

Solving an identity crisis

Bible produced for people of African descent to remind them of their history

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When the Rev. Charles H. Smith, pastor emeritus of First Baptist Church, came back to town last month to help the congregation celebrate its annual homecoming, he brought his Bible with him.

Not unusual, you say?

Well, it really was. HIS Bible, we mean. In every sense. He, or rather his publishing firm in Wayne, N.J., published it and he was its co-editor.

And local church members, including several Smith pastored while he was here, love it.

Jubilee Creations Inc., of which Smith is chairman and president, published the Jubilee Legacy Bible last year to help solve an identity crisis among African-American people.



Smith

"I wanted to lay a base foundation for identity," he says.

Smith says that he concluded — after conducting five years of research at the American Bible Society and convening young people's focus groups in 26 states which involved several ethnic minorities — that a generation of people is growing up without knowing who they really are.

"The time has come to remind people of African descent that their true history does not begin with the horrors and atrocities of slavery," he says. "Rather, the history of black people is traceable back to the earliest biblical records,

And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation.

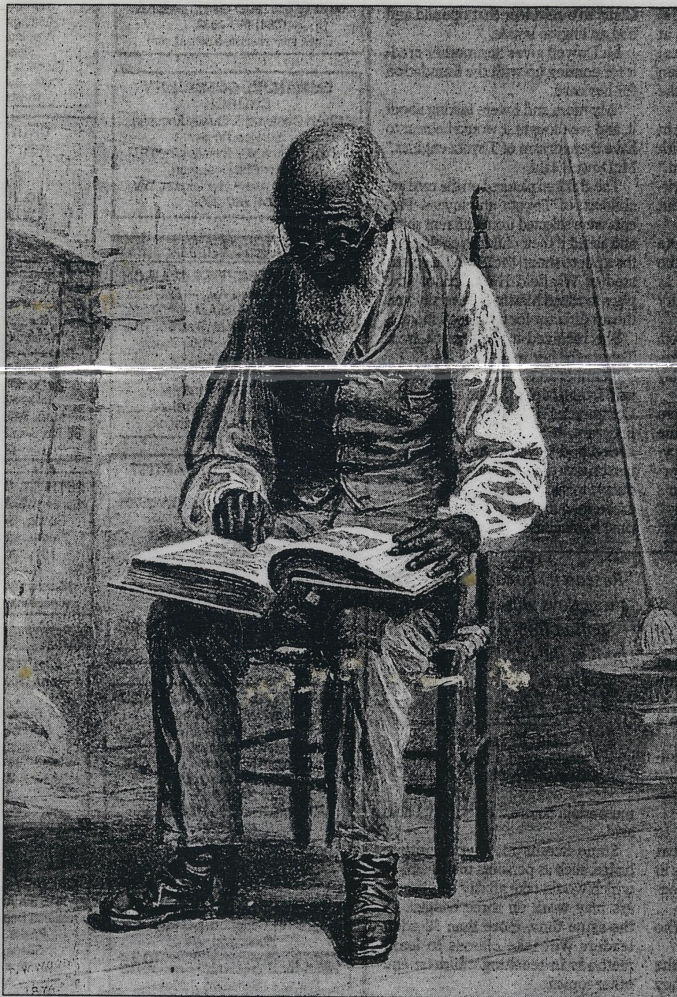
— Acts 17:26

and that history includes some of the greatest civilizations and monuments that one finds in the Holy Bible."

Smith's Bible includes a 176-page section before the Scriptures that outlines the history, migration and development of African people and their descendants.

"The Jubilee Legacy Bible offers freedom from ignorance for those nonblacks who have been misled about the multiracial and multiethnic setting of the ancient biblical narratives," he says. "Too many within Euro-American culture have depicted the African-Americans as cursed, or as stemming from ancestors who were jungle savages. Sadly, the Western media, textbooks and even churches of the 'majority culture' often have propagated such distortions and harmful stereotypes."

For instance, the Jubilee Legacy Bible cites the recent discovery by European anthropologists of humanoid fossils in Africa that are said to be between 3.6 million and 4.4 million years old as evidence confirming what many blacks have always believed — that human-



ity originated in Africa. Other evidence, he says, indicates that the Pison and Gihon rivers, mentioned in Genesis 2:11 and 2:13 during an account of Creation, really represent the Blue

and the White Nile.

"Black scholars have always believed that placing the early beginnings of man in the Tigris and Euphrates valleys was a Eurocentric concept of Cre-

ation," Smith says. "The origins of man were in Africa, and now European anthropologists have come forward and confirmed it."

Smith believes that the way

European and American scholars have re-interpreted history and the Bible to stereotype and even demonize Africa and her children was more accidental than intentional.

"People tend to look through the prism of their own experiences and interpret things as they see them," he says. "They're not bad people for doing that, but that's not the way it really was."

Smith, 69, who pastored here from 1960 to 1980, holds a master of divinity degree from the Samuel de Witt Proctor at Virginia Union University, post-graduate certifications in public health and executive management from Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania, and a doctorate of divinity from Simmons Bible College in Louisville. He serves as a distinguished visiting professor at Samuel DeWitt, where he teaches "Resources for a Creative Ministry."

Meanwhile, church members are buying up the Bible by the dozens.

"It's tremendous," says Jack Forte of South Point, Ohio. "It's really something."

Forte says he really likes the reproduction of a painting titled "Three Women" by Elizabeth Catlett, in which lighter-skinned women are seen to be emerging from a darker-skinned one in the middle.

"It shows that all the women from today are derived from our First Mother," he says.

"It's a legacy to the African-American race in this country and to First Baptist Church," says Kevin McClain of Huntington, who added that the stained-glass windows pictured in the Bible depict ones in the church that Smith designed.

"It's a wonderful Bible," says Roberta Dawson of Proctorville, Ohio. "We have one, three of our children have one, and we're buying one for each of our three other children for Christmas."