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Hebrew Kush: Sudan, Ethiopia, or Where? *Peter Unseth*

*The descendants of **Cush, Mizraim and Put** are the ancestors of the African peoples according to the Scriptures (Gen 10:6ff). The Bible teaches that the peoples of the world have descended from one of the three sons of Noah: Shem, Ham and Japheth. Of the four sons of Ham, three settled in Africa. **Mizraim** settled in north Africa along the lower Nile. **Mizraim** became the regular Hebrew term for Egypt. **Put**, the third son of Ham, likewise settled in Africa, though the exact location is uncertain, possibly in the area of Libya, near Egypt. This article deals with **Cush** (or **Kush**) and its location in Africa.*

The Problem

When I lived in western Ethiopia, a friend came to my home with a Biblical question that had a very personal application for him. He had grown up near the Sudan-Ethiopia border, spending part of his life in Sudan, part of it in Ethiopia. He was puzzled by different English translations of Psalm 68:31. Some translations said "Ethiopia" would "raise her hands to God", another translation said "Sudan", and even different editions of the GNB varied in this. He asked "Which country is the Bible referring to in this passage: Ethiopia or Sudan?"

Indeed, it is confusing. The translators who produced the Bible translations that he read were seeking a modern equivalent for the Hebrew word *kush*. The goal of the translators that produced the GNB1 had chosen the word "Ethiopia", the team that revised it and produced the GNB2 had chosen the word "Sudan".

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The problem is that the Hebrew word *kush* (also spelled *Cush*) does not match the political borders of any modern state. In their efforts to translate the Hebrew word clearly for modern readers, Bible translators have conscientiously struggled with this word, adopting a variety of solutions, (some better than others), sometimes leaving readers perplexed. In this passage, is God referring to a special relationship with Sudan, or with Ethiopia, or with all of Africa or with whom?

Some writers, notably David Adamo, have argued that *kush* should be always translated as "Africa" (1992b:59,60). This article will explain that Hebrew *kush* does not refer to one specific modern state, either Ethiopia or Sudan. Also, it will explain that Adamo's solution is simplistic and misleading. Biblical passages containing the word *kush* inevitably require different translations of *kush*, according to their context.

1. The problem of Hebrew *kush*.

The term *kush* (including various forms of it) is found over 40 times in the Old Testament. Translating this term has been a persistent problem for translators. Generally, earlier translations into English (and other European languages) used the word "Ethiopia" (or its spelling variant "Aethiopia"), but in the last 40 years there has also been a trend to use other words, such as "Cush", "Nubia", or more recently "Sudan". Adamo advocates using "Africa", in an attempt to find a modern word that includes all the areas referred to.

Some of the reference books have further confused the matter by discussing the different geographical limits of Hebrew *kush* and the classical Greek use of *Aithiopia* in a manner that gives readers the impression that the Greek usage influenced the Hebrew usage of the word. The meaning of the Greek word, subsequent in both time and translation, is not relevant to our understanding of the Hebrew word. The Greek word *Aithiopia*, and its spelling variants in various languages, entered the picture when the Greek Septuagint used this word to translate the Hebrew word *kush*.

Scholarly studies on the topic of *kush* have clearly identified its location, but have not been widely read or understood in the broader Christian community, and have not had as much application in the field of translation as might be hoped. It is my goal here to show the meanings of the word *kush*, then explain some of problems of translating *kush* into modern languages. I will also suggest how it can better be translated.

2. Old Testament references to kush.

The Old Testament contains several different forms that include kush. Some of these are references to the land of kush (though scholars do not agree whether all references are to the same area), there are also references to individuals named kushi, there is a reference to a place named kushan, and there are references to people labeled as kushim "Cushites". These references are in a variety of contexts: some in simple narrative passages, others in prophecy, and one (Jer. 13:23) seems to be used in a proverb embedded in a warning to Israel. These references are scattered in 17 of the 39 books of the Old Testament.

The single reference to kushan (Hab 3:7) is presumed here to be different, so this is barely addressed in this article.

3. Location of the kingdom of kush.

Many of the references are to a specific land of kush, a specific powerful kingdom, just south of Egypt. It was so powerful and well known that there was contact with Assyria, evidenced by the discovery of a tablet bearing the seals of Kush and Assyria (Welsby 1996:64) and contact with Persia, documented by Herodotus (2.9, 3.25, 7.69).

There is total agreement among scholars that the specific kingdom of Kush was centered in what is now northern Sudan, with a bit of southern Egypt. It had vaguely defined borders that fluctuated throughout the hundreds of years of its existence, as did Israel and Judah. Evidence for the location of kush comes from both the Biblical text itself and from a variety of archeological sources.

Several biblical references pointing to the location of kush clearly link it with Egypt, such as Ezk. 30:9, Ps. 68:31, Nah. 3:8, and Is. 20:3-5. We find a more specific location, putting it just to the south of Egypt, when Ezk. 29:10 speaks of punishment coming on Egypt, "from Migdol to Syene, as far as the border of kush". Migdol was on the Mediterranean at the northern end of Egypt, Syene (modern Aswan) was at the south end of Egypt, so Ezekiel's prophecy includes all of Egypt, from the northern coast to the southern edge, "as far as the border of kush". This puts Biblical kush just south of Egypt at that point in history.

Also, 2 Kings 19:8-13 and Is. 37:9 tell of king Tirhakah of kush warring against Assyria. He is known to have been from the 25th dynasty in Egypt, which was a dynasty from Kush which had conquered Egypt, whose rule extended from the confluence of the Blue and White Nile to the Mediterranean, 727-656 BC (Clayton 1994:190-193). The Pharaohs of the 25th dynasty, of Kushite origin, ruled both Egypt and kush. An inscription by Esarhaddon of Assyria proclaims in Aramaic that he had defeated Tirhakah "king of Egypt and kush" (Pfeiffer 1966:611,612). King Tirhaka was buried not within Egypt proper, but in Napata, which was the capital of Kush (Adams 1977:250), a city between the 3rd and the 4th cataracts, clearly within the present borders of Sudan.

Another Biblical evidence linking kush with Egypt is found in the account of Zerah the Cushite, 2 Chron. 14:8-14. Zerah attacked Judah from the southwest, coming as far as Mareshah. When attacked by Asa, he fled to the southwest, to Gerar. The army of Judah attacked Gerar and plundered the cities nearby, under Egyptian control. This link with Egypt argues against the theories of some for this passage that kush here referred to a group from Arabia.

The archaeological evidence that the Biblical kingdom of kush was in the northern part of Sudan and the southern edge of Egypt, all northwest of modern Ethiopia, is solid and unanimously accepted. White sums it up clearly: "The biblical Ethiopia is Nubia, in southernmost Egypt and the N[orthern] Sudan, not the modern Ethiopia (also called Abyssinia)" (1975:411). Adams, in his monumental monograph, wrote "The Land of Kush.... lies partly in Egypt and partly in the Republic of the Sudan, but comprises only a small part of either country" (1977:13). This is presented on the popular level by Kendall (1990), showing the territory of Kush with maps and photos.

Many scholars feel that some of the references to kush have in mind simply a general reference to distant foreign lands and people beyond Egypt. This usage seems to be reflected in the description of the extent of King Ahasuerus's kingdom (Est. 1:1, 8:9), also Amos 9:7 Ps. 87:4, Zeph. 3:10.

In Genesis 2:13, there is an enigmatic reference to kush. Some scholars understand it as being in Mesopotamia (Keil and Delitzsch p.83, Wenham 1987:65,66), others understand it as a reference to a location in Africa, south of the Sahara. In the face of this uncertainty, a translator is justified in transliterating it simply as "Kush".

Some published sources have acknowledged that Biblical *kush* was in what is now Egypt and Sudan, but they also add "and parts of modern Ethiopia". I have found no actual evidence that the Kingdom of Kush indeed ruled any parts of the territory in modern Ethiopia. King Ezana of Axum (Aksum), a city located in the northern region of modern Ethiopia, defeated Meroe in approximately 350 AD, but this was long after the Biblical period. The Kingdom of Kush was very distinct from the Kingdom of Axum (Welsby 1996:172-176).

4. Practice in translating *kush*: from Septuagint through a recent semantic shift.

Much of the translators' tendency to translate *kush* by a term that has modern day political significance stems from the Septuagint's use of the word *Aithiopia*. At the time the Septuagint was translated, this was indeed a correct Greek term to use in translating *kush*. The Greek word *Aithiopia* had both a narrow and a wide use. The narrow definition was the Nile valley, south of Egypt, such as used by Herodotus (5th century BC). "Aithiopians inhabit the country immediately above [south of] Elephantine [*n.b.* an island at Aswan]... you will arrive at a large city called Meröe: this city said to be the capital of all Aithiopia" (Herodotus ii.9). He also used the same definition of *Aithiopia* when he wrote of Cambyses procuring interpreters at Elephantine (modern Aswan) for his expedition into *Aithiopia* and marching in via Thebes and back out through Thebes and on to Memphis (iii.19-25). This *Aithiopia* is clearly the adjacent area south of Egypt. This narrow usage of Greek *Aithiopia* is also found in the Greek text of Acts 8:27, where the homeland of the eunuch is referred to as *Aithiopia*, where he served as treasurer to Candace, who is known to have reigned in Meroe, not in the modern state of Ethiopia (Adams 1977:260).

The wider definition of the Greek *Aithiopia* can be seen in Homer's *Odyssey*, where he refers to the Ethiopians as "the most remote of men", living at the farthest edges of the east and west (i.22-24). However, " 'Ethiopia' in most of the references in Greek literature refers to people along the Nile, above [*n.b.* south of] the fourth cataract... This differs from modern Ethiopia, however, which lies well to the east of the Cushites" (Hays 1996:271). We see then that the word *Aithiopia* was a good choice to translate *kush* into Greek, allowing for both a narrow definition and also a wider one.

However, in recent centuries, translators into English and other languages have too often simply transliterated *Aithiopia* (from the Septuagint) into their target languages. This was not a problem as long as the meaning of the transliterated form in the target language was approximately the same as *kush*. This was the case when "Ethiopia" was first used in English Bible translation, at least as far back as 1382, when John Wyclif used it, a tradition continued by the KJV over 200 years later. When the English KJV was translated 400 years ago, the word "Ethiopia" in English was understood to mean the parts of Africa inhabited by black people. Also, at the time, there was no specific political state or government labeled "Ethiopia" known to English speakers. The use of the word "Ethiopia" in English was formerly a legitimate, though overly broad, translation of *kush*, well into the 1800's.

A clear example of how "Ethiopia was understood to include all of Black Africa can be seen in the founding of a denomination called the "Ethiopian Church" in 1892 (Balia 1994:20). Though these people lived far south of the borders of Ethiopia, they felt it to be a legitimate use of the word, reflecting their application of Ps. 68:31 to themselves.

Incidentally, a study of the usage of the word "Ethiopia" in English throughout the centuries disproves Adamo's argument that the use of the word "Ethiopia" in English Bibles led white English speakers to the misunderstanding that dark-skinned Africans are not a part of the Biblical narrative. A brief study of the Oxford English Dictionary, (the standard multi-volume historical dictionary of English), shows that up until at least the late 1800's, the word "Ethiopia" was understood to mean Black Africa and the term "Ethiopian" or "Ethiop" meant "a Black person", or just "black". For example, in 1684 an author described a person as "an Ethiopian, or Negro", using the labels in a synonymous sense. A botanist in 1578 referring to the seseli plant, labeled the black stalked variety as "the Ethiopian Seseli". In an apparent reference to Africa, Dryden wrote of "Ethiopian lands" (1697). We see then that "Ethiopia" and "Ethiopian" formerly did communicate the idea of Africa and black skinned people to English speakers. Adamo's assertion that translating with "Africa" will rectify a long-standing deficiency in English Bibles does not reflect an understanding of how "Ethiopia" was understood in the past. That is, the use of "Ethiopia" in the KJV conveyed exactly what he claims it did not: the people of *kush* were black skinned.

Since the late 1800's, "Ethiopia" has taken on a much narrower, more specific definition, referring to that state in the Horn of Africa which was the

empire of Menelik, then of Haile Selassie, and now is the Republic of Ethiopia. And even the state of Ethiopia has changed borders in major ways, it incorporated Eritrea in 1964; then Eritrea seceded in 1992. If *kush* is translated as "Ethiopia", the question arises: "Ethiopia's borders at which point in time?"

But in the centuries and decades since such early translations as the KJV, the use of "Ethiopia" in translating *kush* into English has become less and less of a legitimate choice. Translators too often retained the word "Ethiopia", overlooking the fact that there has been a change in what was referred to between the use of English "Ethiopia" in earlier centuries (when the English meaning of Ethiopia was very similar to that of Greek *Aithiopia*) and the word "Ethiopia" in common usage of 20th century English (and a number of the world's languages) (Unseth 1998).

But as we have seen above, the kingdom of *kush* was not within the borders of present day Ethiopia, but rather within the borders of Sudan and Egypt. So we must conclude that the use of "Ethiopia" in English translations (and other languages) today leads readers to the erroneous conclusion that the Biblical references were to people and places actually within the delineated borders of the present state of Ethiopia.

5. Modern practice in translating *kush*.

The problem of agreeing on a standard name for the ancient kingdom in *kush* is not unique to Bible translators; historians have also struggled with it. In both fields, history and Bible translation, the term "Ethiopia" had previously been the commonly used term in the past, reflecting the older, wider use of the word "Ethiopia", commonly referring to Africa in general, or to northeast Africa more particularly, especially for ancient times. Adams explained "Most scholars until fifty years ago referred to it as the Kingdom of Ethiopia, retaining the name used by classical [*n.b.* Greek and Latin] writers. However, the latter-day adoption of this name by another kingdom [*n.b.* the state of Ethiopia] far to the east of Nubia raises the possibility of confusion, and makes it desirable to find another name for the ancient Nubian monarchy." He went on to advocate a solution which he himself uses: "Kingdom of Kush [which] has been preferred by many recent writers" (1977:250).

Some have seen the use of the word "Cushitic" by linguists and seen this as an indication of where Biblical *kush* was located. The origin of this label in linguistics is long and complex, but is not grounded in Biblical studies. The word "Cushitic" is used today by linguists to designate a group of languages in eastern Africa. Most of these are in Ethiopia and almost none are in Sudan, but this use of the label "Cushitic" by present-day linguists has absolutely no bearing on the translation of Hebrew *kush*.

I have studied over 30 English translations, charting their translations of *kush* in 21 verses. Their choices were generally from one of four terms: "Cush", "Ethiopia", "Nubia", "Sudan". It was also interesting to note the number and extent of the footnotes that were used to explain the terms used in the text. It was striking to note that almost none of the translations were 100% consistent in their use of a term to translate *kush*. For example, NEB, NIV, and *Tanakh* each use three different terms to translate the geographical use of *kush* in various contexts, "Cush", "Nubia", and "Ethiopia", (in addition to the transliteration of *kush* as a personal name). GW, though it generally uses "Sudan" for *kush* used "Ethiopia" in Ezk. 30:4, but then reverts to "Sudan" in verses 5 and 9.

Certain patterns were clear from the comparison of versions. First, when *kush* (rather *kushi*) was used as a proper name, (e.g. Gen 10:6 & Zeph. 1:1), it was consistently transliterated. Secondly, *kushan* in Hab. 3:7 was almost always transliterated. There is much scholarly speculation concerning whether this refers to the same *kush* as the kingdom south of Egypt or some other group, such as a tribe in the Sinai, so transliterating it allows a translator to minimize such controversy.

In the first edition of the GNB, it used the word "Sudan" to translate most references to *kush*. But in the second edition, after 1992, "Ethiopia" was used, together with a two-sentence footnote inserted in every passage (1996, p.c. Erroll Rhodes, ABS).

Some translations have found ways to translate certain passages without referring to a specific nation or state. In Is. 18:1, LB used the phrase "land beyond the upper reaches of the Nile" instead of "land beyond the rivers of Kush". In Jer. 13:23, CEV avoided a reference to a specific location by saying "Can people change the color of their skin?", GNB1 translated this passage as "Can a black man change the color of his skin?", GNB2 modified this slightly to "Can people change the color of their skin?" In Zeph. 3:10, NCV translated it by "where the Nile begins". Kaplan's *Living Torah* translated Num. 12:1 by referring

to Moses' wife as being "dark skinned", rather than referring to her geographical or national origin. For the same passage, Knox (1950) referred to her as a "desert wife", a phrase so neutral it leaves the reader wondering why Aaron and Miriam objected to her. Tyndale in 1537 used the now archaic phrase "black Moors" in some passages to refer to people of kush, e.g. 2 Chr. 14:12.

When the Ethiopic (Ge'ez) Bible was translated, approximately in the 6th century AD, under the influence of the Greek Septuagint (Ullendorf 1968:55-65), the word kush was translated as *Ityop'ya*.¹ (Monica Devens, p.c. 1998). The Latin Vulgate, also following the model of the Septuagint, consistently translated Hebrew kush as *Aethiopia*.

Even some other African languages, totally outside of Ethiopia, have continued this pattern of translating kush with a form of "Ethiopia", such as the new Swahili version of 1995. On the other hand, African languages other than those in Sudan have chosen to translate kush with "Sudan", such as Ghana's Konkomba Bible of 1997.

6. Problems from mistranslating kush.

At least four kinds of problems have resulted from kush being translated by a term that has present day political significance. Each of these problems can be eliminated, (or at least reduced), by a translation that avoids, or at least lessens, references to present political states.

First of all, ordinary readers have simply not understood the text correctly. They have assumed that the word referred to an area that coincided with the borders of a modern state. This confusion is increased when different versions use words referring to different states. My friend who grew up on the Ethiopian-Sudanese border was genuinely perplexed and wanted to know "Which country does the Bible refer to in Ps. 68:31, Ethiopia or Sudan?"

Secondly, Biblical prophecy has been applied to the wrong parts of the world as a result of terms with political significance. Writers unduly influenced by translations have misunderstood the Biblical text and interpreted prophecies as applying to the present states of Ethiopia or Sudan. Writing about Biblical prophecy, Otis wrote "Persia, Ethiopia (Cush), Libya ... are all easily identifiable with modern nations" (1991:205). A similar simplistic identification of "Ethiopia"

is found in the prophetic analysis of Phillips and Vines (1990:193). Van Kampen has also equated "Ethiopia" in the Old Testament with the present state of Ethiopia (1993:130). Isichei, writing of the opinion of a broader community, wrote "To twentieth-century African Christians, its [Ethiopian Orthodox Church's] history seemed a fulfillment of the promise of the psalmist, 'Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands to God' " (1995:2).

Thirdly, Biblical allusions to present political states (Sudan and Ethiopia) have mistakenly led to assertions of national pride between competing countries. Psalm 68:32 has been the main focus of this contention, in both Ethiopia and Sudan. "This is undoubtedly Ethiopia's favorite Bible quotation; it occurs twice in the *Kebrä Nagast*ⁱⁱ and is frequently used as a motto or in heraldic devices in present-day Ethiopia" (Ullendorf 1968:9). In a book shop in Ethiopia, I bought a 1st edition of the GNB with the following message pasted in the front cover "In the Old Testament read 'Ethiopia' or 'Ethiopians' for 'Sudan' and 'Sudanese' which are misprints."ⁱⁱⁱ I am told there are also claims made by people living in Sudan that verses such as this and Is. 18:1,2 apply to them. However, I have never heard of citizens of either Sudan or modern Ethiopia claiming the passages that prophecy bad things for *kush*, such as Ez. 30:5-9 and Zeph. 2:12. For citizens of Ethiopia, reading Amos 9:7 takes on a different meaning than was originally intended, since it is often understood to mean that the people of Ethiopia are specially chosen and loved by God, in a manner similar to his covenant with Israel.

Fourthly, though a lesser problem, the translation of *kush* by "Ethiopia" has led to incongruous passages in Biblical reference books that include information on modern Ethiopia's crops, climate, and recent political history together with information on the ancient kingdom of Kush, e.g. Youngblood (1982).

7. Suggestions for understanding and translating *kush*.

In translating *kush*, as with any other word, readers and translators must be sensitive to multiple senses of the word. In different contexts, it is used to refer to a fairly specific location, to focus on the color of a person's skin, to indicate remoteness, to label the country of a person's ancestry, to refer to a particular person, to indicate the source of fine gems, etc.

Referring to the Kingdom of *Kush*. In situations where ancient borders overlap modern states, it is best to translate with a word that is not

equated with a present political state. Thompson, writing about Bible translation and geography, noted that to translate *kush* by "Ethiopia" today is "misleading" (1981:432,433), and the same should be said for translating *kush* as "Sudan". Though *kush* was indeed mostly within the borders of modern Sudan, it was only a small part of the present state of Sudan. Another reason for avoiding the use of the words "Ethiopia" and "Sudan" in a translation is that the borders of the two modern countries are still susceptible to change, Ethiopia's borders having changed significantly in 1964 and 1992, and in both countries there are secessionist movements that seek to further change their borders.

No matter what solution is taken for translating the name of the kingdom of Kush, it seems that a footnote is appropriate. That is, whether translators have chosen to use the word "Sudan", "Ethiopia", "Kush", or "Africa", it is not likely to be totally clear to the reader, especially in light of the conflicting choices that have been made by English translators in the past. Some published footnotes include "Hebrew *Cush*: Cush is the ancient name of the extensive territory south of the First Cataract of the Nile River. This region was called Ethiopia in Graeco-Roman times, and included within its borders most of modern Sudan and some of present-day Ethiopia (Abyssinia)" (GNB2), "that is, the upper Nile region" (NIV)^{iv}, "Lit. *Cush*" (NASB). Some specific passages have had modified footnotes, such as Num. 12:1, due to exegetical uncertainties.

When seeking a term for the location of the kingdom of Kush, one possible solution is to simply transliterate *kush* and use a footnote to explain its location. This is the solution taken by NIV and REB.

In languages where the term "Nubia" is known, another possibility would be to use the term "Nubia"^v, a generic term that has minimal present day specific political significance. This has been used sporadically in some versions, though no English version has done it consistently, e.g. REB Ps. 68:31,87:4, NCV Dan. 11:43, NIV Dan. 11:43, *Tanakh* Is. 11:11,18:11. Holter reports that "Nubia" is used in recent translations in Norwegian and Danish (1997:334). In languages far from Africa, where the details of the location of *kush* are not so crucial, it may be enough to say "Africa" or "Northeast Africa" for many contexts. In passages where the translator understands *kush* to be a referent to simply distant and foreign land and people, the word "Africa" would be a possible alternative.

Referring to the colour of a person's skin. In Jeremiah 13:23, *kush* is used in what is apparently a proverb, alluding to the dark skin color of people from *kush*. In this passage, the dark skin color of a person from *kush* is in focus, not the exact location of the person's homeland. In many languages, it would be proper to refer to a person of dark skin by simply using a term for dark-skinned "African". Another approach was used in GNB1, GNB2, and CEV, where this was translated without an explicit reference to *kush*, e.g. "can people change the color of their skin?" (CEV).

Referring to a particular person. When *kush/kushi* is used as a proper name for a person, e.g. Gen 10:6 and Zeph. 1:1, the translator can simply transliterate the name into the appropriate form in the target language.

Referring to a remote region. Sometimes, instead of referring to a specific area, *kush* was used to indicate a distant, remote region, the edge of the known world in the direction of Africa. This usage seems to be reflected in the description of the extent of King Ahasuerus's kingdom (Est. 1:1, 8:9). This may also be the case in Amos 9:7 and Ps. 87:4. In such cases, transliterating *kush* or using "Africa" could be acceptable.

***Kush* in Genesis 2:13.** In this difficult passage, as explained above, a translator is justified in simply transliterating *kush* into the target language.

Referring to the country of a person's ancestry. Several times, a person is referred to as being a Cushite, a person from *kush*, e.g. 2 Sam 18:21 and Jer 36:14. (This is different from cases where *kush* is used as a personal name, as in Gen. 10:6 or Zeph. 1:1.). In these cases, the exact location of *kush* is not in focus; it may be enough to say "African". But there is certainly no reason to identify the location as a specific modern state, either "Sudan" or "Ethiopia".

Referring to a source of fine gems. In Job 28:19, in a reference to the surpassing quality of a topaz, Job speaks of the "topaz of *kush*". (The identification of the exact stone is not precise.) There are no topaz (or other similar gems) found in Ethiopia, at least not in the quantity to be known outside of the immediate area. The point of the reference to *kush* is to assert its quality; the particular geography of its origin is not the point of the passage. "Here the place name probably designates the quality of the gem and not its place of origin" (Reyburn 1992:512) Following this line of reasoning, GNB translates this

“the finest topaz”. All other versions in my survey of English translations used a geographical term: “Cush”, “Ethiopia”, and two translations said “Arabia”. Some scholars point to the Red Sea as the source of this stone (Reyburn 1992:512 and Ullendorf 1968:8), (hence the use of the term “Arabia”), but the state of Ethiopia no longer has any Red Sea coast since Eritrea seceded in 1992. Therefore, it now makes even less sense to translate this passage with “Ethiopia”. It may be better to say “from the Red Sea coast”, but for most readers, this still does not address the matter of the quality of the stone, so a reference to its quality (not merely its geographical origin) should be seriously considered, possibly in addition to the geographic reference, e.g. “the fine topaz of the Red Sea region”.

8. Problems with Adamo’s suggestion.

Adamo has suggested that all instances of *kush* be translated as “Africa” (1992:59). This is a superior policy to the use of either “Ethiopia” or “Sudan”, being more politically neutral. However, in the preceding section, I have shown that different uses of *kush* in different contexts require different translations into English and into other languages.

But there is an additional problem with his suggestion, seen in such verses as Num. 12:1^{vi}, Is. 20:5 and Ez. 29:10. In these verses, the word *kush* is used in a way that excludes Egypt. The problem is that Egypt is geographically part of Africa. It makes no sense to say in Ez. 29:10 “the land of Egypt... as far as the border of Africa.” Clearly, the reference is to the southern edge of Egypt, to the Kingdom of Kush.

In addition, translating 2 Ki. 19:9 simply using “Africa” for *kush* makes King Tirhakah’s kingdom ridiculously broad. He ruled only a very small part of Africa, from approximately the 5th cataract of the Nile to the Mediterranean. When a specific, known area is referred to, it is not justified to translate *kush* with such a broad term as “Africa”. Yet Adamo goes so far as to claim that even the term “Sudan”^{vii} (which does include most of the Kingdom of Kush, and includes much additional territory, as well) “is deficient because it still excludes some parts of Africa represented by biblical Cush” (1992:59).

Adamo argues, with some justification, that translating by transliterating *kush* is obscure to the average reader. But his solution will often lead the reader

into a false sense of accurately understanding a passage, especially for passages where a specific location is in view. The same logic applied to translating "Assyria", another difficult Old Testament geographical term, would lead us to translate it as "Asia".

9. A parallel problem, with an instructive solution.

Translating geographical terms from the Bible into contemporary languages is often challenging. The geographical extent of Biblical countries and kingdoms often overlap modern borders so that choosing a label for a geographical term in a translation has political implications.

As an instructive example, we can profit from looking at the Hebrew word *'asor* "Assyria" and how that is handled by translators. The kingdom of Assyria is mentioned frequently in the Old Testament. In every English version I have examined, it is always labeled as simply "Assyria". No present state or entity has similar borders to Assyria. The core of its territory is now within the borders of modern Syria, Iraq, and Turkey. During times of expansion, the reign of Assyria at some times even included areas of the modern states of Armenia, Iran, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and even Egypt. Rather than use the name of one of the modern states, Bible translators have (wisely) simply transliterated the ancient name of "Assyria". This is an instructive example of one way to handle ancient geographic terms that do not match modern borders, such as *kush*.

10. The ideological drive to argue for an African presence in the Old Testament.

There is a movement by some, (mostly in North America), to argue for an expanded understanding of the Black/African presence in the Old Testament, represented by such authors as McCray (1990), McKissic (1990), Felder (1993), and Adamo (1992a, 1992b, in press). A large part of their motivation is that they claim an inadequate recognition of the presence of Africans in the Old Testament. But we must remember that at least from the time of Moses, the Jews and indeed the Middle East were aware of, and in contact with, Black Africa. Some evidences of contact between Kush and the Middle East, including Israel, include:

- There was a Kushite garrison in Palestine before the Israelites returned from Egypt under Moses, mentioned in the Amarna tablets (tablet 287, Pritchard 1958:271).

- Judah fought wars against the armies of Kush (2 Chr. 14:8-14), as did Assyria (2 Kings 19:8-13).
- Kushites lived in Israel (2 Sam. 18:21, Jer. 38).
- Persia claimed to rule as far as Kush (Est. 1:1) and the Persian king Cambyses (Herodotus 3:25) and Xerxes (Herodotus 7:69) fought against kush, (see also Yamauchi 1990:115, 347-356).
- Israel even had a proverb about the black-skinned people of Kush (Jer. 13:23).
- Jewish prophets prophesied about Kush (Is. 18:1).
- There were diplomatic contacts between Assyria and Kush, evidenced by the discovery of a tablet bearing the seals of both Assyria and Kush (Welsby 1996:64)

Without going into the details of the various claims and interpretations or motivations of the movement to find^{viii} more Black African presence in the Old Testament, I think that the above list shows that there is clearly a significant Black African presence in the Old Testament, and that Israel and the Middle East had much awareness of and contact with Black Africans. Trying to create more African presence in the Old Testament and emphasize the African-ness of kush by translating all instances of kush with "Africa" will probably be successful in this, but at the expense of accuracy. It has been shown above that "Africa" is not an accurate translation of kush for all passages. Ideology cannot be allowed to take the place of accuracy in translation.

11. Conclusion.

In summary, the Old Testament references to kush do not refer specifically or exclusively to the present states of Sudan, Ethiopia, or any other political entity in Africa, and should not be translated with terms that would refer to such political states. The word kush should be translated in a way that is faithful to the text and as clear as possible to the reader. This will generally mean that the word will have to be translated by different words or phrases, according to the particular context and language. Footnotes and maps will generally be helpful.

In situations where we have to work with translations of the Bible that translate kush with a term that signifies a particular state in modern Africa, what

can we do? Preachers and teachers (across Africa and around the world) can help their listeners understand that God has no special love for one political state, but that He loves us all, Ethiopian, Sudanese, African, Asia, European.

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End Notes:

ⁱ The label *Ityop'ya* was eventually adopted as the name of the state, but the Greek origin of this word is belied by the spelling and pronunciation of a rare ejective (glottalic) *p'* in the name.

ⁱⁱ The *Kebra Nagast*, "The Glory of the Kings" is a sort of national epic, a book of history and legend.

ⁱⁱⁱ The same shop sold the widely respected Bible dictionary in Amharic (the official language of Ethiopia) produced by the Ethiopian Bible Society, which defines the Biblical use of "Ethiopia" as "the land and government from Egypt south to the union south of the Blue and White Nile" (p. 150).

^{iv} "Upper" is calculated from the Egyptian viewpoint. People from further upstream would probably label it the "Middle".

^v In Sudan itself, the term "Nubian" is used to refer to a specific group of people, so it would probably be an inappropriate term for use in Sudanese languages.

^{vi} Some interpret this as a reference to a Midianite origin rather than an African from south of Egypt.

^{vii} The use of the term "Sudan" becomes even more complicated if we look at its historic use in English. In the past, as with "Ethiopia", it also had a broad meaning, as well as its narrow meaning. It used to mean the belt of Sub-Saharan Africa from the Atlantic to the Red Sea. But again, modern readers no longer think of such a broad meaning when they read "Sudan", but rather think of

the present, usual, narrow meaning, the state marked on the map, with its government in Khartoum.

^{viii} Some of these writers have moved beyond “emphasizing” the presence of Africans in the Old Testament toward “inventing” it, such as Felder’s assertion that “Adam” in Genesis should be understood as “African” (1993).