humankind. Since Jesus did not himself commit any sin, He did not need to be crucified. But He made the supreme sacrifice to die on the Cross to redeem the world.

The Blessing of Africa does not pay adequate attention to those who made the “supreme sacrifice” by bringing the message of Christianity to Africa, dying of fatigue, diseases, and sometimes outright hostility and violence against their cause. One such example was Father John Shanahan of the Holy Ghost Fathers who worked in eastern Nigeria, and who, in a dream, believed that the name of Jesus was being ridiculed and protested: “Insult me—yes, by all means! Insult my country—perhaps! But insult Saint Patrick—never! Never—mon pere—never.” Burton should have drawn a distinction between “the warring clerics accompanied by

musket-bearing mercenaries” and the genuine teachers of the Word and Christian missionaries. For example, a leading historian of missions, J. F. Ade Ajayi, in his book *A Patriot to the Core: Bishop Ajayi Crowther*, has concluded that Samuel Ajayi Crowther, the pioneering Anglican Bishop of Nigeria who translated the Bible into Yoruba, was a fully committed evangelist and missionary.² Similarly, John H. Darch in his study “The Church Missionary Society and the Governors of Lagos, 1862–72” documented the disagreement and “the uneasy relationship between the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in Yorubaland and the official British presence in the nearby port of Lagos,” which led to “a concerted attack on the colonial governors both from missionaries in the field and from the CMS headquarters in London.”³

The title of the book also raises some problems, and the subtitle, *The Bible and African Christianity* is somewhat ambiguous. What is “African Christianity”? Is there not a uniform, standard definition of Christianity that defies race, ethnicity, or location? Perhaps a better subtitle would have been: “The Bible and Christianity in Africa.”

There are minor spelling and other errors in the book, but these do not detract from the quality of this publication, which should be read by students and researchers requiring, in one volume, a broad knowledge of the role of Africa in the history of the Christian religion. It is frank, firm, and fearless as it eloquently tells the story of how “the very missions that were tainted by the racist notions of cultural supremacy created the institutions that would invoke the spirit of freedom throughout the continent.” In this age of globalization and partnership-building, children and adults should be encouraged to read and to learn more about how various races, genders, peoples, and regions contributed to the making of the Christian world.

NOTES

¹J. F. Ade Ajayi, ed., *UNESCO General History of Africa*, vols. 1–8 (Berkeley, CA, 1988–1998).

²J. F. Ade Ajayi, *A Patriot to the Core: Bishop Ajayi Crowther* (Ibadan, Nigeria, 2001).

³John H. Darch, “The Church Missionary Society and the Governors of Lagos, 1862–72,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 52, no. 2 (2001): 313.