

AFROCENTRIC BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

On October 12, 1994, the *New York Times* carried an article concerning Warner Sallman, whom it called the “best-known artist of the century” for his painting of the head of Christ, which has been reproduced more than half a billion times. Our earliest descriptions of the appearance of Jesus come from the Middle Ages. In an alleged report by Lentulus, which dates from the twelfth century, Jesus is described with “wavy hair, rather crisp of the colour of wine, and glittering as it flows down from His shoulders, with a parting in the middle of the head after the manner of the Nazarenes.... He has a beard abundant and of the same hazel-colour as His hair, not long, but forked. His eyes are blue and very bright.”¹ This is quite obviously an imaginative Eurocentric portrait of Jesus.

Contrast this imagery with the recent portrayal of a black Jesus from *The Original African Heritage Study Bible*, a new Afrocentric Bible that represents in photographic illustrations and textual commentary the conviction that all the biblical figures from Moses to Jesus were black. The image of Christ as black appeared as early as 1700, when a Congolese girl, Beatrice Kimpa Vita, taught that “Christ appeared as a black man in Sao Salvador and that all his apostles were black. He was a Christ who identified himself with the Africans, who threw in his lot with that of the suffering, oppressed blacks as opposed to the white exploiters and oppressors.”² In a 1963 interview Malcolm X declared: “Christ wasn’t white. Christ was a black man.”³ The March 1969 issue of *Ebony* magazine depicted a kinky-haired, broad-nosed black Christ.⁴

These diverse representations raise the issue of Eurocentric versus Afrocentric interpretations of ancient history in general and of the Bible in particular.

¹ Farrar, *Life of Christ*, 664. According to Jensen, “Two Faces of Jesus,” early Christian artists portrayed Jesus as either a handsome, bare-faced youth or as a mature, bearded figure.

² Bosch, “Currents and Cross Currents,” 1.

³ Douglas, *Black Christ*, 1.

⁴ For an interesting attempt to re-create an image of Jesus by a forensic scientist using Jewish skulls from Jerusalem, see Fillon, “Real Face of Jesus.”

Eurocentric Interpretations

One could cite many examples of interpretations of African history by white scholars that are transparently racist and condescending. In *Africa and Africans in Antiquity*, which I edited, several contributors note such interpretations. For example, scholars from Zimbabwe attribute the great stone structures in that country to either Solomon⁵ or Indians but not to the indigenous Bantu population. George Reisner of Harvard University, the great archaeologist of Nubia, was also disposed to ascribe innovations to newcomers and not natives. W. B. Emery posited a “dynastic race” for the flowering of Archaic Egypt.

David Hume (d. 1776) wrote in his *Essays and Treatises*: “I am apt to suspect the negroes ... to be naturally inferior to the white. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation.”⁶ Basil Davidson notes the coincidence that in 1830, when the colonial partition of the African continent began, Georg Hegel, the famous German philosopher, dismissed Africans as insignificant to history.⁷ Hegel wrote in his *Philosophy of History*:

It is manifest that want of self-control distinguishes the character of the Negroes. This condition is capable of no development or culture, and as we have seen them at this day, such have they always been.... At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit.⁸

A century later, C. G. Seligman, who applied social Darwinism to African ethnography, formulated the “Hamitic hypothesis,” which held that Caucasian Hamites, including the Egyptians, created everything of value in Africa. In 1930 he wrote: “Apart from relatively late Semitic influence ... the civilizations of Africa are the civilizations of the Hamites.... The incoming Hamites were pastoral ‘Europeans’—arriving wave after wave—better armed as well as quicker witted than the dark agricultural Negroes.”⁹

Afrocentrism

⁵ See chap. 3, above; and Carroll, “Solomonic Legend.”

⁶ Cited in Harris, *Africans and Their History*, 19.

⁷ Davidson, *Africa in History*, xxii.

⁸ Cited by Harris, *Africans and Their History*, 19.

⁹ Cited by Sanders, “Hamitic Hypothesis,” 521.

The cover of the September 23, 1991, issue of *Newsweek* featured the subject “Afrocentrism: Was Cleopatra Black?” In an understandable reaction to Eurocentric racist interpretations, many African Americans seek to reinterpret history and the Bible on an Afrocentric basis.

In growing numbers Afrocentric scholars have gained positions at major universities such as UCLA, Rutgers, Kent State, Temple, and City University of New York—not in mainstream departments, to be sure, but in separate African American studies departments with a small but committed clientele. Where their teachings have made a significant impact is at the level of public education (and in some private academies) in major cities. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. reports:

Hilliard’s African-American Baseline Essays were introduced into the school system of Portland, Oregon, in 1987. They have subsequently been the inspiration for Afrocentric curricula in Milwaukee, Indianapolis, Pittsburgh, Washington, D.C., Richmond, Atlanta, Philadelphia, Detroit, Baltimore, Camden, and other cities and continue at this writing to be urged on school boards and administrators anxious to do the right thing.¹⁰

How did Afrocentrism develop, and what are its major tenets?¹¹ There were earlier works such as Gerald Massey’s *Ancient Egypt: The Light of the World* (1907),¹² which anticipated the key claim that the cultural origins of humanity were to be traced to Africa, especially to what he called Old Kam (i.e., Egypt), and George G. M. James’s *Stolen Legacy* (1954).¹³ But the birth of the movement can be especially linked to the development, since 1965, of black studies programs at universities on the demand of African American students.

In the 1970s the works of a seminal scholar, Cheikh Anta Diop of Senegal, began appearing in English translations. Diop (1923–1986), who came from a Muslim background, was educated at the University of Paris. He was both a scientist, who became the director of a radiocarbon laboratory, and a prolific author, who in numerous publications set forth his thesis that the Egyptian civilization was a black African one.¹⁴ When in 1967 the Congress of Africanness sponsored by the African Studies Association met in his home city of Dakar, Diop was not one of the participants. But his presentation in 1974 in Cairo

¹⁰ Schlesinger, *Disuniting of America*, 70.

¹¹ Moses in Early et al., “Symposium,” 46, asserts: “Afrocentrism is not a new movement. It makes one of its first appearances in an 1827 editorial in *Freedom’s Journal*, the first black newspaper in the United States, which alleged a relationship between black Americans and the ancient Egyptians.”

¹² See Bruce, “Ancient Africa.”

¹³ Lefkowitz in her important critique, *Not out of Africa*, chap. 4, points out that Massey derived his view of Egyptian mysteries from classical sources, which do not accurately reflect Egyptian religion.

¹⁴ Among Diop’s works translated from French into English are *African Origin of Civilization*, *Cultural Unity of Black Africa*, and *On Science, History, and Technology*.

became a chapter in UNESCO's *General History of Africa*.¹⁵ Though Diop was and still is ignored by mainstream scholars, he has gathered a devoted following among current Afrocentric scholars.¹⁶

Molefi Kete Asante, who coined the word *Afrocentrism*, states: "I am most keenly a Diopian, believing essentially that Cheikh Anta Diop has said quite enough on the theories of culture and history to inform most of what I write."¹⁷ The significance of Diop for Afrocentrism is highlighted in a preface to a collection of essays by Asante:

Before the appearance of Cheikh Anta Diop's *African Origin of Civilization* (1971), African culture was typically examined by Western-trained scholars from a European perspective. Those scholars, often wrapped in the swaddling clothes of a fully emergent European ideology, were often incapable of understanding the unity of African culture. Diop's masterpiece, *African Origin of Civilization*, and its companion, *Cultural Unity of Black Africa*, turned historiography around and provided the basis for an Afrocentric transformation.¹⁸

Charles Finch even declares: "Posterity will undoubtedly place him [Diop] in the company of Herodotus, Manetho, and Ibn Khaldun as an historian whose work not only changed the way we look at history but made history itself."¹⁹

According to Cain Hope Felder, there are three major types of Afrocentrism:

1. "There is Afrocentrism that stresses corrective historiography. Accordingly, Africa and persons of African descent are centered on as proactive in written history and not as passive stereotypes and objects of history."²⁰
2. "For years, various proponents of Afrocentrism have argued for a common cultural heritage, world view, and ethos, suggesting variously that there were unique unifying factors."²¹

¹⁵ Diop, "Origin of the Ancient Egyptians."

¹⁶ Matthews, "Proposal for an Afro-centric Curriculum," sets forth a proposal for seminaries and other schools.

¹⁷ Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity, and Knowledge*, preface.

¹⁸ Asante and Asante, *African Culture*, 3.

¹⁹ Van Sertima and Williams, *Great African Thinkers*, 1.227. Diop is dubbed "the Pharaoh of African studies"; see Tolbert, "Africa and the Bible," 5.

²⁰ Felder, "Afrocentrism," 51. See also idem, "Racial Motifs."

²¹ Felder, "Afrocentrism," 51.

3. There is a Black Nationalist version represented by Al Cleague and Leonard Jeffries: “Here skin color determined by percentages of melanin provides a reverse racist mode of valorization.”²²

Felder himself maintains: “I remain skeptical about the second form of Afrocentrism and reject outright this third form as potentially damaging to the entire multiculturalist movement within America.”²³

With some variations, Afrocentrism in its most conventional form maintains the following theses:

1. A cultural and linguistic unity unites all Africans. Diop noted that ancient Egyptian had links with Wolof, a language spoken in Senegal. Indeed, Diop and Theophile Obenga, a scholar from the Congo, argue for the genetic relationship of all African languages.
2. Egypt is an integral part of Africa, and ancient Egyptians were black Africans. Diop declares: “The oneness of Egyptian and Black culture could not be stated more clearly. Because of this essential identity of genius, culture and race, today all Negroes can legitimately trace their culture to ancient Egypt and build a modern culture on that foundation.”²⁴ Diop and his followers argue this from linguistics and the appearance of selected Egyptians. They also assume that the Egyptian word for their land—*Kemet* (black)—refers to the people and not to the land, as Egyptologists hold.²⁵ They also cite passages from classical writers such as Herodotus, who visited Egypt in the fifth century B.C.²⁶
3. Egypt provided Greece with all of its major intellectual ideas. According to Diop: “The ancient Egyptians were Negroes. The moral fruit of their civilization is to be counted among the assets of the Black world... Pythagorean mathematics, the theory of the four elements of Thales of Miletus, Epicurean materialism, Platonic idealism, Judaism, Islam, and modern science are rooted in Egyptian cosmogony and science.”²⁷ Diop also claims that the ancient Egyptians developed metallurgy around 2700 B.C. and dispersed its knowledge through the continent, a claim that is not considered seriously by reputable scholars.²⁸

²² Ibid., 52.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Diop, *African Origin of Civilization*, 140.

²⁵ See the comments of Sauneron, “Annex to Chapter 1,” 51; cf. Kees, *Ancient Egypt*, 36: “The ‘black’ fertile soil which gave Egypt its name *Kemet* (‘the Black’).”

²⁶ Cf. Hansberry, *Africa and Africans*.

²⁷ Diop, *African Origin of Civilization*, xiv.

²⁸ Miller and Van der Merwe, “Early Metal Working,” 7: “Egypt does not appear to have had a direct formative influence on the advent of metallurgy elsewhere in Africa other than at Meroe.” For ancient metallurgy, see Yamauchi, “Metal Sources and Metallurgy.”

Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Africa and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004).

4. Blacks were ultimately the originators of most of Western civilization. Jeffries, who was for a time removed from his post at the City University of New York for anti-Semitic remarks, declares: "The Greeks did not invent anything: they just inherited knowledge that was taught them by our African ancestors."²⁹
5. Not only the Egyptians but also the ancient Sumerians were black. Some argue this from the designation "black-headed ones,"³⁰ though Sumerologists take this as simply a reference to hair color. Certainly depictions of Sumerians do not support such an assertion.
6. Diop claims that the Egyptian Akhenaten was the originator of monotheism: "Once again, Egypt is the beginning of everything. Akhenaten's monotheistic thinking precedes Moses, so it precedes all Judaism, if we put aside all legend. If we search written history proven by documents in chronological order, Egyptian monotheism precedes all the other monotheistic religions which have existed since, in this case, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The revealed religions borrowed from this Egyptian thought."³¹ But the view that Moses borrowed monotheism from Akhenaten, a thesis popularized by Freud and supported to a degree by W. F. Albright, is not really tenable.³² Elsewhere Diop suggests: "One needs only to meditate on Osiris, the redeemer-god, who sacrifices himself, dies, and is resurrected to save mankind, a figure essentially identifiable with Christ."³³
7. Some Afrocentrists maintain that all the biblical figures in both the Old Testament and the New Testament were blacks. Diop declares: "Even the Blacks of Palestine, these Biblical cousins of the Egyptians, the Canaanites of the Bible, descendants of the Natufians of the Mesolithic period, opposed a fierce resistance in their different cities, which were all conquered and annexed to the Egyptian Empire."³⁴

Criticisms of Afrocentric Views

²⁹ Jeffries, "Afrocentrism vs. Eurocentrism," 22. Cf. the full title of James's *Stolen Legacy: The Greeks Were Not the Authors of Greek Philosophy, but the People of North Africa, Commonly Called the Egyptians*.

³⁰ For example, Copher, "Black Presence in the Old Testament," 54.

³¹ Finch, "Further Conversations with the Pharaoh [i.e., Diop]," 233.

³² See Yamauchi, "Akhenaten, Moses, and Monotheism."

³³ Diop, *African Origin of Civilization*, xiv. For a critique of such comparisons, which were popularized by James Frazer, see Yamauchi, "Easter—Myth, Hallucination, or History?"

³⁴ Diop, *Civilization or Barbarism*, 94.

What shall we say about these differing points of view?

1. The history of interpretation warns us to be aware of biases, both our own and those of others, in interpreting history.
2. There is clear evidence of a Eurocentric racist bias in certain interpretations that exalt whites and denigrate blacks.
3. The recently spawned Afrocentric interpretations focus on some legitimate concerns. The Egyptian language, once classified as Hamito-Semitic, is now recognized by Joseph Greenberg as part of a broad range of Afroasiatic languages that include Berber, Chadic, and Omotic. Egyptian has links not so much with Wolof, as Diop claims, but with Hausa, a dialect spoken in Nigeria, as pointed out by linguist Carleton Hodge.³⁵
4. According to Bruce Williams, the roots of pharaonic Egypt may go back to Qustul in Nubia.³⁶ Other Egyptologists, however, do not attach the same significance to the Qustul finds.³⁷
5. As Afrocentric scholars push their thesis to extreme conclusions, they undermine their credibility by claiming one and all as black and therefore staking the claim of blacks to every imaginable cultural and intellectual achievement. For example, Walter McCray lists as black peoples not only Cush, Ethiopia, and Egypt but also Canaanites, Elamites, and Hittites, and as black individuals not only Ebed-Melech the Cushite ([Jer. 38–39](#)) and Taharqa ([2 Kings 19:9](#); [Isa. 37:9](#)) but also Melchizedek, Ephron the Hittite, Rahab the harlot, and the Queen of Sheba.³⁸ John Henrik Clarke's claim that Cleopatra was black is buttressed by citations from Shakespeare and from Ripley's *Believe It or Not* and is illustrated by a painting by Earl Sweeney.³⁹ But the Ptolemaic dynasty, which ruled Egypt after Alexander, was Macedonian and believed so strongly in preserving the purity of the royal line that they adopted the Egyptian practice of consanguineous marriages—that is, marriages between brothers and sisters.
6. As to the question of whether the Egyptians were black, the answer is not so simple as Afrocentrists assert. Frank Yurco points out that the ancient Egyptians would not have thought in terms of a simple dichotomy: "The ancient Egyptians, like their modern descendants, were of varying complexions of color, from the light Mediterranean type (like Nefertiti), to the light

³⁵ Hodge, "Hausa-Egyptian Establishment"; idem, "Role of Egyptian"; idem, "Afroasiatic."

³⁶ Williams, "Lost Pharaohs of Nubia"; cf. "Rescued Nubian Treasures Reflect Black Influence on Egypt," *New York Times* (Feb. 11, 1992): B5, B8. See chap. 2, above.

³⁷ For example, Trigger et al., *Ancient Egypt*, 62.

³⁸ McCray, *Black Presence in the Bible*, 27–28.

³⁹ Clarke, "African Warrior Queens," 127.

brown of Middle Egypt, to the darker brown of Upper Egypt, to the darkest shade around Aswan and the First Cataract region, where even today the population shifts to Nubian.”⁴⁰ Frank Snowden Jr., a distinguished African American classics scholar who rejects the identification of Egyptians as blacks, points out that the Greeks and Romans were well acquainted in art and text with blacks from the area especially of Meroe: “This group possesses, among others, these characteristics: color varying from reddish-brown to deep brownish-black; tightly curled and wiry hair described as woolly, frizzly, or kinky; a broad, flattened nose; thick lips, usually puffy and everted; prognathism, often marked in the sub-nasal region.”⁴¹ Egyptians were in contact with the darker Nubians of the First and Second Cataracts already in the Old Kingdom.⁴² An increasing number of individuals, including some introduced into royal harems, came from this region in the Middle Kingdom. Egyptians made contact with negroid tribes of central Africa in the New Kingdom.⁴³ These contacts are reflected in the clear depiction of black-complexioned and negroid types in Egyptian art. Snowden concludes: “Though not very numerous, the realistic portrayals of blacks in early Egyptian art are sufficient to illustrate the types of Kushites known prior to the New Kingdom and to show that *Nehesyu*, a word used of southerners as early as 2300 B.C., included peoples with Negroid features.”⁴⁴ The Egyptians accurately depicted their enemies and their allies. They made a clear color distinction between themselves and the black Nubians, whom they rhetorically denounced with insulting epithets. Though the use of reddish-brown for men and yellow for women was conventional, one cannot simply dismiss this as a ceremonial color for blacks, as Diop and his followers urge.⁴⁵

7. Cheikh Anta Diop, whom Afrocentrists adopt as their intellectual star, is not a trustworthy guide in either linguistics or history, as already indicated.⁴⁶ He simply makes too many unsupportable statements. For example, in answer to a question as to when the truth about the beginning of

⁴⁰ Yurco, “Were the Ancient Egyptians Black or White?” 24. Cf. Trigger, “Nubian, Negro, Black, Nilotic?” 27: “On an average, between the Delta in northern Egypt and the Sudd of the Upper Nile, skin color tends to darken from light brown to what appears to the eye as bluish black, hair changes from wavy-straight to curly or kinky, noses become flatter and broader, lips become thicker and more everted.”

⁴¹ Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity*, 8; see also idem, “Attitudes towards Blacks.”

⁴² Bennett, “Africa and the Biblical Period,” 492: “In terms of physical racial characteristics the Egyptians of the ancient Near East were a brown-skinned people with long hair, whose history is the story of their contact and intercourse with darker, curly-haired peoples up the Nile in Nubia.”

⁴³ Junker, “First Appearance of the Negroes.” Cf. LaSor, “Cush.”

⁴⁴ Snowden, *Before Color Prejudice*, 11–12.

⁴⁵ Brunson, “Ancient Egyptians,” 53–54.

⁴⁶ See the review article by MacGaffey, “Who Owns Ancient Egypt?”

world civilization was falsified, he responded as follows: "It's around 1525 B.C. that Egypt was conquered by Cambyses, the Persian King. The command that Cambyses gave was to destroy everything that revealed the greatness of Egypt. The temples were torn down and the libraries were destroyed.... Cambyses also destroyed all of the Egyptian intelligentsia. The Egyptian priests fled to western Asia."⁴⁷ Unfortunately, almost everything about this statement is a false conclusion or is unsupportable.⁴⁸

8. Afrocentric scholars neglect the very real contributions of the black Cushites, Nubians, and Meroites to the biblical narrative and to African civilization, because these are not as universally known as those of the Egyptians.⁴⁹

Despite these severe strictures, we can thank Afrocentric scholars for calling attention to the neglected evidence of significant passages that refer to blacks in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, such as Moses' Cushite wife, Pharaoh Taharqa of the (Cushite) 25th Dynasty, and the Ethiopian eunuch of Candace.

Appendix

MARTIN BERNAL'S *BLACK ATHENA* REVIEWED

The views of Cyrus H. Gordon¹ and Michael C. Astour² with respect to the interaction between the Aegean and the Near East inspired a specialist in Chinese political history, Martin Bernal, to produce one

⁴⁷ Van Sertima and Williams, *Great African Thinkers*, 1.348.

⁴⁸ See Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, chap. 3.

⁴⁹ See Roth, "Building Bridges to Afrocentrism," 16.

An earlier version of this essay appeared in the *Journal of Ancient Civilizations* 14 (1999): 145–52. Used by permission.

¹ See especially Gordon, *Common Background of Greek and Hebrew Civilizations*. Gordon's extraordinary scholarship is acknowledged by several Festschriften: *Orient and Occident* (ed. Hoffner), *Bible World* (ed. Rendsburg et al.), and *Boundaries of the Ancient Near Eastern World* (ed. Lubetski, Gottlieb, and Keller). See also the special issue of *Biblical Archaeologist* 59 (1996).

of the most provocative and controversial studies to roil the study of ancient history in recent years: *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, volume 1: *The Fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785–1985* (1987), and volume 2: *The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence* (1991).³ These two volumes have called forth nearly a hundred reviews and numerous symposia, at which Bernal has tried to respond to his many critics. A volume of critical essays was edited by Mary R. Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers: *Black Athena Revisited* (1996).

Bernal, a specialist in Chinese political affairs at Cornell University, came to a midlife crisis in 1975. He relates, “At this stage, led by my friend David Owen,⁴ I became heavily influenced by the works of Cyrus Gordon and Michael Astour on general contacts between Semitic and Greek civilizations.”⁵ He immersed himself in a very broad range of studies, including ancient languages. As the grandson of the most famous British authority on Egyptian grammar, Alan Gardiner, Bernal had long been interested in Egyptian.

Also as the son of a famous Marxist historian of science, John Desmond Bernal, Martin had been a liberal critic of the establishment. He makes explicit the motive of his project: “The political purpose of *Black Athena* is, of course, to lessen European cultural arrogance.”⁶ Despite some carping about statements taken out of context, many scholars, even among his critics, agree that the most valuable part of Bernal’s first volume is his exposure of some of the racist ideology—especially of German and British scholars of the nineteenth century—in the fabrication of what he calls the Aryan Model of ancient history.⁷ According to Bernal, this model created the image of a pure, northern race who created the Greek civilization, unsullied by contamination from external cultures. The Broad Aryan Model, established by the 1840s, denied Egyptian influence; the Extreme Aryan Model, which flourished in the 1920s and 1930s, denied even Phoenician influences.⁸

² See Astour, *Hellenosemitica*. Astour’s contributions are acknowledged in *Crossing Boundaries and Linking Horizons* (ed. Young, Chavalas, and Averbek). I had the privilege of studying with Michael Astour under Professor Gordon at Brandeis University in the early 1960s.

³ The first volume won the Socialist Review Book Award for 1987 and an American Book Award in 1990.

⁴ Owen, who was a student of Gordon, is the chair of the Department of Near Eastern Studies at Cornell. Another of Gordon’s students in this department is Gary Rendsburg.

⁵ Bernal, *Black Athena*, 1.xiii. Elsewhere, in “Responses to Critical Reviews,” 130, Bernal states that he has “accepted most—though not all—of the ideas of Gordon and Astour.”

⁶ Bernal, *Black Athena*, 1.73.

⁷ Coleman, “Case against Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena*,” 77.

⁸ Bernal, “*Black Athena: Hostilities to Egypt.*”

On the other hand, the Ancient Model as set forth in the Greek sources themselves, such as Herodotus (2.50), acknowledged indebtedness to the Phoenicians and Egyptians.⁹ Bernal proposes what he calls the Revised Ancient Model, which would derive much of the roots of Greek civilization from Egyptian colonists on Crete and Greece in the Middle Bronze and Late Bronze Ages (2000–1200 B.C.). His Revised Ancient Model “accepts that there were Egyptian and Phoenician settlements and that there were massive and fundamental cultural influences on the Aegean from the near East.”¹⁰ The consequences of Bernal’s revisionism is expressed as follows: “If I am right in urging the overthrow of the Aryan Model and its replacement by the Revised Ancient one, it will be necessary not only to rethink the fundamental bases of ‘Western Civilization’ but also to recognize the penetration of racism and ‘continental chauvinism’ into all our historiography, the philosophy of writing history.”¹¹

Archaeological Evidence

Bernal interprets massive drainage works and grain-storage facilities in Boiotia (the area north of Athens) in the third millennium B.C. as evidence of Egyptian presence in Greece.¹² Heracles may have been a reflection of a Boiotian pharaoh.¹³ He believes that Egyptians settled Crete late in the third millennium and early second millennium B.C. Following the lead of Frank Stubbings in the *Cambridge Ancient History*, he views the famous shaft graves of Grave Circle A, found by Heinrich Schliemann at Mycenae in 1876, as the products of the Hyksos dynasty, who had been expelled from Egypt in the sixteenth century B.C.¹⁴ He cites the evidence of Hyksos Pharaoh Khyan, whose objects have been found in Crete, Anatolia, and Baghdad.

⁹ Herodotus learned by inquiry that “the names of almost all of the gods came from Egypt to Greece.” Herodotus indeed gives us valuable information about the Scythians and about the Persian conflict with the Greeks, but he also provides some misinformation. See Yamauchi, *Foes from the Northern Frontier*; idem, *Persia and the Bible*; idem, “Herodotus—Historian or Liar?”; idem, “Herodotus” (1992); idem, “Herodotus” (1999).

¹⁰ Bernal, “Image of Ancient Greece,” 125.

¹¹ Bernal, “First by Land.”

¹² Bernal, *Black Athena*, 2.3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2.109–20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.380. Bernal believes that the biblical account of the Israelites’ sojourn in Egypt is based on a garbled memory of the Hyksos conquest of Egypt and suggests that the Israelite Yahweh was the same as the Hyksos god Seth (*ibid.*, 1.66). Cf. Allen, “*Black Athena*. An Interview,” 20. On the credibility of the biblical account, see Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*. In the same interview Bernal contends that Israelite monotheism was derived from that of Pharaoh Akhenaten (fourteenth century B.C.) and that the tradition of Christ’s resurrection is patterned after the Osiris tradition. On the former issue, see Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Africa and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004).

Textual Evidence

Basing his reconstruction on references to Senusret in [Herodotus 2.102–11](#), Bernal envisions an extensive Egyptian campaign through Anatolia and perhaps into the Cyclades islands of the Aegean, across the straits at Troy, and back around the northern coast of the Black Sea. The remnants of pharaoh's army that he left in Colchis, on the eastern shore of the Black Sea, Herodotus characterized as "dark-skinned and woolly-haired."

Bernal writes that Herodotus's "portrayal of the Egyptians as black ... inspired the title of this series."¹⁵ Bernal takes this reference to suggest that "many of the most powerful Egyptian dynasties ... were made up of pharaohs whom one can usefully call black."¹⁶ This was especially true of the 11th Dynasty.

Linguistic Evidence

Bernal claims that he can propose plausible Egyptian and Semitic etymologies for Greek words that do not have Indo-European roots. He suggests that of the non-Indo-European words some 25% are Semitic and some 20%–25% may be derived from Egyptian,¹⁷ a thesis he promises to develop more fully in a projected third volume. He believes that the name of the Greek goddess Athena was derived from the Egyptian goddess Neith, hence the title of his series: *Black Athena*.¹⁸ Specifically he derives Athena from Egyptian *Ht Nt* (house of Neith). He also derives the name *Aphrodite* from *pr wzdwt*, the name for Buto, the city of Hathor, the Egyptian goddess of love.

In contrast to the traditional view that the Greeks borrowed the Phoenician alphabet in the eighth century B.C., when we first have such texts after the Greek dark age, Bernal proposes that the alphabet was borrowed as early as the fifteenth century.¹⁹

Reception by Afrocentric Scholars

Yamauchi, "Akhenaten, Moses and Monotheism"; on the latter issue, see Yamauchi, "Easter—Myth, Hallucination, or History?"

¹⁵ Bernal, *Black Athena*, 1.53.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.242.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.xiv.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.21.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.39. Cf. Bernal, *Cadmean Letters*.

Bernal expresses a certain degree of empathy with the thinking of African American scholars. For example, he quotes with approval the view of African American scholar G. G. M. James, “whose fascinating little book *Stolen Legacy* also makes a plausible case for Greek science and philosophy having borrowed massively from Egypt.”²⁰ Afrocentric scholars, however, do not think that he has gone far enough.²¹

When asked about the uses made of *Black Athena* by black racists, Bernal responds: “I am infinitely less concerned by black racism than I am by white racism, and white racists, directly or indirectly, make constant use of orthodox views of the classical world and the Aryan model.”²² But critics of Afrocentrism believe that Bernal’s work is “dangerous.” Lefkowitz concludes: “To the extent that Bernal has contributed to the provision of an apparently respectable underpinning for Afrocentric fantasies, he must be held culpable, even if his intentions are honorable and his motives are sincere.”²³

Though Bernal says nothing about the role of women, his challenge to the establishment is also welcomed by feminist scholars. A special issue of the *Journal of Women’s History* (4.3 [1993]) was devoted to *Black Athena*.²⁴

Critical Responses

The vast majority of classical and Near Eastern scholars are skeptical or critical.²⁵ Stubbings’s linkage of Grave Circle A to the Hyksos, upon which Bernal builds, was undermined some years ago by the discovery of Grave Circle B, which indicates that the Shaft Grave culture antedated the date of the expulsion of the Hyksos. Moreover, leading art historian Emily Vermeule asserts: “There is nothing truly Egyptian in the Shaft Graves.”²⁶

James Muhly, who was earlier critical of the views of Gordon and Astour, also takes strong exception to Bernal’s interpretation of the archaeological data. He does not believe that the Phoenicians advanced

²⁰ Bernal, *Black Athena*, 1.38.

²¹ Carruthers, “Outside of Academia,” 471: “Although this is an advance over the pure White Supremacist position, it is somewhat less than some of us will accept.”

²² Bernal, *Black Athena*, 2.xxii.

²³ Lefkowitz, “Ancient History, Modern Myths,” 20.

²⁴ Cf. Bach, “Whitewashing Athena.”

²⁵ Poliakoff, “Roll Over, Aristotle,” gives a good survey of reviews. For a thorough and balanced assessment, see Berlinerblau, *Heresy in the University*.

²⁶ Vermeule, *Art of the Shaft Graves at Mycenae*, 18.

westward into the Mediterranean prior to the eighth century.²⁷ Muhly's student, Eric Cline, compiled a comprehensive list of about eight hundred objects of Egyptian and Near Eastern origins in the Aegean area from the Late Bronze Age period. He is sympathetic to Bernal's view that "there was prolonged, sustained, and probably continuous contact and trade between Egypt and the Aegean throughout the Late Bronze Age, and transfers of ideas and innovations no doubt occurred." However, Cline, whose work Bernal frequently cites, disagrees with Bernal's "contention that the Aegean was under Egyptian hegemony during this time."²⁸ Cline believes that these objects and Egyptian texts are evidence of a possible diplomatic relationship between these two areas in the reign of Amenhotep III.²⁹

Bernal's interpretation of Herodotus to support the notion that Egyptians were black is disputed by the leading authority on blacks in antiquity, Frank Snowden Jr., an African American scholar himself. Snowden concludes: "In short, this Herodotean passage comparing Egyptians to Colchians is not useful as evidence for the identification of Egyptians with Ethiopians, i.e., Negroes or blacks—the purpose which Professor Bernal would have it serve."³⁰

Bernal's heavy reliance on, and interpretation of, Herodotus is questioned. Lefkowitz, for example, says: "Bernal relies too much on Herodotus' treatment of Egypt."³¹ Bernal's treatment of the Egyptian evidence is strenuously disputed by Egyptologists. Especially harsh is James Weinstein's conclusion: "It is not inconceivable that pieces of Bernal's thesis may someday prove correct, but this volume is so littered with factual errors, misstatements, citations of outdated and inappropriate sources, flimsy toponomy identifications, and a host of methodological difficulties that it is impossible to accept his 'Revised Ancient Model.'"³²

Despite these criticisms, there is no doubt that Bernal's works arouse enormous interest and are works that cannot be ignored. One benefit of the controversy is that it calls attention to the fact that many other scholars (Walter Burkert, Sarah Morris, Martin West) have identified quite valid Near

²⁷ Muhly, "Black Athena versus Traditional Scholarship."

²⁸ Cline, "Content and Trade or Colonization?" 36. See also idem, *Sailing the Wine-Dark Sea*.

²⁹ Cline, "Amenhotpe III and the Aegean." Cf. Kitchen, "Theban Topographical Lists." See also O'Connor and Cline, *Amenhotep III*. The subject of such relations was the theme of a conference organized by Eric Cline and Diane Harris at the University of Cincinnati. See Cline and Harris-Cline, *Aegean and the Orient*.

³⁰ Snowden, "Bernal's 'Blacks,'" 89. See also idem, "Attitudes towards Blacks."

³¹ Lefkowitz, *Black Athena Revisited*, 14.

³² Weinstein, review of Bernal's *Black Athena*, 381. Bernal attempts to vigorously rebut all such criticisms at great length (550 pages) in *Black Athena Writes Back*, a book dedicated to "Cyrus Gordon and Michael Astour who have led the way."

Eastern parallels and influences on Greek civilization.³³ Thanks to Bernal, no one studying the classical world can any longer afford to ignore the wider Mediterranean and Near Eastern horizons of that world, including Egypt.

³³ Burstein, "Challenge of *Black Athena*," 13.