

# p e r s p e c t i v e s

## African American Spirituality, III

BY PROF. MCKINLEY BURT

I appreciate your interest in this series and hope to even further increase your awareness of the documented contribution of those of African descent to the essential spirituality of mankind. As I quoted the ancients last week, "In the beginning was the word...", a phrase that many in lands beyond Africa incorporated into their theologies; how fortunate our forefathers wrote in stone.

I never tire of reading the gems in my extensive religious library I mentioned; whether about the more structured facets of theology (doctrines, canonic, hierology, apologetics and so forth), or the less dogmatic expressions of piety and unworldliness. As I did several years ago, let me remind you again of that "word" as it came down from African Ancestors, even thousands of years before clement and dionisius of Alexandria, Africa - or Cyprian of Carthage, Africa (that is the coast of the fertile continent that was home to so many of the early black Popes).

In particular, I would recommend, for some rather enjoyable and enlightening reading, the three-volume set by Miriam Lichtheim, "Ancient Egyptian Literature", 1973, U of Cal. Press @ Berkeley (I got my set from Barnes & Noble, mail order, 126 Fifth Ave., N.Y. 10011). The beauty about reading in literature written by Africans thousands of years before the tribes to the north became literate

is that one is able to see how and where other peoples of the world got their ideas about the nature of things -- creation, cosmology, the soul, Gods and angels, grace, redemption, codes of conduct etc. It is no wonder that the Greeks, marveling at the peoples of these lands (collectively, they named Ethiopians), called them "the most pious and godly of the earth".

Then, too, I would have you find further enlightenment and revelation in a famed text, "The Egyptian Book of The Dead", translation by Donald Budge, Dover Publications Inc., 31 East Second St., Mineola, N.Y. 11501. Between these books you will find the traditional African deities, pantheons, eschatology, doctrines and creeds that the less developed people of Judea and Greece used in structuring their own religions. You will find saviors and Moses', heavens and hells, judgements and salvation. Yet, today, many African Americans celebrate the themes and ceremonies, unaware of their true origin.

Much of what the Jews carried away in the Exodus (to write their own versions) is memory of extremely high levels of organized religious practice in Ethiopia/Egypt thousands of years earlier. I especially like to read in this literature the myriad accounts of the African deities, nearly always characterized by the principal icons they carried -- The "rod and the staff", Biblical-type images of statue and painting. Further elucidation in

respect to Israel's inheritance from Africa is to be gained by examining a copy of "A dictionary Of The Bible", by Fleming (Note, Israel just brought 15,000 Ethiopians from Africa to Palestine. Why?)

This illustrated classic, first published last century at the close of the Civil War, reveals in startling detail how much of Israel, its religion, customs and traditions was and is African. From the religious icons to the architecture, from the household utensils to the toilettries (even mirrors are exact replicas of the Egyptian 'ankh', symbol of life), from the "Ark of the Covenant", an exact model of the Egyptian 'ships' designed to accompany the dead Pharaohs to glory, to "Solomon's Temple", carefully designed in Egyptian measurements (The Royal Cubit).

A modern version of this book may be ordered through the Looking Glass Book Store, 318 S.W. Taylor in Portland (227-4760). I would also recommend for further documentation and research in respect to the African precedence in technology, architecture and cosmology, "Secrets of the Great Pyramid" by Peter Tompkins. (All books mentioned in this article can be ordered through Looking Glass).

It goes without question that it is only this millenniums - old spiritual foundation and tradition that has enabled the African psyche to survive, both on the home continent and in the

Americas, All, of course, has not been a traumatic journey, one step ahead of extinction. We so well know, now, of the many times the Africans have led the world to the wellsprings of religion, culture and education; from Akhenaten and his concept of "A single God" to the Temple Schools and the mathematics that the primitive and avaricious Greeks first admired, then stole.

But in each time of adversity and trauma there has come to the fore that salvation, that sustaining power that W.E.B Dubois referred to as "The Soul Of Black Folks". And like the Phoenix bird of the ancient fable, the black psyche has risen from the ashes, even literally. During the horrors of colonialism, the tortuous passage to the slaveworlds of the Americas, and the racism and discrimination inflicted upon the descendants, that indestructible "Soul" has always burst the chains asunder.

The 'church' has persevered in the New World, the 'Word' has been shouted from a thousand pulpits, and the praises have been sung -- the spirituals of black sacred music, the choirs like the "Fisk Jubilee Singers", or the acapella praises of a "Sweet Honey In The Rock". It is indeed unfortunate that the black race has not been given credit; its contribution of the spiritual glue holding the "End Times" at bay.

And how much louder are the shrill cries that today's violence and

amorality must surely be the precursor to the Biblical "Apocalypse", the cosmic catastrophe in which God destroys evil and raises the righteous to life in a messianic Kingdom. There is something familiar, startling and ironic about this current era of "enormous fragmentation of the human spirit" as I put it in the first article (1/4/94). Like the message on the "buzzing wings over Ethiopia" described in Isaiah there is a particular memory of the strong voices that have always spoken out of Africa to comfort her alienated children.

Webster's dictionary describes "alienation" as a withdrawal or separation of a person or his affections from the values of one's society or family. And we refer you to a time in Egypt and Ethiopia a thousand years before the prophets wrote the "Good Book" -- when the violent and barbaric "Sea people" of Asia had swept down upon the devout cultures of Africa, wreaking a pathological destruction of the highly developed social and cultural fabric. As is the case today we find a "literature of despair"; institutions fail, no one can be trusted, thieves run amok, the young people rebel and fight in the streets as we are told on papyrus and stela. The 23'rd Psalm arises. But in the midst of all this chaos and desolation came the "word" -- and all through the authentic African literature recommended here, you will find sustaining prayer for times of woe:

Assurances given much earlier than the 23'rd Psalm that the Lord is my shepherd...he restoreth my soul...I will fear no evil for thou art with me... thy rod and thy staff they comfort me". Thats right, thousands of years ago we have the earlier African mode of pleas and petitions to the deity and icons and paintings of "good shepherds who tended human flocks.

These powerful pleas to heaven came during century-long period of "alienation" and despair as just described -- they were called "Intermediate Periods", and sustained the populace until enemies were thrown out and the cultural infrastructure restored.

But today, in an allegedly 'modern' world where man seems overwhelmed by his evil and arrogance, by the bloody scenes and reports of the media, the crime in high and low places and the world-wide phenomenon of a crushing disillusionment and uncertainty about life -- we find that the best his favorite religious philosophers and intellectuals can offer is the observation that "God Is Dead!" (Jean Paul Sartre and the "Existentialist" religious philosophers).

So while this country and even nations wonder if the world can sustain further psychological, spiritual and philosophical damage without collapse, the African American may have a definite ray of hope. After all he has a "home court advantage".

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