

Discovering the Bible's African origins

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Story by JERRY BLAIR

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Debating the historical origins of the writings that form the core of Judaism and Christianity is almost always controversial.

For Elizabeth City State University's Dr. Jahi Issa, however, such a debate is necessary to create a better understanding for all people touched by the teachings of the Bible.

Issa began teaching African and world history at ECSU in August as an assistant professor.

Issa, who has traveled extensively to Africa, became intrigued while researching the origins of the Coptic Church as an undergraduate at Texas Southern University in Houston.

One of the oldest of Christian sects, the Coptic Church began in Egypt in the second century, about two centuries before the Roman Empire adopted Christianity.

It was during a research trip in 1994 to the North African nation that Issa said he began to see intriguing similarities in language from ancient Egypt and in Biblical writings with words used to this day in Ghana and elsewhere in West African.

The St. Louis native, who recently earned his doctorate in history at Washington, D.C.'s Howard University, said that what became evident to him – as well as to other researchers – is that for many years mainstream Christian teachings disregarded the contributions of Africans in the foundation of the church.

Even so, he says, there's plenty of evidence to the contrary. For instance, St. Augustine, arguably one of the greatest writers of the early church, lived in present day Libya in North Africa. Other examples include the depiction and honoring of the "Black Madonna," which remains one of Catholicism's most sacred icons with shrines found in several countries around the world, including Hungary, Italy, Switzerland and Poland.

"A lot of historians believe (the Black Madonna's) origin is in the Egyptian gods Isis, the female, and Horace, the son," Issa said.

Ethiopia also has a strong link to both Judaism and Christianity, and a well-known legend claims the Arc of the Covenant can be found there.

Issa is working on a book on the subject entitled "Origins of the Word Amen" that's due to be published in January.

"Christians say (amen) every day, but have no idea what it means," Issa said. "It has an African origin and there are a lot of kings in Ghana who are named Amen. I explore how did this happen, and how, we as Christians, we don't understand why we say it after every prayer."

Admittedly, Issa said, the subject is a touchy one for many, including some of his students during class.

"We get into some lively debates," Issa said.

In the meantime, Issa has been giving a regular presentation at Mount Lebanon A.M.E. Zion Church, 320 Culpepper St., Elizabeth City, called "The Africans Who Wrote the Bible." His next scheduled talk is set for Dec. 1 at 7 p.m.

"I will teach it to those who want to hear," Issa said. "My purpose is to create dialogue in the community."

Issa said that the subject is more than just an academic exercise.

"First it's a story about human beings, and it's a story very few people know about, that the origins (of the Bible) actually come from Africa," he said. "We have a lot of preconceived notions of Africa.

We are so race-biased; I think if we talk about things like this we can help heal some of these things."

Issa also is involved in a nonprofit organization, Building Libraries for Africa. As the name implies, the group's mission is to build libraries that will serve as information centers.

According to the organization, the libraries will have satellite Internet capabilities, allowing African communities access to institutions and educational opportunities around the world.

In December, Issa will travel to Ghana to meet with the U.S. ambassador there to discuss funding for the program. Issa also is working to bring college and high school students from this area to work on the Ghana project in July.

"The U.S. is really focused on Africa right now, (the government) is really paying attention to these type of programs," he said.

More information about Building Libraries for African may be found at www.librariesforafrica.org.