

Who were the Cushites?

Cushites were people from the land of Cush/Kush (or “Cushan” in Habakkuk 3:7). Cush, the place, was named after Cush, the man, the oldest son of Ham (Genesis 10:6). Ham was one of the three sons of Noah to survive the global flood. Cush was the father of Nimrod the hunter (Genesis 10:8-9). Much later, Moses married a descendant of Cush (Numbers 12:1).

The land of Cush is associated in Scripture with several areas in the ancient world, but its most common link is to the land of Ethiopia south of Egypt. Some English translations of the Bible simply put “Ethiopia” where the Hebrew reads “Cush” (see the KJV, NASB, and NET versions of Psalm 68:31, for example). In his *Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus corroborates the association between Ethiopians and Cushites: “For of the four sons of Ham, time has not at all hurt the name of Cush; for the Ethiopians, over whom he reigned, are even at this day, both by themselves and by all men in Asia, called Cushites” (6.2). In ancient times, Cush covered a much broader territory than modern Ethiopia does. The “land of Cush” mentioned in Genesis 2:13 is most likely a different place than the Cush of later history.

There is also a biblical connection between the Cushites and the Midianites. Numbers 12:1 says that Moses had married a Cushite wife. We know that Zipporah was a Midianite (Exodus 2:16; Numbers 10:29). So, if Zipporah is the same wife as mentioned in Numbers 12:1, then Cushan and Midian could be the same people. Habakkuk 3:7 implies the same connection: “I saw the tents of Cushan in distress, / the dwellings of Midian in anguish.” In the parallel structure of the Hebrew poetry, Cushan and Midian are placed as synonyms.

The word Cush itself means “black,” and, historically, the people of Cush have been

dark-skinned. The prophet Jeremiah alludes to the Cushites' skin color when he rhetorically asks, "Can the Cushite change his skin?" (Jeremiah 13:23, HCSB). The Ethiopian people have a tradition that after the flood Ham traveled up the Nile River to the Atbara plain. From there, he could see the Ethiopian tableland. Ham's family settled there and also in the nearby lowland. This tradition, supported by the biblical account, makes the Cushites among the most ancient people-groups in existence.

In an oracle against Cush, the prophet Isaiah describes the Cushites as "a people tall and smooth-skinned . . . a people feared far and wide, an aggressive nation of strange speech, whose land is divided by rivers" (Isaiah 18:2). Isaiah prophesies that Cush will receive God's judgment (verse 6) and the inhabitants of Cush will be among those who bring gifts to the Lord during the millennium (verse 7). Ezekiel 30:4 also predicts a time of judgment for Cush, and Psalm 68:31 predicts a time when Cush "will quickly stretch out her hands to God" (NASB).

In the time of Isaiah, the Assyrians went on the march, bent on conquest. Judah, fearing the might of Assyria, was tempted to enter an alliance with Cush and Egypt, but God through Isaiah warned the Jews against such an alignment. The prophet predicted that King Sargon II of Assyria would conquer Egypt and Cush, showing the foolishness of trusting in other nations for help: "The king of Assyria will lead away stripped and barefoot the Egyptian captives and Cushite exiles, young and old, with buttocks bared—to Egypt's shame. Those who trusted in Cush and boasted in Egypt will be dismayed and put to shame" (Isaiah 20:4-5). Instead of relying on the Cushites to save them, God wanted Judah to rely on Him. Trust in God is never misplaced, and God miraculously saved Jerusalem from the Assyrians in Isaiah 37.