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# Professor Jonathan J. Bonk: The African dimension

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# Professor Jonathan J. Bonk: The African Dimension

By Gabriel Leonard Allen

Professor Jonathan J. Bonk founded the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (DACB) in 1995 and its sister publication, the *Journal of African Christian Biography* (JACB) in July 2016. Together, the DACB and JACB represent a program to obtain and preserve an “electronic, open-access (online) resource to document the 2000 year history of Christianity in Africa.”<sup>20</sup>

For the past quarter of a century (1995-2020), the DACB-JACB have stamped their imprint in the sands of time as examples of an international collaborative effort, not restricted to the confines of academia, inviting anyone with capacity, memory, and conviction to contribute authentic biographical and historical accounts. The combined missionary focus of these two endeavors is to bring quality research that testifies to the significant interventions of African Christian men and women of God in history. They are novel in that they both provide free accessible resources to anyone in the comfort of their homes, churches, and institutions of learning.

On the occasion of his retirement from the work of the DACB-JACB, colleagues in the project have been invited to write a tribute in honor of Professor Jonathan J. Bonk. I will start mine by developing a context from the Holy Bible.

The Judeo-Christian Scriptures inform us that, by God Almighty’s divine plan and will, a host of its iconic subjects sojourned and settled in Africa: Abraham, Jacob (Israel), Joseph, Moses, Jeremiah, Jesus Christ, and the Apostle Apollos. The reasons they made Africa their home were varied, interesting, and wholly relevant for today’s biblical interpreters and theologians who are challenged to bring the contextualization of the Holy Scriptures to twenty-first century audiences and beyond. Three biblical icons will be considered here.

The first Old Testament icon under consideration is Joseph. The land route from the Canaan to Egypt and vice-versa, via the Sinai Peninsula, is a well-trodden path to the peoples of the Ancient Near East. The great-grandchildren of Abraham, meaning the children of Jacob-Israel, were well acquainted with this route as they made their third journey to purchase grain in Egypt. When, on this occasion, the Governor of All-Egypt noticed Benjamin, his own blood brother in their midst, he organized and hosted a forgiveness and reconciliation banquet in their honor. The very next morning, after falsely accusing them of stealing his “cup of divination” and subjecting them to house arrest, Joseph eventually

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<sup>20</sup> [www.dacb.org](http://www.dacb.org).

revealed his identity to them, alone, with the words: “I am Joseph! Is my father alive?” [Genesis 45:3a; ESV]. The day before, they had bowed their heads and prostrated themselves before him, not knowing that it was their own brother Joseph. They thus fulfilled the first dream of Joseph, a prelude to the second fulfillment, which was due to happen with their parents [Genesis 37:5-11]. Governor Joseph, having obtained the pleasure and endorsement of Pharaoh, extended a generous “Letter of Invitation” to his father Jacob-Israel and his entire household of seventy persons [Exodus 1:5] along with the authorization to migrate from Canaan and settle in Goshen in the land of Egypt. Three lessons can be gained from this Joseph story: First, Africa remains a land of unimagined transformation and opportunities. Second, it is still not uncommon to find exceptional slaves being anointed kings. Third, the enduring traditions of forgiveness, reconciliation, and a hearty welcome to strangers, displaced persons and refugees, remain the moral DNA in African societies!

The story of Moses is our second lesson. As years went by, the favor of God was on the Hebrew immigrants in Egypt. They became “fruitful and increased greatly, they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong so that the land was filled with them” [Exodus 1:7; ESV]. While Hebrew prolificacy and prosperity became an emergent reality, there also “arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph” [Exodus 1:8; ESV].

Soon, the Hebrew community in Egypt came under attack and matters took a sharp turn for the worse. By a series of “executive directives,” Pharaoh systematically degraded and decreed the enslavement of the children of Israel [Exodus 1:9-14]. The earliest “executive directive” demanded that the two appointed state midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, murder Hebrew boys at birth. However, these traditional birth attendants “feared God” rather than man [Exodus 1:17]. Shrewdly, they permitted the Hebrew male children to live. Another Pharaonic directive instructed all his subjects saying, every “son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile” [Exodus 1:22b; ESV].

At three months of age, a Hebrew Levite couple could no longer hide the cries of their male child at home. The Hebrew mother resolutely decided to comply with Pharaoh’s decree. Literally and metaphorically, she “cast” her newborn son into the Nile, but provided him shelter in a floating “basket made of bulrushes and dubbed ... with bitumen and pitch” [Exodus 2:3b; ESV]. In the plan of God Almighty, a princess in the palace of Pharaoh assumed direct responsibility to preserve, protect, educate, and provide royal training to the called and appointed Moses, the vulnerable Hebrew child of God. He grew up in wisdom and stature as a prince of the palace, in readiness for his divine tasks of being deliverer and law-giver of the Hebrew people. Human history, in

particularly African history, is replete with many typologies of Moses. Out of Africa, the same land of horror, spring liberators and divine salvation, at God's appointed time.

Our final icon under consideration is Jesus Christ. Soon after the "Wise men from the East" visited the Jerusalem palace and demanded: "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?" [Matthew 2:2a; ESV], the Idumean builder of cities and temples and destroyer of persons, King Herod the Great (37-4BC), promptly issued a decree to kill "all the male children of Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years and under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men" [Matthew 2:16b; ESV].

By such a dreadful edict, now referred to as the "Massacre of the Innocents" (c. 6 BC–AD 2), King Herod presumed that he would have eliminated all existential threats to his kingdom and kingship. Before the arrival of the soldiers in the Bethlehem region to enforce the blockage of villages and cities, Joseph of Nazareth received a dream and direction to "rise" from Bethlehem, where the holy family were staying, and to "take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you" [Matthew 2:13b; ESV]. Joseph responded with prompt obedience. The holy family instantly became refugees who sought protection in the foreign land of Egypt, in Africa, in the same area where the Prophet Jeremiah had been forced to take up residence, almost 600 years earlier. When Jesus Christ arrived in Africa, he was a toddler. Growing up from infancy to boyhood, Jesus Christ and the holy family were together exposed to unique African experiences, influences, education, and morality.

From the 1950s to 1970s, the family of Jonathan Bonk benefitted from similar exposure to the cultures of Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia where he received "all his primary education and part of his high school."<sup>21</sup> His introduction to Africa began in Ethiopia, the heartland of ancient African Christianity. Growing up in that context exposed him to the mystery of the divine presence, to the majesty of worship in diversity in the heart of African Christianity in those ancient Orthodox churches carved out of living stone. I believe that the cyclic reflection of the awesome, the mysterious, the absurd, and the amazingly beautiful never dies in the mind of someone who was initiated in Africa.

My first contact with Professor Jonathan came through a letter of invitation in February 2016 to join the Africa Advisory Council of the DACB. In this letter, Bonk stated that I had been nominated by Professor *Karamokhoba* Lamin Sanneh (1942-2019), now of blessed memory. I was stunned. In this

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<sup>21</sup> <https://dacb.org/about/editorial-committee/>

global sea of more endowed academics, theologians, and clergy, I never anticipated a modicum of literary recognition from the Boston–Yale citadels of learning, let alone being chosen to join the DACB-JACB mission—a task that I soon understood entailed the reconstruction of a modest but essential faithful testimony to the “great cloud of witnesses.” I mused and theologized that this opportunity must be truly some Christological-Pauline-Augustinian *gratias*, an undeserved, sanctifying grace which is to be gratefully received, but matched with an alert obligation of bringing about liberation and healing to many. I promptly accepted.

Within the first six months of our introduction, we interacted in relation to my first submission to the DACB-JACB of October 2016 on the subject “William Wade Harris Prophet-Evangelist of West Africa: His Life, Message, Praxis, Heritage, and Legacy” (DACB-JACB, Vol.1-5, October 2016). Ever since, our engagement has been measured and mature at a deeper level. I soon grew to appreciate Professor Jon as a man of wisdom, full of knowledge, a meticulous person, a ruthless time-manager, and a visionary Christian. I experienced his spirit of compassion for humanity and his many other qualities that are the fruit of a personal knowledge of an awesome, mysterious God who forever remains generous, merciful, and kind.

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