

Carrying Someone Else's Curse?

Exploring the Hebrew Israelite Interpretation of Deuteronomy 28

If you live in a major city such as New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles, then you've likely brushed shoulders with a member of any number of Hebrew Israelite groups. In recent years, this religious group has demonstrated tremendous and rapid growth. In one sense, this is positive evidence of the religious freedom that we enjoy in the United States.

Today, the Hebrew Israelites are as diverse in practice and beliefs as any Christian denomination. The spectrum begins with the more mainstream, established, Church of God and Saints of Christ, to the more informal and counter-cultural group, the House of Israel.

Although there appears to be little doctrinal orthodoxy between the various groups, there are a few tenets that are consistent among all of them. Some of these distinct teachings are as follows:

- Certain African descendants in America represent the lost tribe of Israel, God's chosen people.
- Caucasians are descendants of Esau and the Edomites.
- Caucasians will be enslaved as a just reward for colonization and enslavement of black people on the day of judgment.

Blessings and Curses

One of the most significant beliefs of the Hebrew Israelites relates specifically to the 28th chapter of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy functions as a sort of last will and testament to the children of Israel from Moses. They're like his parting words before he dies, and the transfer of power is passed from him to Joshua. One of the key themes in the book of Deuteronomy is that of blessings and curses. This theme is manifested in several ways throughout the book (see Deuteronomy 11:26, 27:11-26, 30:1). These blessings and curses are representative of the covenant relationship that God was establishing with His chosen people.

Hebrew Israelites consider the blessings and curses (particularly the ones in chapter 28) to be directed toward them. Possessing strong references to slavery, many within the Hebrew Israelite community believe such scriptures are a prophetic foretelling of American chattel slavery and the transatlantic slave trade.

There's Nothing New under the Sun

While the references to slavery in Deuteronomy 28 should not be taken as a direct reference to chattel slavery in the Americas, there is a deep message that we can gather from the allusion. Ecclesiastes 1:9 says, "What has been

will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun." Hence, it's possible that the old adage, "history repeats itself," stems (at least in part) from this text, which is one reason why when we read Deuteronomy 28, we see significance and meaning for our time. Additionally, the text speaks about a kind of suffering that members of the African diaspora (especially those in America) can certainly sympathize with. The text describes a kind of disenfranchisement that almost perfectly describes the African American experience.

"You shall beget sons and daughters, but they shall not be yours; for they shall go into captivity...The alien who is among you shall rise higher and higher above you, and you shall come down lower and lower" (Deuteronomy 28:41-43 selected).

These verses are just a snapshot of the issues and concepts mentioned in the text that are especially relevant to the black experience. Yet, there are several considerations that should prompt us to look closer for the contextual meaning of the text.

Prophecy and Fulfilment

Hebrew Israelites assert that Deuteronomy 28 applies directly to certain groups of African-descended people. The challenge is, if we accept this assertion, we would be setting aside a historical record that is universally accepted as a direct application and fulfilment to the prophecy.

Especially significant to the Hebrew Israelite perspective of this chapter is the interpretation of the very last verse in the chapter:

"The Lord will send you back in ships to Egypt on a journey I said you should never make again. There you will offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but no one will buy you" (Deuteronomy 28:68 NIV).

The intimation that the Israelites would be returned to slavery on ships is one part of this that is identified as significant and characteristic of the African American experience. Nevertheless, a few elements in this verse should cause us to question such an interpretation.

First, the reference to Egypt is significant. This would suggest that black people will ultimately be enslaved by black people. Are we to surmise that Egyptians here represent Caucasians rather than Edomites as has been previously asserted? Moreover, the closing phrase, "but no one will buy you" suggests a level of depravity and degradation worse than the initial slave experience. Hebrew Israelites, however, generally believe that vindication of black people comes at the judgment. If this is the case, what ways could a second slave experience be manifested, and when or why, given the expected vindication?

Bible scholars generally agree that this second slave experience, wherein Israelites were transported on ships, is believed to have been fulfilled during several sieges of Jerusalem by emperors like Vespasian, Titus, and Hadrian. According to John Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible, "this prophecy was literally and exactly fulfilled, and one which is owned by the Jews themselves" in the devastation and ultimate total humiliation of the Jews during this period.¹

Real Solace in Suffering

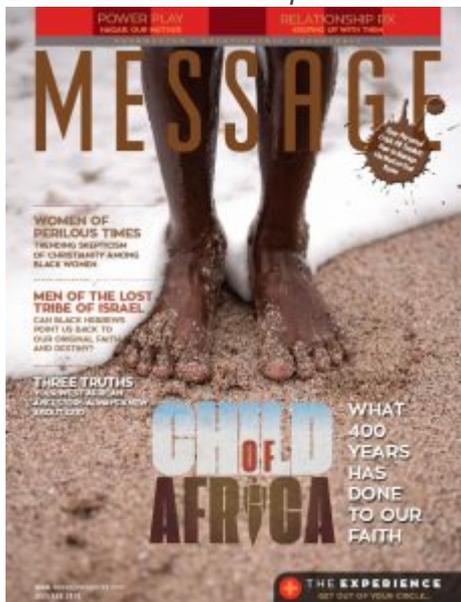
Given the reality that the black experience in America is fraught with hardship, struggle, oppression, and degradation, the parallels of struggle between African Americans and Jews are striking. Nevertheless, this aforementioned realization also makes us aware of the pain of all people.

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” Martin Luther King, Jr. famously stated. For this reason, we embrace God’s invitation that all people be welcomed into the diverse, multiracial and multiethnic family of God. And we celebrate that powerful pronouncement that “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28, NIV).

Humanity all over the Earth is joined with Christ in His suffering. Whether in the chattel slavery of the American South or the Jewish Holocaust of Europe, humanity can take solace in the fact that its suffering is known and felt by God. Our greatest hope is that our God in whose suffering we are joined, who experienced torture at the hands of institutions, will come again and we who were joined with Him in suffering will be joined with Him in the glory of Heaven.

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1 *John Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible, 1746 – 1763.*



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