

Jacob Oson, "*A Search for Truth; or, An Inquiry for the Origin of the African Nation: An Address, Delivered at New-Haven in March, and at New York in April, 1817*." By Jacob Oson, A Descendant of Africa. Published for, and by the request of, Christopher Rush, a descendant of Africa (1817).

My thoughts run on my people and nation; and I wish to inquire, who was our common Father, and from whom we sprang? And whether our ancestors were such a vile ignorant race of beings, as we, their descendants, are considered to be, viz. The most brutal of God's creation—Some say we sprang from the accursed race of Cain; others say from the devil, and that we have no soul and must completely perish like the beasts: but, blessed be God, there is a third class believe that we are human, and that we have souls to be saved or to be lost; but whatever the opinion of the two former classes may be, their actions and usages to us in general is, *let the beast have the pre-eminence*. And now I adjure you in God's name, to read these lines with candour; for I shall not confine myself to profane history, but to the word of Truth, and that will bear investigation. I well know that the task is arduous to inquire into this subject, on account of opposers, for they are many; but ought I give up the inquiry after Truth on this account? Certainly not. Neither let me be thought to be your enemy, when I tell you the truth; for I appeal unto the Creator of all things, who knows my heart and that of all men, that my inquiry is only after truth. And I now appeal to every true Christian or candid person, that wishes to keep the 1st and 2nd commands of Christ, whether the inquiry is not justifiable. But do not some say, Shall we call an African, or negro, our neighbour? No, we disdain that. I now ask the question, whether the tincture of the skin can destroy the validity of the commands? and leave it to you to judge who is your neighbor, St. Luke x25, &c. Again I ask, if it is not natural, be he or they of what colour, nation, or land, they may, diseased or in thralldom, to ask the cause? I know whether this inquiry has been made in respect to my nation; and as we cannot ascertain the tribe, being in a strange land, and in captivity; and few neither know the tongue nor land; therefore, I shall not inquire, concerning tribes.

But in the first place:—Who is our common Father, and from whom did we spring? 2ndly. Whether our ancestors were as vile, ignorant race, as we their descendants are considered to be. 3rdly. Where they got the fictitious name, Negro—which word conveys of the appellation of scandal. 4thly. Remarks.

1st place, Who was our common Father, and from whom did we spring? We are informed from holy writ, that God made the world in six days, and on the sixth day he made man in a state of innocence, but he fell by transgression and corrupted his ways by disobedience. So God was sorry he had made man, and it repented him; therefore he was determined to destroy man and every thing upon the face of the earth; but Noah and his wife, and his sons, and his sons wives, and of every clean beast, and fowls by sevens, and unclean by two's, these only excepted; and the remainder were destroyed. We read that it rained 40 days and 40 nights; so that the waters rose above the highest hills, and every thing died, except Noah and his family, and those that were in the ark with him. Therefore it seems unnecessary to say any thing of the race from Adam to Noah; for I am of opinion, that it will be agreed, that Noah and his children descended in a right line from Adam. This is the genealogy—Seth was the son of Adam, and Enos the son of Seth, and Cainan the son of Enos, and Mahaleel, the son of Cainan and Jared, the son of Mahaleel and Enoch, the son of Jared and Methuselah, the son of Enoch and Lemech, the son of Methuselah and Noah, the son of Lemech. It therefore appears evident, that Adam was Noah and his children's common father. Believing in the antideluvian flood, it must be agreed by all persons that Noah and his sons were the

common fathers of all human beings on earth, without any distinctions of colours, nations, lands or tongues; for I cannot find any new creation, and as we believe that all the people upon earth sprang from Noah and his three sons; of course, they were the common fathers of all upon earth now, and that we are the same by consanguinity, and from the original stock, be the cavils what they may, without they can produce or prove that there is a new creation; and therefore I do conclude that no person that believes the word of God, will presume to dispute that all nations upon the earth sprang from one common father, even Adam; and Shem, Ham and Japhet, sprang in a right line from Adam, and by these were the whole earth peopled. Gen. ix.19. ‘And God made the world and all things therein, and hath made of one blood all nations of men to dwell upon the face of the earth.’ Acts, xxiv.26. ‘Now let me ask, which of the three sons of Noah was our common father, or supposed to be?’ My opinion is, that Ham was, and there appears to me sufficient ground for it. As Ham had four sons, viz. Cush, Mizraim, Phut, and Canaan; and it appears, that Ethiopia was peopled by Cush; Mizraim, Egypt; Phut, Nubia; and that Canaan peopled the promised land, which now bears the name of Judea; Africa being peopled by the three sons of Ham, and the Christian nations (as they are called) having committed rapine and carnage; having trodden under foot laws both human and divine; and having brought thousands and thousands of our race from that land and enslaved them, and still hold them in bondage and subjection; we therefore claim Ham as our common father, and Africa as our mother country.

2dly. Whether our ancestors were, and we their descendants are, such a race of barbarous and ignorant beings, as has been represented?

I am well aware that nations have their rise and fall, both in trade and science; which goes from one nation to another; and this is a well known fact, that Egypt was a great nation for trade and science; but God gave it to Nebuchadrezzar, king of Babylon for his wages he fought Tyre, and had a hard siege (as Ezekiel the prophet says,) so that every shoulder was peeled and every head made bald. And after 13 years siege he took it, but got no booty, although Tyre was the mart of nations for trade; and as Tyre fell, so did Egypt. Upon the ruins of Egypt rose Alexander; and from thence the trade went to Venice, and from thence to Antwerp, and from thence to Amsterdam, and from thence to England; which is acknowledged to be the mart of trade; but my opinion is, that it will have its fall; for it is well known that commerce has been ruinous to nations in a greater or less degree. Commerce produces luxury, and that brings down the wrath of God.

Again with regard to our nation; it must be obvious to every impartial person, that it is proved that we all sprang from one common father, and are united by consanguinity. I shall now endeavour to show, that the race of Ham were not so barbarous and ignorant as they have been represented.

In the early ages of the world, we learn, that Abram went into Egypt on account of a famine which arose in Canaan, and was there permitted to associate with the learned men of that nation; and Josephus says “that while there, he taught them the knowledge of astronomy and arithmetic; which was unknown until Abram brought it from Chaldea.” He also adds, “that Greece is indebted to Egypt for that science.” Another author, speaking of Nubia, declares that it was the seat of learning; and from which, probably, science sprung, and that they were a powerful and polished nation; and furthermore, he believes them to be the offspring of Phut. Again, Dr. Dwight, in his Conquest of Canaan, Book III. lines 643, & c. says,

“Say, Tadmore, say, those viles of arts to shun,  
To Egyptian realms impatient don’t thou run,  
To courts, to lords with smooth deceit o’er hung,

Where art first budded, and where learning sprung.”

Holy writ speaks more of our nation and land, than any other land or people, except the Israelites who wrote it. The Jews, although they were in bondage to that land, returned back, in their hearts, to it; yea they put their trust in it, and were threatened by God for putting such confidence in it. God says, by the prophet Isaiah, chap. 31, “Wo unto them that go down to Egypt for help and stay on horses and trust in chariots, because they are many, and horsemen because they are strong.”

Again; Africa is not silent in history, of literary characters: suffer me to mention some of them. Divinus, Turtulian, Cyprian, Julius, Africanus, Armobius, Sactantins, and St. Austine; and these were all of them bishops of the church, and, therefore, may I not say that the enlightened nations consider some of them as corner stones? But it is needless to enumerate, for we have our warriors and poets, viz. Hannibal and Asdrubel, Terrance and his competitors: with these, I close this point.

Again: Whether we, their progeny, are as vile as we are represented to be? I contend that it is a false representation, and insist, that it is not founded upon truth; for, it is well known that the strength of a thing cannot be ascertained until tried. I am led to conjecture, if you had seen Xerxes’ army when he crossed the Dardennes to go into Greece, you would have concluded that no power on earth could have withstood them. This army consisted of from two to three millions of men; and yet this astonishing, numerous army, was checked at the Straights of Thermopylae, by the Spartans, with only a body of between eleven and twelve thousand men.

Again: It is no place to judge of the strength or agility of the tyger in his cage. Furthermore, the majesty state of the lion may be debased by bondage.

Again: What would be the condition of our fine gardens and enclosures, if they were not cultivated? Would they not produce thorns and briars, and be of no profit? Now, let me ask, what would be the state of a people, enslaved, and taught nothing from generation to generation to enlighten their minds, and being obliged to submit to hard labour and abject submission? I seriously ask, in this case, what would be the state of their minds?

Once more: It is well known that silver and gold are valuable and bright metals; but either of them may be tarnished by long lying; but yet they are silver and gold still. I now contend, that a thing must be tried or cultivated before we can find out its efficacy; for it is obvious, that if Xerxes had been less emulous in viewing his troops, and had paid more attention in training them to war, he would not have left Greece in that state he did: and, it is likewise obvious, that had the Christian nations had been as ambitious to train up our minds to religion and piety as they were to enslave and live upon their ill gotten wealth, by injustice and cruelty, our minds would never have been degraded as they are represented to be. And as the strength of a tyger, or his agility, is not known in his cage, but uncage him, and then see whether he would be made the sport and derision of men, women and children around him—so uncage us, or take off the veil that has been unjustly cast over our eyes, for obvious reasons, that we should not see, and then would children of six years old, and unprincipled persons up to fifty, deride us as we walk peaceably along the streets?

Again: Let his majesty the Lion be unbound, and he will resume his former prerogative: so let us be emancipated from our incumbrances, and then, where ignorance and darkness reigns, religion and true science would abound. As a garden uncultivated soon grows to weeds, so is the state of our nation, being enslaved in America for about three hundred years—trodden under foot, and considered as the offscouring of the earth—and taught nothing except submission and hard labour, and to consider those who had the rule over us as demigods, and that we are of an inferior clay: besides many have told us that we have no soul and are like the beasts. It appears to me, that all

their study was, to spread ignorance and darkness among us; and their reasons for that is obvious to us. I now ask, whether any reasonable person can be astonished to perceive that dullness pervades our minds? What is their language when they pass by a garden or enclosure that is run over with briars and weeds? The observation is, that the possessor is supine:

and no other rule is wanted to judge by, nor need they have any other. So if our minds are clouded, it is our possessors' indolence; for they have not cultivated them. We have been thought unworthy of notice; and, in some places, almost a criminal thing to be thought worthy of that. But, glory to God, there is a Star in the East, and its refulgence is opening across the Atlantic, and New-England has caught the ray! And the doctrine that this Star teaches is, Love to God and good will to man. Now,

When New-England saw the ray,  
 With careful steps she hastes,  
 Resolv'd to do away  
 Poor Afric's sons' disgrace.  
 Her fathers spread the poison round,  
 But she's the light in view;  
 She's broke the fetters, and unbound  
 And cultivated too.

And now, my brethren of Afric's race, let your hearts be grateful to New-England for what she has done; for she has broken the chains, and destroyed that name in her which makes human nature shudder, viz. *Slavery*—*nay, say cruel slavery*. She hath also set a pattern, which, I most sincerely hope all her sister states will follow. And if they do, the sons of Africa will be raised to their former dignity, and will not, like as Israel did, go out of Egypt borrowing gold. Neither will they make a molten calf for their god, for our belief is in the true and living God, and upon whom we place our reliance to lead us; and his dictates shall be our rule, and with his help we will follow him: and we trust that he will give us a treasure that the world can neither give nor take away. But let me not forget New York, for she has the ray in her, though not (as it appears to some persons) so clear, yet it seems to glimmer across the Hudson, and unto the west to New-Jersey; and I earnestly pray that the Almighty may continue its progress until it arrives to its meridian splendour, from the east to the north, west, and south; and may it appear refulgent in Georgia, and from sea to sea, unto the Straights of Magellan, and from thence throughout the whole universe, wherever the sons of Africa have been trodden under foot, and are still held in cruel slavery.

I now come to the third and last inquiry, viz. Where we got that fictitious name, *Negro*? Which, as before observed, conveys an idea of *scandal*, for we consider it as such: and I think the person that makes use of that epithet, is either ignorant of the import of the word, or intends to libel us; for this is the worst epithet that they can, even in the heat of passion, stigmatize us; or, in the vulgar, *damn'd negro*. This word *negro*, appears to be derived from the Latin or Spanish *black* and seems to have had no other meaning in ancient times; but in modern times, the word seems to be altered, and its meaning applied to a mean wretch. Be the person ever so dignified by moral or religious virtues, he is not exempted from the name; it is applied to all the sons and daughters of Africa. In a temporal sense we deny the term, but in a spiritual sense, we agree to the assertion; and assert that every son and daughter of Adam has been, and is stigmatized with the same epithet. Certainly it must be unchristian to select us out and brand us with a character that belongs to all

mankind. We have susceptible feelings, and those feelings can be hurt—and we are daily wounded by libels—therefore, I would to God that this golden rule might be established throughout the world: “Do to others as you would have others do to you in like cases.” If this was once established, it would bring mankind into a unison with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It would also debase the haughty spirit of the world, which now reigns triumphant; and it would also make humble and obedient spirits, and contrite hearts; and those virtues which St. Paul speaks of would abound, viz. Faith, Hope, and Charity.

I now come to make some observations on the whole. Was there ever a land more fertile than that of our ancestors? History informs us that the arts and sciences sprang from thence; and that they were a very mighty and powerful nation. And yet, in the annals of history, there was never a nation so subjected, made so vile, so trodden under foot, and used with such cruelty as my nation. All this God hath permitted, but he hath said that he would heal us. I am of opinion, and firmly believe, that we are the offspring of Ham, and, likewise, that his descendants were not the least noticed as astronomers, philosophers, &c. &c. This was in the early ages of the world, but at this period we are trodden under foot. Still I believe that the same, true, genuine spirit is in us; and although we are tarnished by subjection and neglect, as is witnessed in silver and gold, yet, blessed be God, the time is hastening when the remainder of the prophecies will be fulfilled, as spoken of by Isaiah, ver. 19, &c.) and we shall be called the people of God. My opinion is, that Africa must be restored before the Jews; for in that day shall Israel be the third with us, and God shall say, blessed be Egypt, my people, and, Assyria, the work of my hands, and Israel, my inheritance; for they shall cry unto the Lord on account of the oppressors, and he will send us a Saviour and a great one; and he shall deliver us. He has smitten us, but we shall return unto the Lord. He will be entreated of us, and will heal us.

And now, I would ask, if our ancestors, and we their descendants, were such a vile and ignorant race as hath been represented, how it came about that the most dignified personages that ever were upon this earth, should associate and have connexion with us? Is not Abraham styled the father of the faithful? And who can deny that he had his son Ishmael by a woman of the Africa race? Again, did not the law come by Moses which we all hold sacred; and no one that believes the word of God, will dare to dispute that Tharbias, his wife was not of that race; and Solomon, the wisest of all princes, took a wife of those said to be a vile, ignorant race. Again; I only ask of what race was Bethsheba, the mother of Solomon, king David’s wife? The immaculate Son of God was humble, though King of kings and Lord of lords; still I can select out his followers one of the race of Ham, that bore the name of a disciple. Again, may I not say, that every christianized nation on earth is indebted to Africa for science, both religious and moral? Here was an asylum to flee to from hunger and persecution—here it was that Abraham and Sarah found relief in time of famine—here it was that the family of Jacob found food and were preserved from famine, that the name of Israel should be held in everlasting remembrance—that is the land where Moses was born and educated—the same Moses that spoke unto God face to face and gave us the moral law—and here it also was, that the angel of the Lord commanded Joseph to flee with the child Jesus from the persecuting rage of Herod—here innocence was protected, that it might be fulfilled as was spoken by the prophets, saying, “Out of Egypt have I called my Son.” And now, why should the Christian nations boast of the Law and Gospel, and of their supremacy over us? For, if they would consider its rise, and obey its precepts, they would be a humble as we poor Africans. I shall conclude with the following words of the poet:

“Earth on whose lap ten thousand nations tread,  
And Ocean, brooding his prolific bed;  
Night’s changeful orb, blue pole and silvery zones,  
Where other worlds encircle other suns,  
One mind inhabits; one diffusive soul  
Wields these huge limbs, and mingles with the whole.