Moses Married a Black Woman: Modern American Receptions of the Cushite Wife of Moses

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ABSTRACT

Americans overwhelmingly assume that Moses married a Black woman. Using sources from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this article highlights interpretations of Moses’s marriage to the Cushite woman in Numbers 12. Utilising cultural-critical reception history—that biblical interpretation is culturally conditioned—readers in the United States contrast a Black wife with an assumedly white Moses and Miriam and therefore display an assumption of a racial binary at work in their contemporary societies. In some cases, the name Tharbis is utilised as part of a post-biblical tradition that Moses acquired a war-bride in his early days as an Egyptian military leader. In three parts, the article first discusses nineteenth century associations between a Black wife and a white Miriam, followed by several examples of readers using “Moses Married a Black Woman,” or, as I call it, “Mosaic miscegenation” in their social and intellectual spaces. Readers call upon Moses’s marriage to a Black woman to address their contemporary social issues. Tharbis makes a come-back with twentieth-century novels that lead up to the 1956 Hollywood film The Ten Commandments. Whether named or not, the wife of Moses, mentioned briefly in Numbers, serves as a touchstone on which Americans project their anxieties about abolition and inter-racial marriage.

KEYWORDS

Numbers 12, reception history, Moses, marriage, race

An enigmatic and brief objection to Moses marrying a Cushite woman in Numbers 12 carries much speculation. When Miriam and Aaron wonder why the LORD has chosen to exclusively speak through Moses (12:2), the LORD appears at the entrance of the tent, calls out Aaron and Miriam, and confirms that Moses receives direct communication (12:5–9). This direct communication is “mouth to mouth” or “face to face” not just in dreams (12:8). After the cloud of God’s presence leaves the tent, Miriam is struck with a skin disease resulting in scales on the skin. Aaron petitions Moses, who then petitions God, to remove the punishment. Miriam is silent. God responds to Moses in kinship language: “If her father had but spit in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days?” (Num 12:14). Even though Aaron is involved, he does not get punished in the same way. Miriam is shut out of the camp for seven days (12:10–16). The mystery of this scenario begins with two references to Moses’s Cushite wife. First, Miriam and Aaron speak against Moses “because of the Cushite woman whom he had married” (Num 12:1). Then, the narrator verifies that they have accurate information—indeed, Moses married a Cushite

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1 All biblical quotes come from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise stated.
woman.

While the passage confirms Moses’s distinctive prophetic status, questions remain. Who is the woman from Cush that Moses married and why is his marriage an issue for Moses’s prophetic authority? Miriam is the main objector, if the feminine singular form of the verb “to speak against” (wattedabber) in Numbers 12:1 is any indication. Is Miriam jealous of the wife? Does it matter that Moses’s wife hails from Cush or is that geographical orientation simply the way to identify her as another wife other than Zipporah, who is from Midian? A tight marital stricture is placed on the Aaronites; not only are they prohibited from marrying divorcees, prostitutes, or women who have been “defiled” (Lev 21:7), their wives must be Israelites. Moses, on the other hand, is allowed to marry foreign women?

This article deals with interpretations that exclusively entertain the assumption that the woman in Numbers 12:1 is not Zipporah, the wife from Midian (Exod 2:15–22), but an additional unnamed wife who comes from a North-African geographical region. “The Table of Nations” in Genesis 10 sets out a “geographic horizon” drawing territorial and national divisions of humanity after Noah’s flood. Cush refers to a proper name, the son of Ham, who was the eldest son of Noah (Gen 10:6). The Hamites become a great civilisation. For our purposes, the biblical authors used Cush as an ethnic designation of someone from the region of northern Africa (specifically, Nubia or modern-day Sudan). The Septuagint translates Cush as “Aithiopia,” therefore, a long-standing connection between the biblical designation of Cush and Ethiopia is established. The first century Roman historian Josephus, for instance, associates the Cushites with Ethiopians (Jewish Antiquities 1.6). Ancient sources place no racial value judgments upon the Cushite wife.

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4 Commentators have argued that Cush could possibly parallel Midian, and thus the woman in question could be Zipporah. The geographical placement of Cush is debated since some texts place Cush as part of Midian, which is Zipporah’s homeland (Hab 3:7). In this case, Zipporah’s leadership role or her influence on Moses could be the issue. Equating the Cushite with Zipporah is a valid alternative that holds weight and much conversation in Jewish exegesis, but I deal with modern sources from the United States that choose to connect the woman in Num 12 with modern African geographical origins. See Steven L. McKenzie, “Moses’ Cushite Wife: Hebrew Bible/Old Testament,” in Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception: Volume 19, eds. Constance M. Furey et al. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021), 1154–1155, doi:10.1515/ebd.mosescushitewife.
5 The phrase “geographic horizon” is from Nahum M. Sarna, Genesis (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 68.
If any complaint against Moses exists in ancient contexts, it is due to him marrying a foreign woman—a non-Israelite.\(^6\)

Another element to add comes from post-biblical traditions of Moses as an Egyptian war hero. A legend circulated that Moses, a charismatic young loyal Egyptian, leads an Egyptian army against the Ethiopians (Cushites) where he captures the capital city of Saba. Tharbis, an Ethiopian regarded as either a princess or widowed queen, becomes his war bride. Moses’s fellow Egyptians, threatened by his adoptive status and his valour in war, want him dead. To protect himself, Moses flees Ethiopia, leaving his wife behind when his fellow Egyptians try to kill him.\(^7\) This all takes place before Moses kills the Egyptian taskmaster and flees to Midian, where he meets Zipporah (Exod 2). This full story of Moses as an Egyptian war hero comes from Artapanus of Alexandria in the 3\(^{rd}\) century BCE.\(^8\)

The Ethiopian military legend was alive and well for the ancient historian Josephus (Jewish Antiquities 2.238–253) who names Moses’s first wife Tharbis, the daughter of the King of the Ethiopians. As she watched Moses fight with valour, she fell so madly in love with him that she was willing to surrender her town in order to marry him. Their marriage mitigates the looming promise of Cushite enslavement and destruction that comes from war. In this telling, Tharbis is both a war-bride and a bridge to making a political alliance.\(^9\)

\(^6\) David M. Goldenberg, The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 74, 136–138. An apparent shift occurs, according to Goldenberg, during the second through fourth centuries that lead to Ethiopia correlating with Black Africa, but not altogether in negative terms. Elements of Cushites having dark skin appear in biblical literature, such as Jer 13:23, but there are no value claims about the dark features of the Cushites. The age of European expansion and exploitation of sub-Saharan Africa around 1400 and the rise of print capitalism allowed for the dissemination of travel narratives and the Bible. As a result, the early modern period witnessed deeper connections made between Ham and Africa, especially with the emergence of printed biblical “Table of Nations” charts. The 15th century witnessed the transatlantic slave trade where Portugal and other European countries kidnapped people from the west coast of Africa, transporting them back to Europe as enslaved peoples. Therefore, the “immediate reality of slavery and the need to justify it” were important factors for why contradictory and nonsensical traditions about Ham emerged even further, Benjamin Braude, “The Sons of Noah and the Construction of Ethnic and Geographical Identities in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods,” The William and Mary Quarterly 54 (1997): 129.


\(^8\) As quoted in Eusebius, Praeparatio Evangelica 9.27.7–10.432D–433A.

Given the connection to Ethiopia, a long-standing interpretive tradition exists to identify the Cushite woman as an African. While the assumption of her black skin can simply come from her geographic origin, the sources highlighted here measure the category of her “blackness” in relation to “whiteness.” American readers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries apply interpretive value to the colour of her skin. In other words, American interpreters in the late 1800s and early 1900s invoke Moses’s connection to a Black woman with racial bias. The fleeting appearance of an unnamed woman in Numbers 12:1 becomes a beacon of hope for racial integration, or depending on the reader, a reason why God forbids the mixing of races.

The focus here is on readers and how they use the biblical text, how they fill in the gaps with their receptions, or the interpretations that demonstrate how they have “received” biblical texts given their cultural contexts. “Moses married a Black woman” is a reoccurring phrase readers use to respond to contemporary political and cultural dilemmas. I do not trace how American readers came to understand the Cushite wife as a Black woman from Africa, rather, I investigate why they emphasise the colour of her skin in their interpretations. My analysis is rooted in cultural criticism as it meets reception history. In the words of David Gunn, reception history as cultural criticism “explores how the Bible’s use or impact relates to the social circumstances and culture of those who use it or are influenced by it.” The method works well in cultures that invest social capital into the Bible. In other words, investigating “hidden cultural assumptions,” and how people privilege certain biblical interpretations over others in certain times, could “challenge our own assumptions about the responsible use of religious texts today.” The “hidden cultural assumptions” behind interpretations of the Cushite wife of Moses are the focus of this article.

The first section of this article begins in the United States during the 1800s, a time when the abolitionist movement sought to end slavery in America. The name “Tharbis” is not utilised in these interpretations. The Cushite wife is the “silent other”; readers appeal to the only named woman in the story, Miriam, in their arguments for or against abolition—namely that Miriam speaks out against the Black wife of Moses, but is she wrong or right to do so? The second section moves into the late 19th and early 20th centuries, demonstrating how a small sample of readers use Moses’s marriage to a Black woman to advance their social claims to include African


12 Gunn, “Cultural Criticism,” 204.
Americans. I call this second section “Mosaic miscegenation.”\textsuperscript{13} In providing a breadth of examples, rather than a depth, I mean to demonstrate a recurring theme. Readers juxtapose an assumedly white Moses with a Black wife in a Black/white binary at work in American culture. Finally, the last section brings Tharbis back into the discussion, in that early 20\textsuperscript{th} century America saw a resurgence of her presence in popular Mosaic legends, such as the sources that influence the Hollywood film \textit{The Ten Commandments} (1956).\textsuperscript{14} I will also make note of how Tharbis, a Black woman, is depicted in America’s highly racialised society and culture.

\textbf{White Miriam in 19\textsuperscript{th} Century America}

The biblical text does not assume a racialised construction for Moses’s wife, but a foreign one. Her skin colour is not of importance, rather her ethnic origins seem to concern Miriam and Aaron. Moses marries a woman from Cush, and this article remains focused on those interpreters who connect Cush with Africa. Taking my cue from Wilda Gafney, I highlight those readers “influenced by contemporary race relations,” whose interpretations may not accurately reflect the world of the biblical text.\textsuperscript{15} The modern era attaches value judgment to skin colour in ways biblical authors did not.\textsuperscript{16}

Alice Ogden Bellis notes that “a number of male commentators, including some prominent African-American interpreters, have suggested that racism was the basis of the complaint” against Moses’s wife.\textsuperscript{17} Bellis does not speculate why, but I suggest commentators seek liberatory passages because they hold the Bible with attention to social and moral matters; it is in their best interest to further positive racial relations in the United States when they can find a biblical racist test-case.\textsuperscript{18} One example is from Cain Hope Felder who finds an “intentional

\textsuperscript{13} The term “miscegenation” is utilised in a pamphlet against abolition from white supremacists David Goodman Croly and George Wakeman in 1864 called “Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races, Applied to the American White Man and Negro,” which combines \textit{miscere} (to mix) and \textit{genus} (race). Another term, “amalgamation,” is a synonym also used at the time.

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{The Ten Commandments}, directed by Cecil B. DeMille, written by Æneas MacKenzie, Jesse Lasky Jr., Jack Gariss and Fredric M. Frank, 1956, Paramount.

\textsuperscript{15} Wilda C. Gafney, \textit{Daughters of Miriam: Women Prophets in Ancient Israel} (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2008), 83. Race is a social category (not a biological one) important in contemporary Western society, but not a category prescribed to people in biblical texts. In this way, it may be anachronistic to call Moses’ wife a “Black woman” in the way that modern interpreters understand that category.


\textsuperscript{17} Alice Ogden Bellis, \textit{Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women’s Stories in the Hebrew Bible} (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 103.

\textsuperscript{18} Womanist scholar Renita Weems takes the opportunity to call out women who could have worked together; Miriam should have embraced her sister-in-law and thus they could have challenged patriarchal systems together. In other words, “racism hinders solidarity,” a phrase used by Barton in reference to Weems: Renita J.
contrast” between Moses’s Black wife and Miriam’s white skin punishment, holding Miriam as an example of how “individuals can quickly move from a sacred ethnic stance to racism of the worst sort.”

Phyllis Trible, an influential feminist biblical commentator, also makes such the connection: “She who opposed Moses because of his marriage to the black woman stands condemned in diseased white. By the irony of the implied contrast, the text would seem to set female against female, native against foreigner, white against black, power against powerlessness.”

Modern interpreters see a Black /white binary at work in the text and intentionally recall it to respond to modern race relations.

The term “black” does not appear in the biblical text, nor does the term “white” depending on choice of translation. Many English translations use the idiom “white as snow” to describe Miriam’s skin disease (Num 12:10). The text states that Miriam got struck by a “scale disease” (tsara’at); often translated as “leprosy,” this broader type of ailment includes any kind of skin disease. The scales could signify the skin peeling, bumping, burning, discoloring, and wasting away. Likewise, the phrase often translated “as white as snow” does not actually include “as white” in Hebrew, but a simile “as snow” (sheleg, cf. Isa 1:19), like when psoriasis causes skin flakes to fall off the surface of the skin. In summary, the Hebrew could read that Miriam became “skin-diseased like snow.”

The text does not grant us enough information to warrant any colour connection between the two women, nor does it indicate that a Cushite woman’s skin colour would function as prominent enough to create a colour contrast. Apparently whatever Miriam implied about the Cushite wife mattered enough for her skin-disease punishment, but we are left to speculate on the exact nature of that implication.

Nineteenth-century readers capitalise on this gap in the text. I thus turn to American preachers from both sides of the abolitionist camp who engage Numbers 12 to promote their agendas.

In December 1848, a large meeting was held at the Broadway Tabernacle in New York City to raise money to free the Edmonson Sisters, two “respectable young women of light

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22. Milgrom suggests that leprosy acts as a punishment in the ancient Near East and in biblical literature for offences against the Deity, Jacob Milgrom, Numbers (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 97.
complexion” who “had the misfortune to be born while their mother was a slave.”

Two famous abolitionist Protestant preachers, Henry Ward Beecher and Samuel Hanson Cox, led the charge. While Henry Ward Beecher was a Congregationalist and minister of Plymouth Church in Brooklyn who regularly preached at Broadway Tabernacle, which became a centre for white antislavery Christian society. Rev. Dr. Cox’s speech brings in biblical history, including a map of “The Table of Nations” based on Genesis 10. Therefore, Cush becomes relevant. Cox focuses on Miriam as a negative example of what could happen if the crowd does not support the freedom of the Edmonson Sisters. But Cox will not go so far as to support amalgamation:

In alluding to Moses, however, I need scarce say, that I am not advocating the principle of amalgamation. Our opposition to that is one reason why we oppose Slavery, and why we are here this evening. Look at these two rescued victims. Yet we may not forget that the sister of Moses resented the affinity in a way that was far from pleasing to God. The word Cush also means brown, dark, or blackish. And Miriam, perhaps, had made her toilet with such vanity, that she could not bear a sister-in-law who was browner than herself. —See Numbers 12:10. On that occasion, God made her whiter than she wished to be, ‘as white as snow.’

Placing two Black sisters on display and asking the white audience to look at them in response to a biblical passage underscores the careers of Beecher and Cox in terms of white antislavery, viewing “abolition as a dialogue between white people, a discourse that objectified and excluded people of color.”

White Christians were deeply divided when it came to abolition, even to the point of violence. Just a few years later in 1850, a gang of proslavery forces surrounded the Tabernacle and stopped the meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society of which Beecher and Cox were a part.

The proslavery movement had its own spokespeople who looked to Miriam in Numbers 12 to justify their position. Josiah Priest wrote “Slavery, As it Relates to the Negro” which was revised and published as Bible Defence of Slavery or, The Origin, History, and Fortunes of the Negro Race (1852). Priest, a self-educated Christian from New York, attempts to provide evidence for why enslavement of Black people remains biblically justified. For Priest, Miriam is correct in that Moses’s prophetic authority comes under question if he is allowed to marry “one of the cursed race.”

However, Priest argues that since Moses married the woman before God gave the law, God only punishes Miriam for questioning Moses’s authority. Though they stand on

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24 “Meeting at the Tabernacle.”
26 Wilder, A Covenant with Color, 85.
27 Josiah Priest, Bible Defence of Slavery: And Origin, Fortunes, and History of the Negro Race (Glasgow, KY: Brown, 1852), 404.
opposite sides of abolition, both Rev. Cox and Priest agree that amalgamation is not supported with Moses’s marriage. They also agree that Miriam does not approve of Moses’s marriage to a Black woman. Priest states clearly that “amalgamation by marriage with them derives no support from that portion of Holy Writ.”

The antislavery forces in Brooklyn continue with the Presbyterian Brooklyn Tabernacle in 1886 and Thomas De Witt Talmage’s *The Marriage Ring: A Series of Discourses in Brooklyn Tabernacle*. A popular preacher in the mid-nineteenth century, his Presbyterian congregation in Brooklyn, New York, built a tabernacle just so he could preach to massive crowds. Talmage claims that Miriam is “disgusted and outraged” at Moses because he had practiced miscegenation by marrying a Black woman from Ethiopia. Miriam need not be critical of her brother’s life, Talmage suggests, for brothers and sisters ought to get along. He drops the miscegenation issue as quickly as he mentions it.

Talmage’s popularity meant that Charles Carroll in 1900 picked up on Talmage’s statement about Mosaic miscegenation, citing him in *The Negro a Beast*. Carroll, a white supremacist Christian preacher from Missouri, suggests that Miriam’s leprosy was not a punishment for questioning Moses’s marriage to a Black woman; rather, Miriam was punished for her “disgust and frenzy.” In other words, she was correct to question the marriage, but not in the way she did. Miriam expressed fear that Moses married a woman of “mixed-blood,” but God “would never have selected a degraded amalgamationist with a black wife to lead Israel.”

Miriam becomes his “heroine” of sorts, speaking out against mixed marriages.

The thought to lift up Miriam as a contrarian toward God’s acceptance of African Americans, bypassing amalgamation and miscegenation issues, comes in Benjamin Tucker’s 1895 *The Color of Solomon—What?*. Tucker founded *The Christian Recorder*, a long-running periodical for African Americans, by African Americans. Tucker focuses on the spiritual side of law in *The Color of Solomon*; God punishes Miriam because Miriam and Aaron interpret God’s

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law strictly and without a gracious spirit.\textsuperscript{33} The goal for Tanner, an African American intellectual, was to demonstrate that all people remained capable of intellectual gain “and that no race had a monopoly on greatness or futility.”\textsuperscript{34} The Color of Solomon mentions nothing about Mosaic amalgamation or miscegenation.

Colin Kidd suggests that the push to create an interracial marriage for Moses appeared as an interpretive move in the United States around the last third of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{35} With what I have found in my research noted here, Kidd’s assessment remains correct. Kidd does not provide any possible explanations for why, but perhaps the emergence of those interpretive assumptions correlates with the abolition of slavery in America with the adoption of the 13\textsuperscript{th} amendment in 1865. Abolition threatened social order with white anxiousness increasing for other social institutions, such as marriage. Most states still had anti-miscegenation laws on the books well after abolition. Early laws against interracial marriages stem from economic concerns from white male colonial leaders; in 1662, Virginia created legislation to protect white men who had sexual relations with Black women in that any children born would inherit the mother’s social standing. Children born to female slaves would become slaves regardless of the father’s social status. Such conditions also kept white women controlled because they would be condemned to slavery if they married an African man.\textsuperscript{36} Virginia banned interracial marriage in 1691, with the famous US Supreme Court case Loving v. Virginia challenging that law nearly three centuries later in 1967.

As evident in the mid–late nineteenth century, anxieties run deep in terms of abolition leading to amalgamation. The interpretations in this first section have centred on Miriam’s disapproval for her assumedly Black sister-in-law. As the nineteenth century closes and the twentieth century unfolds, I have found a few incidences in which “Moses married a Black woman” is used as support for amalgamation, and even inclusion of Black people into white spaces. The next section provides a catalogue of examples. I highlight a few examples here from various geographical locations. The process of listing examples proves useful in reception history when wanting to highlight a reoccurring trend of the Bible’s effects on its readers. My goal is not to prove that Moses’s marriage to a Black woman was a pervasive and prevalent interpretation

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\textsuperscript{33} Tanner, The Color of Solomon, 43–44.
\textsuperscript{34} William Seraile, Fire in His Heart: Bishop Benjamin Tucker Tanner and the A.M.E. Church (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1998), 144
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to support amalgamation, but to demonstrate an instability in reading that naturally exists as people interpret ancient biblical texts in their own social contexts.

**Mosaic Miscegenation**

Prudence Crandall (1803–1890) was a Quaker abolitionist and an American schoolteacher who started teaching an African American girl in her private school in Canterbury, Connecticut in 1832. After white parents withdrew their daughters, Crandall turned her boarding school into one for African American girls. In Boston, William Lloyd Garrison was publishing *The Liberator* (1831–1865) and circulated the existence of her school to African American families. In 1833, a “Black Law” was placed on the Canterbury books that allowed for the arrest of Crandall. In 1834, the Connecticut State Supreme Court appealed her case. When a group of “town fathers” came to interrogate her and pressure her into closing the school because equal opportunity for African Americans in education leads to the danger of promoting the amalgamation of the white and Black people, Crandall responded with “Moses had a black wife.”\(^37\) The phrase caught on in local publications; it was used by the prosecutors to discredit Crandall’s school, to promote racial fear that her school was supporting interracial marriage. In the *Norwich Republican*, an opinion piece by Andrew T. Judson, a Democratic politician and leader of the opposition, stated, “when she justified her proceedings and principles on the ground that Moses married a ‘colored woman,’ it was suggested that she might as well advocate polygamy now, because it was lawful in the days of antiquity.”\(^38\) White social anxieties over how abolition could lead to interracial marriage come through in Crandall’s case.

Lewis C. Sheafe (1859–1938) was an African American Adventist minister granted status as “the colored delegate” at the 1899 General Conference session of the Adventist Church. Proceeding with multiple prominent preaching posts, Sheafe founded a Washington DC church for Black urbanites in 1903 called the People’s Church. During these years, while he helped the denomination form anti-racial-discrimination resolutions, Sheafe received discrimination from within his own denomination. In 1907, the People’s Church withdrew from the Seventh-day

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Adventist denomination. One of his white fellow clergy in the denomination, J.S. Washburn, wrote a letter to Ellen White because Shaefe preached a sermon claiming, “Moses married a colored woman and no one had any business to interfere.” The letter was essentially a “tattle tale” as Ellen White was an instrumental leader within the small group of early Adventists soon to be known as the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Her teachings, written just years before Shaefe’s sermon, states, “the wife of Moses was not black, but her complexion was somewhat darker than the Hebrews.” Because Shaefe preached otherwise, and contradictory to the leader of the Adventist Church, his authority came under question. While not a major motivating force in the inner-denominational controversy, the marriage of Moses becomes yet another point of contention used by all sides.

In 1913, Joseph R. Gay compiled and published Self-educator for a Rising Race: A Practical Manual of Self-Help for the Future Development of Ambitious Colored Americans. Prepared for and by African Americans, the publication evidences a time of self-ingenuity and support for economic advancement, including manuals about how to develop skills for daily interactions. In the vein that “God helps those who help themselves,” such manuals celebrated the notion that African Americans can create their own future. In this way, the book supports the valued contributions Africa has made to civilization. In the section on Ethiopia, there is a piece titled “Moses Married a Colored Woman”; according to the book, Moses married an Ethiopian woman “before any legislature had an opportunity to prevent it.” The “Colored American descended from ... a superior race of people,” and as a result, “the colored race do not care for any admixture of their blood with the Aryan, the latter need have no fear that it will ever be forced upon him.” Using “the Bible as a Proof,” the publication lauds “Hamitic” ancestry of “Colored Americans” as something to celebrate. Moses’s marriage provides one area of proof of the merits of Black culture and contributions to the American landscape.

John Alexander Dowie (1847–1907) was a controversial figure of his time, having founded the city of Zion, Illinois, and the Christian Catholic Apostolic Church in 1896 after his healing ministry in San Francisco in 1888. In 1901, he travelled to Illinois with thousands of his followers.

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39 Douglas Morgan, Lewis C. Sheafe: Apostle to Black America (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2010), 212–214.
and there established Zion, which he ruled as the leader of a theocracy. As an evangelist, Dowie imagined a city of racial equality run in accordance with Christian ideology. The city and church went bankrupt in 1907 but continued operating until the mid-1930s. Dowie studied theology in Edinburgh and developed his practice in spiritual healing, titling his weekly publication *Leaves of Healing*. In 1903, he claims that Moses’s wife was Ethiopian and “with a black skin ... That was miscegenation. There was trouble because of this, for Miriam did not like it; she no doubt wanted him to marry a ‘lily white’ person.”\(^43\) Dowie looked to Moses as the prime leader of a theocracy; if Moses married a Black woman, then such is supported in the utopian world Dowie was attempting to build. In fact, Dowie supported miscegenation and told people in Zion to practice it, which was the source of much controversy and infamy.\(^44\) Dowie remained the subject of many jokes. In the 1903 section of “The World of To-Day” in the *Boston Home Journal*, for instance, the satire remains evident that Dowie, a “modern Elijah” would settle the question of intermarriage between black and white people. The writer satirically states that just because Dowie proclaims that “Moses married a black woman,” now everyone is comforted “to know what God thinks, and to have at one’s tongue’s end innumerable sayings straight from the lips of the Creator.”\(^45\) Ironically, as Moses’s authority is questioned in Numbers 12:1, so is Dowie’s authority to speak about Moses marrying a Black woman. While the rest of society struggled with miscegenation, Dowie’s certainty provides a stark contrast.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the theology of separate races and the belief that God did not mean for racial mixing, gained wide acceptance.\(^46\) Exceptions existed, such as Robert Bailey (1885–1940) who was an African American lawyer from Indiana and the first Black member of the Indianapolis Bar Association. Because he was also a member of the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, when Bailey was appointed Assistant Attorney General for Indiana in 1931, he held the post with a sense of Christian identity and biblical authority.\(^47\) In a 1933 case, Bailey defended a Black man and a white woman who were charged with miscegenation. Indiana state law forbade interracial marriages, but Bailey argued that the working definitions of what qualified as racial designations of white and Black were too vague. Bailey’s case made the front page of *The Indianapolis Recorder*, where the headline reads “Moses Married a Colored Woman.” When Judge Baker suggested that God made all the various races but kept them in their separate

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\(^43\) John Alexander Dowie, *Leaves of Healing: Volume 13* (Zion City, IL: Zion Publishing House, 1903), 689, tinyurl.com/DowieLeaves. Quote from a sermon by Dowie on September 6, 1903, called “The Rights of Ethiopians in America” as found in the volume.


\(^46\) Botham, “The ’Purity of White Woman,” 256–257.

habitations, Bailey pointed to the fact that “Moses married a black woman.” The judge replied, “well, Moses did a lot of things which if he did around here today might compel me to take charge of him.” Bailey retorts, “the point, your Honor, is not what Moses did but the fact that God placed his approbation upon this particular act of Moses.” It is not clear if Bailey’s argument that God supported Moses’s marriage helped sway the judge. The judge withheld judgment and the couple, unable to post bond, stayed in jail until they were released.

This section listed five brief examples of people appealing to what I call “Mosaic Miscegenation.” These examples matter because they use Moses’s marriage to a Black woman to not only support Black–white marriage, but also to support the social advancement of African Americans. They place upon the Bible a level of social importance. Thus, I share a breadth of examples with the goal once again to demonstrate how readers use the brief and fleeting existence of the woman in Numbers 12:1 to make claims concerning race in their cultural contexts. A reception history of the Cushite woman in these settings reveal racial tensions at play in American society. When the Cushite makes her debut on the big screen as a Black woman alongside a white Moses in the 1956 Hollywood epic film The Ten Commandments, the Black Cushite wife fixes herself in popular American imaginations.

When Moses Marries a Black Woman in 1940s and 50s America

The previous section highlighted a small list of people in the early 1900s from all walks of life using Moses’s marriage to Black woman to support some level of racial equality. At the very least, a precedent had been set in many American minds that as assumably white Moses married a Black woman. Thus, the previous section catalogued the recurrence of a theme that provides a foundation for this section. It was already in the minds of Americans that “Moses married a Black woman” when we arrive at the influential 1956 Hollywood epic film The Ten Commandments in which Moses is played by a white actor. This section, a discussion of modern sources that impacted the 1956 film, demonstrates that Moses’s marriage to a Black woman becomes a plot-point for his coming-of-age story. As we will see, a trend in American novels emphasises Moses as leader, his individual will, and his tumultuous decision to embrace his destiny to lead his people out of slavery. His Ethiopian wife, then, provides authors with intentional connections to enslaved Africans in America.

In the same year that Freud released his Moses and Monotheism (Der Mann Moses, und die monotheistische Religion), Zora Neale Hurston published Moses, Man of the Mountain (1939).

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An anthropologist and prolific writer, Hurston knew of the Ethiopian military legend and incorporated it into the novel. Moses brought back to the palace “the Ethiopian Princess,” his “wife as a sign of peace between Egypt and Ethiopia,” but she “meant nothing to him.” Hurston provides no physical description of his first wife. But, when she finds out about Moses’s adoption, she cowers in fear from him while calling the Hebrews “a gang of rapists and slaves.”

Later in the novel, Zipporah is the source of bane for Miriam with the complaint that a “dark complected woman he done brought and put up to be a Queen over the rest of us women.” To further her agenda against Zipporah, Miriam spreads rumours that she is from Ethiopia and “we don’t want people like that among us mixing up our blood and all.” Miriam uses the colour of Zipporah’s skin as an excuse for her jealousy of Zipporah’s position of leadership among the other women. When publicly questioning Moses’s marriage, Moses retorts, “The trouble with you is that nobody ever married you. And when a woman ain’t got no man to look after, she takes on the world in place of the man she missed.” Yet, when Moses takes her and Aaron into the tabernacle, Miriam is struck with “leprous whiteness.” As Melanie Wright explains, the exodus story, while “paradigmatic of the American slave experience is tempered by a need to engage with the implications for women.” Alongside the competition between women within patriarchy, the connection Hurston makes to mixed blood responds to her situation. Hurston writes during the Harlem Renaissance, a movement out of Harlem within New York City in the 1920s and 1930s in which political issues integrated with ethnic and racial ones.

Twentieth-century Americans revisited Moses for the political commentary, especially in terms of how leadership shapes the social and political contours of a nation. For Hurston, the politics also include commentary on “mixed blood” anxieties. Furthermore, eugenics and other pseudo-sciences justified racial discrimination using evolution and natural selection. For instance, his Ethiopian wife fears Moses because he is not a “pure Egyptian.” Miriam equates Zipporah’s black skin with Ethiopia in the novel. After Miriam complains that she’s “too dark,” Moses responds with “haven’t we had the mixed multitudes with us ever since we started from Egypt?” Through these interactions and more, Hurston identifies how race is not an objective

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51 Hurston, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, 64.
56 Wright, 59–60.
57 Hurston, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, 244.
While not an explicit source for the Hollywood version, Hurston’s novel presents an alternative conversation about race that sets the stage for the discussion that follows concerning modern treatments of Moses as an Egyptian war-hero who accumulates his Ethiopian bride, Tharbis.

Tharbis appears in the 1956 Hollywood film *The Ten Commandments* starring Charlton Heston as Moses. The film captures a fascination with the Near East and all the stereotypes of uncivilised barbarity that come with it. Americans relish a story of a “lone-man” struggling with a difficult decision, a coming-of-age saga of a leader, which certainly reaches its zenith in the film. Tharbis, the princess of Ethiopia, played by Esther Brown, appears in only one scene. In his first appearance on screen as a grown man, Moses has returned from a successful campaign against Saba. Having captured Ethiopia, the people are celebrating with fanfare and women are swooning, especially princess Nefretiri who is destined to marry the next pharaoh. When Moses presents his booty before Pharaoh, he proclaims, “Great One, I bring you Ethiopia!” Along with much Ethiopian tribute carried in by Black bodies, Moses presents a scantily dressed Tharbis before the Pharaoh. Moses presents them as the Ethiopian king and his sister in allyship to guard the southern gates. While no mention of any marriage ensues, Tharbis has a speaking line, presenting Moses with a necklace, calling him kind and wise with a bit of sexual energy emulating from her words. Nefretiri displays jealousy at the gift from Tharbis and watches her with disdain as she leaves. She does not appear again, nor is she mentioned again. The attention on Moses sends a message of his worthiness as the next pharaoh, and implicit sexuality that propels the storyline with Nefretiri forward. Tharbis, played by an African American actress, is a connecting figure between ancient enslavement and the “freedom” Moses, portrayed by a white man, brings for his people.

One of the film’s sources, the 1942 novel *All the Trumpets Sounded* by W.G. Hardy, a Canadian professor of classics, begins with Moses and his adopted mother scheming to get him appointed as general to lead the military campaign in “Kush,” or “upper Egypt.” In his youth, he grasps for power. At the age of twenty-five, less than a year into his post and through a great risk to his army, he captures seven nobles of Kush. Relishing in his victory, he sees Tharbis among the captive women standing silent and proud. Moses brutally rapes Tharbis, the daughter of the King of Kush. Afterwards, “the confident Prince of Egypt possessing a captive woman was changed into a man, strangely humble,” and he consented to marry Tharbis regardless of what Pharaoh

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58 Wright, *Moses in America*, 64. Wright also holds a strong argument that Hurston writes with possible concerns for the Nazi regime’s use of eugenics to justify the “Aryan race” in the 1930s (67–69).
or his mother might say. He takes her back to Egypt where Tharbis turns out to be childish and shallow, ultimately a representative of Moses’s youthful lust for the conquest. Tharbis refuses to flee with Moses after the murder of the overseer and his discovery of his Hebrew identity. Hardy depicts what could be seen as a male coming-of-age saga, in which women represent a gendered expectation of youthful conquest.

Dorothy Clarke Wilson’s bestseller *Prince of Egypt* from 1949 is a main source for the 1956 film. Clarke Wilson sets up Tharbis as a Nubian princess and Moses’s true love, with Tharbis the one beside Moses during the exodus. Wilson’s influential work of biblical fiction, “more in common with popular ‘bodice-ripper’ fiction than the Bible,” is a prime example of Western racialisation of the area known as Cush. She interchanges “Cush” with descriptors of “Nubian” and “Negro.” Moses’s slave is named White Elephant, a Black boy from Nubia. The novel mentions Black slaves throughout, primarily to pit the exploitative Egyptian empire against the liberation heralded by Moses through the Exodus. In other words, Wilson comments that slavery is against God’s intentions. In this way, Moses aims to make a necessary reform of oppressive imperial forces, an act that echoes the political situation in the United States. With the US entering the Second World War in 1944, and then the Cold War thereafter, the novel demonstrates an element of anxiety that the lack of law and self-discipline leads to corruption and threatens a cohesive society.

Moses does not marry Tharbis until halfway through Wilson’s *Prince of Egypt*. An old friend, Tutu, mocks him: “A pretty bit of irony—exchanging the loveliest princess of Egypt for a black daughter of Kush! How the noble friend of the pharaoh has fallen!” The irony continues when Moses finally meets Tharbis, the queen of Saba, and he mistakes her for a slave. The fact that Moses chooses to marry a Black woman, a visible character throughout the novel, might serve in some way as a commentary on Wilson’s interracial America. In this possibly progressive way, Wilson challenges what many white Americans would find unthinkable—that Moses (imagined as a white man) would wed a Black woman. Racial segregation was a reality in America in the 1950s. In 1958, only 4 per cent of American whites approved of miscegenation, or the concept of mixing different racial groups (as constructed in society) through marriage.

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63 Quote from Britt, *Rewriting Moses*, 16.
64 Wilson, *Prince of Egypt*, 172.
Dorothy Clarke Wilson’s novel portrays a marriage with Tharbis that Hollywood could not. Censorship in the early 1930s to the mid-1960s came from the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, or commonly known as the Hays Office. In fact, the production code, also known as the Hays Code, included a clause on miscegenation. Ironically dubbed “Moses of the Movies” in 1922, Will Hays developed a list of “Don’ts for the Motional Picture Industry,” which included forbidding miscegenation, specifically “sex relationship between the white and black races.”66 The code specifically targets the binary “Black” and “white” racial categories, despite a “multiplicity of racial and ethnic targets of the pervasive xenophobia” that existed “in the decades out of which the Code emerged.”67 This section began with a discussion of Hurston’s Moses, Man of the Mountain for the ways it challenges the possibility of clearly defining “mixed” racial blood-lines. In contrast, the narrowness of the Hays Code clause is remarkable, and speaks directly to American systemic assumptions that such categories were objective, clear-cut, and self-evident. With a fuller treatment of Tharbis found in the film’s sources, her brief appearance in The Ten Commandments—Moses as a white man with a Black woman—only hints at Mosaic miscegenation.

When it comes to this article’s method of reception history as cultural critique, it becomes clear that “responses to biblical texts have been culturally conditioned.”68 Abolitionists in the 1800s respond to Miriam’s act of defiance in Numbers 12 along lines of racial relations. When some Americans refer to Moses marrying a Black woman, they do so to enact social change. When the Cushite woman reaches American minds, interpretations of her become steeped in racial value-judgments.

Concluding Thoughts: Biblical Currency

In the summer of 2016, amid the wake of years of watching white police officers unjustifiably and fatally shoot Black people, Colin Kaepernick refused to stand during the playing of the national anthem. As the quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, all eyes remained on him as he continued to kneel during the national anthem in protest of showing pride for the flag of a country that oppresses people of colour. In a statement to the NFL, Kaepernick stated: “To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the

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67 Courtney, Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation, 118.
68 Gunn, “Cultural Criticism,” 234.
street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder." A member of an Iowa City writers’ group, Mary Gravitt, wrote an opinion piece and drew a comparison between the actions of Colin Kaepernick and those of the biblical Moses. In doing so, Gravitt recognised that the didactic parables of the Bible “offer currency. Currency now has to do with civil disobedience and racism.” The comparisons are creative: “Kaepernick, biracial, was adopted by a white middle-class family (where he became a son—Exodus 2:10); a quarterback prince in college and professional football; and like Moses, knowing his cultural-heritage, sacrificed his position and wealth protesting the police brutality routine to African-American life; and like Moses, married a black woman (Numbers 12:1).” This example does not use Moses’s marriage to support interracial marriage. Rather, it uses Moses’s marriage to suggest that the actions of Colin Kaepernick, like those of Moses, are warranted because they protest the ruling forces of their day. Perhaps with growing support for interracial marriage in the United States, readers will find other ways to use the unnamed wife of a famous biblical man in Numbers 12:1 to support their social causes. The uses of Moses’s marriage may take on new dimensions as the centuries unfold and the idea of biblical currency, as Mary Gravitt notes, remains a compelling explanation as to why.

Through the method of biblical reception history and cultural criticism, it becomes apparent that Moses’s Cushite wife remains part of a long legacy of people responding to the social ideas of their day with ancient biblical examples. Culturally conditioned biblical interpretation continues today. Contemporary Baptist minister and biblical scholar J. Daniel Hays interprets Numbers 12 this way: “I would suggest that *interracial intermarriage is strongly affirmed* by Scripture. Marrying unbelievers, on the other hand, is strongly prohibited.” Hays acknowledges that he directs Numbers 12 to the heart of Black/white racial division in America; those who are prejudiced against interracial marriage are out of line with God’s revealed will. However, in an increasingly religiously pluralistic world, Hays uses the text to caution his fellow Christians against marrying non-Christians. As evident from the other examples noted in this article, social norms change, and biblical interpretations reflect those norms. Readers can take a brief appearance of an unnamed wife for Moses and turn that appearance into competing social commentary for their contexts because they hold stock in the Bible’s level of authority. Moses

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marrying a Black woman allows for readers to rebel against, or to support, the social forces of their time.

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