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Sanders, P.

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# EBED-MELECH THE KUSHITE (JEREMIAH 38–39): NEW LIGHT FROM OUTSIDE THE BIBLE

Paul SANDERS

## 1. A Black Saviour

This contribution concerns the background of a notable individual mentioned in the Hebrew Bible: עֶבֶד מֶלֶךְ הַכּוּשִׁי, “Ebed-melech, the Kushite.” The book of Jeremiah describes in positive terms the role he played in Jerusalem briefly before the city fell into the hands of the Babylonians (587 or 586 BCE): Ebed-melech stood up for Jeremiah in front of King Zedekiah and saved this prophet from an imminent death (Jer 38:7–13). It is even told that he received a personal oracle of salvation from God himself (Jer 39:15–18).

The gentilic כּוּשִׁי, “Kushite,” after the name Ebed-melech (Jer 38:7, 10, 12; 39:16) is a derivative of the toponym כּוּשׁ, “Kush,”<sup>1</sup> a territory south of Egypt also known as Nubia. The size of this territory changed over time, but its core lay between the second and sixth cataracts of the Nile. As we shall see, ancient sources already describe the inhabitants of the areas south of Egypt as dark skinned. The biblical text does not indicate how the Kushite Ebed-melech or his ancestors ended up Jerusalem.

It is uncertain whether in the Hebrew Bible every single occurrence of the name כּוּשׁ, “Kush,” or the gentilic כּוּשִׁי, “Kushite,” relates to this territory,<sup>2</sup> but there is no reason for doubt in the case of the occurrences

<sup>1</sup> Hebrew כּוּשׁ, “Kush,” derives from Egyptian *Kš* (alternative spellings: *Kšj*, *Kšs*, *Kšš*, *Kššj*), both referring to the same area; see *LÄ* III, 888–89. The etymology of this Egyptian toponym is unknown. In Akkadian, Kush is designated as *Kāšu* in the El-Amarna letters (RGTC 12/2, 160) and as *Kūsu* (sometimes *Kūšū*) in neo-Assyrian texts, with *Kūšāiu*, “Kushite,” as the related adjective (RGTC 7/2-1, 356–58). Thanks are due to Riens de Boer (Leiden) for helping me with the interpretation of the Akkadian textual evidence.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2003), 17–20. For כּוּשִׁי in Num 12:1 and כּוּשִׁי in 2 Sam 18:21–32, see n. 72 below. Because of the focus on Mesopotamia in Gen 10:8–12, many scholars connect כּוּשׁ in Gen 10:8 with an ethnic group or toponym in Mesopotamia, for instance, the Kassites (Akkadian: *kaššū*), who governed

in the book of Jeremiah.<sup>3</sup> In the Biblical texts composed during and after the time of Jeremiah, the term כּוּשׁ designates Kush south of Egypt, about which the Judeans had proper knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the only other verse in Jeremiah in which the gentilic כּוּשׁ occurs alludes to the Kushites' skin colour (Jer 13:23):<sup>5</sup>

הֲיִהְיֶה כּוּשִׁי עוֹרוֹ וְנִמְרֵי הַבְּרִבְלִיתִי  
גַם אַתֶּם תּוּכְלוּ לְהִיטִיב לְמַדֵּי הָרָע

Can a Kushite change his skin, and a leopard his spots?  
Then you can also do good, you who are trained to do evil.

The message is clear: just as it is unthinkable that a Kushite can change the colour of his skin, or that a leopard can remove his spots, even so it is impossible that those who are addressed can put an end to their evil behaviour.

This background information indicates that Ebed-melech's physical features, especially his dark skin, probably distinguished him from most of the other inhabitants of Jerusalem. The gentilic "Kushite" after his name apparently sufficed to identify him. Since this gentilic suggests that Ebed-melech could be regarded as a foreigner, the positive description of this courageous person in the book of Jeremiah deserves attention in this volume about meaningful meetings with foreigners. Several earlier studies offer an analysis of the passages about Ebed-melech in Jeremiah

Babylonia from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, or the legendary city of Kish; see Yigal Levin, "Nimrod the Mighty, King of Kish, King of Sumer and Akkad," *VT* 52 (2002): 350–66. Their assumption is that Gen 10:6–7 and Gen 10:8–12 come from different sources and that redactors mistakenly identified כּוּשׁ in Gen 10:8–12 with כּוּשׁ in Gen 10:6–7, a section which relates mainly to areas in the south, including Egypt (מִצְרַיִם) and Kush.

<sup>3</sup> The suggestion by Meik Gerhards, "Über die Herkunft der Frau des Mose," *VT* 55 (2005): 162–75, esp. 169, that Ebed-melech cannot have come from distant Kush but derived from a tribe in Northern Arabia is rightly rejected; see Section 6 below.

<sup>4</sup> Kushite kings of the so-called 25<sup>th</sup> dynasty governed Egypt between ca. 745 and 655 BCE. According to 2 Kgs 19:9 and Isa 37:9, King Tirhakah, who was a Kushite and reigned over Egypt between ca. 690 and 664, invaded Judah with an army during the siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib (ca. 701 BCE). If this information is correct, the invasion may have taken place before Tirhakah became king; cf. Rodney S. Sadler, Jr., *Can a Cushite Change His Skin? An Examination of Race, Ethnicity, and Othering in the Hebrew Bible*, LHBOTS 425 (New York & London: T&T Clark, 2005), 115–16. In many biblical texts from the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE onward, the word כּוּשׁ, "Kush," occurs together with references to Egypt or areas close to Egypt, or together with other indications that "Kush" relates to the area south of Egypt; see especially Isa 11:11; 20:3–5; 43:3; 45:14; Jer 46:9; Ezek 29:10; 30:4–5; Nah 3:9.

<sup>5</sup> In Jer 36:14, כּוּשִׁי is a personal name (see n. 72 below). In Jeremiah the toponym כּוּשׁ occurs only in 46:9.

38–39, some of which were written by black African scholars,<sup>6</sup> but there is commonly overlooked evidence from outside the Hebrew Bible that sheds new light on the question of how Ebed-melech or his ancestors had come to Jerusalem.

I devote this article to my highly esteemed and sympathetic supervisor and colleague Professor Klaas Spronk on the occasion of his retirement. During his whole scholarly career, Klaas showed how important it is not to interpret the Bible without paying attention to evidence from the rest of the ancient Near East. Biblical exegesis should take account of the relevant sources from, for instance, ancient Ugarit and Mesopotamia,<sup>7</sup> but also of classical Greek and Hellenistic literature.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Klaas was well aware of the risk that the Bible can be misused to exclude and silence others. In his scholarly works, he called attention to important notions in the same Bible that counter racism and other forms of exclusivism.<sup>9</sup> It is my intention to demonstrate my appreciation for this approach in this contribution about Ebed-melech and his Kushite background.

## 2. Greeks about Blacks

Since time immemorial people have noticed that there are physical differences between the community to which they belong and other groups. Indeed, one of the most conspicuous differences they observed

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Gene Rice, “Two Black Contemporaries of Jeremiah,” *JRT* 32 (1975): 95–109; Georg Molin, “‘Ebed-Melek, der Kuschit: Bemerkungen zu Jer. 38, 7 – 13 und 39, 15 – 18,” in *Al-Hudhud: Festschrift Maria Höfner zum 80. Geburtstag*, ed. Roswitha G. Stiegner (Graz: Karl-Franzens-Universität, 1981), 219–23; Tom Parker, “Ebed-melech as Exemplar,” in *Uprooting and Planting: Essays on Jeremiah for Leslie Allen*, ed. John Goldingay (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 253–59; Deusdedit Musinguzi, *The Oracle of Deliverance for Ebed-Melech, the Cushite: An Exegetical-Theological Study of Jer 38,1–13 and 39,15–18*, African Theological Studies 22 (Berlin: Lang, 2000); David T. Adamo, “Ebed-Melech’s Protest to King Zedekiah as a Model of Modern Protest Movement (Jr 38:1–17),” *IDS* 53/1 a2450 (2019); L. Juliana M. Claassens, “Prophetic Leadership as Resistance: The Case of Baruch and Ebed-melech (Jeremiah 36–38),” in *Transforming Authority: Concepts of Leadership in Prophetic and Chronistic Literature*, ed. Katharina Pyschny and Sarah Schulz, BZAW 518 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 33–46.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Klaas Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, AOAT 219 (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1986).

<sup>8</sup> See Klaas Spronk, “Comparing the Book of Judges to Greek Literature,” in *Open-Mindedness in the Bible and Beyond: A Volume of Studies in Honour of Bob Becking*, ed. Marjo C. A. Korpel and Lester L. Grabbe, LHBOTS 616 (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 261–71; Spronk, *Judges*, HCOT (Leuven: Peeters, 2019), esp. 19–22.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Klaas Spronk, “In de Bijbel doen zwarte levens ertoe,” *OnderWeg* 7/2 (2021): 14–15.

concerned the colour of people's skin. Quite explicit evidence occurs in ancient Greek literature, more than in the surviving texts from the ancient Near East.<sup>10</sup>

In this section I present some illustrative examples from Greek texts to disclose part of the background of the references to Kushites in the book of Jeremiah.<sup>11</sup> In the Septuagint (LXX), the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the gentilic Αἰθίοψ, “Ethiopian,” is the usual rendering of כּוּשִׁי, “Kushite.” This rendering occurs also in the Greek text of Jeremiah.<sup>12</sup> As we will see, Greek authors used the same gentilic to denote black persons.

The historian Herodotus, who lived in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, observed that the skin of people living in areas south of Egypt was black (μέλας), and ascribed this skin colour to the high temperatures in those regions (*Histories* 2.22).<sup>13</sup> He called these black people Αἰθίοπες, “Ethiopians,”<sup>14</sup> and used the name “Libya” (Λιβύη) to designate one of the areas in which they lived. About a certain group of these Ethiopians, he remarked that they were the tallest and most handsome of all humans (*Histories* 3.20: μέγιστοι καὶ κάλλιστοι ἀνθρώπων πάντων). Herodotus used the gentilic “Ethiopian” also to denote the dark-skinned Indians in the east, suggesting that the only conspicuous physical feature that distinguished the two types of Ethiopians from each other concerned their hair (*Histories* 7.70):<sup>15</sup>

οἱ μὲν γὰρ ἀπὸ ἡλίου Αἰθίοπες ἰθύτριχες εἰσὶ, οἱ δ' ἐκ τῆς Λιβύης οὐλότατον τρίχωμα ἔχουσι πάντων ἀνθρώπων.

For the Ethiopians from the east are straight-haired, but those from Libya have the curliest hair of all humans.

<sup>10</sup> Both in Egypt and Mesopotamia, Kushites were depicted as black or with distinctive physical features. For examples, see p. 44 figure 1; *ANEP* figures 4–6, 8, 179; Mattias Karlsson, *From the Nile to the Tigris: African Individuals and Groups in Texts from the Neo-Assyrian Empire*, SAA 31 (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2022), front cover, 232, 235. Cf. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham*, 183.

<sup>11</sup> For more early examples, see Frank M. Snowden Jr., *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970), esp. 2–8.

<sup>12</sup> In the LXX, כּוּשִׁי is translated as Αἰθίοψ, “Aethiopian,” in Jer 13:23, 38:7 (Greek: 45:7), and 39:16 (Greek: 46:16), while there is no counterpart of כּוּשִׁי in the Greek text of 38:10, 12 (Greek: 45:10, 12).

<sup>13</sup> οἱ ἄνθρωποι ὑπὸ τοῦ καύματος μέλανες ἐόντες. For similar ancient explanations for racial diversity among humans, see Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity*, 172–77; Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham*, 23, 97.

<sup>14</sup> The suggestion that Αἰθίοπες—as a combination of αἴθω and ὄψ—means “(with) burnt faces” occurred already in antiquity, but it is incorrect according to Robert S. P. Beekes, “Aithiopes,” *Glotta* 73/1 (1995): 12–34.

<sup>15</sup> See also *Histories* 3.101.

Some decades earlier, the Greek poet and philosopher Xenophanes (ca. 570–475 BCE) made a remark which implied that the Ethiopians were black (μέλας) and flat-nosed (σῆμος), while he assumed that being red (πυρρός) and blue-eyed (γλαυκός) was characteristic of the Thracians.<sup>16</sup>

A parable credited to the Greek storyteller Aesop (ca. 620–564 BCE) also includes the gentile Aιθίοψ, “Ethiopian,” to denote a black person, in this case a slave:

Αἰθίοπά τις ὠνήσατο τοιοῦτον αὐτῷ τὸ χρῶμα εἶναι δοκῶν ἀμελεία τοῦ πρότερον ἔχοντος. Καὶ παραλαβὼν οἴκαδε, πάντα μὲν αὐτῷ προσῆγε τὰ ρύμματα, πᾶσι δὲ λούτροις ἐπειράτο καθαίρειν. Καὶ τὸ μὲν χρῶμα μεταβάλλειν οὐκ εἶχε, νοσεῖν δὲ τῷ πονεῖν παρεσκεύασεν. Ὁ μῦθος δηλοῖ ὅτι μένουσιν αἱ φύσεις ὡς προῆλθον τὴν ἀρχήν.<sup>17</sup>

Someone had bought an Ethiopian, and assumed his colour to be due to neglect by his previous owner. When he had taken him home, he applied to him all kinds of soap and tried to clean him with all kinds of baths. But he could not change the colour, and even made him sick from the efforts. The story shows that natural qualities remain as they were from the beginning.<sup>18</sup>

It is disputable to what degree the Greek texts mentioned above show traces of negative sentiments toward black people. Some of them sound quite positive, or at least not negative, but it is not surprising that the parable attributed to Aesop, with its implicit connection of black with dirty, could later be used to boost racist prejudices.<sup>19</sup> However, what all these texts have in common is that the perspective is non-black. Greeks perceived the dark skin of the “Ethiopians” as something remarkable since their own skin was lighter, while Xenophanes additionally observed

<sup>16</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 7.4.22: ὡς φησιν ὁ Ξενοφάνης Αἰθιοπέες τε μέλανας σιμούς τε Θρηάκες τε πυρρούς καὶ γλαυκοῦς. Xenophanes’ own text has been reconstructed as Αἰθιοπέες τε <θεοὺς σφετέρους> σιμούς μέλανάς τε Θρηάκες τε γλαυκοῦς καὶ πυρρούς <φρασι πέλεσθαι>, “Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and black; Thracians that theirs are blue-eyed and red-haired” (see James H. Leshner, *Xenophanes of Colophon, Fragments: A Text and Translation with a Commentary* [Toronto: University of Toronto, 1992], 24–25, fragment 16), but this reconstruction is debatable; see Maria Michela Sassi, “Where Epistemology and Religion Meet: What Do(es) the God(s) Look Like?,” *Rhizomata* 1 (2013): 283–307, esp. 291–92. Sassi argues that πυρρούς probably refers to the colour of the Thracians’ skin instead of their hair (291 n. 20).

<sup>17</sup> This is the version published in Émile Chambry (ed.), *Aesopi Fabulae*, part 1 (Paris: Société d’Édition “Les Belles Lettres”), 1925, 49.

<sup>18</sup> Translation by Jan Krans-Plaisier, PThU.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Jean Michel Massing, “From Greek Proverb to Soap Advert: Washing the Ethiopian,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 58 (1995): 180–201, esp. 183–85.

that the lighter colours of the Thracians distinguished them from the Greeks. The perception of Xenophanes and other Greeks appears to have been that their own, more “normal” skin colour was midway between black and white. The same perception existed also among Jews.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. Ebed-melech: The Name of a Real Person

“Ebed-melech” is the transcription of Hebrew עֶבֶד מֶלֶךְ, a semantically transparent proper name that comprises the nouns עֶבֶד, “servant” or “slave,” and מֶלֶךְ, “king.” The expression has been interpreted as an indication of the man’s function: “servant/slave of the king.”<sup>21</sup> However, since there is no article before מֶלֶךְ, this interpretation must be rejected.<sup>22</sup> Most of the oldest translations also interpret עֶבֶד מֶלֶךְ as a proper name.<sup>23</sup> There are no other occurrences of the name in the rest of the Hebrew Bible, but its counterparts seem to have been quite common in the whole of the ancient Levant. The proper name ʿAbdumalik was already common in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Mari.<sup>24</sup> The same name—possibly with slightly different vowels—occurs twice in the El-Amarna letters from the 14<sup>th</sup> century<sup>25</sup> and remarkably often in 13<sup>th</sup>-century Ugaritic texts.<sup>26</sup> Occurrences of the

<sup>20</sup> See Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham*, 95–97.

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah*, vol. 2: *Chapters 26–52*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 289; Edward R. Dalglisch, “Ebed-melech,” *ABD* 2:259; Claassens, “Prophetic Leadership,” 39.

<sup>22</sup> Cf., e.g., 2 Sam 15:15; 16:6; 18:29; 2 Kgs 19:5; 22:12. The title ʿbd hmlk occurs also on Lachish Ostrakon 3 (*KAI* 193:19; early 6<sup>th</sup> cent.; after proper name *tbyhw*) and on several seals and bullae from Judah (mainly 7<sup>th</sup> and early 6<sup>th</sup> cent.); see Anat Mendel-Geberovich, Yiftah Shalev, Efrat Bocher, Nitsan Shalom, Yuval Gadot, “A Newly Discovered Personal Seal and Bulla from the Excavations of the Giv’ati Parking Lot, Jerusalem,” *IEJ* 69/2 (2019): 154–74, esp. 158 n. 3 (after proper name *y’znyhw*), 161–66 (after proper name *ntnmlk*), 163 n. 7 (after proper name *ym*).

<sup>23</sup> LXX: Αβδεμελεχ; Syr.: ܐܒܕܡܠܟܝܐ (*ʿbdmlk*); Vulg.: *Abdemelech*. For the rendering in Targum Jonathan, see Section 7 below.

<sup>24</sup> Spelled as *ḥa-ab-du-ma-lik* or *ab-du-ma-lik*; see the references in Richard S. Hess, *Amarna Personal Names* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1993), 14–15. The West Semitic name ʿAbdu-maliki occurs also in a Late Old Babylonian text (YOS 13 54: 5; ca. 1635 BCE).

<sup>25</sup> Written with sumerograms: 𒀵R-LUGAL; EA 123:37 (a certain ʿAbdimilki mentioned in a letter from Byblos) and EA 203:3 (letter sent by ʿAbdimilki, ruler of *Šašimi*, a small city in the southern Bashan or the Yarmuk valley); see Hess, *Amarna Personal Names*, 13–14. The determinative (𒀵) shows that the following signs represent a proper name, while the spelling 𒀵R-LUGAL demonstrates that the name had kept its semantic value.

<sup>26</sup> See the references in *DULAT*<sup>3</sup>, 140 s.v. ʿbdmlk (with word divider in 4.807:17: ʿbd.mlk); also in *KTU* 4.833:9. In Ugaritic Akkadian the name was spelled with sumerograms: 𒀵R-LUGAL; see *DULAT*<sup>3</sup>, 140 s.v. ʿbdmlk, and Hess, *Amarna Personal Names*, 14.

name ʿAbdimilki (or ʿAbdimilku) in Assyrian texts from the late 8<sup>th</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, much closer to Jeremiah’s time, suggest that the same name was quite common among men with a Northwest Semitic background and that it also occurred in Samaria.<sup>27</sup> The name ʿbdmlk still occurs in more recent Semitic texts, for instance, in a Phoenician inscription from Cyprus dating from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE.<sup>28</sup> The second element of the name (מֶלֶךְ) does not refer to a human king, but is a divine epithet: “servant of the (divine) King.”<sup>29</sup> The name expresses dedication to the deity, possibly to be identified as YHWH.

There are good reasons to assume that part of the information about Ebed-melech in Jeremiah 38–39 is reliable. Lawrence Mykytiuk has shown that nine non-royal individuals mentioned in Jeremiah 36–39 can be identified with virtual certainty with persons whose names occur on excavated bullae from the late 7<sup>th</sup> and early 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE or Babylonian cuneiform texts from the same period: the scribe Šafan and his son Gemaryahu (Jer 36:10–12, 25; 39:14), Šelemyah(u) and his son Y(eh)uchal (Jer 37:3; 38:1), Pašhur and his son Gedalyahu (Jer 38:1), and the Babylonian officials Nergal-šarezer (1<sup>st</sup> occurrence, followed by נֶרְגַל־שָׂרֵזֶר; Akk. *Nergal-šarra-ušur*; Jer 39:3), Nebu-sarsekim (Akk. *Nabû-šarrūssu-ukīn*; Jer 39:3), and Nebuzaradan (Akk. *Nabû-zēr-iddinam*; Jer 39:9–11, 13).<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> See PNA 1/I, 6–7; <sup>m</sup>*ab-di-mil-ki* in SAA 7 126: 5; SAA 14 146: rev. 7; also VS 1 95: 25 (late 7<sup>th</sup> cent.; see Karen Radner, “Vier neuassyrische Privatrechtssurkunden aus dem Vorderasiatischen Museum, Berlin,” *AoF* 24 [1997]: 115–34, esp. 119); <sup>m</sup>*ab-di-mil-ku* in a section of a cavalry list regarding the contingent of Samaria; see Stephanie Dalley and John Nicholas Postgate, *The Tablets from Fort Shalmaneser* (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 1984), 169, 173, 177, 208.

<sup>28</sup> KAI 35:3; same name reconstructed in KAI 39:3. For additional, somewhat later Semitic evidence, see the references in HAHAT, 910–11 s.v. עֲבַד־מֶלֶךְ.

<sup>29</sup> See now Dennis Pardee, “An Onomastic and Prosopographic Forest: ʿAbdimilku in Texts from Ras Shamra–Ugarit and Ras Ibn Hani,” *Maarav* 27/1–2 (2023): 39–73, esp. 43–45. Cf. HALOT, 591 s.v. מֶלֶךְ; 776 s.v. עֲבַד־מֶלֶךְ; HAHAT, 910–11 s.v. עֲבַד־מֶלֶךְ; Hess, *Amarna Personal Names*, 14. See also the theophoric personal names עֲבַד־יְהוָה/עֲבַד־יְהוָה (e.g., 1 Kgs 18:3–7; Neh 10:6; 12:25), עֲבַד־אֱלֹהִים (Jer 36:26), and עֲבַד־יְהוָה (1 Chr 5:15), as well as the proper name יְהוָה מֶלֶךְ, “the (divine) King has given,” which occurs in 2 Kgs 23:11 and also in the *ntnmlk* seal impression from Jerusalem; see Mendel-Geberovich et al., “A Newly Discovered Personal Seal and Bulla,” 161–66; cf. already Molin, “Ebed-Melek,” 220–21. See also the Ugaritic names ʿbdʿil; ʿbdʿnt; ʿbdbʿl; ʿbdršp, etc. (*DULAT*<sup>3</sup>, 141–44).

<sup>30</sup> Lawrence J. Mykytiuk, “Eleven Non-Royal Jeremianic Figures Strongly Identified in Authentic, Contemporaneous Inscriptions,” in *Eretz-Israel: Archaeological, Historical, and Geographical Studies: Joseph Naveh Volume*, vol. 32 (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society and The Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2016), 57\*–64\*. The letter *p* on the Gedalyahu bulla is missing: *lgdlyhw / bn [p]šhw*; see “Eleven Non-Royal Jeremianic Figures,” 60\*. For the interpretation of Jer 39:3 and the identification of Nebu-sarsekim with *Nabû-šarrūssu-ukīn*, see Bob Becking,



Mykytiuk drew the conclusion that “we do have multiple, credible *indications* that we are dealing with material that originated with eyewitnesses of the details of the setting and/or direct witnesses of or participants in the narrated events.”<sup>31</sup> There is no reason to doubt that during the time when Zedekiah was king of Judah a man known as “Ebed-melech the Kushite” lived in Jerusalem.

Many characters in the book of Jeremiah are identified with precision by adding a patronym, e.g., “Baruch, son of Neriah” (36:1, etc.; further examples in, e.g., 38:1, 39:14). Apparently, however, the apposition “the Kushite” sufficed for the correct identification of Ebed-melech and no further specification was needed.<sup>32</sup> In his time the name Ebed-melech may have been relatively rare in Jerusalem, and it may have been that Ebed-melech’s “Kushite” physical features distinguished him sufficiently from most of the other inhabitants of Jerusalem.

In the Hebrew text of Jeremiah 38–39, the apposition **הַכּוּשִׁי**, “the Kushite,” is repeated several times. It occurs after the name Ebed-melech in 38:7, 10, 12, and 39:16, but not in 38:8, 11.<sup>33</sup> Some scholars assume that the gentilic is repeated to put special emphasis on Ebed-melech’s Kushite identity and on the positive role that he, as a black person, had played.<sup>34</sup> It is uncertain whether this assumption is correct, since also after other personal names in the book of Jeremiah, appositions are repeated more than once, probably not since the apposition itself deserved special attention, but apparently merely because it was usual to identify the person with the help of this apposition.<sup>35</sup> However it may be, in the case of Ebed-melech the effect of the repetition is that his Kushite background receives ample attention.

“The Identity of Nabu-sharrussu-ukin, the Chamberlain: An Epigraphic Note on Jeremiah 39,3,” *BN NF* 140 (2009): 35–46.

<sup>31</sup> Mykytiuk, “Eleven Non-Royal Jeremianic Figures,” 61\*. See further Lester L. Grabbe, *Ancient Israel: What Do We Know and How Do We Know It?*, rev. ed. (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 252–54.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Mendel-Geberovich et al., “A Newly Discovered Personal Seal and Bulla,” 163, with reference to seals and seal impressions with titles instead of patronyms after the personal name. See also **שְׁמַעְיָהוּ הַנְּהֶלְמִי**, “Šema’yah(u), the Neḥelamite” (Jer 29:24, 31–32).

<sup>33</sup> For the LXX, see **n. 10** above.

<sup>34</sup> E.g., Rice, “Two Black Contemporaries,” 101; J. Daniel Hays, “The Cushites: A Black Nation in the Bible,” *BSac* 153 (1996): 396–409, esp. 405.

<sup>35</sup> See, for instance, **שְׁמַעְיָהוּ הַנְּהֶלְמִי**, “Šema’yah(u), the Neḥelamite” (29:24, 31–32); **בְּרוּךְ בֶּן־נְרִיָּה/נְרִיָּהוּ**, “Baruch, son of Neriah(u)” (32:12, 16; 36:4, 8, 14b, 32; 43:3, 6); **גְּדַלְיָהוּ בֶן־אֲחִיקָם**, “Gedalyah(u), son of Aḥiqam” (40:5–7, 9, 11, 14, 16; 41:1–2, 6, 10, 16, 18; followed by **בֶּן־שָׁפָן**, “son of Šafan,” in 40:5, 9, 11; 41:2).

#### 4. A Eunuch?

The Hebrew text of Jer 38:7 designates Ebed-melech not only as a Kushite but also as an אִישׁ סָרִיס. The meaning of the word סָרִיס is disputed, some scholars arguing that it designates a “eunuch.”<sup>36</sup> It is beyond doubt that in the Hebrew Bible most of the occurrences of the word סָרִיס denote a high official at the court, often apparently a personal attendant of the king or queen (cf. 2 Kgs 9:32; 23:11; 24:12, 15), or an important functionary in the army (cf. Jer 52:25). Most scholars assume the narrower meaning “eunuch” only for part of the occurrences, such as those in Isa 56:3–4, which implies that not each סָרִיס was necessarily a eunuch.<sup>37</sup> Nothing in the contexts of the earliest occurrences of סָרִיס suggests that the word denotes a castrated male. Also in the case of Ebed-melech, there are no indications that סָרִיס has the meaning “eunuch.”<sup>38</sup> All that the context suggests is that he had a position in the court and had easy access to the king.

It is generally agreed that the Hebrew word סָרִיס is derived from Akkadian *ša rēši*, literally “one of the head.”<sup>39</sup> The exact meaning of this Akkadian expression is hotly debated. Nonetheless, it is beyond doubt that it was used to denote certain courtiers, officials, and soldiers, just like Hebrew סָרִיס, while only a few Akkadian occurrences clearly relate to castrated males.<sup>40</sup> The expression *ša rēši* was also used for two “Kushite” officials in Assyria, as will be shown in Section 5.

Especially when סָרִיס refers to military functionaries (e.g., Jer 52:25; cf. רַב־סָרִיס in 39:3, 13), the meaning “eunuch” is quite improbable. The Septuagint’s frequent rendering of סָרִיס by εὐνοῦχος, “eunuch,” expresses the predominant interpretation of the word at a relatively late stage, but its less frequent translation of סָרִיס by δυνάστης, “official,”<sup>41</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Especially Hayim Tadmor, “Was the Biblical *sārīs* a Eunuch?” in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical, Epigraphic, and Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield*, ed. Ziony Zevit, Seymour (Sy) Gitin, and Michael Sokoloff (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 317–25, with reference to the usual rendering εὐνοῦχος, “eunuch,” in the LXX. See also the contribution by Eveline van Staaldoune-Sulman in the present volume, pp. XX–XX.

<sup>37</sup> See HALOT, 769–80 s.v. סָרִיס; HAHAT, 903 s.v. סָרִיס; Benjamin Kedar-Kopfstein, “סָרִיס *sārīs*,” TDOT 10:344–50, esp. 347–49.

<sup>38</sup> See Rice, “Two Black Contemporaries,” 98–101; Adamo, “Ebed-Melech’s Protest,” 6.

<sup>39</sup> Plural: *šūt rēši*. The expression was usually spelled with sumerograms (sg.: LÚ\*.SAG, LÚ.SAG, etc.). For some less convincing alternative derivations of סָרִיס, see Kedar-Kopfstein, “סָרִיס *sārīs*,” 345.

<sup>40</sup> See CAD R, 292–96 s.v. *ša rēši*.

<sup>41</sup> See Jer 34:19 (Greek: 41:19) and 1 Chr 28:1.

may represent the earlier meaning of the noun. All in all, it seems best to admit that different interpretations of *אִישׁ קָרִים* in Jer 38:7 are possible. In the context of this contribution about Ebed-melech's Kushite background it is less relevant whether the expression is to be interpreted as "eunuch" or as "official." It remains uncertain whether there is a relationship between Ebed-melech's Kushite background and his classification as an *אִישׁ קָרִים*.<sup>42</sup> Actually, it may even be doubted whether the expression was part of the original Hebrew text, since there is no rendering of *אִישׁ קָרִים* in the Septuagint's translation of Jer 38:7 (Greek: 45:7).<sup>43</sup>

### 5. Kushites in Assyria and the Levant

The Bible is not the only ancient Near Eastern text that refers to Kushites. In his recent study about Africans mentioned in texts from the Neo-Assyrian Empire, Mattias Karlsson was able to identify many individuals or groups as Egyptian, but also several individuals and groups as Libyans or Kushites.<sup>44</sup> Most of the Kushites in these texts lived in the Assyrian territories, many of them as commoners, while others appear to have belonged to the upper classes.

A 7<sup>th</sup>-century text from Nineveh (SAA 7 47) mentions two "Kushite" officials who had managed financial affairs in western Assyria: a certain Dāri-šarru, whose name is followed by *ša rēši Kūsāia*, "Kushite official," and a certain Šulmu-šarri, after whose name the same clarifying phrase follows.<sup>45</sup> Šulmu-šarri's authority appears from the remark that he sent a royal bodyguard to demand money (7 47 ii 5–9). It is relevant that each of these officials had an Assyrian name that occurred quite frequently, with

<sup>42</sup> Nili Sacher Fox, *In the Service of the King: Officialdom in Ancient Israel and Judah*, HUCM 23 (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 2000), 200–01, 203, raised the suggestion that all the biblical *קָרִים*—including Ebed-melech and Nathan-melech (2 Kgs 23:11)—were non-Israelites.

<sup>43</sup> The suggestion that *אִישׁ קָרִים* is a later addition was already made by J. Gerald Janzen, *Studies in the Text of Jeremiah*, HSM 6 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1973), 73. It was taken over by Holladay, *Jeremiah*, vol. 2, 266, 289; William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*, vol. 2: *Commentary on Jeremiah XXVI–LII*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 952.

<sup>44</sup> For the title, see n. 10 above.

<sup>45</sup> Dāri-šarru is mentioned in SAA 7 47 i 1–2 (LÚ\*.SAG *ku-sa-a*), Šulmu-šarri in SAA 7 47 ii 3–4 (LÚ\*.SAG KUR.*ku-sa-a-a*). I translate the expression *ša rēši* as "official," since nothing in SAA 7 47 points to the meaning "eunuch"; cf. the discussion of Hebrew *קָרִים* in Section 4 above.

Dāri-šarru meaning “the king is everlasting” and Šulmu-šarri meaning “well-being of the king.”<sup>46</sup> Not only their financial activities and their function of *ša rēši*, “official” (cf. Hebrew סָרִישׁ), but also their Assyrian names suggest that these two Kushites participated fully in the Assyrian society.

Karlsson identified other individuals as Kushite on the basis of their names, that is, men with the name Kūsāiâ, Kūsāiu, or Kusî, and a woman called Kūsîtu.<sup>47</sup> The texts show that some of these individuals were part of the elite (Kūsāiu 6, Kusî), while others are mentioned in lists of persons acting as witnesses. Assuming that a son, father, or brother of an individual with one of these typically Kushite names was also a Kushite, Karlsson identified several additional males as Kushites, for instance, a son with the frequent and typically Assyrian theophoric name Mutakkil-Aššur (7<sup>th</sup> cent.),<sup>48</sup> and a father with the Aramaic name Zabad (late 7<sup>th</sup> cent.).<sup>49</sup> A census tablet from the time of Sargon II (reign 722–705 BCE) includes some information about the family of another Kūsāiu, which lived in western Assyria (SAA 201 ii 38–42):

Šē'-aqāba, guardian of the grove, Šēr-manāni, his son, adolescent;  
Kūsāiu, his son, of 4 spans' height, a total of three people.

Since Šē'-aqāba and Šēr-manāni are the father and brother of this person named Kūsāiu, Karlsson regards them as Kushites.<sup>50</sup> An even older Assyrian text from Kalhu (786 BCE) refers explicitly to a group of anonymous “Kushites” who, as members of the palace in Kalhu, are listed as receiving six portions of wine.<sup>51</sup> Seventh-century Assyrian texts also

<sup>46</sup> For the name Dāri-šarru, see *PNA* 1/II, 380–81; for the name Šulmu-šarri, see *PNA* 3/II, 1277–78. Karlsson, *From the Nile to the Tigris*, 102 n. 391, 118 n. 461, argues that each of these two names “conveys a loyalist tone,” which tells of these Kushites’ “assimilation.”

<sup>47</sup> *PNA* 2/I, 642–44; Karlsson, *From the Nile to the Tigris*, 104–11.

<sup>48</sup> *PNA* 2/II, 782–84, where the name is translated as “The one who inspires trust is Aššur,” with Aššur as the name of the Assyrian national god. Karlsson, *From the Nile to the Tigris*, 127–28, remarks: “His personal name, which incorporates the name of the main Assyrian god, tells of assimilation” (n. 499).

<sup>49</sup> *PNA* 3/II, 1426; Karlsson, *From the Nile to the Tigris*, 136–37.

<sup>50</sup> Karlsson, *From the Nile to the Tigris*, 105, 130–31, 132–33. The name Šē'-aqāba is classified as West Semitic (*PNA* 3/I, 1098), while Šēr-manāni is classified, with more precision, as an Aramaic name (*PNA* 3/II, 1264).

<sup>51</sup> Karlsson, *From the Nile to the Tigris*, 196; James V. Kinnier Wilson, *The Nimrud Wine Lists: A Study of Men and Administration at the Assyrian Capital in the Eighth Century B.C.* (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 1972), 137–38, text 9 rev. 21: KUR.ku-sa-a-e. The individual with the name Kusî (see above) is also mentioned in 8<sup>th</sup>-century texts from Kalhu.

contain references to “Kushites”<sup>52</sup> and, in connection with the royal palace, to “Kushite girls”<sup>53</sup> and “15 Kushite women.”<sup>54</sup>

After his discussion of the textual evidence regarding each Kushite individual or group, Karlsson indicates that it is difficult to pin down the circumstances leading to this individual or group being in the territory of Assyria, but he consistently adds that “it is likely that he/she/they or older relatives of his/her/theirs came to Assyria forcibly through/via/by means of deportation.”<sup>55</sup> Several contemporary texts indicate that such deportations took place. In many inscriptions, each with the same words, the Assyrian king Sennacherib describes a battle near the Philistine city of Eltekeh (701 BCE) during which his troops defeated their Egyptian and Kushite enemies and made many of them prisoners of war:

In the thick of battle, I captured alive the Egyptian charioteers and princes together with the charioteers of the king of the land of Meluhḫa.<sup>56</sup>

The toponym Meluhḫa is here used as an alternative for Kush, whose kings governed Egypt during the reign of Sennacherib.<sup>57</sup> Although the text does not explicitly say that the charioteers of the Kushite king were Kushites themselves, the capture of troops by Sennacherib’s forces may explain why relatively many 7<sup>th</sup>-century texts refer to Kushites within the territory of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. However, this does not explain why Kushites are also mentioned in neo-Assyrian texts from the 8<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>58</sup> The earliest Assyrian references to Kushites must result from earlier contacts between the ancient Near East on the one hand, and Egypt and

<sup>52</sup> SAA 13 13: 14, rev. 1: *ša* KUR.ku-sa-a-a. See Karlsson, *From the Nile to the Tigris*, 194.

<sup>53</sup> SAA 16 78: 22–23: GEMÉ.MEŠ [KUR.ku]-sa-a-a-te. See Karlsson, *From the Nile to the Tigris*, 195.

<sup>54</sup> SAA 7 24: 2: 15: *Ku-sa-a-a-t[e]* . See Karlsson, *From the Nile to the Tigris*, 193.

<sup>55</sup> See Karlsson, *From the Nile to the Tigris*, 102 (Dāri-šarru), 104–05 (Kūsāiā 1 & 2), etc. Cf. also 210–11: “... at least four modes of integration (all more or less linked to the use of force) can be distinguished regarding various groups of Africans within the orbit of the Neo-Assyrian empire, namely the modes or fates of deported, transferred, subjugated, and defeated.”

<sup>56</sup> RINAP 3/1, e.g., 4 45; 15 iii 23’–25’; 17 iii 18–21; 22 iii 3–5. See Karen Radner, “After Eltekeh: Royal Hostages from Egypt at the Assyrian Court,” in *Stories of Long Ago: Festschrift für Michael D. Roaf*, ed. Heather Baker, Kai Kaniuth and Adelheid Otto, AOAT 397 (Münster: Ugarit Verlag, 2012), 471–79; Karlsson, *From the Nile to the Tigris*, 188, 210.

<sup>57</sup> See n. 2 above. For the use of the toponym Meluhḫa to designate Kush, see RGTC 7/2-2, 422–24 (neo-Assyrian); 12/2, 189 (El-Amarna letters).

<sup>58</sup> Karlsson, *From the Nile to the Tigris*, 207, lists the Kushite individuals mentioned in Assyrian texts from the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

Kush on the other. Karlsson points to earlier military confrontations, such as the battle of Qarqar (853 BCE) between the Assyrian forces of King Shalmaneser III and an alliance of states in the Levant, which was supposedly supported by Egypt.<sup>59</sup> Of more importance may be his reference to the extensive contacts between the Levant and Egypt during the 14<sup>th</sup> century BCE.<sup>60</sup>

It is significant that the 14<sup>th</sup>-century El-Amarna letters, most of which were sent from the Levant to the Egyptian Pharaoh, already include references to Kushites. In one of them, King Niqmaddu II of Ugarit asks for a physician and also for “two youths, palace personnel of the land of Cush.”<sup>61</sup> Rib-Haddi, ruler of Gubla (= Byblos), asks Pharaoh to “send three hundred troops, thirty chariots and one hundred Cushite men that they may guard the city of Gubla, the city of my lord.”<sup>62</sup> In several other letters, Rib-Haddi also asks for troops from Kush, sometimes designated as Meluḥḥa, often in addition to a request for troops from Egypt.<sup>63</sup> Instead, ‘Abdi-Ḥeba, the ruler of Jerusalem, complains to Pharaoh about the aggressive behaviour of certain Kushites, whom he even accuses of an attempt to kill him.<sup>64</sup> This evidence shows that groups of people designated as “Kushites” were present in the Levant from at least the 14<sup>th</sup> century BCE onward.

The 14<sup>th</sup>-century references to Kushites in the Levant make it more understandable that Kushites are also mentioned in 8<sup>th</sup>-century texts from Assyria. Karlsson rightly observes: “Generally, Africans appear in Assyrian texts as if they had always been part of Assyria.”<sup>65</sup> In my view, the “Kushites” who lived in the Assyrian territory during the 8<sup>th</sup> century may be descendants of black Africans who came to the Levant and Mesopotamia during the preceding centuries. Some of their ancestors may have arrived there several centuries earlier. Over the generations, these

<sup>59</sup> Karlsson, *From the Nile to the Tigris*, 11, 210.

<sup>60</sup> Karlsson, *From the Nile to the Tigris*, 10–11.

<sup>61</sup> EA 49:19-20: 2 šú-ḥa-[ri] L[Ú].É.GAL ‘ša’ KUR Ka-ši; transcription and translation: Anson F. Rainey, *The El-Amarna Correspondence: A New Edition of the Cuneiform Letters from the Site of El-Amarna based on Collations of all Extant Tablets*, vol. 1, ed. William M. Schniedewind, HdO 110 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 380–81.

<sup>62</sup> EA 131:12–13: me ‘LÚ’.MEŠ’ KUR.MEŠ Ka-ši; transcription and translation: Rainey, *The El-Amarna Correspondence*, vol. 1, 678–79.

<sup>63</sup> See EA 133:16–17: L[Ú].MEŠ [Me-lu-]ḥa \ Ka[-ši], “m[en of Meluḥ]ḥa \ Kush[ites]” (Rainey, *The El-Amarna Correspondence*, vol. 1, 686–87). For requests by Rib-Haddi for troops from Kush/Meluḥḥa, see also EA 70:17–19; 108:66–67; 112:19–20; 117:81; 127:36 (reconstr. in 127:22); 132:57.

<sup>64</sup> EA 287:33: LÚ.MEŠ Ka-ši-yi, “Kushite men” – 287:72: LÚ.MEŠ ‘KUR’ Ka-ši; 287:74: LÚ.MEŠ KUR Ka-ši, “the men of the land of Kush” (transcription: Rainey, *The El-Amarna Correspondence*, vol. 1, 1112, 1114).

<sup>65</sup> Karlsson, *From the Nile to the Tigris*, 210; cf. 211.



Figure 1: Relief from Nineveh depicting Assyrian soldiers and shackled Kushite prisoners of war, ca. 640 BCE, British Museum no. 124928

“Kushites” may have assimilated to their new environments to a high degree, including the adoption of the local language, religion, and customs. It is possible that they were still denoted as “Kushites” only because of their skin colour and other physical features which distinguished them from the rest of the local population. This suggestion seems to correspond with a phrase on a badly preserved Assyrian tablet from the 7<sup>th</sup> century: “... Kush, black Meluhhians ...”<sup>66</sup> Unfortunately, the context has been lost, but the text suggests that Kushites were distinguished on the basis of their skin colour.

## 6. From Kush to Jerusalem

Since the text of Jeremiah 38–39 does not indicate how the Kushite Ebed-melech had come to be at the royal court in Jerusalem, interpreters can only speculate about this. One of the options is that Ebed-melech himself came from Kush, or otherwise from Egypt, which had been governed by Kushites during the 25<sup>th</sup> dynasty.<sup>67</sup> Some scholars suggested that Ebed-melech had been brought to Jerusalem to become a slave at the court.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>66</sup> RINAP 4 35 rev. 4’: [...] KUR.ku-u-si LÚ.me-luḥ-ḫe-e GE<sub>6</sub>.MEŠ [...]. See Karlsson, *From the Nile to the Tigris*, 190.

<sup>67</sup> See n. 4 above.

<sup>68</sup> See, e.g., Holladay, *Jeremiah*, vol. 2, 289; Dalglish, “Ebed-melech,” 259. See also the literature in Jerry Hwang, “Who is the Real ‘Model Minority’? An Asian American

Others regarded it as more likely that Ebed-melech was an Egyptian military attaché in Jerusalem, which better explains that King Zedekiah took him seriously and entrusted him with grave responsibility in the rescuing of Jeremiah, including authority over thirty personnel (Jer 38:10).<sup>69</sup> Scholars who assume that Ebed-melech came from abroad suppose that only after his arrival in Judah did he begin to be designated as עֶבֶד־מֶלֶךְ, “servant of (the) king,” with “king” standing for the Judean king. The reason would be that the Judeans could not pronounce his original, foreign name.<sup>70</sup>

In view of the Levantine and neo-Assyrian evidence described in Section 5 another course of events appears to be more probable. It has been shown that in the Neo-Assyrian Empire there were Kushites who participated fully in society. They could act as witnesses and could be officials (*ša rēši*) responsible for financial affairs, while several Kushites were apparently part of the elite. Some Kushites had names that pointed to their Kushite background (Kūsāiâ, Kūsāiu, Kusî, Kūsîtu), while others had typically Assyrian names (Dāri-šarru, Šulmu-šarri, Mutakkil-Aššur), or West Semitic names (Zabad, Šē'-aqāba, Šēr-manāni). In particular, the theophoric name Mutakkil-Aššur is significant, since it indicates that the assimilation of the presumably Kushite family in which this name occurred included the adoption of the predominant religion, or at least part of it. The evidence suggests that Kushite families had lived in these areas for several generations and that their physical characteristics were the main reason why they were still designated as Kushites.

In the case of Ebed-melech, it seems quite likely that his family had arrived in Judah at least somewhat earlier. It is significant that Ebed-melech is described as a Kushite who put his trust in YHWH, the deity of the Israelites (Jer 39:18). Furthermore, his West Semitic name suggests that his parents had already assimilated to their Levantine surroundings (see Section 3 above). Georg Molin also assumes that his name indicates that his parents had arrived in Judah before his birth:

‘Ebed-Melek trägt trotz seiner kuschitischen Abstammung einen hebräischen Namen. Dies legt den Gedanken nahe, schon seine Eltern

Reading of Ruth and Ebed-Melech in the Hebrew Bible,” *BibInt* 31 (2023): 457–72, esp. 466 n. 23.

<sup>69</sup> Hays, “The Cushites,” 405; Kevin Burrell, *Cushites in the Hebrew Bible: Negotiating Ethnic Identity in the Past and Present*, *BibInt* 181 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 309, 312; Hwang, “Who is the Real ‘Model Minority’?,” 465–66.

<sup>70</sup> See, e.g., Holladay, *Jeremiah*, vol. 2, 289.



seien nach Jerusalem verschlagen worden, doch kann er diesen Namen auch selbst gewählt oder von einem der Könige Judas erhalten haben.<sup>71</sup>

Kushite ancestors of Ebed-melech may have ended up in Judah one or more generations before Ebed-melech lived there, although the references to Kushites in the 14-century El-Amarna letters demonstrate that they could have arrived even many centuries earlier.<sup>72</sup> However it may be, the presence of his family in Judah for one or more generations would explain several aspects of the way in which the text of Jeremiah describes him. He was supposed to have proper knowledge of King Zedekiah's deliberations and decisions, which suited his status as סָרִיס, "official" (Jer 38:7). Also, he had access to the king and was able to change the king's mind, after which the king granted him exceptional authority in the rescuing of Jeremiah. Of more importance seems to be that Ebed-melech's Kushite background could have induced him to support the circles that hoped for Egyptian help against the Babylonians (cf. Jer 37:5–10), and that accused Jeremiah of undermining the morale of Judah's army and citizens (cf. 38:4). Apparently, however, Ebed-melech was no supporter of the pro-Egyptian party, which could have been expected if he had been a newcomer and certainly if he had been an Egyptian military attaché.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Molin, "Ebed-Melek," 220. Translation: "Despite his Kushite ancestry, Ebed-Melek has a Hebrew name. This suggests that his parents had already come to Jerusalem, but he could also have chosen this name himself or received it from one of the kings of Judah." The suggestion that Ebed-melech's family had come to Judah some decades earlier is also found in Sadler, *Can a Cushite Change His Skin?*, 149.

<sup>72</sup> For the suggestion that the occurrences of the personal name כּוּשִׁי, "Kushi," in Jer 36:14 and Zeph 1:1 point to Kushite ancestry for Yehudi and Zephaniah, respectively, see Gene Rice, "The African Roots of the Prophet Zephaniah," *JRT* 36 (1979): 21–31; cf. Sadler, *Can a Cushite Change His Skin?*, 63–70, 91–93. The gentilic כּוּשִׁית in Num 12:1 is traditionally interpreted as "Kushite" (fem.), but some scholars connected it with the word כּוּשָׁן, "Kushan," which in Hab 3:7 occurs in parallelism with מִדְיָן, "Midian"; cf. Robert Houston Smith, "Ethiopia," *ABD* 2:665–67, esp. 666; Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham*, 26–29; Gerhards, "Über die Herkunft," 167–70. According to this view, כּוּשִׁית in Num 12:1 relates to Moses' Midianite wife Zipporah (see Exod 2:15–22). Others still suppose that in Num 12:1 כּוּשִׁית relates to a Kushite, second wife of Moses; see Hays, "The Cushites," 397–401; Sadler, *Can a Cushite Change His Skin?*, 32–40. In view of the references to Kushites in the El-Amarna letters, there is no reason to regard the appearance of a כּוּשִׁי, "Kushite," in 2 Sam 18:21–32 as anachronistic and as reflecting later circumstances, as was advocated by Donald B. Redford, "Kush," *ABD* 4:109–11, esp. 111. The suggestion by Gerhards, "Über die Herkunft," 169, that in Jeremiah 38–39 and 2 Sam 18:21–32 the gentilic כּוּשִׁי relates to Kushan, the north Arabian tribe associated with Midian, is also unfounded; see Burrell, *Cushites in the Hebrew Bible*, 309.

<sup>73</sup> Molin, "Ebed-Melek," 220, remarks regarding Ebed-melech: "Merkwürdigerweise gehört gerade er nicht der auf ägyptische Hilfe vertrauenden Kriegspartei an, sondern jener, die die Unterwerfung unter die Herrschaft Nebukadnezars vorzieht, wie Jeremia

All in all, the question arises to which degree Ebed-melech was still regarded as a foreigner. The text of Jeremiah still designates him as a Kushite, presumably because of his ancestry, skin colour, and other physical features. It is also likely that Ebed-melech and other “Kushites” were still associated with Kush, the area to the south of Egypt.<sup>74</sup> In some respects, however, he was apparently no longer a foreigner. He may even have been regarded as a Judean national with foreign ancestry, just like Uriah the Hittite, whose name is Yahwistic (2 Sam 11–12).<sup>75</sup>

It was probably attractive for a king to assign a high position to such a well-integrated foreigner, who had enough knowledge of the course of events in and outside of the court but did not share the interests of native groups that tried to influence the king to their own advantage. Jack Lundbom rightly observes:

Kings of antiquity commonly employed foreigners—very often prisoners of war—in their governments as security against ambitious nobles or other would-be usurpers, receiving from them a greater loyalty than from native subjects.<sup>76</sup>

## 7. A Black Man Favoured

Ebed-melech was apparently a black man with roots in Kush, the area south of Egypt. According to Jeremiah 38–39 it was possible for such a person with foreign ancestry to attain an influential position at the court of Jerusalem. This is not unthinkable in view of the positions that Kushites could have in the areas belonging to the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

However, the Biblical story goes one step further: Ebed-melech’s courage and his trust in God are described as exemplary and are contrasted with the rejection of Jeremiah’s prophecies by the Judean leaders (38:1–4) and the fickleness of King Zedekiah (38:5, 10, 14–26). The text

sie im Namen Jahwes immer wieder verlangt.” Similarly Georg Fischer, *Jeremia 26–52*, HThKAT (Freiburg: Herder, 2005), 345.

<sup>74</sup> In the Akkadian texts, this is demonstrated by the frequent use of KUR, “land,” before the toponyms and gentilics for “Kush(ite)”; see nn. 45, 51–53, 61–62, 64, 66.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Sadler, *Can a Cushite Change His Skin?*, 68, 94.

<sup>76</sup> Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 37–52: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 70. Similarly Molin, “Ebed-Melek,” 219–20: “Schließlich darf man daran denken, daß die Herrscher des Alten Orients gerne Fremde in ihre unmittelbare Umgebung holten, denen sie mehr Vertrauen schenkten als ihren eigenen Leuten, besonders in jenen aufgeregten Zeiten, da die Staatswesen des vorderen Orients durch Parteienstreit zerrissen waren; für oder gegen Assur, für oder gegen Babylonien, für oder gegen Ägypten.”

even attributes the appreciation of this Kushite's behaviour explicitly to God himself. In God's eyes, this black man's life matters (39:15–18).<sup>77</sup>

The positive role of Ebed-melech the Kushite is remarkable, since the book of Jeremiah was clearly written from a Judean perspective. The book's non-black perspective is illustrated by the rhetorical question in Jer 13:23, which shows that the dark skin of the Kushites was perceived as something unusual. A Kushite could just as well have asked whether Israelites—or Mesopotamians or Greeks—could change their skin.<sup>78</sup> However, the positive judgement about Ebed-melech counters all biases against Kush or Kushites.

Through the Hebrew text as well as through most of the translations,<sup>79</sup> the demonstration of exemplary courage and faith by a black man could influence communities of Jews and Christians until the present day. This aspect was lost in Targum Jonathan, in which עֶבֶד־מֶלֶךְ הַכּוּשִׁי, “Ebed-melech, the Kushite” (38:7, 10, 12; 39:16), is consistently translated as עֲבָדָא דְמַלְכָא זְדַקְיָה, “the servant of King Zedekiah.”<sup>80</sup> However, also if the translations disclosed that Ebed-melech was a Kushite, the positive appreciation of this black man's role in the rescuing of Jeremiah was unfortunately often no longer taken into account, while the rhetorical question in Jer 13:23 was abused to promote racism.<sup>81</sup>

The decisive role of Ebed-melech in the book of Jeremiah should preclude such racist interpretations. It is my hope that it may inspire Jewish and Christian communities to adopt an inclusive perspective, one that—according to the text—is the perspective of God himself.

<sup>77</sup> If in Num 12:1 כְּשִׂית relates to a Kushite wife of Moses (see n. 72), the exclusion of this Kushite by Miriam and Aaron was countered by God himself; see Num 12:4–15.

<sup>78</sup> See Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham*, 38.

<sup>79</sup> LXX: Αἰθίοψ (see n. 12); Syr.: ܟܘܫܝܐ (*kwšy*); Vulg.: *Aethiops*.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. bMo'ed Qatan 16b: וְכִי כּוּשִׁי שְׁמוֹ וְהָלָא צְדָקְיָה שְׁמוֹ אֵלָּא מָה כּוּשִׁי מְשׁוּנָה בְּעוֹרֵי אֶף צְדָקְיָה: אִם צְדָקְיָה: אִם צְדָקְיָה, “Is his name Kushite? Is not Zedekiah his name? Rather, just as a Kushite is distinguished by his skin, so too, Zedekiah was distinguished by his actions.”

<sup>81</sup> Massing, “From Greek Proverb,” 181–82; cf. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham*, 22.