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# REDISCOVERING ANCIENT EGYPT

*An African Perspective*

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of  
**MASTER OF ARTS**  
in the Department of Religious Studies  
**UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN**  
under Supervision of Dr. Welile Mazamisa

Cape Town

2002

**DIGITISED**

4 SEP 2013

*Rediscovering*

# Ancient Egypt

An African perspective

University of Cape Town

## ABSTRACT

This research focuses on the role of *Ancient Egypt* during antiquity. It attempts to demonstrate a rereading of Egypt through the lens of an African, in relation to the views held by traditional scholarship. It also provides its readers with an alternative way of looking at how Egypt and the Near Eastern countries influenced each other.

Secondly, this research provides evidence, which suggests that the founders of ancient Egyptian civilization relates closer to their African heritage than their Asian, or even its European neighbours. This research also provides evidence, which suggest that most world-renowned Greek scholars studied under the feet of the Egyptian priest-scholars. The role of the 'Wisdom of the Egyptians' is discussed in comparison to other forms of wisdom, including Greek philosophy.

Thirdly, this research provides us with new tools with which we can interpret sacred literature through the lens of an African. These tools play a significant role in the development of an African approach. Throughout this research, African scholars are searching for an African discourse, which aims at providing an alternative approach to the Western or European discourse. This perspective is very helpful in redefining the role of ancient Egypt throughout the ancient world.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to extend my sincere gratitude and appreciation to Dr. Welile L. Mazamisa for supervising this work. His undaunted patience and personal support were an excellent help throughout this time. He has proved himself worthy of a remarkable scholar with excellent fortitude. I would also like to thank Chuck Wanamaker, Chirevo Kwenda and Abdul-Kader Tayob for their assistance in the production of this thesis. May I salute my fellow students Samuel, Vuma and Peggy, as well as my colleagues, Benjamin and Christopher, for their encouragement and support.

Secondly, I would like to thank the United Church of Canada and the University of Cape Town for their generous financial assistance. In this regard, I extend my heartfelt thanks to Professor de Gruchy and his assistant, Lynn Holness. May I also express my gratitude towards the administrative staff of the Department of Religious Studies, especially Ursula and Naboweyah, for their kindness and thoughtfulness. It would be a serious omission to forget my friend, Rosy Williams, for her assistance during this period.

Finally, my earnest gratitude goes to my wife, Noline and kids, Matthew and Malachi. This research deprived us of valuable family time and fellowship. In life, we owe our success to other people!

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# **1. INTRODUCTION**

## **1.1 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to explore in what ways ancient Egypt contributed to the development of Mediterranean and ancient Near Eastern culture. The recent search for literary sources emanating from ancient Egypt has not proved successful. Various contemporary writings that discuss the past are available. However, these writings do not compare to the vast array of western literature. Research discussing ancient Egypt indicates that most scholars, throughout history, have been silent regarding Egypt's past, while those that portray Egypt, do so in a pejorative manner (Holter 2000:27).

This research is in dialogue with mainly African and African American scholarship, as it discusses ancient Egypt through the eyes of an African. The references to European (Western) scholarship help to develop the argument for a search towards an African perspective. This research acknowledges that African and African American scholarships do not always dialogue from the same reference point, as their social and geographical locations influence their worldviews. In this regard, they view Egypt in a slightly different manner. However, this research allows divergence and convergence between African and African American scholarship in their need for acknowledging an African perspective.

The main argument in Chapter 2 debates the African origins of an Egyptian civilization. Throughout history, there has been a basic assumption that the original occupants of the Nile Delta (Egypt) were either a white or a 'mixed' people (Bernal 1987:242). Literary evidence portraying the physical characteristics of the Egyptians is scarce, while agreement among various scholars remains questionable. However, African scholars during the latter part of the twentieth century argued that the Egyptians were of black (or African) descent (Diop 1996:1). On the other hand, most European scholars have argued for a white or mixed origin of the inhabitants of Egypt (Lefkowitz 1996:32).

In relation to the debate for an African origin of Egyptian civilization, chapter 3 seeks to argue for a possible connection between the wisdom of the Egyptians and Greek philosophy. The focal point of this discussion is to develop an argument that the wisdom of the Egyptians shows similarities to Greek philosophy. This argument incorporates a notion that, traditional scholarship focussed mainly on the Greco-Roman world, in comparison to Egypt and the rest of Africa.

Ancient literature portrays the notion that authors of sacred literature reluctantly focused on Africa. Chapter 4 discusses this silent reluctance of authors of sacred literature, as it reveals elements of prejudices. This chapter also focuses on various narratives, including

the Hagar-Sarah and Ishmael-Isaac debate. Further, this chapter emphasises various parallels between Egypt and other peoples.

The attempt to develop a search for an African perspective takes shape in chapter 5. This chapter aims at discussing elements of prejudices, as mentioned in chapter 4, as well as the assumption that Africans, Egyptians included, are a people “without history” (Eze 1997:142). Furthermore, this chapter will discuss various perspectives in developing a search for an African perspective. These negative assumptions spearhead this paper in asking certain questions regarding ancient Egypt. The next section that deals with research questions, gives us an idea of the various arguments under discussion.

## **1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This section aims at developing a few intricate questions, which deal with the field of this study. This study designs these questions, in order to provide the necessary tools to deal with this research. Lack of literary resources is a major problem, as this paper faces an area of study, which needs further testing and research. Hence, formulation of research questions includes the following:

Has ancient Egypt contributed towards history in particular, and towards religion in general? Who were the Egyptians? Were they a white or black race, or is there a possibility of a mixed people? To what extent does the wisdom of the Egyptians compare to Greek

philosophy? Where did most of Greek philosophers of antiquity study? How does sacred literature portray ancient Egypt? To what extent does the reluctance of traditional scholarship influence ancient Egypt? In what ways does the search for an African perspective assist African scholarship?

### **1.3 DELIMITATIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF STUDY**

Delimitations and limitations are necessary for this field of study as they provide a framework for research purposes. This study is limited to the availability of African and non-African scholarship, which focuses on Egypt. Due to a lack of literary resources, it is also limited to ancient Egypt's contributions in antiquity.

The vast amount of scholarship who argues for a white or mixed origin of Egypt is a big limitation to this study. This includes the argument that traditional scholarship isolates Egypt from the rest of the African continent. Another limitation to this study includes the reluctance of traditional and modern scholarship regarding this research.

This study delimits its focus on the debate between Western (European) and African scholarship regarding Egypt. Various arguments develop throughout this paper, in order to arrive at a search for an African perspective. The representation of Egypt in sacred literature delimits this study to the household of Abraham, and other small references.

## **1.4 METHODOLOGY**

### **1.4.1 METHOD TO BE USED**

In the event of rediscovering the past, this study will use a method that suits the focus of this research. Considering that this study focuses on *Rediscovering ancient Egypt*, as a symbol of the African identity, it becomes necessary to, critically analyse all literary sources that, depict Egypt in both a positive, as well as in a pejorative manner. The literary-critical method easily encapsulates a quest for an African perspective, and thus, seems most suitable for this research. It provides this study with a critical review of all the various literatures.

The literary-critical method is not only compatible with a search for an African identity of Egypt, but is also in agreement with African scholars challenging the western approach towards the original occupants of Egypt. It aligns itself with various arguments from different scholars, including that of various perspectives. These arguments are critically analysed for the sake of this research. This method allows the researcher to develop a reasonable and fair argument based on various literatures. Furthermore, the struggle to remain objective and unbiased is not an easy task, as the individual faces various pressures beyond his or her control.

### **1.4.2 JUSTIFICATION OF SUBJECT AND METHOD**

It is necessary to state that the literary-critical method is not the only method to produce this work. This method is necessary to provide an

alternative approach to non-African literature in a much-needed subject. While only a few scholars attempted to research this field, many were unable to arrive at a reasonable understanding of ancient Egypt's contribution to antiquity. This research contains areas for further research, in order to grasp the focus of this paper. African leaders and institutions should also make financial assistance available, in order to have this field of study developed and researched for further discussion and debate.

The need for most African scholars, if not all, is to understand the role and importance of Egypt in the search for an African Renaissance. This need is of symbolic necessity, as it is a possible doorway to unfold the dream of African unity. While ancient Egypt played a major role in history, it is necessary for every person on the African continent to reinvent and relive the African past. Thus, the need for this field of study justifies grounds for contributing to the development of ancient history.

As to the amount of literature available for this research, it is important that the various perspectives of scholars have a reasonable chance to substantiate their claims. The literary-critical method allows for different opinions of scholars, be they from an African or non-African background. It also makes room for an African approach, as the opinion of African scholarship to the discourse of ancient Egypt is integral and important.

### 1.4.3 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This study will seek to make use of both literature oriented towards an African and European perspective of ancient Egypt. Many scholars have attempted to research a similar field of study, while others have surrendered a chance to express alternative views. Those who successfully completed their research, did so beyond the confines of the African continent, and therefore left a periphery for an African perspective. Therefore, this study will allocate a substantial part of this paper to literature produced by African scholarship.

Chapter 2 describes the physical characteristics of the Egyptians. The views of Jairazbhoy, Farid, Obenga, Lefkowitz, Bernal and others explore various perspectives. While most of these scholars view their arguments in literary sources, this study makes use of Jairazbhoy's seminars, held at the University of Cape Town on 13<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> February 2002, whose books are not available in South Africa.

Chapter 3 deals with the wisdom of the Egyptians. Literature for this chapter includes the works of Diop, Onyewuenyi, Berlinerblau, Lefkowitz, Brown, and others. The works of Wright, Murphy and other commentaries assisted much in developing a reasonable argument for this research.

Chapter 4 discusses the representation of Egypt in sacred literature. The biggest contributions to this chapter are *The Jerome Biblical*

*Commentary* (Brown et al), and *The Tribes of Yahweh* (Gottwald). Various other works include that of Holter, Felder, Snowden, and others.

Chapter 5 develops a search for an African perspective and includes a vast array of literature produced by African and European scholarship. These works include that of, Asante, Mudimbe, Eze, Phyllis and O'Meara, and others. Most of these works are oriented towards an African approach.

## **1.5 SUMMARY**

The review of the scope of literary sources is a clear guide as to which direction this research will follow. These sources give us a combination of various perspectives to the discourse of ancient Egypt, which creates an opportunity for an exploration of what is at our disposal. It is necessary to state that it is difficult, at times, to be fully objective due to the reasons discussed above. Other reasons include the social location and African background of the researcher. These influences have ignited the researcher to make use of the literary-critical method that enables him to allow his convictions to guide him through this paper. However, it is necessary that impulsive and emotional feelings be set aside, in order to develop an argument for an African perspective.

The focus of this research is to develop an argument leading to a search for an African perspective. Throughout this paper, this argument builds an alternative approach to the traditional understanding of ancient Egypt. The focus of this study is to prove that African discourse is not inferior or superior to Eurocentric discourse, or vice versa. Research questions formulated, provide us with tools to enable us to have a broad understanding of this field of study. The field of study has also been limited to certain areas of discussion, while delimitations were necessary to stay in line with this research. The section that deals with the review of literature, guides this study through the various chapters. In the next chapter, this study will discuss the physical characteristics of the Egyptians.

## **2. DEBATE ON AFRICAN ORIGINS OF EGYPT**

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, a scholarly debate emerged about the racial origins of the inhabitants of ancient Egypt as the founders of one of the earliest civilizations known to us. This debate relates to a geographical problem, since the land bridge formed by the Sinai Desert connects Egypt to Asia. The implications of this have become part of the debate around whether Egypt and its ancient civilization were African in origin, or Asian or even European. This chapter will explore the three dominant proposals for the origins of the ancient inhabitants of Egypt who built a major civilization some six and a half thousand years ago.

European scholarship suggests, for example, that Egyptians could have been of European offspring. In contrast to the Eurocentric (Western) perspective is the Afrocentric view, which argues that Egyptians are of black or Negroid origin. Other views also seem possible especially those that support the idea that Egyptians were an amalgamation (mixture) of African and Asian peoples. These perspectives derive from the premise that Egypt made contact with other cultures. Due to its geographical location, Egypt had links to the

south via the River Nile, and to its northeastern neighbours via the Red Sea and Mediterranean Sea.

The aim of this chapter is to debate claims held by various scholars including Lefkowitz, Jairazbhoy, Farid, MacDonald, Onyewuenyi and others. It will attempt to explore the views held by these scholars, and in so doing, develop an argument that focuses on an African origin of Egyptian civilization. This chapter forms part of an integral whole that observes ancient Egypt through the eyes of an African. It also aims at re-examining European literature, as it focuses on African scholarship.

Since geographical location suggests Egypt as an African country, many scholars argue that its early occupants could have resembled an Asian or Mediterranean people. The modern world portrays Egypt as Middle Eastern or a country north of the Saharan desert. From another perspective, one can argue that the first inhabitants of ancient Egypt were of European descent. This view supports the fact that Egyptians and other peoples around the Mediterranean Sea share many commonalities, including similar physical appearances. Various scholars support this view, especially those who advocate a Eurocentric perspective. This chapter does not discuss the various perspectives. However, it only focuses on the views held by these

scholars, while chapter five focuses on these perspectives in detail. Hence, this chapter explores the various debates that argue either for a European, Afro-asiatic or African origins of Egyptian civilization respectively.

## **2.2 DEBATE FOR A EUROPEAN CIVILIZATION OF EGYPT**

Traditional scholarship including most European scholars, argue that the first occupants of ancient Egypt was of European origin. Eurocentric scholarship is oriented towards a European point of departure into a discourse (Chidester 1996:15). Among others, Lefkowitz challenges the premise that the original inhabitants of Egypt could have been black. Throughout her book *Not out of Africa*, Mary Lefkowitz mentions that there is no substantive literary evidence and or facts, that support the assumption that the origins of ancient Egyptian civilization could have been “black” or Negroid (1996:8). She criticises the idea that ancient Egyptians were black. She states that some of the founders of an Afrocentric school of North America created this idea, and therefore regards it as a myth (1996:8). This Afrocentric School maintains that, human civilization had one of its origins in Africa. She stresses that Afrocentric scholars wanted to destroy the facts about the Greek origins of civilization and philosophy. Lefkowitz, like Bernal and others, argues that the skin colour of the Egyptians was the same as the other inhabitants who lived in the coastal areas along the Mediterranean basin (Lefkowitz

1996:32). Facial and physical characteristics of Mediterranean peoples show close parallels to an Afro-asiatic people.

Furthermore, Lefkowitz argues that the Egyptians of North Africa were actually Europeans who migrated to the Nile Delta during the fourth and fifth centuries before the Common Era (1996:72). According to Lefkowitz, this argument suggests that, the northern most part of Egypt, including Alexandria, consisted primarily of Greeks (1996:72). She asserts further that these Greeks remained fundamentally 'white' or 'Mediterranean' even after amalgamation through intermarriage between Egyptians and Greeks. She also mentions that amalgamation only took place after the Greek invasion of Egypt during the fourth century BCE (1996:7). Her idea of amalgamation refers to the fact that Egyptians still resembled similarities to European features, which means that the origins of ancient Egyptian civilization could have been white or European.

Lefkowitz reiterates that the skin colour of the Egyptians was not 'black' as she strongly criticizes the idea of black Egyptians (1996:8). Furthermore, she seems to reject the idea that the Egyptians of Northern Egypt had close links with the Ethiopians (modern day Sudan and northern Ethiopia). Her argument suggests that Ethiopians were a 'darker' people in relation to ancient Egyptians. She

firmly believes that they were a Grecian people who did not make contact with the rest of Egypt. She seems to distance herself from those who support any genetic connection or involvement between Egyptians and Ethiopians. She mentions that ancient Egyptians were closest to that of the Mediterranean peoples. She suggests that Egyptians have developed a 'dark' skin due to the geographical conditions, and does not consider any possibility of black genetic relationship. Her arguments show certain commonalities to Bernal, who agrees that Egyptians were not as dark-skinned as Ethiopian blacks were. She criticizes those that emphasise any connection between Egypt and Ethiopia (Berlinerblau 1999:152).

On the contrary, Lefkowitz lays the 'foundation' for her idea of a possible Mediterranean Egypt. She mentions that further up the Nile or south of Egypt (the land of Nubia – modern day Sudan) lived the more darker or Negroid peoples. Her argument suggests that ancient Egyptians had analogous physical features to that of ancient Greeks (Europeans). Bernal mentions that it is a geographical fact that people, who stay closer to the Equator, resemble a more 'darker' skin colour than those staying further from it (1987:242). This statement is quite explicit as it provides her with grounds to conjecture the possibility of a probable Greek migration to Egypt. Bernal's statement seems highly unlikely as ancient Ethiopia (Nubia) refers to modern day Sudan and northern Ethiopia.

However, Lefkowitz does mention that the Greeks called the Egyptians "a people of colour" (1996:13). Many scholars would argue that she contradicts her own claims as she opposes any notion that argues for a black Egyptian civilization. She supports her claim by mentioning that Greeks referred to them as being foreign, and not 'dark' in the true sense of the word. She also mentions the possibility of Greeks staying in Egypt who differed slightly in their physical appearance to the indigenous Egyptians (1996:8).

Another scholar that supports Lefkowitz' claim of a Mediterranean Egypt, is Berlinerblau (1999:154). Berlinerblau states that Egyptians were a North African people distinctly different to sub-Saharan people. It is possible that he referred to sub-Saharan people as a black or Negroid people who were different to Egyptians. It is also possible that his statement links closely to the inhabitants of Ethiopia. Besides the fact that Lefkowitz, and others, oppose a possible African origin of ancient Egyptian civilization. Lefkowitz fails to provide enough evidence proving that an Asian or even an Afro-asiatic origin could have been possible. Her closest argument towards a possible Asian origin of Egypt is the fact that she states that Egyptians could have been a Mediterranean people. Lefkowitz does not provide enough evidence, which suggests that Egypt had its origins in Europe. However, her argument seems to be incomplete, as it does not constitute of archaeological artefacts or literary evidences to support

her claims. The next section deals with the Afro-asiatic model, which discusses the importance of archaeological evidence.

### **2.3 DEBATE FOR AN AFRO-ASIATIC CIVILIZATION OF EGYPT**

The Afro-asiatic perspective starts with the assumption that Egypt was the gateway to Asia and Africa (MacDonald 1999:90). As a result, scholars have sought evidence to support the possibility that Egyptian civilization owed its origins to both African and Asian people interacting with one another around the stable and agriculturally productive world of the lower Nile basin. This perspective, suggests that ancient Egyptians could have been an amalgamation of African and Asian peoples who migrated to the Nile Valley. Archaeological findings support an idea of close contacts between Egypt and Asia during antiquity. Various scholars including Bernal, Jairazbhoy and others support the idea of close contacts between Egypt and Asia, as well as other parts of the Mediterranean world. Bernal bases his point of view on historical facts while Jairazbhoy uses archaeological evidences to support his arguments.

In his book, *Black Athena*, Martin Bernal states his notion regarding the physical characteristics of Egyptians. He sums up his view in the following argument:

*To what race then did the ancient Egyptians belong? I am very*

*dubious of the idea to what race then did the ancient Egyptians belong? I am very dubious of the utility of the concept "race" in general because it is impossible to achieve any anatomical precision on the . . . nevertheless I am convinced that, at least for the last 7000 years the population of Egypt has contained African, South-West Asian and Mediterranean types. It is also clear that the further south, or up the Nile, one goes, the blacker and more Negroid the population becomes, and that this has been the case or the same length of time. As I stated in the Introduction, I believe that Egyptian civilization was fundamentally African and that the African element was stronger in the old and middle kingdoms, before the Hyksos Invasion, than it later became. Furthermore, I am convinced that many of the most powerful Egyptian dynasties which were based in Upper Egypt—the 1<sup>st</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>— were made up of pharaohs whom one can usefully call black.*

(Bernal 1987:241-242)

In the above quotation, Bernal discusses the various arguments to what the meaning of the term 'black' is. He suggests that ancient Egyptian civilization could have been 'Mediterranean', which resembles the peoples staying around the Mediterranean Sea. At the same time, he reiterates a possible evolution of an Egyptian people, while acknowledging various pigmentations in their skin colour. It is

clear that he provides a possible understanding of the reason that among the Egyptians was a range of skin colours. Many readers may find difficulty with some of his statements when describing who and what the Egyptians were. Some of his ideas are seemingly in agreement with scholars who argue that the Egyptians could have been African, while other ideas focus on the different variants in skin colour. In principle, Bernal agrees that the Egyptians could well have been black, yet with different colour pigmentations. He bases his statement on the North-American experience, which states that, "one is considered black" through black bloodline or descent (Berlinerblau 1999:149). At the same time, he iterates that they were either an African or even a Mediterranean people.

Bernal argues that Egyptians could have been Mediterranean with reference to Egypt's geographical location. He creates the perception that the terms 'black' and 'white' cannot be used to determine the skin-colour of the Egyptians. He therefore distinguishes between different variants of what modern scholars would refer to as 'black'. In the above quotation, he refers to 'black' as either *African, Negroid, dark* or *Egyptian*. Bernal comes under heavy attack from scholars like Berlinerblau who accuses him of being inconsistent when it comes to the facial features of the Egyptians (1999:152). Bernal mentions that the Negroid pigmentation probably refers to the Ethiopian origin, seemingly closest to the Equator, and assumes that they were the

darkest skin-colour of all Africans. On the contrary, he argues that Egyptians were either a Mediterranean or crossbred nation, which is culturally different to darker Ethiopians. Again, he distinguishes between African and Egyptian. He also differentiates between, “fundamentally black” and “what we can usefully call black.” He states that ‘usefully black’ could refer to black in descent or genetic bloodline, whereas ‘fundamentally black’ would refer to black in appearance. This statement is in agreement with the argument that “Africans are fundamentally different” from European peoples (Werbner and Ranger 1996:51).

Bernal’s argument suggests different pigmentations in skin colour, especially when you refer to ‘black’ or darker skins. He mentions that, the “criteria of modern United States of America - where one is not white if one has even a particle of *African* blood” uses variants in conjunction with skin colour (Berlinerblau 1999:149). With reference to race, he mentions the different variants of blackness to justify his argument, with regard to what he think the ancient Egyptians were. He does this when stating that the Egyptians could have been a crossbred of African, Southwest Asian and Mediterranean peoples. It also seems noticeable that he calls the Egyptians *African* and not black or Negroid. He attributes the latter characteristics to the Ethiopians.

Like others, Bernal's explorations seem viable to readers as he broadens the aspect of pigmentations to skin colour. Although he strikes a balance between an Afro-asiatic and a Mediterranean people, he fails to discuss the difference between Egyptian and African. On the other hand, his premise that those staying closer to the Equator are darker in skin colour than those who stay further, is questionable. This premise is not entirely correct, as most West African peoples are darker than Ethiopians who virtually stay on and around the Equator. Hence, Bernal's approach reveals elements of incompleteness. He does not substantiate his arguments with historical facts or archaeological evidences.

Another scholar who advocates a similar position as Bernal is Rafique Ali Jairazbhoy. He bases his arguments on the recent research and archaeological findings on Egypt. As a well-renowned Egyptologist, Jairazbhoy bases his arguments on archaeological artefacts, recently discovered, in and around Egypt. At a recent seminar held at the University of Cape Town on February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2002, Jairazbhoy discussed and shared his archaeological research in detail. In the next few paragraphs, this study will discuss his arguments from that lecture, as his books are not available in South Africa.

Jairazbhoy mentioned that artefacts discovered outside Egypt suggests that the Egyptians influenced many peoples around them. These groups of peoples include Africans, Asians and Europeans. In various ways, these peoples had an impact on the Egyptian culture. He states that two village peoples occupied pre-dynastic Egypt, which refers to the period around 4000 - 3400 BCE. He also mentions that these villagers may have been of 'pure' Egyptian origin.

Jairazbhoy states that these Egyptians were mainly farmers who engaged in the cultivation of corn, wheat, barley, etc. The facial and physical characteristics of these villagers have not been determined and therefore, we do not yet know whether these villagers were of African or Asian origins. Jairazbhoy states that they were of African origin, yet he distinguishes between black African and African, as well as Egyptian and African. He does mention that they could have been purely Egyptian, and not a mixed or Afro-asiatic race.

He seems to differentiate between Africans who were agricultural farmers, and black Africans that were not yet exposed to these forms of agriculture during the pre-dynastic period. It seems important for him to stress this fact, as agriculture was not yet, according to him, practiced in the rest of Africa. Cultivation of corns, as in the case of pre-dynastic Egypt, existed in the area of Mesopotamia around 7000 BCE. He argues that these forms of agriculture probably drifted to Turkey and Europe around 5000 BCE and 4000 BCE respectively. He

suggests that these forms of agriculture arrived in Egypt around 4500 to 4000 BCE.

Furthermore, Jairazbhoy states that there were great contacts made between the inhabitants of Egypt and Mesopotamia, especially the area around Sumer. He bases his argument on various archaeological artefacts, with special reference to a knife handle found at Jabel-el-araq, Egypt, dating back to around 3400 BCE. This knife handle is important because it confirms information regarding various assumptions of ancient Egypt. It depicts a battle between two peoples, where the victors were possibly a nation that focused on sea voyages. After careful examination and research, the evidence suggests that these two peoples referred to the Egyptians and the Sumerians. It also portrays one of the kings sitting on a throne with two lions beside him, wearing a turban (headgear) declaring victory with ivory in his hand. The victorious king is also dressed in foreign clothes wearing a tail from his back.

As part of his findings, Jairazbhoy declares that the victorious king could have been a Sumerian who conquered Egypt, as his dress code was similar to that of other Sumerians of that time. The only difference was the tail he wore, which was Egyptian in origin. Various scholars including Farid and others support the suggestion that ancient Egyptian kings used to wear animal tails (1985:26).

Another area Jairazbhoy focuses on is the physical attributes of the ancient Egyptians. Again, he makes use of archaeological evidence to prove his point. He draws our attention to the four slate palates found in a museum in Paris, which depicts king Narmer who led a conquest on the black Negroes of Nubia. On one of these palates, Narmer is wearing an animal tail. Jairazbhoy mentions that the Egyptians never focused on conquests before the Sumerians took control of Egypt around 3400 BCE. However, Jairazbhoy assumes that the Sumerians introduced the idea of conquests to the Egyptians. During the conquest of Narmer, Egypt exported black Negroes as slaves around 3100 BCE. This conquest probably united the kingdoms of Egypt and that of Nubia, as Egypt was already a remarkable force with a civilisation to be reckoned with. This period became known for good relations between Egypt and Sumer, especially the export of ivory to Sumer. During this period, ancient Egypt probably experienced the Sumerian culture with a probable assimilation of Egyptians (75%) and Sumerians (25%). With the introduction of black Negroes as slaves, further assimilation took place. The possibility of an assimilated culture with the Sumerians is closely linked to the renowned archaeological finding of the Rosetta-Stone in Egypt. It proves that the Egyptians made use of a combination of hieroglyphic, hieratic and demotic writings. The Sumerians were accustomed to the latter two forms of writing. Furthermore, Jairazbhoy states that the Egyptians probably furthered

or continued the inventions which the Sumerians introduced and vice versa.

In the previous paragraphs, Jairazbhoy categorically makes a clear distinction between Egyptians, Negroes and Sumerians (Asians). He also refers to the Negroes as black people and to the Egyptian as African. He makes a very important point by suggesting that all inhabitants of Africa are Africans, which affirms their continental heritage. However, he makes reference to various kinds of peoples who occupied Egypt during this period. In this regard, he states that, the original occupants of Egypt were African in origin. His reference to the term 'African' seems to be relative, as he does not mention any reference to facial characteristics or skin colour. He seems to emphasize a distinction between black and Egyptian, based on their skin colour. He mentions various skin colour pigmentations to prove that the Egyptian, Asian and Negro peoples could have been from different origins. This proves his declaration that a later Egyptian people developed through assimilation with Sumerians, and later with Negroes and other African and Asian peoples.

Jairazbhoy makes very interesting statements regarding ancient Egypt, which he bases on historical and archaeological evidence. He states that the Egyptian people during the reign of Alexander the Great, around 333 BCE already evolved into an Afro-asiatic race through constant crossbreeding and assimilation of African, Asian

and probably European peoples. However, he seems to leave a vacuum in his finding, as he cannot explicitly determine who the original inhabitants of Egypt were. Stating that they were 'purely Egyptian' seems to beg the question of their origin. In the next chapter, this study seeks to turn our attention to the explorations of the African perspective.

#### **2.4 DEBATE FOR AN AFRICAN CIVILIZATION OF EGYPT**

The adherents of this model argue that the original occupants of ancient Egypt (pre-dynastic period) were of black African or Negroid origin (MacDonald 1999:90, 91). Some of them deny that the Egyptians could have been an amalgamation of African, Asian and European peoples. However, they argue that an amalgamated Egyptian people evolved since Asians and Europeans migrated to Egypt, where they made contact with Egyptians of black descent.

An African scholar of Senegalese origins, C.A. Diop who has written *Civilisation and Barbarism* and *The African Origin of Civilisation* states that the Egyptians migrated to the Nile Valley, and that their physical characteristics show many parallels to the Ethiopians. He stressed that the Egyptians were a dark-skinned people with woolly hair (1996:1). Mudimbe confirms Diop's claim by stating that Diodorus of Sicily made reference to the "thick lips and flat noses" of the Egyptians (1994:79).

Furthermore, Diop emphasises what the book of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible mentions regarding the skin colour of the Egyptians (1996:7). According to Hebrew tradition, the Egyptians were the offspring of Ham, son of Noah, who settled in Egypt and other parts of Africa. The Hebrew Bible also states that Mesraim, Chus and Canaan came from Mesopotamia to settle in the Nile Valley. This claim is in agreement with Jairazbhoy's idea of a Mesopotamian invasion of Egypt. With regard to this statement, Diop argues that Asians found an already established Egyptian civilization.

Diop stressed that the Mediterranean peoples referred to Egyptians as Hamites, due to their skin colour and Kemites due to the 'black language' they spoke (1996:7). He supports Herodotus, an eyewitness to Egyptian civilization, who insists on the Negro character of the Egyptians. Herodotus was an old Greek historian and philosopher of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and many scholars refer to him as the father of History, as he was the first person who wrote about foreign peoples. Diop also mentioned that, probably around the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the Egyptians remained black even after intermarriage with other peoples. It is necessary to state that if Herodotus found Egyptian civilization closest to that of a black population, then it is possible that it must have been so from the start (Diop 1996:7, 8).

Another scholar who refers to Herodotus is the author of *The African Origin of Greek Philosophy*, Innocent Onyewuenyi. He states that:

*The Colchians, Egyptians and Ethiopians have thick lips, broad noses, woolly hair and that they are burnt of skin*

(Berlinerblau 1999:69)

As noted above, Herodotus clearly draws a parallel between the Ethiopians and the Egyptians as he distinguishes between Greeks and Egyptians. More importantly, he does not distinguish between black and African peoples. We need to understand that Herodotus travelled quite extensively, and therefore this study concludes that he had a good idea of what was 'black' and 'white'. It becomes necessary to state that the term 'burnt of skin' referenced to the Ethiopians, when he reiterated that the Egyptians were closest to the Ethiopians (Onyewuenyi 1994:68). It seems possible that Herodotus could have known the difference between Ethiopian and Egyptian. He provides enough evidence stating that the Ethiopians and Egyptians resemble a people of the same skin colour and physical appearance. We also note that he does not distinguish between different skin colour variants or pigmentation. What was black to Herodotus, seemed to have been black, and African as Negroid or Egyptian, etc. In his reviews, Onyewuenyi never mentioned any different skin colours to that of the Greeks or Egyptians. What was Greek, according to Herodotus, remained Greek, and what was African (black), possibly remained African. Furthermore, Onyewuenyi mentions that, after the conquest

of Egypt by Alexander the Great, intermarriage between white Greeks and black Egyptians took place (1994:69).

Onyewuenyi's approach to ancient Egyptians is similar to other Afrocentric scholars. He agrees with Diop that the inhabitants of Kemet (Egypt) resembled similar features to their southern neighbours of Nubia (and Ethiopia). He states that crossbred Egyptians were a result of intermarriages. This clearly confirms that he did in fact agree to a notion of a crossbred or Mediterranean Egyptian, but emphasized that they were not a separate race. However, he recognizes them as products of intermarriages between whites (Greeks) and blacks (Egyptians). He challenges traditional scholarship by stating that they used "pen to remove Egypt from Africa" (1994:58). Furthermore, Onyewuenyi states that traditional scholarship has tended to isolate Egypt from the rest of Africa (1994:70). He mentions that the founders of ancient Egypt were black Africans, who likewise were the builders of the pyramids (1994:71). He reiterates that Egyptians, probably around the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, connected strongly to a part of Africa, namely, Ethiopia in terms of language, culture and racial characteristics (Onyewuenyi 1994:76). Thus, Onyewuenyi argues that ancient Egyptians were a people with a darker appearance.

The general trend among Afrocentric scholars including Diop, Onyewuenyi, and others, regard the founders of ancient Egyptian civilization as a black race that migrated from Ethiopia or the ancient Nubian kingdom (Southern Egypt). There seems to be substantial evidence by scholars under discussion suggesting that Egyptians were of Negroid origin. However, most of these scholars use Herodotus as their primary source. The problem with their use of Herodotus and Diodorus of Sicily as primary sources is the fact that little archaeological evidence supports their view. In their polemics against Eurocentric views, African scholars may have overstated or even distorted the evidence in support of their position. It is also a concern that some African scholars could have been extreme in their fight against western and Eurocentric perspectives.

As a scholar and linguist, Farid's theory is an independent perspective that precedes the work of Afrocentric scholarship. His perspective corresponds with the Afrocentric perspective that the racial characteristics of the original inhabitants of ancient Egypt, relate to the black peoples of Africa, probably Nubia. It is rather difficult to distinguish if his perspective regarding Egypt is in agreement with that of Onyewuenyi, Diop and others. This is questionable especially when Farid's arguments focus on tracing the origin of languages used in Egypt and not on Egyptian skin colour. Farid also mentions that the language spoken by the Egyptians links closely to that of ancient

black African peoples. Farid's research suggests that ancient Egyptian resembled closer links with other African languages than Asian or European. He states that many Egyptian consonants and vowels show cognation to Wolof and other West-African languages, especially the use of /g/ or /k/ and /iy/ or /y/ respectively (1985:84, 85). Obenga supports Farid theory when he mentions that African terms for sheep and goats /sr/ and /zr/ show commonalities to its Egyptians counterparts, in comparison to Asian and other European languages (1988:51-58).

Farid notes that both the black African peoples who are the current occupants of North-east Africa and the Egyptians are from the same origins (1985:82). He refers to a possible origin of Egypt's occupants as the highland areas of North Africa. He mentions that the occupants of these highlands and the Egyptians connect genetically to other black African peoples. In their search for greener pastures, Farid argues, that they migrated into two different directions. He mentions that one group moved into the Nile delta, while the other group moved towards West Africa, probably around 2200 BC (1985:83). He bases this view on artefacts found at Kerma and Libya (present day Libya). Some of these artefacts show similar forms of pottery and Saharan motifs, which resemble commonalities in agriculture, weaving and animal domestication (Farid 1985:82, 83). Various forms of rock art found in the Saharan desert, support the idea that the Egyptians

could have lived in the highland area of North Africa. Pre-dynastic art and the Saharan rock art share common ideas of characteristic motifs suggesting similar traits (Farid 1985:82).

Farid declares that "it seems that among Pre-dynastic foreign relations, the Saharans were the first to have significant contact with the Nile Valley, and even formed a part of the Pre-dynastic population" (1985:85). He also states that the ancestors of the Egyptians originally lived in Nubia, which supports the discovery of artefacts by the Oriental Institute at Qustul, Egypt. The evidence supports the argument that the original occupants of Egypt could be from Ethiopian descent. These artefacts include a stone incense burner that portrays a white crowned king sitting on a throne. Farid mentions that the white crown on this Qustul king resembles similar headgear worn by "the rulers of upper Egypt" (1985:26). Farid's mentioning of the white crown and animal tail, is in agreement with Jairazbhoy's research regarding the dress code (headgear and animal tail) of ancient Egyptian kings. It also provides evidence that white crowns were of African origin, as it was unknown to Asian cultures of the same period.

Farid's arguments are supportive of Afrocentric scholarship, which dispute the hypothesis that ancient Egypt was Afro-asiatic or even

European in origin. In this regard, scholars oriented for an Afro-asiatic origin of Egypt, argue that the Afro-asiatic languages originated in Asia. Farid's view on the origin of Egyptian language is similar to that of Losambe, Diop, Obenga and others who argue that ancient Egyptian is closest to the languages of the black peoples of Africa, probably Nubia. A comparison of Egyptian, Afro-Asiatic and black African terms suggest that Egyptian is closer to black African languages, than Asiatic.

Furthermore, Farid alludes that it is the correlation between black African and Egyptian languages that led Obenga and others to recognize an Egyptian language as black African, rather than an Afro-asiatic language. Another proven fact is that the Egyptians often painted monuments depicting themselves the same colour as the Kushites (Farid 1985:26). This supports the view that the Egyptians and black Africans are genetically related. He also mentions that this argument led to the corollary hypothesis that, black Africans and Egyptians spoke similar languages.

Although a linguist by profession, Farid develops several strands of evidence in support of his contention that ancient Egyptians had close links with black Africa. Not only does he use linguistic information but he also employs archaeological evidence of various kinds to support

his contentions. Thus, Farid claims that the historical evidence that black Africans and Egyptians formerly lived in the Sahara, provide substantial evidence supporting a genetic relationship between these groups. Semitic languages consist of many Egyptian loan words, which explain the fact that Semitic speakers lived in a bilingual environment in Egypt, especially referring to the Hebrews who lived there.

## **2.5 SUMMARY**

This chapter explored most of the possible avenues oriented toward discussing the origins of ancient Egyptian civilization. The big question remains: Where do we go from here? Which approach seems most viable to unfold the original inhabitants of Egypt? The answer to these questions should focus on facts, or individual perspective. It should rather consider all the evidences and or archaeological findings. Part of this study is also to put all the various approaches and evidences in perspective in order to arrive at a proper reinvention of ancient Egyptian civilization and its people. After careful research and consideration of various perspectives, this study is oriented towards the debate that argues for an Egyptian civilization, whose origins relate closer to the black African peoples.

The importance of Jairazbhoy's research cannot be over-emphasised as his findings provide various archaeological evidence. His research suggest that the claims and views of Lefkowitz' are untenable. Jairazbhoy has also helped this study by stating that the two ancient villages of Egypt were of Egyptian origin. He does however, not help us much when differentiating between African and Egyptian. This study acknowledges him for his unselfish research, as he preferred to remain 'silent' regarding the identity of these villagers. However, Jairazbhoy could not establish enough evidence to confirm the origin of these villagers. The evidence provided by Obenga and Farid suggests various parallels between ancient Egyptian and other black languages.

Both Farid and Obenga's explorations share commonalities regarding the use of language in ancient Egypt. Both argue that the language used by Egyptians relates closer to black African languages than Asian and European languages. This probably supports Farid's view that Egyptians and black Africans could have been from the same origin. This study does not suggest that the original founders of ancient Egyptian civilization were Negroid, as literary evidence does not suggest otherwise. However, this study suggests that the evidence provided in this chapter favours an Egyptian civilization, which had its origins in Africa. In other words, the evidence provided suggests that the genetics of the inhabitants of ancient Egyptian civilization

seems to be similar to that of ancient black African peoples. An important recommendation to this study is the work of African scholars such as Diop and Onyewuenyi who referred to Herodotus and Diodorus of Sicily. This study does not denounce the works of Lefkowitz and Bernal, as their arguments are not denied their rightful places in history. However, Lefkowitz' view of a probable Greek invasion or migration to Egypt leads this study to the next chapter that discusses the 'wisdom of the Egyptians'.

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### **3. THE WISDOM OF THE EGYPTIANS**

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

The aim of the previous chapter focussed on the debate about the origins of Egyptian civilization and the physical characteristics of its earliest inhabitants. The evidence provided suggests that Egypt's earliest civilization relates closer to Africa than Asia, or even Europe. Similarly, this chapter will focus its attention on the importance of the 'wisdom of the Egyptians', which became a hallmark of the Egyptian civilization. This discussion will argue that the 'wisdom of the Egyptians' is of African origin. This argument, the wisdom of the Egyptians, relates to the whole research, which discusses it within an African framework.

This discussion incorporates a debate that argues various perspectives for and against the wisdom of the Egyptians. Another part of this debate circles on how the wisdom of the Egyptians influenced Greek thought and the rest of the Mediterranean world. Firstly, this chapter will discuss the meaning of the wisdom of the Egyptians. The aim of this section is to relate the wisdom of the Egyptians to the wisdom in the Mediterranean world of the same period. Secondly, this chapter will attempt to provide evidence that the earliest Greek philosophers studied in Egypt, and how their studies influenced Greek philosophy. Thirdly, this chapter will debate the

origins of Greek philosophy from various perspectives. Lastly, this chapter will discuss the looting of the Egyptian library temples.

### **3.2 WHAT WAS THE WISDOM OF THE EGYPTIANS?**

Onyewuenyi states that the wisdom of the Egyptians referred to the instruction of various disciplines by the priest-scholars of Egypt. These disciplines included every kind of philosophy, religion, medicine, law, astronomy, geometry, mathematics, and other sciences (Onyewuenyi 1994:44). The various kinds of instruction operated at centres or library temples at Memphis, Heliopolis and Thebes (Onyewuenyi 1994:44, 45). Onyewuenyi states that these centres of learning formed part of the “Egyptian Mystery System”, as it remains a mystery among traditional scholarship (1994:21). Murphy mentions that the wisdom of the Egyptians is closely associated and defines best with the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible (1968:487). He also mentions that Egyptian literature is truly akin to Old Testament wisdom (1968:489).

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the book of Proverbs acknowledges King Solomon as the wisest person of that time. The book of Proverbs also measures Solomon’s wisdom with the wisdom of the Egyptians (Murphy 1968:489). Some of the wisdom teachings of Solomon (Proverbs 22:17 – 24:22), show parallels to the teachings of pharaoh Amen-em-ope, which dates back to the post-exilic period (Murphy 1968:488). The post-exilic period refers to the period when Israel was

under Babylonian rule. Furthermore, Wright states that the Book of Wisdom resembles the work of Grecian Jews, probably from Alexandria as it shows many parallels to other Jewish-Alexandrian works of that time (1968:556). Notably, the Book of Wisdom is not included in the Hebrew Bible, but was included in the LXX text as the Wisdom of Solomon. The LXX text is the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible (Murphy 1968:486). With its emphasis on Egypt and its relationship to Israel, Wright states that the author(s) were acquainted with "Greek philosophy and culture" (1968:556). The place of composition of the Book of Wisdom is apparently Alexandria, Egypt, which was "the great intellectual and scientific center of the Mediterranean world and one of the largest centers of the Jewish diaspora" (Wright 1968:556). In light of the above claims, scholars seem to display different opinions relating to the origin of the wisdom of the Egyptians. Some argue for a Greek origin of Egyptian wisdom, while others relate it to the Egyptian Mystery System. Hence, the focus of the next section revolves around the impact of Greek scholars who studied in Egypt, and how they have influenced Greek thought.

### **3.3 GREEK PHILOSOPHERS IN EGYPT**

Onyewuenyi states that, "it is a scientific and proven fact that most of the earliest philosophers visited and studied in Egypt (1994:131). Some of these philosophers include Thales, Pythagoras, Socrates, and others. Among others, Onyewuenyi states that Thales, the universally acclaimed father of philosophy, received his training in Egypt before

his migration to Miletus where he founded the Milesian school of philosophy (1994:131). Burns is in agreement with Onyewuenyi when he mentions that the Milesian school of philosophy operated during the sixth century BCE, which birthed Greek philosophy (1984:124). However, most African scholars of the late twentieth century question the validity of Greek philosophy. They emphasize the remarks Aristotle made regarding Thales:

*This revelation by Aristotle concerning ancient Egyptian origin of philosophy is corroborated by other documents showing that Thales, universally acclaimed father of philosophy, studied in Egypt and borrowed his doctrine of the cosmic origin, his geometry and his political and epistemological theories from Egypt where these have been taught and practiced centuries before Thales' birth . . . a second century source which tells us that Thales prior to going to Miletus, had visited and studied philosophy there.*

(Onyewuenyi 1994:46)

In reference to the above quotation, Onyewuenyi's evidence suggests that Thales' studied in Egypt. It also suggests that some of his works shows parallels to Egyptian wisdom. This implicates O'Connor who claims that Thales studied in Greece (1964:2). Further, Onyewuenyi states that Plutarch also confirmed "Thales' doctrine proposing water as principle of all things" which is "adopted from his Egyptian education" (1994:46). It is important to note that evidence does not establish the duration of Thales' visit to Egypt. However, it becomes

necessary to explore Aristotle as evidence suggests a possible duration of his Egyptian studies.

Onyewuenyi asserts that some of the great works of Aristotle include *Physics, The Soul, Politics, Logic, Ethics* and *Metaphysics* (1994:44). Beside these works, he also contributed to the development of the mathematical arts (Berlinerblau 1999:28 and Mudimbe 1994:96). Traditional scholarship, according to Obenga, ascribes Aristotle to be one of the greatest contributors to philosophy (1992:93). It seems somehow possible that Aristotle's contribution to philosophy is very large, especially when Burns states that Aristotle wrote larger volumes of philosophical work than his mentors, Socrates and Plato (1984:129). William Stace assumes that Aristotle has allegedly published four hundred works (Onyewuenyi 1994:45). It is possible that these great works could be a combination of published works by Aristotle's philosophical school. African scholars question validity of Aristotle's published works, and trace its origin to Egypt. The above indicates that most of Aristotle's works published show many parallels to the wisdom of the Egyptians. In this regard, the evidence suggests either that Aristotle's works are of Egyptian origin, or that his Egyptian training influenced his thinking.

Among others, Obenga states that Plato, another philosopher of that time studied in Egypt (1992:100). The education and cultural consciousness of the world regard Plato as a major contributor to its

disciplines (Obenga 1992:100). Traditional scholarship emphasizes that Plato received his training from Socrates, as well as from the Eleatics (Onyewuenyi 1994: 148). They also mention that Plato received further training at the Pythagorean School in southern Italy. Later, this school became the *Academy*. This could probably mean that Plato received his training from Socrates and the Pythagoreans. A possibility of Plato studying in Egypt, to a large extent, could not be traced.

Burns reiterates the importance of Plato's influence on modern educational systems by asserting that, "most of our knowledge comes from Plato" (1984:126). Plato's area of specialization included topics such as psychology, mathematics, geometry, astronomy, epistemology as organic and interrelated subjects, which were meaningful only as variations upon a single theme (Onyewuenyi 1994:44). However, Onyewuenyi states that all these topics already formed part of the various disciplines taught by the priest-scholars of Egypt (1994:45).

While most sources cannot trace the possibility of Egyptian training, many scholars assume that Plato must have studied in Egypt. They base their argument on the fact that Plato's greatest works, *Dialogues* and *The Republic* already formed part of the wisdom of the Egyptians (Onyewuenyi 1994:44). Mudimbe, however, asserts that Isocrates confirmed Plato's studies in Egypt. He alludes that *The Republic* was a mere "Athenian idealization of the Egyptian Mystery System"

(Mudimbe 1994:96). In agreement to Mudimbe, Onyewuenyi asserts that:

*Plato, by visiting their schools [Eleatics and Pythagoreans] and learning from them, was actually learning the philosophy of the Egyptian Mystery System. Finally, he went for specialization to the source and centre of philosophic studies, Egypt, and it is only after he visited Egypt that he returned to Athens and started the most productive period of his life. In William Stace's words: "He now appeared for the first time as a professional teacher and philosopher. He chose for the scene of his activities, a gymnasium, called the Academy." (1994:148)*

The above quotation clearly suggests that Plato's works relate to an Egyptian training. The validity of the above quotation disputes many literary resources taught in Egypt. The possibility of copying the educational system of the 'Ancient Egyptian Mysteries' into Plato's *The Republic*, questions the validity of his work (Onyewuenyi 194:149). The evidence also suggests that Plato's training could have been of Egyptian origin, whether it was on Grecian or Egyptian soil, as his teachers received their training in Egypt (Onyewuenyi 1994:148).

Another Greek philosopher known for his mathematical significance is Pythagoras. Mathematical sciences know him for his significant contribution on the theorem of the right-angled triangle, which students still study at modern-day schools around the globe (Burns

1984:131). Modern scholarship ascribes this theorem to Pythagoras and his Pythagorean School of philosophers who had ostensible influence in antiquity (Obenga 1994:100). Apart from his mathematical significance, Pythagoras' doctrine of The Soul made him well known. In this published work, he describes that the soul operates separately from the body (Freeman 1996:144). While traditional scholarship attributes this mathematical significance to Pythagoras, African scholars are problematizing the authenticity of some of his works, especially the above-mentioned.

Some observe Pythagoras to have travelled and studied in Egypt, while others suggest his association with Egypt. With regard to the historical background on philosophy, Onyewuenyi states that Pythagoras:

*spent twenty-two years studying different disciplines in Egypt under the Egyptian Mystery priests. After his studies, he migrated to Crotona in present-day Italy where he founded a society and taught the philosophy and disciplines of the Mystery System to the Crotonian initiates.*

(1994:132)

In the above quotation, Onyewuenyi suggests that a connection between the Egyptian influence to the life and mathematical significance of Pythagoras. Onyewuenyi states that it was Amasis, king of Egypt, and Polycrates, king of Samos, who introduced him to the priests for his initiation into the Egyptian mysteries (1994:47). His

initiation, as mentioned by Onyewuenyi included circumcision and other trials. The practice of circumcision was also a Near Eastern custom of that time. Circumcision, as an Egyptian custom, was necessary to enter the 'Egyptian Mystery System' for the impartation of specialized knowledge from the Egyptian priest-scholars (Onyewuenyi 1994:47). Circumcision could not have been a Greek cultural practice, as was the case for initiation to the Egyptian system. Origen Adamantius, a first-century scholar writes in support of circumcision as a requirement of the Mystery System that:

*No one among the Egyptians either studied geometry, or investigated the secrets of astronomy, unless circumcision had been undertaken.* (Onyewuenyi 1994:48)

Furthermore, Onyewuenyi states that Pythagoras "sacrificed to the Muses after the priests explained to him the properties of the right-angled triangle" (Onyewuenyi 1994:48). The significance of twenty-two years in Egypt suggests that the wisdom of the Egyptians heavily influenced Pythagoras. Diop declares that Pythagoras was one of the Greeks who most revered the Egyptians, probably due to his extended visit to Egypt (1974:232). Pythagoras is probably one of the best examples that emphasize how the scholar-priests of Egypt influenced Greek philosophers. As mentioned above, African scholars refer to the instruction taught at these Egyptian centres of learning as the Egyptian Mystery System.

In his book, *The African Origin of Greek Philosophy*, Onyewuenyi gives an idea of what the Egyptian Mystery System was. He mentions that:

*The Egyptian Mystery System was a kind of university established by the priest-scholars of Egypt and located in various temples. Every kind of discipline was taught in these temple schools. This study reaffirms that Greece was a colony of the Egyptian kingdom, that the Greeks, the so-called fathers of philosophy, came to Egypt and studied under the Egyptian Mystery System priest-philosophers, and that the theories and doctrines of the Greeks were influenced by their study in Egypt. (1994:21)*

Onyewuenyi asserts that the Egyptian Mystery System schools operated at various venues, including the temples of the Egyptian kingdom at Memphis, Heliopolis and Thebes. These university schools operated at the feet of the Egyptian priest scholars, who also trained the most acclaimed fathers of philosophy (Onyewuenyi 1994:21). In comparison to Greek philosophy, all of the philosophies of the Egyptian Mystery System, as mentioned above, formed part of the philosophy taught by Greek philosophers. This contributes to the debate around the origin of philosophy. Considering the above quotation, it is clear that Onyewuenyi like others, including Diop and Mudimbe, suggests that these mystery schools are the foundation of Egyptian thought, which influenced the rest of the ancient Near

Eastern world. However, traditional scholarship disputes the origins of the wisdom of the Egyptians.

Lefkowitz, among others, criticises the views of scholars oriented towards an Egyptian origin of the wisdom of the Egyptians, especially the contributions of Diop and Onyewuenyi. She regards the Egyptian Mystery System as a myth, which never existed (1996:18). She declares that no substantial facts support the idea that these library schools ever existed. Furthermore, she mentions that the Egyptians invaded Greece during the second millennium BCE. She uses the evidence of a Greek invasion to suggest that Greeks took their philosophy to Egypt, after that invasion, as she argues that philosophy originated in Greece (Lefkowitz 1996:18). However, Lefkowitz' claim of a possible Greek philosophy during the second millennium is disputable as Greek philosophy only started in the sixth century BCE (O'Connor 1964:2).

In his book, *Heresy in the University*, Berlinerblau asserts that Lefkowitz supports her argument by stating that the Greeks "did not speak Egyptian, nor could they draw upon the archives of the Egyptians" (1999:37). She alludes that Greek philosophy remained Greek even in Egypt, especially referring to the Greek inhabitants of Alexandria (Lefkowitz 1996:72). Furthermore, she mentions that these library schools only came into operation after the conquest of Alexander the Great in 332 BCE. Thus, she asserts that these schools

could have advocated a pure Greek philosophy, as Egypt was 'hellenised' after Greek invasion. The hellenisation of Egyptians resulted into an assimilation of a Greek culture and philosophy in Egypt. Among others, Lefkowitz gives little credit to Egyptians, when she argues that Alexandria consisted of Grecian inhabitants. Assimilation between Greeks and Egyptians did not take place for a number of years (1996:72). She alludes further that the only reason Greeks went to Egypt was due to their scientific demonstrations and experiments. Although some arguments may seem justifiable, she does not state the exact reason why Greek philosophers visited and studied in Egypt.

#### **3.4 THE ORIGINS OF PHILOSOPHY**

This section focuses on the debate regarding the origins of philosophy. Webster's Encyclopedia refers to the term philosophy as the study that is "concerned with the principles of wisdom, thinking and knowledge" (1992:2013). Similarly, it could also refer to the 'love of wisdom'. The 'love of wisdom' shows many parallels to the wisdom of the Egyptians. However, traditional scholarship argues that the discourse of philosophy originated among the Greeks (Freeman 1996:140–149). Among others, Freeman attributes most recognition to Greek philosophers like Thales, Pythagoras, Aristotle, and other Greek philosophers. In comparison to Freeman, Burns has given much respect for Egyptian thought, while at the same time attributes the achievements of Greeks to be the true development of philosophy,

especially after the Greek invasion of Egypt (1984:124). In his book, *Western Civilizations*, Burns suggests that the origin of philosophy started in the Milesian school of Thales during the sixth century BCE (1984:124). Webster's Encyclopedia states that "Historically, philosophical as opposed to religious or magical speculation arose in Greece in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC in the attempts of the school of Miletus" (1992:2013). In relation to traditional and western scholarship, is an African perspective, which provides an alternative look at philosophy.

As an African scholar, Diop is of the impression that the origin of philosophy links close to Egypt. He states that, "the Greeks merely continued and developed, sometimes partially, what the Egyptians had invented" (Diop 1974:230). Diop's claim suggests that the foundation of Greek philosophy reflects the wisdom of the Egyptians. Obenga iterates that, the influence of Egyptian thought on Greek philosophers, are evident as observed in their writings (1994:60). It is evident that Diop links the origin of philosophy to the wisdom of the Egyptians, as the evidence suggests many parallels between Greek philosophy and the wisdom of the Egyptians.

The science that studies the origin of words (Etymology), has difficulty in tracing the origin of the term 'philosophy', as it could not be established in either Greek or Indo-European languages (Obenga 1992:100). Obenga suggests that it could possibly be of Egyptian origin, probably among the priest-scholars of Egypt. Furthermore,

Obenga mentions that it is “a well established, unarguable, historical fact” that Greece only awoke to science and philosophy, after its westward and eastward expansion from the eighth to the sixth century BCE (1992:60). His approach is in agreement with Onyewuenyi and others who argue that the most astounding Greek scholars studied in Egypt. Considering Obenga’s statement that philosophy was already part of the wisdom of the Egyptians before this time, seems to contrast scholars oriented towards a Greek origin of philosophy.

This debate challenges various scholars, whether they argue for an Egyptian or Greek origin of philosophy. It is important to note that many perspectives could share light on this topic, especially when evidence is scantily. While Obenga argues that Greek philosophy displays a clear demonstration of Egyptian influence, we need to understand that the Greek origin of philosophy was an already accepted notion in the modern world. On the other hand, Lefkowitz seems to have reason to believe that the Afrocentric approach ‘is based on myth’. However, it is necessary to state that evidence supports the influence of Egyptian thought on the various nations of the Mediterranean World. This includes Greek thought, as Diop and others state that Greeks could have developed what the Egyptians invented. On the other hand, it would be inappropriate to state that modern philosophy originated either in Egypt or in Greece, when literary evidence does not support it. However, this paper does not suggest that all elements of philosophy originated in Egypt. It is

possible that the wisdom of the Egyptians influenced near Eastern philosophy, as well as Greek philosophy.

### **3.5 THE EGYPTIAN LIBRARY-TEMPLES**

The wisdom of the Egyptians, as mentioned above, related closely to Greek philosophy. The priest-scholars of Egypt were responsible for teaching the wisdom of the Egyptians at library temples which operated like small university schools at Memphis, Alexandria, Thebes, etc. (Onyewuenyi 1994:21). It was on the account of these operations that the wisdom taught at temple schools were referred to as the 'Egyptian Mystery System' (Onyewuenyi 1994:22). It probably remains as 'mystery schools' when traditional literary works do not support it. These temples were renowned for their places of learning which influenced the countries of the Mediterranean world (Wright 1968:556). Scholars including Lefkowitz, Burns, Freeman, and others give little or no credit to an Egyptian origin of these centres. They question the validity of the Egyptian school system, as evidence does not trace such centres.

The possibility and validity of these statements or assumptions can be traced to the time of Alexander the Great. Alexander, who received his training from Aristotle, was crowned pharaoh soon after his successful conquest of Egypt in November 332 BCE (Onyewuenyi 1994:157). Onyewuenyi also states that the conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great probably became the "genesis of western philosophic and

technical knowledge” (1994:158). On the other hand, it could well have been the exodus of Egyptian wisdom or philosophy.

During Alexander’s reign over Egypt, Onyewuenyi states that the “temples and libraries of the great cities of Thebes, Memphis, and Heliopolis were looted and the sacred books and manuscripts carried off to Macedonia and Athens” (1994:155–157). Onyewuenyi supports the idea that Alexander sent these books to Greece where they landed in the hands of none other than Alexander’s teacher, Aristotle. O’Connor argues that Alexander received his training from Aristotle (1964:36). This probably suggests, according to Onyewuenyi and others, why Aristotle published so many works. The works Aristotle produced show various parallels to the wisdom of the Egyptians. However, Onyewuenyi makes the following statements regarding Alexander:

*... for he sent hundreds of natural-history specimens home to Greece to his old teacher Aristotle, then teaching in Athens. He was as much interested in science as he was in his conquest and his great campaign became the first scientific expedition in history. The looting of Egyptian libraries occasioned, in modern parlance, the transfer of technology in every field of learning and culture to the Western world.* (1994:157)

Onyewuenyi’s evidence provided above suggests that Aristotle’s philosophic works relate not only to the wisdom of the Egyptians, but

indicates that Aristotle had close ties with the priest-scholars of Egypt. Herodotus' claims suggest that the Egyptians "were the inventors of the doctrine of the soul" which later were attributed to Aristotle (Onyewuenyi 1994:46). Onyewuenyi and others question Aristotle's various doctrines, which already formed part of the disciplines taught by the Egyptian scholar-priests. These disciplines became the foundations of various principles under the Egyptian Mystery System as "the wisdom of the Egyptians" (Onyewuenyi 1994:44). In relation to Aristotle's works, Mudimbe alludes that, Aristotle was "fascinated by the Egyptians and the power of their priests", who were the "inventors of the mathematical arts" (1994:96). In relation to mathematical arts, Onyewuenyi quotes what Aristotle writes:

*When all such inventions [inventions related to the necessities of life and art] were already established, the sciences which do not aim at giving [physical] pleasure or at the necessities of life were discovered, and first in the places where men began to have leisure. That is why the mathematical arts [science of precise knowledge or philosophy] were founded in Egypt; for there the priestly caste was allowed to be at leisure.*

(Onyewuenyi 1994:46)

This study could not establish sufficient primary literary sources, which suggest that Aristotle studied at the feet of the Egyptian Mystery System schools. However, it can only assume that he must

have studied in Egypt prior to the Egyptian conquest of Alexander the Great. On the other hand, Burns provides evidence that he studied under Plato's Academy, at the age of seventeen (1984:129). This evidence also reveals that he held different beliefs regarding a spiritual outlook to his predecessors, Plato and Socrates. Normally, the works of students reveal a lot about their teachers, which was not the case with Aristotle. This study can thus assume that most of his writings must have derived from the libraries of the Egyptian Mystery System, which Alexander the Great probably looted.

Contrary to the claim by Lefkowitz and others, is the declaration by Obenga, Onyewuenyi and Diop, which emphasizes that most Greek philosophers, probably two-thirds, could have studied in Egypt. These scholars claim that Greek philosophers taught Egyptian philosophy in Greece, in the same manner they received their training in Egypt. On the other hand, they seem to agree that the 'wisdom of the Egyptians' was borrowed or probably stolen from Egypt. George James supports the importance of the Egyptian Mystery System libraries with regard to the source and foundation of Greek learning when he said:

*It is therefore an erroneous belief that the Greeks, on Egyptian soil, and through their own ability, set up a great university at Alexandria and turned out great scholars. On the other hand, since it was a well-known fact that Egypt was the land of temples and libraries, we could see how comparatively easy it*

*was for the Greeks to strip other Egyptian libraries of their books in order to maintain the new library at Alexandria, after it had already been looted by Aristotle and his pupils. The Greeks converted the Royal Library of Alexandria into a research centre by transferring Aristotle's school and pupils from Athens to this great Egyptian library, and therefore the students who studied there receive instructions from Egyptian priests and teachers until they died out. The difficulty of language and interpretation made it imperative for the Greeks to use Egyptian teachers. The Greeks did not carry culture and learning to Egypt, but found it already there, and wisely settled in that country in order to absorb as much as possible of its culture.*

(Onyewuenyi 1994:159)

George James supports Onyewuenyi that Aristotle symbolically looted the library temples and that Aristotle became the beneficiary of these great books and texts. These claims by Onyewuenyi are very important and necessary for this research. However, it does not provide substantial evidence, to a certain degree, that Egyptian philosophy was 'stolen' and sent to Aristotle. On the other hand, these claims are not denied when the arguments made are vital for further research. It neither confirms nor denies that philosophy started in Egypt, or that it did not. It does, however, suggest that the influence of Egyptian culture and religion on Greek thought cannot be denied, and vice versa. Not many works agree to the destruction of these wisdom schools. However, this paper suggests that, Lefkowitz and

others acknowledge the highly respected culture of the Egyptians and that it influenced Greek thought. The evidence provided favours the wisdom of the Egyptians as an Egyptian invention.

### **3.6 SUMMARY**

This chapter provided information showing that the Mediterranean world was familiar with wisdom literature. It has also provided evidence that the wisdom of the Egyptians influenced Jewish wisdom literature. Onyewuenyi's claims suggest that library temples especially in Alexandria, Memphis and Thebes operated as small university schools for teaching the wisdom of the Egyptians. Various literatures refer to these temples as the Egyptian Mystery System schools. Whether the 'Egyptian Mystery System' was a term developed by African scholars, remains questionable, while traditional literary sources do not affirm this concept. Lefkowitz, among others, is one of only a few scholars who not only mentions it, but also states that it was non-existent (1996:126).

The evidence provided by Lefkowitz supports a claim that Egyptian wisdom is of Greek origin. The only link to this claim could be that the centre of Alexandria used Greek as medium of instruction. However, it was only after the conquest of Alexander the Great in 332 BCE that Greeks took full control of Egypt. It is also since then that Alexandria, centre with the biggest Jewish immigrant contingent of the diaspora (Jewish exile) evolved into a Greek-speaking city (Wright 1968:556).

This probably supports why the book of Wisdom was written in Greek. African scholars declare and suggest that the wisdom of the Egyptians was an Egyptian invention well before the Greek conquests of Egypt. In comparison to the evidence on Egyptian civilization provided above, which was around 2200 BCE, Thales' school of philosophy was only founded in the sixth century BCE. This suggests that the wisdom of the Egyptians operated well before the origins of Greek philosophy.

Diop, Onyewuenyi, Obenga and others, concerning claims by scholars oriented towards a Greek origin of Egyptian wisdom agree that the original founders of Greek philosophy visited and studied in Egypt. This study has provided enough evidence suggesting that Thales, Socrates and Pythagoras have studied in Egypt. It has also suggested that Thales, father of philosophy, only started his school of philosophy after he visited Egypt. Pythagoras' twenty-two years of study in Egypt could have laid the foundation to his own knowledge and philosophical works. This study argues, as evidence suggests, that Aristotle became the beneficiary of Egyptian documents after the looting of the library temples. It also argues that most of Aristotle's work relate close to the wisdom of the Egyptians, especially his, *The Republic*. As mentioned above, this work (*The Republic*) suggests a mere Greek version of an Egyptian state of that time.

Therefore, this study suggests that the long journey of Greek philosophers to Egypt was in fact a journey of accomplishing wisdom

at the feet of the priest-scholars. It has also established evidence on how the wisdom of the Egyptians influenced the development of the peoples of the Near Eastern world. Bernal's evidence largely agrees on the influence of the Egyptians on the respected philosophy of the Greeks (1987:242). Nonetheless, this study would like to add that the intercultural relations in Egypt have influenced each other in various ways. The claim by African scholars, including Onyewuenyi, Obenga and others, that Greece stole its philosophy from Egypt is an area needing further requiring research, as this study could not establish enough evidence to confirm it (1994:159). Similarly, evidence provided refutes the claim by scholars, including Lefkowitz and others that, Egypt borrowed its philosophy from Greece (1996:18). It becomes necessary to state that the wisdom of the Egyptians shows may parallels and analogous features to Greek philosophy.

The claim that Aristotle received most of his work from the library temples of Egypt needs to be problematized. It seems a vital area for further research. On one hand, Aristotle could have received some of that documentation, and on the other, he could have received small portions or even nothing at all. However, Onyewuenyi and others, suggest that Aristotle did receive some specimens from Egypt based on the similarities shown between his work and the wisdom of the Egyptians. This study also acknowledges the cry by Africa, for recognition as a continent that contributed to the development of philosophy, religion, etc. Hence, this study suggests that the wisdom

of the Egyptians and Greek philosophy show many commonalities, and that both have influenced each other in many ways. The outcry for recognition by African scholars fits into the broader field of study, which aims at looking at African texts and literature through the lens of an African.

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## 4. REPRESENTATION OF EGYPT IN SACRED LITERATURE

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter emphasized how Egypt influenced the Greeks and other peoples around the Mediterranean Sea. This chapter will focus on the representation of Egypt among various sacred literatures. It will also discuss the Egyptian influence on various religious traditions. Egyptian religious practices have, either directly or indirectly influenced various religious traditions of the ancient Near East. This chapter will also argue that the representation of Egypt in sacred literature was either negated or trivialized. It will focus on the reading of sacred texts through the lens of an African.

Sacred literatures especially that of the religions mentioned above, have not attributed sufficient recognition to Egypt in reference to their contributions towards its religious development. Most authors do mention some of the contributions of Egypt, but mostly display and convey it in a pejorative manner (Holter 2000:94). Scholars and theologians from various perspectives seem to be reluctant to emphasize Egypt's role in ancient religious scholarship. Knut Holter, author of *Yahweh in Africa*, agrees to the reluctance of traditional scholarship regarding Africa's contribution towards other peoples by stating that:

*Only a brief glance into the current scholarly literature on*

*the OT is enough to realise that traditional western OT scholarship has not shown much interest in the portrayal of Africa in the OT. On the contrary, western literature on the OT, from Bible atlases and histories of Israel to dictionaries and commentaries, has been accused of reflecting a more or less deliberate de-Africanisation.*

(Holter, 2000:94)

In the article, *Who was Hagar?* John Walters states that the portrayal of black peoples in the Hebrew Bible has always been a difficult subject (1991:187). In comparison to Walters, Felder states that bible scholars have limited their focus of the Bible to the Greco-Roman world, which contributed towards the alleged de-Africanisation of the New Testament (1991:144).

However, this chapter is limited to the impact of Egypt on other religions, and not the reasons why Egyptians and other black peoples held inferior roles. Various forms of literary evidence, on the other hand, provide us with information on Egypt that does not portray it in a negative manner. The emphasis should be on recognition and not the portrayal of insufficient or unreasonable acknowledgement, as is the case in sacred literature. Firstly, this chapter will discuss Egypt as a safe haven, as opposed to a place of slavery. Secondly, it will discuss how the customary practices of Monotheism and Circumcision influenced other religions around the Mediterranean Sea. Thirdly, this

chapter will discuss the Hagar-Sarah and Ishmael-Isaac narratives where it will look at these texts within an African framework.

#### **4.2 EGYPT AS SAFE HAVEN OR PLACE OF SLAVERY**

One of the areas where Egypt received recognition is where literature refers to it as a place of asylum. The Hebrew people before their exodus, on the other hand, held different views when they compared their experiences in Egypt with that of hardship and slavery (Exodus 20). Hence, this study looks at Egypt as a possible 'safe haven' or place of refuge.

Abraham (Abram before his covenant with the Hebrew god) was the first person mentioned in the Hebrew Bible who went down to Egypt due to the highly unpredictable rains in Canaan (or Palestine). The lack of rain was the sole reason for the often-occurring famines (Genesis 12:10). The author of the book of Genesis declares that Abraham received instruction from his god to go down to Egypt. Egypt was fortunate in comparison to Canaan and other neighbouring countries with, good weather and sufficient water from the banks of the River Nile. Similarly, Jacob and his family migrated to Egypt due to constant famines in Canaan (Genesis 46:1-6). In this regard, Egypt became a place of refuge or safe haven to its new visitors. On the other hand, we can assume that many people visited Egypt for various other reasons.

One of the visitors, and probably the most important for Christianity, is Jesus Christ who became their mediator. In the same manner, Egypt became a safe haven for Jesus and his parents (Garland 1993:84). The New Bible Commentary regards Egypt as a “natural asylum for Jews” (Hill 1990:86). In the second chapter of the book of Matthew, Jesus’ parents had to flee to Egypt due to King Herod’s threat to kill all children under the age of two years. This narrative shows a parallel of a persecution, escape and return, to the early life of Moses in Egypt (Schweitzer 1977:43). One can only assume the amount of trust the Hebrew god had in Egypt, which was favourable to the developmental stages of the life of his ‘son’.

The reader does not often realise that Jesus spent a large part of his childhood in Egypt (Matthew 2). The Egyptian culture and lifestyle probably influenced his life as discovered in his later years (Hill 1990:85). One may argue that Jesus probably embraced the philosophy of the Egyptians until the age of twelve, when he moved with his parents to Palestine. Schweitzer also mentions the possibility that the miracles performed showed parallels to his Egyptian influence (1977:44). The author of the book of Matthew, and probably Luke, were reluctant to elaborate on his early childhood. These authors do not mention the possibility of an industrialised country in contrast to an undeveloped Palestine. This suggests that authors of the various Gospels (Christian Bible) never focused on Egypt.

The land of Egypt experienced less famines compared to Canaan. Egypt's geographical conditions are conducive for cultivation and fresh produce. The River Nile and Egypt's weather patterns, among other conditions, attributed much to the fertility of Egypt. The reader grapples with a scenario where the Hebrew god made certain promises to his followers. These promises are very problematic as they implicated various situations. Gerhard von Rad maintains a similar position by arguing that the essence of Judaism is rooted in the 'promised land' (1966:76). One may argue why their god inspired and encouraged his followers to 'possess' the land of Canaan when it had its native citizens before the rulers of Israel dispossessed it. Surely, one would question a god who promises land already occupied by others. On the other hand, the 'promised land' could have referred to, an area which was not occupied by indigenous people.

The situation regarding the 'promised land' does not help the reader to discover its function in the broader context. There seems to be some inconsistency when trying to discover the Promised Land. On one hand, Jacob never witnessed the fulfilment of the Promised Land, and on the other, he died a stranger in a 'foreign land' depicted as Egypt (Genesis 40:12). Similarly, Joshua became the leader of the Hebrews when they entered Palestine, as Moses died before they crossed the River Jordan (Deuteronomy 34). Strangely enough, all patriarchal fathers of the Hebrews (Israelites) visited and experienced the fertility of Egypt, yet they never experienced the 'promised land'. Moses, who

led the Israelites out of Egypt, also never witnessed it. These arguments direct one's idea to a possibility that the 'promised land' could have referred to Egypt. In support of this argument is the fact that Egypt fulfilled all the geographical attributes of a 'promised land' (Reader 1998:189). Other possibilities exist that the "richness and fertility of Egypt" as the 'promised land' could even be "likened to the Garden of Eden" (Genesis 13:10), as it constitutes the background for the growth of the people of Israel" (Holter 2000:98). This study seeks to maintain that the possibility of Egypt as the 'promised land' or even as a seasonal place of asylum, should not be discarded. While literary evidence does not support the notion of Egypt as the 'promised land', both traditional and modern scholarship agree that, it was known as a place of refuge or safe haven for asylum-seekers. In many instances, Egypt refers to, the place of slavery (Exodus 20) while little references portray it as a place of refuge. Among others who enjoyed Egypt as a place of refuge was Jesus, the son of the Christian god, as well as the patriarchs and the Hebrews. The next section will discuss the relation between customary practice of Egyptian monotheism and the Hebrews.

### **4.3 MONOTHEISM**

One of the areas that depict the reluctance of authors of sacred literature could be associated with the customary practice of monotheism. The principle of monotheism is a foundational pillar among many religions around the world. This study seeks to portray

how authorship of three of the largest religions in the modern world: Islam, Christianity and Judaism, was reluctant to acknowledge Egyptian influence of monotheism on other religions. These religions are also referred to as, the great monotheistic religions.

Webster's Encyclopaedia describes monotheism as a belief in only one single god (1992:1747). Most adherents to these religions, whether observant or not, agree in the belief of a single supreme god. Historical and literary evidence support the idea that the origin of these religions refer to the same ancestor, namely Abraham. In this regard many believe that Abraham, and his descendants introduced this belief to the Israelites. Others maintain that monotheism did not emerge until after the exilic period. Another viewpoint suggests a type of quantum leap from polytheism (belief in more than one god) to monotheism (belief in a single god), took place in Jewish religion (Christen 1969:67). Contrary to these views is the idea held by other adherents who maintain that Moses gave birth to the monotheistic faith (Gottwald 1985:194). From a hypothetically point of view, little or no reference is made to Egypt. Hence, this study seeks to provide evidence suggesting that the principle of Hebraic (Jewish) monotheism shows many parallels to Egyptian monotheism.

Whether the patriarchs introduced monotheism to the Hebrews, or Moses or later, does not implicate the stance of this study. More importantly, literary evidence traces the origins of monotheism to

Egypt. Before 1400 BCE, the ancient world was probably unaware of monotheism, as it was surely not part of the religious groups in the ancient Near Eastern countries. It was only around 1375 BCE that Pharaoh Akhenaton introduced this Egyptian religion, the worship of Aton, to Egypt (Christen 1969:25). It was the introduction of a pure or probably primitive form of monotheism, as the pharaoh abandoned all other forms of worship in Egypt. The introduction of monotheism to the Egyptians took place before the Hebrews left Egypt. When the Hebrews left Egypt, which was around 1358 to 1350 BCE, Pharaoh Akhenaton had already died (Christen 1969:44). Throughout their sojourn in the desert, the Hebrews continued to serve other gods. This was evident whenever Moses left them to speak to Yahweh on the mountains of the Arabian Peninsula (Exodus).

Literary evidence suggests Moses as a late construct for introducing monotheism to the Hebrews (Gottwald 1985:194). However, this study seeks to suggest that, the Egyptian form of monotheism had influenced Moses, as he was a nobleman in the court of Pharaoh Akhenaton. Similarly, one can refer to Moses as Egyptian, which was his place of birth, and the fact that he spent most of his life in Egypt. If Moses should be attributed the person who introduced monotheism to the Hebrews, then this study suggests that his idea of monotheism originated from Egypt (Gottwald 1985:194). According to The Jerome Biblical Commentary (Volume II), Albright suggests that Akhenaton's form of monotheism has influenced the Hebrews, as well as Moses,

before they left Egypt (North 1968:664). On the other hand, many scholars agree that the principle of monotheism was a later literary accretion (Huesman 1968:57).

It is necessary to state that the emphasis of this study is not really to focus on where monotheism originated, but rather on informing us how it influenced the religions around the Mediterranean Sea, especially Hebraic religion. While the religions of the ancient Near East were mostly polytheistic in nature, one can certainly understand the influence of Egyptian monotheism on the Hebrews, who had served the Egyptians for about four hundred years. This study does not suggest that the Hebrews discovered monotheism in Egypt, as literary evidence does not support this notion. However, literary evidence suggests that elements of Egyptian monotheism are evident in Hebraic tradition, and that it connects closely to Egyptian monotheism, which Moses was 'accustomed' to (Gottwald 1985:194).

#### **4.4 CIRCUMCISION**

As in the case of monotheism, the practice of circumcision as portrayed in sacred literature does not give any recognition to Egypt. Traditional scholarship is of the opinion that circumcision was a traditional ritual among the peoples of the ancient Near East, which was also an ancient practice among the Hebrews (Kearney 1968:129). Others suggest that circumcision was part of a covenant agreement, which the Hebrew god instituted with Adam, Noah, Abraham and

others (Maly 1968:21). Another viewpoint suggests that the Hebrews went through circumcision before they entered Canaan, which was well after they left Egypt.

Webster's Encyclopaedia describes circumcision as "the removal of all or part of the foreskin of the penis" (1992:583). This customary practice does not seem to be practiced among female adherents, although its known among primitive peoples. In the modern-day context, the practice of circumcision takes place for religious purposes as well as for medical reasons. According to literary evidence, this practice became part of various covenants as mentioned above (Genesis 17). In *A History of Israel*, John Bright states that the covenant agreement was a promise repeatedly renewed, as witnessed in Genesis (15:5, 13-16 and 18:18). With reference to Leviticus (12:3), the author states that the covenant agreement between Moses and his god also included the practice of circumcision.

Most of the covenants mentioned above, implicate literary evidence that suggests circumcision as a sign of such an agreement. The validity of circumcision and, why it had to be re-emphasised with the renewal of a covenant, remains questionable. It seems to be confusing to use circumcision as a sign of a covenant. On the other hand, it could mean that their god only reminded them on renewal of a covenant. When one looks at the possibility of a circumcised Hebrews before they left Egypt then its connection to Egypt makes sense. This

clears the air for a possible origin of this ancient customary practice. It would also confirm that their practice of circumcision originated in Egypt, which was a pre-requisite for gaining the 'wisdom of the Egyptians' (Onyewuenyi 1994:48).

Literary evidences do not support the idea that those who sojourned were circumcised which opens up other possibilities for further exploration. The possibility that they practiced circumcision before crossing the Jordan bears much weight. On one hand, it traces monotheism to Egypt, while on the other hand it could have referred to a renewal of the covenant. In this regard, the Hebrews consisted of a combination of various peoples, including peoples from Africa, Arabian peoples and Hebrews (Copher 1991:158). However, Maly suggests that the practice of circumcision received "the full religious significance indicated here only at the time of the Exile" (1968:21). If this was the case, its origin could also have been traced to, Egypt. Supporting this claim is the notion that Alexandria (Egypt) constituted of the largest Jewish community during the exilic period (Wright 1968:556). Once again, Egyptian monotheism to have influenced even exilic Hebrews (Jews) seems possible. Whether the Hebrews adhered to circumcision before or after the exilic period, the Egyptian influence on their lifestyle is evident. This does not confirm that circumcision originated in Egypt, as evidence suggests that Egyptian monotheism has influenced Hebrew practices, be it from a direct or indirect manner.

#### 4.5 THE HAGAR-SARAH DEBATE

With regard to Egyptian influence on monotheism and circumcision, this section will argue that Egyptians did contribute to the Hebraic community. In this regard, literary evidence seems to disparage Egypt's role. Many narratives in sacred literature portray elements of reluctance or 'prejudice' toward Egyptians, or even portray Egypt in a pejorative manner. This narrative describes the story of Abraham and his wives, as described in the Hebrew Bible. The narrative encapsulates a patriarchal father's attempt to get an heir, as his wife Sarah was barren (Genesis 16:1-16). The story shows elements of tension when Abraham received an 'heir' through his wife's slave-girl, Hagar. This study seeks to use this story to suggest that various forms of biases against Egyptians did occur in sacred literature. Some of these forms of prejudices include gender, status and ethnic biases.

The Hagar-Sarah narrative expands on the tension between Hagar and Sarah (Sarai before Abraham's covenant with the Hebrew god). Tension mounted when Hagar fell pregnant with Abraham's child. Hence, the next few paragraphs will attempt to trace and argue the tensions between the two women. It starts with the dialogue between Hagar and Sarah:

*'My wrong be upon you! I gave you my maid into your embrace; and when she saw that she had conceived, I became despised in her eyes.. The Lord judge between you and me. So Abraham said unto Sarah, 'Indeed your maid is in your hand; do to her as*

*you please' And when Sarah dealt harshly with her, she fled from her presence.* (Genesis 16:6 - 7)

The narrative depicts Sarah as a protagonist (main or good character) and Hagar as an antagonist (adversary). Many ancient Eastern religions including Mesopotamian Law, which Abraham was accustomed to, allowed men to obtain children from their concubines, especially when the first wife was barren (Ellis 1968:192). Slaves were included in the husband's estate, which means that the wife had full control over slave-girls. Most countries of the ancient Near East regarded barrenness as a woman's deepest social stigma, as it could affect their social status (Walters 1992:191). It is probably true that Sarah's barrenness made her jealous of her slave-girl, and therefore she despised her. Genesis 16 describes Hagar as arrogant and rebellious. Seen from another perspective, it becomes necessary to understand Hagar's response when her mistress treated her with abhorrence. The narrative clearly shows elements of prejudice towards the slave-girl. Elements of prejudice are disputable when one looks at other narratives where the first wife kept her status, even in the case of barrenness. Genesis 29 also suggests that barrenness had the same effect when referring to the Rachel-Rebecca narrative. This narrative does not portray elements of prejudice, although the notion of an heir was controversial.

It becomes necessary to question whether this narrative portrays elements of racial biases towards Hagar, who was Egyptian by birth. On the other hand, the notion of social standing also seems to be a possibility. Literary evidence suggests that it was not the case due to the fact that, the inhabitants of the ancient Near East had more or less the same physical appearances (Felder 1991:128). Later evidences suggest that the Hebrews/Israelites, descendants of Abraham, were probably an amalgamation of African and Asian peoples (Felder 1991:128). Hence, the evidence suggests that this narrative portrays elements of prejudice of status between these two women. Firstly, the mistress abuses her status as primary wife by treating the secondary wife with contempt. Secondly, the banishment of the slave-girl would reduce Hagar's social status to that of a foreign single mother, which brought about a shameful experience during that time. Although the narrative describes her bad treatment, her social status did not allow her to retaliate.

On the contrary, Sarah described Hagar's reactions as rebellion (Genesis 16). More importantly, Hurrian Law prohibited the expulsion of slave-girls, especially when a son was born out of a union between husband and concubine-wife (Bright 1972:78). It is possible that Sarah would struggle to accept Hagar as co-wife to Abraham, and the child as legal heir to Abraham. This probably explains Abraham's reluctance to send Hagar and the child away (Genesis 21).

Abraham's attitude to the whole situation contributed towards the drama and hostility between Sarah and Hagar. This is confirmed when he replied to Sarah that "your maid is in your hand; do to her as you please" (Genesis 16:6). Besides an abuse of status, this narrative shows elements of ethnic bias against Egyptians. Although Hagar was a slave-girl in Abraham's household, Sarah also capitalised on the notion that Hagar was a stranger in a foreign land. Sarah abused her authority as primary wife to vindicate the response of an acquiescent husband (Weems 1991:75). Weems states that this narrative holds many analogous forms to the plight of women for survival as Hagar's actions justified Sarah treatment (1991:76). Hagar was not willing to accept such harsh treatment, which resulted in her expulsion. One can also understand Sarah's plight for survival as her failure would probably have reduced her status to that of secondary wife (Maly 1968:20). Whichever way one looks at this situation, this study seeks to empathise with Hagar, as she had to abide with inhumane circumstances. Sarah's actions do not justify her plea for a son.

Modern day Feminism and Womanism probably shares in the experience of Hagar, as no woman should ever be allowed, or have the power to ill-treat fellow human beings. Feminist theologians challenge the notion, which regard the male as the normative and dominant representative of society, while the female is regarded as subordinate and auxiliary to the male (Weems 1991:57-60). Webster's Encyclopedia states that scholars who held similar beliefs to that of

Feminists, criticise any form of male arrogance, and strive towards achieving equality on the basis of “social customs and attitudes” towards achieving women’s liberation (1992:2765). With reference to the above remarks, feminists would steer the focus back to the patriarchal father, whose acquiescence was responsible for the whole situation. Seen from a modern-day perspective, Abraham’s actions lacked responsibility and accountability towards his child. He was the only person, with both power and authority, who could have changed and stopped the hostility between the two women. However, Abraham’s unjust attitude contributed to Sarah, who decided Hagar’s fate. There is no literary evidence that support or justify the actions of the first or primary wife of a patriarchal father. With reference to other patriarchal fathers, similar situations occurred, but no documentation provides us with signs of hostility among primary and or secondary wives. Further, the Hagar-Sarah debate resulted in another narrative, referred to as Ishmael-Isaac narrative.

#### **4.6 ISHMAEL AND ISAAC**

The focal point of this section will be a continuation of the situation between Hagar and Sarah. In the previous section, this study has provided evidence that supports the idea that sacred literature revealed elements of biases against Africans, and particularly female Egyptians. In this section, this study will seek to continue the argument that authors showed elements of biases toward non-

Hebrews (non-Israelites), especially Egyptians. This study has chosen the Ishmael-Isaac narrative in order to further this argument.

The Ishmael-Isaac narrative remains an age-old debate among traditional and modern scholarship. In continuation with Hagar-Sarah narrative, authors of sacred literature describe the representation of Egyptians in a pejorative or reluctant manner (Holter 2000:94). The Ishmael-Isaac narrative is so controversial that it changes the essence of both the Islamic and Jewish religions. This narrative describes the first two sons of Abraham, where both mothers fought for their sons to obtain status as a legal heir for Abraham. As mentioned above, this situation created elements of animosity between both mothers.

Jewish and Christian scholarship support literary criticism, which regards Isaac as the legal heir to Abraham (Genesis 17). However, Islamic scholarship maintains that the text (xxxvii verses 100-105) in *The Qur'an* depicts Ishmael as Abraham's legal heir. The Islamic sacred text bases its argument on the ancient Near Eastern practice that the first-born son becomes legal heir of a man's estate (Maly 1968:20). Likewise, Islamic texts claim that Ishmael was supposedly 'sacrificed' instead of Isaac, as mentioned in Genesis 22. Islamic scholarship argues that the Hebrew god's instruction to Abraham to sacrifice his 'only' son referred to Ishmael, as Isaac was not the first-born. Ishmael was already a teenager, probably about thirteen, at

Isaac's birth (Maly 1968:21). The idea of Isaac as 'first' or 'only' son to Abraham is disputable, as Ishmael was supposed to be the 'legal' heir.

Hurrian Law of the time states that the first male-child automatically becomes legal heir of the father, whether he was born of the primary or second wife. Had the child been born of the secondary or concubine-wife, the child would have been the legal son of the mistress or primary wife (Maly 1968:20, 21). It is possible to assume a negative portrayal of Ishmael, who was born from an Egyptian mother. This seems to have been a custom among the Hebrews as various other narratives, like the Rachel-Rebecca narrative, show many parallels to the Hagar-Sarah debate. It is possible that some form of justification appears, especially when the Hebrew god makes a covenant, which includes both sons. The following two scriptures bear evidence to this:

*Then the angel of the Lord said to her (Hagar), 'I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude' (Genesis 16:10)*

*I am almighty God, walk before me and be blameless.*

*And I will make my covenant between me and you (Abraham), and will multiply you exceedingly.*

(Genesis 17:1, 2)

In both quotations the author states that Abraham's seed, be it Ishmael or Isaac, would multiply exceedingly. Furthermore, the author

states that god "will establish his covenant with Isaac" (Genesis 17:21). These two scenarios seem to contradict each other, as well as the announcement of Isaac as legal heir. Not only does it refute customary practice, it also questions the reliability of literary evidence. It is possible to assume that Ishmael might have regarded himself as the heir to Abraham's estate, as his father was already old with a barren wife. It is also possible to question why the Hebrew god made his covenant with Abraham after Ishmael's birth, and not after Isaac's birth. Likewise, we can claim why Abraham's god announced his covenant at Ishmael's birth. A possible solution is that literary evidence, as portrayed in sacred literature, was not recorded chronologically, or that the narrative was a result of a few perspectives. This seems possible as the narrative could be a compilation of two authors, namely that of the Jahwist and Elohist redactors (Maly 1968:20, 21).

Whether we accept the notion of two different perspectives does not provide us with a possible solution. It is possible that the Hebrew god preferred Isaac above Ishmael on the account that Ishmael was the product of a 'mixed' union. A mixed son could probably have not been a 'pure' Hebrew heir of the covenant while Isaac was born out of a 'pure' Hebrew union. In the same manner, some of the twelve sons of Jacob (second Hebrew patriarchal father) were already born of 'mixed' unions. Some of his sons were not really 'pure' heirs to Jacob, yet all of them became part of the twelve tribes of Israel. While this study has

looked at various ways to arrive at a suitable solution to this controversial situation, neither of them proved productive for this research. The only other solution to this scenario is that elements of biases crept into either authorship or translation of literary evidences. This study did not focus on elements of racial prejudice, as literary evidence does not support it. However, this study does not rule out the possibility of racial prejudice towards Egyptians. The most profound form of prejudices witnessed in this narrative indicates signs of ethnic and religious prejudice.

#### **4.7 SUMMARY**

This chapter attempted to provide evidence that sacred literature minimised Egyptian representation, as it contained elements of prejudice. This research has explored various arguments, which were necessary to arrive at a reasonable explanation for these possibilities. The arguments provided discussed various narratives in sacred literature, with special reference to the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Islam and Christianity. The examples discussed are narratives that influenced the theology of these religions. In many aspects, this study focused on texts related to the place of monotheism and circumcision in antiquity. On the other hand, lack of literary evidence could not substantiate certain elements of prejudice, which remain areas for further research.

The chief argument of this chapter was to acknowledge Egyptian influence in sacred literature, and to reaffirm the notion that some of the authors of sacred literature reveal elements of prejudice. The introductory part of this chapter confirms Holter's idea that Old Testament authorship, which comprised mainly Jewish authors, was reluctant when referring to the representation of Egypt in sacred literature (2000:94). This study also suggests that many references do reveal a positive portrayal of Egypt. However, positive remarks are minimal, and in most cases do not acknowledge Egypt's influence on religions of the Near Eastern countries of that time. It is also possible that authors never focussed on Africa in general or Egypt in particular (Felder 1991:144).

The sections on monotheism and circumcision suggest that these customary practices had a diverse effect upon the religions of that time. Many religions and peoples did practice circumcision, and thus could have influenced the Hebrews. On the contrary, this study has provided evidence that monotheism, in a primitive form, originated in Egypt, which had a definite influence on the Hebrews (Gottwald 1985:194). The aim of these sections dealing with these practices was to argue that Egyptian practices influenced the Hebrew people, either directly or indirectly. However, this study claims that little reference or acknowledgement has been attributed towards Egypt. Authors seem to have focused more on the idea that Egypt held the Hebrews as slaves.

The section that deals with slaves and or slave-girls, suggests that authors did show a colour-bias towards the Egyptian (Felder 1991:127). In this regard, the yardstick to use skin colour to measure peoples or to describe them in a negative manner, was not established. With reference to the Hagar-Sarah and Ishmael-Isaac narratives, this study suggests that a negative attitude towards darker people, especially Egyptian Africans, did occur. These negative attitudes coincided with social and economic status, ethnic differences and even gender prejudices. Feminist criticism provided us with various ways of looking at prejudices, besides gender differences. They focussed on sacred literatures that demonstrate the role of women, and especially Egyptian women, in a hostile manner (Weems 1991:57). Their criticism has also proved that sacred literature shows elements of male dominance, and that women's interpretation of scripture differs from their male counterparts.

Apart from these forms of prejudice, other forms of prejudices also occurred. This study has not focussed on the latter, because this research did not deem it relevant for this research. This study has not ruled out the possibility of racial prejudice towards Egyptians. It also did not focus on the role and importance of racism and racial prejudice. However, possible elements of racial prejudice in sacred literature remains an area for further research.

This study emphasises Felder's claim that "negative attitudes about black people are entirely post-biblical" (1991:127), while Snowden argues that it did not promote racial superiority (1970:196). However, the evidence provided suggests that negative attitudes possibly evolved into other forms of prejudices. The elements of racial prejudices emerged over time, which probably manifests during the colonial period.

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## **5. SEARCH FOR AN AFRICAN EXPERIENCE**

### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

The primary objective of this chapter and the whole thesis is to develop an argument, which reveals that ancient literature manifests various forms of prejudices towards Africans in general. The paper has limited its focus to ancient Egypt's advancement in the Near East, and its influence on the peoples and religions around the Mediterranean Sea. This chapter argues that literature portrayed Egypt in an antagonist way, and likewise, it depicts most African people in a similar manner. The previous chapters have discussed elements of these 'negative attitudes' toward Egypt which, to a certain extent, have contributed towards the importance of this chapter.

The focus of chapter 2 provided evidence that argue for an African origin of Egyptian civilization. It gave rise to an Egyptian people, who relate closer to its other African neighbours, than to their Asian and European counterparts (Diop 1996:1). It also challenged the traditional argument that, ancient Egypt relates closer to a 'white' or 'mixed' people. Archaeological and literary evidences suggest that the language and physical appearances of Egyptians showed analogous forms to that of their southern (African) neighbours, which later evolved into a 'mixed' or Afro-asiatic race (Bernal 1987:242). It has also attempted to prove that traditional scholarship was hesitant to

regard Egypt as African, while African scholarship argues that the original inhabitants of Egypt resembled an African origin (Berlinerblau 1999:149).

The evidence provided in chapter 3 suggested that the wisdom of the Egyptians originated from this Egyptian civilization. It also suggested that the wisdom of the Egyptians showed analogous forms to Greek philosophy, and that it influenced the civilizations of that time (Obenga 1994:60). The wisdom of the Egyptians also compared to its Greek counterpart, as most renowned Greek scholars studied in Egypt. Various perspectives suggest a Greek 'borrowing' of Egyptian wisdom have proved successful, as many parallels established argue in favour of this notion. The emphasis of that chapter explores the importance of Egypt's contribution to the development of the ancient world, and not necessarily the origin of philosophy. In this regard, scholarship has been silent, or reluctant in acknowledging Egypt's role in antiquity (Onyewuenyi 1994:46). Traditional scholarship does recognise the influence of Egyptian wisdom on the Near Eastern world, however, its recognition has proved minimal and incomparable to Greek philosophy.

The same trend continued in chapter 4, which unravels the reluctance of authorship, as portrayed in sacred literature, to acknowledge Egyptian contributions (Felder 1991:144). This chapter provided evidence suggesting that sacred literature revealed many forms of

prejudices toward non-Jews, be they Egyptian or other non-Jewish peoples. It also substantiated the notion that literature which depicts elements of a 'colour-consciousness' suggests to be associated to ethnicity, and not race. However, Cain Hope Felder mentioned that colour consciousness is a "post-biblical development" which provided a basis for white racism ((Felder 1991:127). However, this chapter will argue that the African perspective be acknowledged as an alternative to the Eurocentric perspective.

This chapter will also further the argument developed in the previous chapters in an attempt to trace these elements of prejudice in literature, be it sacred or secular. It will focus on the origins of colour prejudices and how it developed over time. Therefore, this chapter will briefly discuss the "impact" of the Greco-Roman and Colonial periods, and how it influenced African discourse. Secondly, this chapter will briefly discuss the Eurocentric and Afrocentric discourses. The section discussing the Eurocentric perspective will mainly focus on critiques by African scholars. Lastly, this chapter will discuss the importance and extremes of Afrocentricity, and how it differs in relation to an Africa-centred order of discourse.

## **5.2 GRECO-ROMAN TO COLONIAL PERIODS IN AFRICA**

The aim of this section is to discuss the negative attitudes of scholarship towards Africa and Africans. With regard to New Testament literature, scholarship has focused on the contributions of

the Greco-Roman world, and not much on Egypt or other parts of Africa. Snowden states that the Greco-Roman world showed no colour prejudice, as differences appeared when people were “classified as free or servile” (1970:169). A few references that direct towards Africa, however, in comparison to the Greco-Roman world, remains but a drop in the ocean. Felder states that scholarship has “trivialized ancient contributions of Africa” (1991:144). The reluctance of scholarship in portraying Egypt in developing the ancient world, suggests the modern ideological assumption that “nothing good has ever come from Africa” (Eze 1997:8). It is possible that translations and commentaries contribute to this problem:

*In western biblical scholarship, the real culprit is the King James Version of the Bible. Given the negative view of Africa at the time this translation came into existence, a person in the Bible who had an African heritage was usually described as a slave . . . It is, for instance, inherent with the biblical tradition that non-Israelites are inferior to God’s ‘chosen people,’ the Israelites.*

(Felder 1991:203)

The above quotation suggests that the King James Version of the Bible came into existence before the colonial period. Translations reflect the understanding of the world of the translators, which in this case was probably British Europeans. It also reflected how the terms ‘Africa’ and ‘Africans’ were translated. From a religious point of view, Felder suggests that Jewish forms of prejudices were not racially inspired, but possibly ethnic or ideological.

Concerns with regard to racist views have developed through translation and the reading of various texts. Similarly, the reluctance of scholars to write about Africa, as revealed in the above quotation, creates a notion of prejudice towards Africa (MacDonald 1999:91). Furthermore, Felder also states that Western (Eurocentric) scholarship expressed their concern with race through “translations of texts and interpretive commentaries on the texts” (1991:205). Sacred literature reveals these concerns, while it is also evident in various works produced by western scholarship. Many African scholars claim that these negative attitudes originated well before the Colonial period.

It seems possible that the Colonial period must have had a major influence on the African peoples. In the book, *Postcolonial African Philosophy*, Eze states the following about the Colonial period:

*This is a period marked by horror and violence of the transatlantic slave trade, the imperial occupation of most parts of Africa and the forced administrations of its peoples, and the resilient and enduring ideologies and practice of European cultural superiority (ethnocentrism) and ‘racial’ supremacy (racism).* (1997:4)

Eze states that the Berlin Conference of 1884/85 “partitioned and legitimized European occupation of Africa,” until the 1960’s “when most countries received constitutional decolonisation” (1997:4). Apart from the Berlin Conference, many scholars claim that the colonial

period actually started from the 15<sup>th</sup> century through the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Martin & O'Meara 1995:135). In relation to this, Finn describes the colonial period as one of the worst things in history, as Africa still "suffers from the scars of Colonialism" (1988:8).

While African scholarship describes the colonial period in a negative manner, apologists for European colonialism and imperialism argue that "it was the right, indeed the duty of the 'higher' civilizations to conquer the 'lower' civilizations in order to bring prosperity and 'progress' to all parts of the world" (Martin & O'Meara 1995:141). In relation to Martin and O'Meara, Eze states that, "Europe had to give the law of reason to [Africans] others" (1997:412). It is noticeable that Europe fulfilled a 'duty' towards Africa, as traditional scholarship positioned Africa "outside of history" (Eze 1997:8).

Therefore, the evidence suggests that the colonial period influenced the whole continent of Africa, as Africans still struggle to rebuild the inequalities of the past (Werbner & Ranger 1996:5). Once again, evidence suggests that the colonial period 'legitimized' these forms of prejudice towards Africans, as well as other non-European peoples (Eze 1997:7). Historical and literary evidences suggest that European peoples saw Africans as 'inferior creatures' that were 'not fit to rule themselves' (Martin & O'Meara 1995:141). Furthermore, it emphasises the 'universal tendencies' of Eurocentric scholarship in their bid to rule the world through its ideas (Eze 1997:156). Literary evidence also

suggests that the architects of the colonial period show many parallels to the adherents which advocates a Eurocentric perspective.

### **5.3 EUROCENTRIC SCHOLARSHIP (WESTERN SCHOLARSHIP)**

Losambe states that a Eurocentric perspective is concerned with a “Western or European expression of thought and interpretation”, which refers to scholars using Europe (or America) as point of departure in dialogue (1995:1). With regard to interpretation and understanding of literature, dialogue takes place through the same entry point. With reference to the past, Eurocentric scholars seek to use Greece and Rome as their reference point. The Eurocentric perspective is also concerned with a worldview, which advocates European history and philosophy. It also constitutes of a historical and cultural experience of the European peoples. Literary evidence suggests that the Eurocentric perspective is most popular as philosophical works produced, took place in Europe (Onyewuenyi 1994:34). In the next few paragraphs, African scholars will critically analyze the Eurocentric perspective.

The notion that the northern hemisphere has produced, and still produces most literature, has a negative influence on African scholarship. In this regard, African scholars are challenging the Eurocentric perspective as more and more literature produced implicates the role of Africa in history. Some Eurocentric by-products reveal elements of prejudice, as discussed above. These problems have

created boundaries between the Eurocentric and other perspectives, especially the African one. Most African scholars probably developed a negative attitude towards the Eurocentric perspective, due to certain statements European scholars made.

English translations of sacred literature, especially the King James Version of the Christian canon, probably occurred as a European interpretation. This suggests that the English translation articulated a European perspective. Various other translations, be they African or Asian, should be regarded as products of the worldview of that specific perspective. Likewise, translations occurred through language usage and understanding of the text. In the same manner, translation of the King James Version depicts interpretation of texts, meaningful to a specific society (Felder 1991:203). In this case, some translations reveal the worldview of the translator, who describes certain things according to his/her understanding. Hence, Felder states that most translations and commentaries are products and by-products of a Eurocentric perspective (1991:128).

Eze states that European scholars like Hegel, depict Africa as, "incapable of rational thought or ethical conduct," while Kant regards European existence as "qualitatively superior to other forms of human life" (1997:8, 142). Most African scholars, including Asante, are in agreement with Eze that the Eurocentric perspective reduces Africa to a continent 'without history'. Furthermore, Asante states that:

*Almost all of them, moreover, have seen from a male, Eurocentric angle, which in their estimation, equals "universal," and have therefore negated – and where they have not negated, ignored – other perspectives. One finds this hostile silence in the writings of Northrop Frye, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Paul de Man, as well as Jacques Derrida.*

(1998:174)

In comparison to Asante, Eze states that Eurocentric scholarship regard themselves as "the consciousness of our age" (Eze 1997:155), which is supreme in relation to other discourses (Finn 1988:8). In association with these claims is the notion that Eurocentrists regard philosophy and language that originated from the Greeks as "par excellence" (Obenga 1992:51).

The above claims by Asante and others, suggest an understanding of how African and African American scholars regard European scholarship. Some of Asante's critiques reveal elements of animosity among various scholars. It is possible that European scholarship could refer to these elements of animosity as bitterness. However, it is necessary to explore and discuss the implications of such critiques; as it is possible that African scholarship could exaggerate certain claims by individual European scholars. On the other hand, African scholarship could reveal elements of inferiority, as European scholarship was able to produce more or even most literary

documentation, in relation to philosophical works. It becomes necessary to look objectively at these allegations.

In order to address the above claims, this study seeks to discuss the relevance and appropriateness to the African perspective. African scholars probably accuse Eurocentric scholars as being selfish, due to the certain 'derogatory' statements and other elements of prejudice that occur in European literature. Other claims like "universality" and "superiority" of the Eurocentric perspective suggest a negation of African, as well as other non-European discourses. Eze declares that the silent hostility of Derrida and other post-modern scholars, implicates equality of beings, as it portrays a 'male-dominated' perspective, which refutes the existence of all forms of human life (Eze 1997:8). On the other hand, it is unfair of African scholars like Asante and others, to regard all European scholars as Eurocentric, as some of them do not feel the same about all aspects of European literature. It is necessary to state that only those European scholars that regard their existence and philosophy as 'superior', 'universal' and 'dominant' should be regarded as Eurocentric. It is also possible to mention that philosophical works produced by European scholars do not necessarily mean it is Eurocentric. The same principle applies to African scholarship. In the same manner, philosophical works produced by African scholars do not necessarily make it African or even Afrocentric. The two dominant views that argue for an African

reference point are the Afrocentric perspective and the Africa-centred order of approach.

#### **5.4 AFROCENTRIC SCHOLARSHIP**

In many ways, Afro-centric scholarship seems to denounce Eurocentric scholarship who regards their discourse as 'universal' and exclusive. Afrocentric scholarship is oriented towards an approach that views Africa through the lens of an African (Asante 1998:190). Many scholars regard the Afrocentric perspective as a radical opposition to the Eurocentric approach. In many ways, the Afrocentric perspective seems to be a direct reaction or response to the Eurocentric approach. Among those who are oriented towards this approach are Onyewuenyi, Obenga, Diop, Asante and others. There is a growing need for an Afrocentric approach to any discourse, which aims at uniting African scholarship. This perspective also aims at challenging the 'derogatory' claims, expressed by Eurocentric scholarship. This challenge includes the notion of African writers and thinkers to confront all forms of supremacy, discrimination and oppression on Africans (Asante 1998:173). Part of its focal point is to fight for equal partnership into any discourse, though from a different point of view.

While Eurocentric scholarship uses Greece and Rome as their reference point, Africans see the need to use ancient Egypt in a similar way. In his book, *The Afrocentric Idea*, Asante challenges the

'universality' of Eurocentric scholarship, and supports the idea of an African method (1998:1). This method is concerned with a worldview regarding the writing and speaking of an oppressed people. The principal crisis of the Afrocentric writer remains in the "political and cultural aspects" (Asante 1998:173). It is a crisis, which should regard "true human existence" as the general perspective of all scholarship, not depicting a singular scholarship (Eze 1997:144). Afrocentric scholarship seeks to dispute the silent reluctance of Eurocentric writers that advocate this "superiority culture" (Chidester 1996:15).

As part of his contribution towards an Afro-centric approach, Asante states that:

*Since so much of African American discourse, in the sense of people speaking and writing, occurs within a Eurocentric context, it is necessary to isolate those aspects of a critical theory, derived from the condition, that are applicable to discourse. One cannot rightly call any African American discourse, merely because it is uttered by a black person, Afrocentric. In fact donning the agbada of a critic, I believe that much so-called black discourse is essentially white or European discourse by black people. A person's writing does not make the writing Afrocentric, no more than living in Africa makes a person Afrocentric.*

(1998:185)

In relation to the above extract, Asante claims that many African or African American scholars are "forced to go Eurocentric" to be

accepted by their white counterparts, or even for “economical considerations” (1998:183). In this regard, Asante refers to them as “white-out blacks,” who should break out of “these restricting chains” (1988:183). The same critique, of course, seems relevant for white scholarship in a predominantly African society. The only difference is that Eurocentric discourse overshadows other discourses, which makes it easier for whites to adhere to Eurocentric instead of Afrocentric scholarship. Felder agrees with Asante, and states that the Eurocentric interpretation is favoured as an original meaning, irrespective of the historical and cultural differences (1991:6). It is therefore, the intention of African scholarship to receive equal status to other discourses, especially in relation to the Eurocentric discourse (Asante 1998:187).

The Afrocentric approach needs critical attention as many Africans and African Americans still regard the Eurocentric approach as normative. Asante refers to them as victims of their own identity who “see themselves as serving some artificial value to European scholarship” (1998:181). The Afrocentric perspective also calls on African scholarship to challenge the Eurocentric tendencies of “superior human existence” and tendencies to “totalize all literary genres” (Eze 1997:142). Asante states that African scholarship should not tolerate any ideological position that discusses Africans as “the other”, as it promotes elements of supremacy (1998:177). On the other

hand, African philosophy should not achieve status similar to, “recycled ideas from the West” (Eze 1997:236).

Afrocentric scholarship challenges the notion that Eurocentrists “have the tendency to demystify the world with the absolute truth of rationality and African philosophy” (Onyewuenyi 1994:34). The challenge is that African scholarship should not be criticised on the basis of, a Eurocentric reference point. Asante states that, “Afrocentricity does not reside in the glitches of rationalism of European modernism and postmodernism” (1998:178). This does not suggest a disregard for Eurocentric scholarship. However, any scholarship should be relevant and appropriate within its own framework or social context.

Further, Asante suggests that Africans should enter into dialogue from an Afrocentric perspective, which constitutes the existence of a ‘historical and cultural experience’ (1998:196). Asante also states that evaluation of African philosophy and themes should occur from an African perspective, as a lack of an Afrocentric experience could lead to incorrect or ‘distorted’ conclusions. Likewise, the same method should be applicable to the Eurocentric approach. This approach will allow Afrocentric rhetoric to oppose the negation of western culture, and a need to respect and acknowledge a co-existence of others (Asante 1998:186). In this regard, Eurocentric scholars are right in entering any discourse from a European reference point, on condition

that they do not oppose other discourses. This clears the way for scholars to respect the views of others.

Therefore, Asante suggests that the Afrocentric perspective should attempt to rediscover Africa's place in the origins of Egyptian civilization, as well as in every aspect of post-modern history (1998:190). The Afrocentric perspective should be regarded as the rationality of Africa, and should not attempt to be regarded as 'supreme' or 'universal,' as it reveals elements of exclusivity and supremacy (Chidester 1996:15). In the same manner, Afrocentric scholarship should not view western literature based on an Afrocentric approach, and vice versa. Thus, an Afrocentric discourse should view Africa through the lens of an African (Losambe 1995:2). On the other hand, Afrocentric scholarship seems to be exclusive to African scholars, while it struggles to accept non-Africans to participate in African dialogue. In contrast to the radical Afrocentric approach, is the Africa-centred order of discourse.

## **5.5 THE AFRICA-CENTRED ORDER OF DISCOURSE**

While still struggling for a pure African perspective, Losambe argues for an African perspective that regards all perspectives as equals. He states that such a perspective is associated with Mudimbe's Africa-centred order of discourse (Losambe 1995:1). Mudimbe argues for a different approach than the existing Afrocentric perspective. In most cases, Mudimbe's approach is similar to the Afrocentric one (1988:35).

However, his approach encapsulates a few differences to the principles of the Afrocentric one. He mentions that the African researcher should repossess the power of speech where: the African culture will be understood and seen as a “wholesome embodiment of past and present” (1995:4). Furthermore, he states that:

*The necessity for contemporary Africans as a people with discernible, distinct traditions, from a distant milieu and time, to work out an authentic order of discourse that would enable them to effectively reassess African concepts, issues and behaviours, contribute meaningfully towards producing a new world order in which difference or marginality is seen as ‘subjective other’ rather than inferior category.*

(Losambe 1995:6)

This Africa-centred order of discourse regards all scholars as equal partners to a discourse, and states that respect for point of reference is integral, irrespective of colour, race or creed (Mudimbe 1994:213). He grapples with the Eurocentric notion of ‘superiority’ and warns Afrocentric scholarship not to fall into the same trap (Losambe 1995:4). Therefore, Mudimbe suggests that the Africa-centred order of discourse is an approach that is open to both African and non-African scholarship, which allows “inclusive and intersubjective dialogue” (Mudimbe 1994:214). In support of Mudimbe’s approach, Eze states that a “truly African philosophy does not ignore outside influences, but one which is able to root them in its own soil” (1997:235).

In his books, *The Invention of Africa* and *The Idea of Africa*, Mudimbe argues for an approach that rewrites Africa's peculiar history (1988:135) and a rereading of the African past (1984:88). He aims at demystifying a distorted idea of Africa created by colonialism, and a call for a reconstructed idea of an Africa to be proud of (1988:88). This reconstruction should focus on an idea of Africa that "articulates itself as a rereading of the past and as contemporary searches for an identity" (1994:211). This idea should reconstruct African philosophy, as it is in a position to compare to European philosophies such as those of Hegel, Aristotle, and others (Sogolo 1993:9). African scholars seek to remind European and other non-African scholars that the original founders of Greek philosophy, including Thales and Aristotle, studied in Africa (Onyewuenyi 1994:46).

Africans should not accept their philosophy as 'primitive' as African philosophy should aim at "destroying the myths and sustain a critical reinterpretation of an African history invented from exteriority" (Mudimbe 1988:36). The chief difference between Mudimbe's Africa-centred order of discourse and the original Afrocentric approach is that Mudimbe divorces himself from extreme and wilful forms of Afrocentrism that reject other discourses (Losambe 1995:2). He distances himself from 'black-conscious' groups like the 'Negritude' and 'Bolekaja' movements (Losambe 1995:3). Mudimbe also states that non-African scholars entering into an African discourse should not impose their own cultural frame of reference with a foreign one

(1988:40). Mudimbe also states that the Africa-centred order of discourse should view Africa within an African framework (1994:213). Failure to do so can result in a 'corruption' or 'implication' of a true African understanding. In fact, Africans should allow non-Africans to enter into dialogue with Africans, as Africans are in a position to learn from non-Africans and vice versa. Further, Mudimbe states that it is "impossible not to consider western literature," unless it disputes Africa as entry point (1994:214). This option, Mudimbe argues, cannot diminish any research, as it can be valuable and beneficial to any discourse. Many scholars celebrate Mudimbe's approach for its openness, while others criticise him for creating a gap within African scholarship. His detractors claim that he relies too heavily on the works produced by Eurocentric scholars. Mudimbe illustrates this when he refers to the works of many modern and post-modern scholars like Foucault, Herskovitz and Levi-Strauss (Losambe 1995:6).

## **5.6 SUMMARY**

This study has attempted to establish that a search for an African perspective is essential and integral. This chapter forms part of the whole discussion that attempts to look at ancient Egyptian civilization through the eyes of an African. It also links to the broader argument depicting the reluctance of European scholarship to acknowledge Africa's role in ancient Near Eastern history. Furthermore, this study has provided a brief description of the impact and influences of colonialism on the African peoples. The disadvantages of the western

or Eurocentric discourse followed, which laid the foundation for the main argument of this chapter - the search for an African perspective.

In developing the search for an African perspective, this study focussed on the Afrocentric and Africa-centred approaches. In Relation to another, the Africa-centred order of discourse is similar to the Afrocentric approach, separated by only a few minor differences. The importance of the Africa-centred order of discourse is that it uses an African point of departure, or reference point, when entering any discourse. This approach allows dialogue on African themes, on condition that various scholars do so through the lens of an African. Another important breakthrough to an African perspective is that African scholars have reached consensus regarding Africa's history. They agree that Africa's past and present should be analysed 'on the basis of its own rationality' in developing a pure African discourse (Losambe 1995:6). This study also attempted to bring the Afrocentric and Africa-centred order of discourse closer to each other, by building on common principles. However, African scholars in general seek to argue that an African discourse should be open for dialogue on condition that it uses Africa as reference point, and accepts Africa as an equal partner in the discourse.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study is a small contribution towards the establishment of an alternative understanding of ancient Egypt. The attempt here is to develop an alternative perspective to the view held by traditional scholarship that is rooted in the African universe of discourse. Various literature, be it sacred or secular, interpret texts from a specific vintage point, which is Africa. The term 'African' does not employ a racial category, but 'continental', which is inclusive. The reason for focusing on the theme, ancient Egypt, is to challenge methodologies that have been reluctant and silent to incorporate Egypt as part of Africa's historiography.

This research has developed a new look at interpreting the ostensible contribution of Egypt in the historical processes of the ancient Near Eastern world. While many scholars have regarded Africans as a people without history, this study has provided substantial information that refutes this viewpoint. The evidence provided suggests that the development of philosophy and civilisation cannot deny or deprive Egypt of its rightful place in historiography. The adoption of an alternative perspective makes it necessary to express a new look at resurrecting and reviving Egypt's past.

The relevance of this subject has enabled African scholarship to search for new tools in developing the African approach. Part of this approach is to re-examine the validity of any non-African perspective. On the other hand, it is also a call to accept the validity of a truly African perspective. This research has provided reasonable evidence suggesting that the Eurocentric approach to Africa is incomplete and imbalanced, as it reveals elements of foregone conclusion. This study does not suggest that the Eurocentric perspective is essentially wrong, however, it is necessary to state that various perspectives should not regard its Eurocentric counterpart as normative. The African (and African American) perspective, as an alternative approach, provides us with a different view that interprets Africa from this particular perspective. Hence, this research has led to many breakthroughs that enable us to rediscover ancient Egypt.

Since Africans received their independence from Europe, which marked the postcolonial period in Africa's history, there has been an attempt to find its continental roots. The effects of the colonial period are still evident as it derooted the various African peoples. In post-Apartheid South Africa, people seem to be more and more interested in rediscovering their roots. Somehow Africans attempt to go back to question their interconnections with ancient Egypt and the wisdom of the Egyptians. Part of this dispute is to go beyond the borders of contemporary Egypt, which will enable Africans to rediscover the pharaohs of ancient Egypt. In rediscovering Egypt's past, Africans will

be able to connect their various religious traditions to ancient Egyptian/Nubian religion. This is exactly what Thabo Mbeki said, "The time has come" for Africans to unite and become one geopolitical structure (1998:5).

Every chapter looked at the debate on ancient Egypt from an African perspective. These chapters link closely to the main theme of this research that seeks to look at Egypt within an African framework. Chapter 5 developed a search for an African perspective. This approach suggests that the Africa-centred order of discourse as an alternative approach to the Eurocentric discourse will enable Africans to rediscover ancient Egypt. The Africa-centred approach does recognise various perspectives as equal partners in this field of study. This perspective does not regard itself to be normative, as it provides an alternative way of perceiving the past. This approach agrees that the origins of ancient Egyptian civilization stood in relation to other peoples, closer to their African neighbours. It also suggests that this civilization revealed the wisdom of the Egyptians, although this never received proper acknowledgement and recognition. Furthermore, African scholarship challenges the reluctance of secular and sacred scholarship regarding Egypt's contributions to philosophy and historiography. However, this field of study is still in an embryonic stage, and therefore is an area for future testing and research.

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