

# The Kandake: A Missing History

Heather Preston

Without question, one casualty of Western biblical scholarship has been the Kandake (Queen of Ethiopia, pronounced Kan-dák-e, often spelled “Candace”) in Acts 8:27. As a result, the matriarchal history of Africa as it concerns the establishment of Christianity on that continent has also been neglected. She ruled as queen at a pivotal time in human history, and an examination of her “kingdom” as well as the ways her story has been mishandled, is instructive. It challenges us to consider our account of the spread of Christianity in the early centuries after Christ.

## The “Kingdom” of Kush

While Egypt boasts a celebrated history that continues to fascinate the world, most Westerners will draw a blank at the mention of Kush (often spelled “Cush”). Some may recall it as a land mentioned in the OT, but few would dream that the Kushites overran and ruled Egypt by the eleventh century BC.<sup>1</sup> Home to the ancient city of Meroe, Kush was located in what is now southern Egypt and northern Sudan. Kushite history was one of exceptional stability at a time when, elsewhere, rulers were almost continuously being overthrown. This region is often referred to as Nubia, its Roman name from the fourth century AD on.<sup>2</sup> Its borders depended on its acquisition of tribute-paying vassal states.<sup>3</sup> The stability of this remarkable region, however, is without question and is not only confirmed by secular research, but also through an examination of Kush’s mentions throughout Scripture.<sup>4</sup> Its wealth and strength as a nation are noted in Isaiah, Nahum, and Job,<sup>5</sup> and other biblical books mention it as well, with these references spanning hundreds of years. This is a “kingdom” whose language, Meroitic, was completely independent from Egypt’s and has only recently begun to be understood.<sup>6</sup> It recounts a history replete with queens, fascinating enough to have been recorded by Greek historians and geographers alike.<sup>7</sup> These queens either ruled equally with their husbands, or their husbands are entirely unknown to history. Yet, the contributions of the Kandakes are virtually unknown. What is worse, their historical role is either lost in the mire of political propaganda or neutralized through fiction.

## The Queens of Kush

The queen of Kush was called by the title “Kandake.” In the Middle Ages (AD 1250–1550), she began to appear in literary works in the trope of the dark seductress who lures the white knight. Albert Magnus villainized her famously in his *De Natura Loci (On the Nature of Place)*. Among other sordid details, she was described as having extreme “sexual lust.” She was revisited in poetry by Heinrich von Neustadt’s *Appoloni von Tyrland* (a 1906 adaptation of the Greek romance about Apollonius of Tyre)<sup>8</sup> in which she was depicted as a beautiful black queen who seduces the already-married knight by using her special abilities of sexual gratification. These works of fiction are only a couple of examples of many that continued to aggressively impugn African noblewomen, but it is important

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to note that they found easy success in the rich soil of widespread mistruths regarding those with dark skin. As Valentin Groebner states, “Medieval hagiography knew no saintly black women of virtuous behaviour.”<sup>9</sup> These medieval examples are secular works of literature, but unfortunately even the early church fathers are not without a weight of responsibility. In their exegetical attempts in the second to the fourth centuries, authors such as Irenaeus and Origen, and Philo as well, drew inferences from race and skin colour.<sup>10</sup> As David Goldenberg states, “Origen’s exegesis . . . played a key role in the development of anti-Black racism. . . .”<sup>11</sup> The lie of perception, of black symbolizing sin or evil, meant that sensationalizing it required little effort on behalf of those such as Magnus and Neustadt.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the African, dark-skinned Kandake became a literary trope—a stereotype.<sup>13</sup> This villainization is hazardous to more than memory, for it confuses our understanding of a minor, yet significant, character in the NT.

It is with this in mind that we consider the Kandake mentioned in Acts 8:27, introduced as “Queen of the Ethiopians.” Historians identify her as Amantitere of the realm of Kush described above. She likely reigned from AD 25–41.<sup>14</sup> Her reign is nested within a remarkably long stretch of history (between the eighth century BC and the fourth century AD) when the Kushite realm stands apart from other kingdoms as a continuously steadfast power.<sup>15</sup> As Randi Haaland points out, it was so well established it draws the attention of virtually every other explorer or political ruler. Emperor Nero and Pliny the Elder are said to have paid visits to Amantitere.<sup>16</sup> She is praised for her prowess in battle. In Meroitic art, she is depicted as striking down enemies of the “kingdom.”<sup>17</sup> Astonishingly, these enemies included as formidable an opponent as Rome. A previous Kandake, named Amanirenas, had even decapitated a statue of Augustus Caesar and buried its head at the foot of a local temple so that her people could physically trample their foe.<sup>18</sup> Excavated in the early twentieth century, this bronze head, known as the Meroe Head, is now on display at the British Museum in London.<sup>19</sup>

At the point in history we are considering, the Roman Empire was dominant. It had demonstrated military prowess and controlled the majority of available trade routes. But the Roman Empire, we can argue, was hostile towards women, influenced by earlier Greek

philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, who taught that women were inherently inferior to men. In fact, male Roman citizens had the legal right to kill their wives, and their daughters were equally disposable.<sup>20</sup> Such a worldview could not accommodate a “kingdom” ruled by powerful women. Given the Kandake Amantitere’s success against the Roman army, a rivalry emerged—but this was more than a question of military capability. Rome’s identity as a superpower was at stake. It required that Kush be effectively erased. And so, this unique and powerful empire was redacted from scores of histories, an empire whose Kandakes were a threat to the patriarchy of Rome.

### **The Kandake of Acts 8:27**

While, as explained above, historians identify the Kandake who appears in Acts 8:27 as Amantitere, the text only gives her the title *basilissa*, “queen.” With gender roles being what they were in ancient Greek culture, there would have been no room for gender discrepancy or error in recording the Kandake as a female with ruling authority, especially when the text also mentions that the Kandake’s subject, whom Philip encounters, is a eunuch. Luke has no qualms about strong women. What is more, at this point in Acts, Luke features characters at the periphery of Judaism: Samaritans (Acts 8, etc.), Cornelius the God-fearing centurion (Acts 10), this eunuch from the Judaism-influenced upper Nile region, and his queen. This queen possesses authority over the “Ethiopians,” which for the Greeks meant everything south of Egypt, not confined to the present-day boundaries of the country by the same name. And this is an affluent kingdom,<sup>21</sup> for Luke indicates the eunuch’s importance, describing him as “in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake.”

It would appear that Luke’s information matches with the Kushite history that we know.<sup>22</sup> So, we could postulate that at the time of Philip’s encounter, and continuing to the time of Luke writing Acts, her identity would have been well known. Indeed, Luke gives this queen the kind of introduction you might offer a minor celebrity. He anticipates that his audience will know to whom he is referring—the queen of a strong and wealthy land. This is wealth that Rome has great interest in, and although Rome had successfully conquered northern Africa and made Egypt a province of the Empire, Meroe remained intact. The Greek geographer and historian Strabo (64/63 BC–AD 24) memorably documented the mounting tension between Kush and Rome.<sup>23</sup>

What also comes through in Luke’s account is that the Kandake places a high value on learning. Indeed, her servant is capable of reading and studying in multiple languages. He has no trouble communicating with Philip in Greek even though his native tongue would have been the Meroitic language. In Luke’s careful record, the eunuch’s and Philip’s words are not only in Greek, but in Greek with a nod to the elite.<sup>24</sup> The Kandake’s servant not only postulates on a deeply intellectual level but is also following the cultural practice of reading aloud. In the ancient world, few kingdoms could have devoted so much attention to education. Additionally, for a wealthy foreigner to undertake a journey of over 1,200 miles in a lavish caravan would have been especially precarious and would have required a high level of protection. All this again speaks to the status of the eunuch’s patron queen and a thriving empire. When we combine these

inferences with the archeological evidence of royal feminine presence in first-century Kush, the Kandake emerges as a striking figure. Referring to sculptures of Kandakes that date back centuries before the book of Acts, Steffan Spencer comments: “These statues convey a royal air . . . rather than solely emphasizing their fertility.”<sup>25</sup>

This conclusion is reiterated when we consider Luke’s account. Luke’s information is not directly about the queen herself, but rather, she is introduced matter-of-factly in an account of great significance to the newly emerging Christian faith.

### **Christianity in First-Century Kush/Ethiopia**

That the Ethiopian eunuch goes on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem “to worship” (Acts 8:27) indicates that he is a practitioner of Judaism. The practice of Judaism is known from the first century in Aksum,<sup>26</sup> a rising power adjacent to Meroe<sup>27</sup> on its northern borders, occupying the present-day northern regions of Sudan, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and stretching as far east as Yemen. When Judaism was first introduced to Aksum is hard to say. There is a claim that it was brought back by the queen of Sheba during the reign of King Solomon (1 Kgs 10:1–13; 2 Chron 9:1–12; cf. Isa 11:11–12).<sup>28</sup> It is more likely to have been brought up the Nile by exiled Jews.<sup>29</sup> Regardless of the source, the presence of Judaism in the region of Kush is worth noting, as it not only frames the eunuch’s narrative, but also gives us a picture of the ruling Kandake as sponsoring the eunuch’s interest in Judaism. Though some have speculated that the eunuch found his faith while in Jerusalem, his desire to worship there and his understanding of the prophet Isaiah suggest a maturity of faith. He is earnestly seeking the Messiah through the words of the OT prophet. He came over a great distance “to worship.” This is no casual curiosity; this is an intentional quest.

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According to Western scholarship, we have no documented proof the eunuch returned to his homeland, though Irenaeus speculated as much,<sup>30</sup> and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, the Ethiopian Church, and the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria hold this to be historical fact.<sup>31</sup> The proliferation of the Christian faith among the elite suggests that someone with authority brought back word of Judaic prophecy fulfilled in Jesus Christ.<sup>32</sup> Early converts to Christianity appear to have seized the opportunity for the spread of religion through the vast trade networks across the kingdoms of this region.<sup>33</sup> With Judaism already established here, Christianity as the fulfillment of prophecy must have been accepted as a logical progression.

## The Nubian Church

As mentioned earlier, in present-day historiography the name for the region we have referred to as Kush/Ethiopia changed during the fourth century AD to Nubia. Archeologists are now dating the presence of Christianity in Nubia to at least the fifth century AD based on the discovery of churches built of stone.<sup>34</sup> However, churches are typically built after Christianity is well established in a region.<sup>35</sup> The earliest Christian churches in Rome, during the time Luke would have been writing, did not have dedicated buildings at all, but rather met in homes. The idea of the church as an institution is a distinctly European one, and furthermore, the notion of the church as a ruling authority is not biblically evidenced, but rather a theological and sociopolitical construct only visible after the Council of Nicaea in AD 325.

Thus, it is plausible that there was established Christianity in this region before the construction of churches. Additionally, archeologists have uncovered in Nubia frescoes<sup>36</sup> as well as manufactured products such as silver reliquaries<sup>37</sup> depicting Christian scenes from before the fifth century AD. Even more compelling are the inscriptions regarding such advanced doctrines as the Trinity and Christian eschatology that have been discovered on well-preserved artifacts dating back to the early centuries AD.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, as mentioned previously, Judaism was an acceptable practice in the Aksumite court in the first century AD, and based on the same methods of data analysis applied elsewhere when determining the origins of Christianity, we can safely deduce a progression from Judaism to Christianity.<sup>39</sup> Tertullian (ca. 155–220) himself supported such conclusions.<sup>40</sup>

Further support for the early presence of Christianity in Nubia may come from the Meroitic language, in which certain words suggest a Christian influence. Considering that the language itself ceased to be used in the fourth century AD, Christian elements in Meroitic would contradict currently held fifth to sixth century dates for the reception of Christianity in Africa.<sup>41</sup>

It seems that the Eurocentric lens has skewed the historical record concerning the “spread of Christianity” by favoring the Western missionaries of the sixth century rather than attempting to salvage the Egyptian and Meroitic records. The loss here is twofold. It results in a gap in our understanding of the political powers that dominated the ancient world at the time of Luke. And it obscures the possibility that the Christian faith in Nubia may have its roots in the missional efforts of the eunuch of Acts, who was under the patronage of the Kandake.

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## Conclusion

Understanding the significance of the “Kandake moment” in Acts 8 is crucial to our understanding of early church history. The Kandake requires us to investigate our own misconceptions and assumptions. She represents a significant propagation route for the Christian faith. Her lost history is deeply entwined with our own, as this black, African queen likely played a role in the early establishment of Christianity in Africa.

## Notes

1. Isma'il Kushkush, “In the Land of Kush: A Dazzling Civilization Flourished in Sudan Nearly 5,000 Years Ago. Why Was it Forgotten?,” *Smithsonian Magazine* 51/5 (Sept 2020), <https://smithsonianmag.com/travel/sudan-land-kush-meroe-ancient-civilization-overlooked-180975498/>.
2. Robert B. Jackson, *At Empire’s Edge: Exploring Rome’s Egyptian Frontier* (Yale University Press, 2002).
3. George Hatke, *Aksum and Nubia: Warfare, Commerce, and Political Fictions in Ancient Northeast Africa* (Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, 2013) 57.
4. Frank M. Snowden, “Images and Attitudes,” *Expedition* 35/2 (1993) 40–50. It is important to note that the region of Nubia is largely interchangeable with Kush and even at times Ethiopia. It is roughly the territory of modern-day Sudan but can include portions of Egypt as well. Most translations of Acts 8 use the name “Ethiopia.”
5. Isa 45:14; Nah 3:9; Job 28:19.
6. Claude Rilly and Alex de Voogt, *The Meroitic Language and Writing System* (Cambridge University Press, 2012) 3.
7. Jean Leclant, “The Empire of Kush: An Original Civilization which Flourished for a Thousand Years in Ancient Nubia,” *The UNESCO Courier* 32/8 (1979) 56.
8. Christa A. Tuczay, “Motifs in ‘The Arabian Nights’ and in Ancient and Medieval European Literature: A Comparison,” *Folklore* 116/3 (2005) 272–91.
9. Valentin Groebner, “The Carnal Knowing of a Coloured Body: Sleeping with Arabs and Blacks in the European Imagination, 1300–1550,” in *The Origins of Racism in the West*, ed. Miriam Eliav-Feldon, Benjamin Isaac, and Joseph Ziegler (Cambridge University Press, 2009) 220.
10. Jillian Stinchcomb, “Race, Racism, and the Hebrew Bible: The Case of the Queen of Sheba,” *Religions* 12/795 (Sept 2021).
11. David Goldenberg, “Racism, Color Symbolism, and Color Prejudice,” in *The Origins of Racism in the West*, 97. Origen was particularly focused on Gen 9 and drew inferences from the “curse of Ham,” which led to an ideology of superior or inferior races (*First Principles* 2.9.5). This was also based on geographic philosophical thought—that those who live in particularly hot, dry climates such as southern Africa were driven there because they are particularly sinful. See further: Matthijs den Dulk, “Origen of Alexandria and the History of Racism as a Theological Problem,” *JTS* 71/1 (April 2020) 164–95.
12. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 10th anniversary ed. (Routledge, 2000) 69–83. Collins examines how these ancient and medieval parodies of black women have continued to evolve and negatively impact women of color even in modern-day America.

13. Sophia Smith Galer, "How Black Women Were Whitewashed by Art," *BBC* (Jan 16, 2019), <https://bbc.com/culture/article/20190114-how-black-women-were-whitewashed-by-art>. Galer discusses the way the visual arts were complicit in this misrepresentation and at times even more harmful because even the illiterate population could internalize their message.

14. Kushkush, "In the Land of Kush."

15. Ahmed M. Ali Hakem, "The Matriarchs of Meroe: A Powerful Line of Queens Who Ruled the Kushite Empire," *The UNESCO Courier* 32/8 (1979) 58.

16. Randi Haaland, "The Meroitic Empire: Trade and Cultural Influences in an Indian Ocean Context," *African Archaeological Review* 31/4 (2014) 654.

17. Hakem. "The Matriarchs of Meroe," 59.

18. Kai Mora, "The Nubian Queen Who Fought Back Caesar's Army," *History*, last modified March 23, 2022, <https://history.com/news/nubian-queen-amanirenas-roman-army>.

19. The Meroe Head, The Head of Augustus, The British Museum, 1911,0901.1, 2019, Room 35, "I Object: A History of Dissent," [https://britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G\\_1911-0901-1](https://britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1911-0901-1).

20. Loren Cunningham and David Joel Hamilton, with Janice Rogers, *Why Not Women? A Fresh Look at Scripture on Women in Missions, Ministry, and Leadership* (YWAM, 2000) 89–90.

21. O. G. S. Crawford, "Christian Nubia: A Review," *Antiquity* 21 (1947) 10.

22. Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament: A Historical and Theological Survey*, 3rd ed. (Baker Academic, 2013) 195.

23. Nuria Castellano, "Rival to Egypt, the Nubian Kingdom of Kush Exuded Power and Gold," *National Geographic* (Nov 15, 2016), <https://nationalgeographic.com/history/history-magazine/article/ancient-egypt-nubian-kingdom-pyramids-sudan>. The same documentation exists in the Meroitic language, but because of the lack of scholarship regarding the Meroitic language we are unable to ascertain their account, thus relying on Greco-Roman history. The sandstone stela with the African account is on display at the British Museum, [https://britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y\\_EA1650](https://britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA1650).

24. Gifford Charles Alphaeus Rhamie, "Whiteness, Conviviality and Agency: The Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26–40) and Conceptuality in the Imperial Imagination of Biblical Studies" (PhD diss., Canterbury Christ University, 2019) 295–96: "For example, in 8:31, Luke has the Ethiopian commanding an eloquent utility of the *lingua franca* Greek by employing the unusual optative mood . . . when he asks . . . How might I be able to, unless someone guides me? . . . This sophistication does not merely highlight the eunuch's education, and Luke's accomplished penmanship but a notable slant to an appreciative literary patron and audience."

25. Steffan A. Spencer, "Matrifocal Retentions in Ethiopian Orthodox Traditions: The Madonna as Ark & Queen Makeda as Prefiguration of Mary; with Egyptian Queen Tiye & Pharaoh Hatshepsut as Reference," *African Identities* (Nov 2021) 12. The author provides many notable examples of sculptures depicting dignified female rulers, now featured in museums worldwide, including the National Museum of Ethiopia and The Neues Museum in Berlin, Germany. The statues themselves date as far back as 1470 BC.

26. Rukuni, "Early Ethiopian Christianity: Retrospective Enquiry from the Perspective of Indian Thomine Tradition," *HvTSt* 76/3 (Nov 2020). Additional supporting evidence Rukuni does not mention are the Elephantine papyri and, likely, a Jewish temple. Both these confirm the presence of a Jewish community from the 7th–5th centuries BC.

27. Stanley M. Burstein, "Axum and the Fall of Meroe," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 18 (1981) 47–50. In addition to the region being referred to by different names (Kush, Nubia, Ethiopia), the main power changes from the city of Meroe (where we find the majority of records pertaining to the Kandake) to Aksum. It is after this power shift that Kush becomes predominantly known as the Nubian Empire.

28. David B. Miller, "Law and Grace: The Seamless Faith of Ethiopian Orthodoxy," *Russian History* 44/4 (2017) 505–14.

29. Joel Marcus, "'The Twelve Tribes in the Diaspora' (James 1.1)," *NTS* 60/4 (Sept 10, 2014) 433–47; Dierk Lange, "Origin of the Yoruba and 'The Lost Tribes of Israel,'" *Anthropos* 106/2 (2011) 579–95. Both Marcus and Lange argue for an organic assimilation of exiled Jews into African tribes. They argue that Jews fleeing oppression came to Africa and either assimilated or maintained their tribal identity, but over the years it has become entangled with African mythology. This becomes all the more compelling when combined with Tudor Parfitt's DNA studies of the Lemba people.

30. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses* 3.12.8.

31. Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, October 3, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ethiopian-Orthodox-Tewahedo-Church>.

32. Mark Shaw and Wanjiru M. Gitau, *The Kingdom of God in Africa: A History of African Christianity* (Langham, 2020) 71.

33. Haaland, "The Meroitic Empire," 670.

34. Livia Gershon, "Ruins of Monumental Church Linked to Medieval Nubian Kingdom Found in Sudan," *Smithsonian Magazine* (July 9, 2021).

35. Salim Farjai, "King Silko and the Roots of Nubian Christianity," in *The Kushite World: Proceedings of the 11th International Conference for Meroitic Studies* (Vienna: Sept 1–4, 2008) 334.

36. J. W. Crowfoot, "Christian Nubia," *JEA* 13/1 (1927) 145.

37. Farjai, "King Silko and the Roots of Nubian Christianity," 331.

38. Jacques van der Vliet, *The Christian Epigraphy of Egypt and Nubia* (Taylor and Francis, 2018) 185–91.

39. Rukuni, "Early Ethiopian Christianity."

40. ANF 35.

41. Richard Andrew Lobban, *Historical Dictionary of Ancient and Medieval Nubia* (Scarecrow, 2004) 104–6.



**Heather Preston** is a professional writer with a Master of Arts in Theological Studies. As a consultant, she works with churches and pastors and has a passion for academic collaborations. Heather hosts a podcast called *Scripts on Scripture* where she discusses all things Bible with pastors and fellow writers. Her most recent book is entitled *Between the Lines: Discover What You're Missing in the Story of Biblical Women of Faith* (River Birch, 2023).