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Race Matters: Biblical Representations in the Seminary Classroom

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Blog Series: Race Matters in the Classroom

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When and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me.

Anna Julia Cooper

Student enters. Looks at me, looks at other students, looks back at me. Is this room 101? Looks at me, looks at other students, looks back at me. Is this Hebrew? Looks at me, looks at other students, looks back at me. Are *you* teaching it?

There is no place that race is not present and shaping the discourse in my classroom. It walks in with my body, adorns my free (preciously locked) African hair, is painted in the particular brown of my skin - that also tells another story. It is present in the beliefs, assumptions, fears and aggressions of my students. To the degree that race has been socially engineered, the bible has been a tool of that engineering and has been read subsequently applying and constructing racial categories. Race is also very much present and explicit in my teaching. Here are a few ways in which I teach race in the Hebrew Biblical Studies classroom.

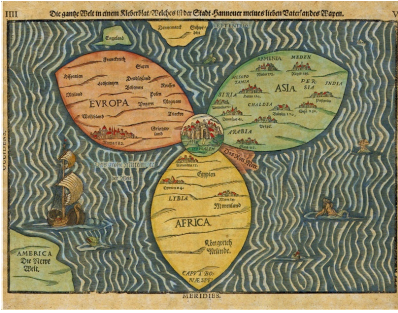
One of the explicit goals of my teaching on every syllabus in an introductory course in the Hebrew Scriptures is: *We will be introduced to the West Asian, East African and ancient Near Eastern contexts of the Hebrew Bible.* For other goals the language is “*we will explore*” but so



Photo by James Lewis

many of my students falsely locate the biblical text in or immediately adjacent to Europe that the Afro-Asian context of the scriptures is a revelation, hence the language “*we will be introduced to.*” I cannot presume knowledge of the basic regional geography. My implicit goals that accompany that explicit goal are: 1) to scrape off the layers of whiteness that have been spackled onto the text, 2) to render visible white cultural constructions that have been imported onto and into the text, 3) to introduce the ethnic and cultural contexts from which the scriptures emerged, 4) to trouble contemporary constructs of race and ethnicity with ancient understandings of ethnicity and identity and, 5) to offer visual resources that present peoples and their cultures, and literary characters and their contexts in ways that reflect their cultural and geographical contexts.

I introduce the geography of biblical Israel with a map of Africa and Asia. Students learn to identify Israel as the land-bridge connecting north eastern Africa with West Asia. In Hebrew courses I situate Hebrew and Aramaic in their language family: Afro-Asiatic languages cover northern, eastern and parts of Central Africa in addition to Western Asia and include 1) Egyptian, closest to Semitic, 2) Berber with several million modern speakers in northern Africa, including Mali and Niger, 3) Kushitic with 15 million speakers in Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia and Northern Tanzania, 4) Chadic with 30 million speakers around Lake Chad at the intersection of Chad, Niger and Nigeria,



5) Omotic with 1 million speakers in Ethiopia, north of Lake Turkana and 6) Semitic which stretches from East Africa to West Asia including Israel, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and the Arab Peninsula and includes the biblical transmission languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, Ge'ez (I & II Enoch, Jubilees) and Syriac (Peshitta).

Then we look again at the map of Africa to identify the countries where the languages related to Hebrew and Aramaic are spoken. (The students can generally find the Arab nations.) Sometimes we have to discuss the fact that Egypt is in Africa and what is at stake in claiming otherwise. We discuss visual representations of Egyptians, Israelites and other ancient peoples as Europeans in popular media but more significantly, in children's bibles, Sunday School and Vacation Bible School literature and, sanctuary art and icons.

Sometimes I make reference to Martin Noth's quotation that "Egyptians [also] portrayed the people

living along the Nile south of Egypt in a generalized and certainly incorrect manner, with typical

Negro faces... by incorrectly classifying the Nubians as Negroes." (M. Noth, *The Old Testament World*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966, pp. 234-235.) Then we look at the contemporary nations that correspond to biblical Nubia (or Kush/Cush also called Ethiopia), Sudan and Ethiopia. We discuss why a white scholar writing in 1966 might insist that biblical peoples were not Africans, or at least not in the same sense as the "negroes" in his country.

Throughout the semester I make it a point to supply a range of images that compete and



Hagar and Ishmael

Photo by
Alan Jones

conflict with the euro-centric imagery my students have consumed and been force-fed. I use archaeological images with representations of ancient peoples depicting themselves, their neighbors and/or their enemies. I use the photographs from the American Colony in Jerusalem collection from the turn of the twentieth century which document peoples in Egypt and in Israel and Palestine before mass European Jewish immigration. We discuss the effect of the Ottoman conquest of Egypt on culture and appearance. And I use a wide collection of liturgical and contemporary African, African American, Asian and Asian American art from the Ethiopian orthodox church to contemporary artists He Qi and Laura James. I have recently added the photographic recreations of James Lewis.

For some of my students this is the first time whiteness has been decentered as a norm when reading and interpreting the scriptures. For others it is part of work they have already been doing. For some this is an “all lives matter” moment, everyone should be free to choose which ever image they like with no recognition of the theological implications of whitewashing the bible in a nation that demonizes black and brown bodies. I spend more time with this issue in an advanced course on social media.

Race is always present in an American classroom. The history of biblical exegesis and scholarship often mean the blanching of the text in support of a white ideal painted onto the scriptures of an Afro-Asiatic people that have become the scriptures black, brown, beige, tan,

white and pink peoples the world over.

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