

What is the significance of Cush in the Bible?

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The land of Cush refers to a land south of Israel and is translated as “Ethiopia” in some Bible versions. Cush derives its name from Cush, a son of Ham, son of Noah (Genesis 10:7). The country of Cush is mentioned throughout the Old Testament, and Cushites regularly interacted with Israelites.

Cush is first mentioned in Genesis: “The name of the second river [flowing out of Eden] is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush” (Genesis 2:13). Although some believe that, in this passage, Cush could be a reference to Mesopotamia, other biblical scholars believe that it is more consistent to identify it as a general term for the African lands south of Egypt. The King James Version and Contemporary English Version translate the name of the land as “Ethiopia” in Genesis 2:13.

Cush is depicted as a powerful nation in the Bible. While Sennacherib was laying siege to Jerusalem, he felt threatened by Tirhakah, king of Cush, who had been marching to meet the Assyrians in battle, which is why Sennacherib attempted to discourage the Israelites (2 Kings 19:9-10; Isaiah 37:9). Later, Judah’s King Asa and his army marched out to fight Zerah the Cushite, who is described as having “marched out against them with an army of thousands upon thousands and three hundred chariots, and came as far as Mareshah” (2 Chronicles 14:9). Asa entrusted the battle to the Lord, and by the strength of God the Cushites were defeated (2 Chronicles 14:10-14). Isaiah also mentions Cush, describing it as a “powerful and oppressive nation” (Isaiah 18:1-2, NASB). Not only did Cush possess military might, but it was also a land of wealth known for its precious stones. Job mentions the topaz of Cush as being very valuable (Job 28:19).

The Lord pronounced judgment upon Cush in the prophecies of Isaiah and Ezekiel. Since the Egyptians were related to the Cushites, according to the lineage of Ham, Cush is usually mentioned alongside the judgments of Egypt (Genesis 10:6). In Isaiah, God denounces the Israelites who trusted in Cush or Egypt to save them from the Assyrians (Isaiah 20:5). God's judgment against Cush is also seen in Ezekiel's prophecies, which mention how Cush's wealth and power would be taken away (Ezekiel 30:4-5, 9).

Although several Bible translations substitute the English word Ethiopia for Cush, the nation of Cush was not equivalent to modern Ethiopia. The Cush of the Bible often does seem to refer to a region in Africa (Ezekiel 30:4-6); at other times, it seems to refer to Arabia—in Habakkuk 3:7, Cush is linked to Midian, a land closer to the Red Sea. The reason for the obscurity could well be that the Cushites migrated to various areas. The Cushites were dark-skinned (Jeremiah 13:23). A couple Cushites are mentioned in the Bible. Moses married a Cushite woman (Numbers 12:1). And it was a Cushite who brought news of Absalom's death to King David (2 Samuel 18:20-21, 31-32).

Significantly, Cush is also a nation that received the gospel and will be involved in the millennial kingdom. The evangelist Philip gave the gospel to an Ethiopian eunuch, who would have been referred to as a Cushite in Hebrew, and the eunuch was one of the first converts of Ethiopia to Christianity (Acts 8:26-39). He undoubtedly took the gospel back to his land, where he had great influence as a royal official to Queen Candace (Acts 8:27). During the millennial reign of Christ, Jesus will receive honor from Cush/Ethiopia: “From beyond the rivers of Cush my worshipers, my scattered people, will bring me offerings” (Zephaniah 3:10).