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RABBINIC KNOWLEDGE OF BLACK AFRICA (Sifre Deut. 320)

David M. Goldenberg

While the biblical corpus contains references to the people and practices of black Africa (e.g. Isa 18:1-2), little such information is found in the rabbinic corpus. To a degree this may be due to the different genre of literature represented by the rabbinic texts. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that black Africa and its peoples would be entirely unknown to the Palestinian Rabbis of the early centuries. An indication of such knowledge is, I believe, found imbedded in a midrashic text of the third century.

Deut 32:21 describes the punishment God has decided to inflict on Israel for her disloyalty to him: “I will incense them with a no-folk (*be-lo’ am*); I will vex them with a nation of fools (*be-goy nabal*).” A tannaitic commentary to the verse states:

ואני אקניאם בלא עם: אל תהי קורא בלא עם אלא בלוי עם
אלו הבאים מתוך האומות ומלכיות ומוציאים אותם מתוך בתיהם
דבר אחר אלו הבאים מברבריא וממרטניא ומהלכים ערומים בשוק

“And I will incense them with a *be-lo’ am*.” Do not read *bl’ m*, but *blwy m*, this refers to those who come from among the nations and kingdoms and expel them [the Jews] from their homes. Another interpretation: This refers to those who come from *barbaria* and *mrṭny*², who go about naked in the market place.¹

¹ *Sifre Deuteronomy* 320 (ed. Finkelstein, p. 367). Parallels and citations: *bYev* 63b, *Midrash Tannaim*, ad loc. (ed. Hoffman, p. 196), *Midrash ha-Gadol*, ad loc. (ed. S. Fisch, p. 717), *Leqah Tov*, ad loc. (ed. Buber,

p. 115). Variant readings are recorded in the critical editions of *Sifre* and *bYev*. M. Kahana's *Manuscripts of the Halakhic Midrashim: An Annotated Catalogue* [Jerusalem, 1995] lists no extant fragments covering the relevant lines in *Sifre*. The redaction of *Sifre Deuteronomy* is generally put in the early Amoraic period (230-280); see the discussion in S. Fraade, "Sifre Deuteronomy 26 (ad Deut. 3:23): How Conscious the Composition?," *HUCA* 54 (1983) 296-298, and add: Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary* (Albany, 1991), pp. 17 and 185n56; Reuven Hammer, *Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy* (New Haven, 1986), p. 8 (all mid-third century); and S. Lieberman "Palestine in the Third and Fourth Centuries," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 36 (1946) 355 (beginning of the 3rd century). Among those who opt for a later dating add D. Boyarin, who, speaking of tannaitic midrashim in general, considers the redaction to have been done in "probably the late third and fourth centuries" ("On the Status of the Tannaitic Midrashim," *JAOS* 112 [1992] 460). The question of redaction is separate from the dating of *Sifre*'s contents, which stem from the tannaitic period. According to Lieberman (loc. cit.), "those who come from among the nations and kingdoms" is a reference to the *socii populi Romani*, the auxiliary (*blwy* = *bi-leway*) troops drafted by the Romans. (Cf. the commentary of Moses David Treves Ashkenazi [d. 1856], *Toledot 'Adam* [Jerusalem, 1974], p. 359, for a similar idea based on an exegesis of *blwy* = mixture.) My translation of Deut 32:21 follows NJPS with minor modification.

The concern of this paper is with the “other interpretation” that identifies the biblical text with those from *barbaria* and *mrṭny* (=Mauretania) who go naked.² Clearly *barbaria* in this text, cited with Mauretania, refers to a specific place, but where is it? The association with Mauretania might lead us to identify *barbaria* with the Barbabares or Bavares of Mauretania.³ However, such an identification does not take into account the rabbinic exegesis. The commentaries to the text that I have seen – whether medieval or modern – are concerned with the readings and identities of *barbaria* and *mrṭny* but do not explain how the midrashist arrives at these names, i.e. they do not explain the basis of the exegesis.⁴ But, as we might expect, it is precisely the exegesis that supplies the key to identifying the place-names. I believe that the exegetical fulcrum in the *Sifre* is a wordplay on *be-lo* ‘am as Blemmye, and possibly also on *nabal* as Nobae (Nubae, Nobatae, Nobadae), the African peoples of antiquity.⁵

² It is not impossible that *mrṭny* is a corruption of “Sarmatia” (*srmtṭy* > *smrṭy* > *mrṭy* > *mrṭny*). This apparently accounts for the reading *mrṭny* in a passage recorded in *Yalqut Shim‘oni* Song 986, ed. pr. (Salonika, 1521) quoting *Pesiqta Rabbati* 15 (ed. Friedmann, p. 71b). *Pesiqta Rabbati* itself does not have this reading, nor do the parallels (*Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana* 5.7 [ed. Mandelbaum, 1:89-90], *SongR* parshah 2, sec. 1.8.2/3) and as I have shown (“Scythian-Barbarian: The Permutations of a Classical Topos in Jewish and Christian Texts of Late Antiquity,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 49 [1998] 88n3) the correct reading in these texts is *srmtṭy*, Sarmatia. The variant readings – *mrṭny* (Mauretania) and *brṭny* (Britania) as well as several unintelligible corruptions of “Sarmatia” – are easily accounted for as deriving from “Sarmatia”, a place-name unfamiliar to medieval copyists. The graphic similarity of the two names is close, allowing for later medieval scribes to more naturally substitute the known Mauretania for the unknown Sarmatia. However, in our case the fact that not a single manuscript in *Sifre* reads “Sarmatia” (which is not the case in *PesR*, *PesRK*, and *SongR*), argues against the possibility of this type of corruption in *Sifre*.

³ The Barbabares are mentioned in Julius Honorius, *Cosmographia* (5th century) A 47, A 48 (var. Barbaricen(s), Barbarigens), B 48 (Barbaricenses), ed. Riese, *Geog. Lat. Min.*, pp. 53-54; *Liber generationis* 197.67 (*Chronographus anni 353*), ed. Mommsen, p. 107, ed. Riese, p. 167; *Laterculus Veronensis* (4th century), ed. Riese, p. 129. Barbabares is a variant form of the name Bavares, a people of Mauretania Tingitana and/or Caesariensis, who possibly appear also under the name Babari. Note the association of Barbabares with Mauretania in the *Laterculus Veronensis* (Riese, p. 129): “Item gentes quae in Mauretania sunt: Mauri [Quinque]gentiani, Mauri Mazices, Mauri Barbabares, Mauri Bacuates...”

⁴ Solomon ibn Aḥuna, quoted by David Pardo (d. 1792) and, anonymously, by Eliezer Naḥum (d. ca. 1746), at least connects the exegesis of *blwy* (which he emends to *bwly* = βουλῆ) to the Barbarians on the basis of a non-extant version of *GenR* 10.7 that mentioned *bule* with *barbaria* (בולי ודימוס יוצאין לקראתו וקלסו אותו) (נְקִיטָא בַרְבַּרִיָּא) which he found quoted in the *‘Arukh*, s.v. *bul* (ed. Kohut 2:92b). Although the reading בולי יצאין ודימוס is not found in extant versions (including MS Vat. 60), it is apparently related to יצאין כל גדולי רומי found in the printed editions (see *GenR*, ed. Theodore-Albeck 1:83). Pardo’s commentary, originally published in Salonika, 1799, has been recently published anew (Jerusalem, 1990). Naḥum’s commentary has now been published from MS by M. Kahana, *Rabbenu Eliezer Naḥum: Perush Sifre* (Jerusalem, 1993). Incidentally, in both works (Naḥum, p. 432; Pardo, 4:249 as also in the Salonika edition) Ibn Aḥuna’s explanation, based on his emendation of *blwy*, is incorrectly transcribed. On Ibn Aḥuna’s commentary (still in MS), see now M. Kahana, “Perushim le-Sifre ha-Genuzim bi-Khtuve Yad,” *Studies in Memory of the Rishon le-Zion R. Yitzhaq Nissim* (Jerusalem, 1984) 2:107-110.

⁵ On the spelling of the name Blemmyes, see Frank Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity*, p. 288 n. 64, and E.O. Winstedt, *The Christian Topography of Cosmas Indicopleustes* (Cambridge, 1909), p. 343. In Syriac sources the following spellings occur: *blm*, *blmwn* (R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus* [Oxford, 1879], col. 536); *blmw*, *blms* (J.P. Margoliouth, *Supplement to the Thesaurus Syriacus of R. Payne Smith* [Oxford,

It is difficult to imagine that the Rabbis had not heard of these people. The Blemmyes appear in written sources spanning, perhaps, a 2,000-year period (Egyptian hieroglyphics probably, demotic papyri beginning in the 6th century BCE, Greco-Roman sources beginning in the third century BCE, Greek papyri up to, at least, the 6th century CE). They were well known as a fierce nomadic people who inhabited the desert south of Egypt between the Nile valley and the Red Sea and often invaded Egypt. During the second half of the third century CE, beginning in the reign of the emperor Decius in 249-251, they became a major threat to Roman rule in Upper Egypt. One scholar has referred to this time as the “period of Blemmyan terror.”⁶ Their raids finally forced Diocletian in 297 to cede control of Roman territory south of the first cataract. For the next century and a half, the Blemmyes controlled the area developing diplomatic relations with Rome. The raids into Egypt, however, were resumed in 373 and continued, with intensity, into the 5th century. The Blemmyes’ period of political importance extended over 300 years, approximately during the years 250-550 CE. Their repeated struggles with Rome “almost assume a legendary character appropriated by poetry.” As a nomadic people they ranged widely moving westward beyond the Libyan desert and as far north as Eilat.⁷

1927], p. 56); and *blmyy(n)*, *blm'y(y)* in *The Forty Martyrs of the Sinai Desert*, ed. A. Smith Lewis (Cambridge, 1912), Syriac section, p. 27, line 21; p. 44, l. 13; p. 46, l. 2; ed. C. Müller-Kessler and M. Sokoloff (Groningen, 1996), p. 110, s.v. In Coptic *blmū*, *balehmū* (Sahidic), *balnemmū* (Bohairic), and in Demotic *blhmw* (W. Vycichl, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue copte* (Leuven, 1983), p. 28. It is generally, but not completely, agreed that the names Nobae, Nobatae, and Nobadae refer to the same people. The name Nobae disappears in the third century and is replaced by Nobatae/Nobadae. See J. Desanges, *Catalogue des tribus africaines*, pp. 192-196; Pauly and Wissowa, *Real-Encyclopädie* 17/1:1230 (Windberg); Snowden, p. 118; U. Monneret de Villard, *Storia della Nubia Cristiana* (Rome, 1983), pp. 39-40 and 87; W. Y. Adams, *Nubia: Corridor to Africa* (Princeton, 1977), pp. 420-421; L. P. Kirwan, “The International Position of Sudan in Roman and Medieval Times,” *Sudan Notes* 40 (1959) 23-37, esp. 31, and “A Survey of Nubian Origins,” *Sudan Notes* 20 (1937) 47-62, esp. 59; Updegraff, “The Blemmyes I: The Rise of the Blemmyes and the Roman Withdrawal from Nubia under Diocletian,” *ANRW* 2.20.1 (Berlin, 1988), pp. 76-77.

⁶ See A.A. Vasiliev, *Justin the First* (Cambridge Mass, 1950), p. 286 and n. 49.

⁷ The quotation is from Theodore Papadopoulos, *Afrocanobyzantina*, p. 23. On the Blemmyes, see R.T. Updegraff, *A Study of the Blemmyes* (Ph.D diss., Brandeis Univ., 1978), esp. pp. 1-2, 46, 72, 92, 106, 160; idem, “The Blemmyes” in *ANRW* 2.10.1 (Berlin, 1988), pp. 44-97. Other discussions are found in the entries in W. Smith, *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Geography* (Boston, 1854) 1:408-409; Vasiliev, *Justin the First*, pp. 285-289; R. B. Hitchner and A. Kazhdan in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, ed. A.P. Kazhdan et al., 1:296-297; Pauly-Wissowa, *RE* 3:566-568 (Sethe); J. Desange, *Catalogue des tribus africaines*, pp. 184-187; and W.Y. Adams, *Nubia: Corridor to Africa*, pp. 419-424. Calderini, *Dizionario* 2:53, s.v., lists references to the Blemmyes in the ancient sources. **A number of ancient sources from the 3rd–6th centuries CE that mention the Blemmyes are reproduced, together with English translations, in *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum*, ed. T. Eide, T. Hägg, R.H. Pierce, and L. Török (Bergen, Norway, 1994-2000) 3:1055-1202.** A review of the Blemmyes political-military history with Rome is found in Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity*, pp. 136-140; J. Krall “Beiträge zur Geschichte der Blemyer und Nubier,” in *Denkschriften der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Classe* 46 (1900) 1-15, and Woolley and Randall-MacIver, *Karanòg*, Text volume, pp. 90-98 with an appendix of the classical sources (pp. 99-105); L. P. Kirwan, *The Oxford University Excavations at Firka* (Oxford, 1939), Appendix I: The Early History of the Blemmyes, pp. 46-48; Lloyd A. Thompson, “The Kingdom of Kush and the Classical World,” *Nigeria and the Classics* 11 (1969) 47-48; idem, “Eastern Africa and the Graeco-Roman World (to A.D. 641),” in *Africa in Classical Antiquity* (ed. L.A. Thompson and J. Ferguson (Ibadan, Nigeria, 1969), pp. 42-60; J. Desanges, “Les relations de l’empire romain avec l’Afrique nilotique et érythréenne, d’Auguste à Probus,” in *ANRW* 2.10.1 (Berlin, 1988), pp. 33ff. On the “anthropological type” of the

In addition to *be-lo' am* = Blemmye, I think it quite possible that there is a double wordplay involved in *Sifre*, with biblical *nabal* being interpreted as a reference to the Nobae, another well-known African people and neighbors of the Blemmyes. The Nobae were also known for their raids into Roman territory. Diocletian tried to buy off both the Blemmyes and the Nobae with an annual sum of gold on condition that they stop raiding Roman land. Nevertheless, Procopius tells us, although they were still receiving the money in his day (mid 6th century), “they still overrun the country there.”⁸

Not only are the Blemmyes and the Nobae both well known to Roman writers, but they are regularly mentioned together. “Classical writers distinguish between three peoples with whom on various occasions the Romans in these parts had most to do: the Ethiopians of Meröe proper, the Blemmyes, and the Nobatai or Noubai.”⁹ As early as the 3rd century BCE, Eratosthenes describes the Blemmyes as living near the Nobae, whom he calls “a large tribe ... divided into several separate kingdoms” (apud Strabo 17.1.2; see also 53). Procopius describes the southern frontiers of Roman Egypt as an area within which “many nations are settled, and among them the Blemmyes and the Nobatae, who are very large nations” (1.19.28; at 1.19.35 Procopius describes the beliefs and practices of “both these nations, the Blemmyes and the Nobatae”). At Philae, Diocletian set up a shrine for the Romans, the Blemmyes, and the Nobadae.

The two peoples regularly attacked Egypt such that during the 3rd-4th centuries their names together with the Maziques “recur as a litany.”¹⁰ “The Nobae are most often named together with the Blemmyes.”¹¹ The linkage of their names continues into later times as well. During the 4th and 5th centuries the Blemmyes and Nobadae sometimes attacked each other; at other times they formed an alliance to attack Roman Egypt, such as when, in the first half of the 5th century, they attacked Philae. They were defeated by Rome, but shortly thereafter returned and devastated the

Blemmyes, see Lloyd A. Thompson, *Romans and Blacks* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1989), p. 58, and Christides, “Ethnic Movements in Southern Egypt and Northern Sudan: Blemmyes-Beja in Late Antique and Early Arab Egypt until 707 A.D.,” *Listy Filologické* 103 (1980) 130. Today’s Beja are considered to be descendants of the ancient Blemmyes.

⁸ Procopius, *Bell. Pers.* 1.19.32-33. On the Nobae, Desanges, *Catalogue des tribus africaines*, pp. 192-193, 194-196; L.P. Kirwan, “Comments on the Origins and History of the Nobatae of Procopius,” *Kush* 6 (1958): 69-73; Windberg in Pauly-Wissowa, *RE* 17.1:1230-1234; Updegraff, “The Blemmyes,” in *ANRW* 2.10.1 (Berlin, 1988), pp. 76-79.

⁹ Woolley and MacIver, *Karanòg*, p. 85.

¹⁰ G. Wagner, *Les Oasis d’Égypte à l’époque grecque, romaine et byzantine d’après les documents grecs* (Cairo, 1987), pp. 394-397; quotation p. 395.

¹¹ Pauly-Wissowa, *RE* 3:566 (Sethe). The earliest reference to a Blemmyan raid into Egypt, the 7th-century *Chronicon Paschale*, records that the emperor Decius (249-251) put snakes at the borders of Egypt “on account of the barbarous Nobadae and Blemmyes” (ed. L. Dindorf, *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae* [Bonn, 1832], p. 505). Updegraff, “The Blemmyes,” *ANRW* 2.10.1, p. 69 is of the opinion that this coupling of the Nobadae and Blemmyes in the reign of Decius is anachronistic; that the Nobadae were not in the area of Lower Nubia until later. Indeed even Procopius’ report, according to Updegraff, which couples the Nobadae and Blemmyes in Lower Nubia during the time of Diocletian is also anachronistic. But against this view, see L. Török, “Additional Remarks,” in *ANRW* 2.10.1 (Berlin, 1988), p. 103.

region. They are named together again in this period.¹² Even later, in 523, Timothy the monophysite patriarch of Alexandria, promised (on behalf of the emperor) to send Blemmyan and Nubian troops against Dhu Nuwas, the Himyarite Jewish leader who had attacked and killed Christians.¹³ And in his inscription of 545 Silko refers to the “Blemmyes ... and the other Noubadae to the south.”¹⁴

For almost 300 years the Blemmyes and the Nobae are the two most well-known peoples of East Africa on the borders of Upper Egypt. It would not be surprising if their names were known, and known together, in Roman Palestine. On the basis of such knowledge, it would seem that the midrashist in *Sifre* is playing on *blp ʿm* and *nbl* as the names of the two African peoples, the Blemmye and the Nobae. The inexact parallel between the consonantal clusters *nbl* and *nb* would certainly not stand in the way of good Rabbinic paronomasia. Many exegeses are built on similar inexactitude.¹⁵

If the Rabbis indeed had in mind the Blemmye and Nobae, the reference to *barbaria* makes good sense, for Barbaria was a well-known location(s) in East Africa. There is an abundance of evidence -- Egyptian, classical, Jewish, Christian, Arabic, and even Chinese -- ranging from the 15th century BCE to modern times attesting to the toponym Barbaria in what is today Sudan and Somalia.¹⁶ In any case, the toponym Barbaria and the people Barbarians in the Sudan/Somalia region are well attested for the period under discussion.

¹² U. Wilcken, “Heidnisches und Christliches aus Ägypten,” *Archiv für Papyrusforschung* 1 (1901) 399, τῶν ἀλιτηρίων βαρβάρων τῶν Βλεμύων καὶ τῶν Νουβάδων. See also Priscus (5th century), K. Müller, *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum* 4:100 (excerpted in *Karanòg*, pp. 103-104) where the Βλέμμιες καὶ Νουβάδες are mentioned several times as the forces Maximinus engaged in battle in 452. *The Fontes Historiae Nubiorum* reproduces this text (with translation) as well as several others referring to the attacks of the “Blemmyes and Nobae”; see *FHN* 3:1139-40, 1149-56, 1153-58, 1186-87, 1193-94; see also 1158-65. See also L.P. Kirwan, “The International Position of Sudan in Roman and Medieval Times,” *Sudan Notes* 40 (1959) 29, and “A Survey of Nubian Origins,” *Sudan Notes* 20 (1937) 53-54.

¹³ Snowden, pp. 212-213. See also Justin’s letter reproduced in *FHN* 3:1185-88.

¹⁴ Reproduced in *Karanòg*, p. 104 and E. A. W. Budge, *The Egyptian Sûdân* (London, 1907) 2:310. The translation of the former does not make the connection clear between the two names. See also the text and translation in *FHN* 3:1149-51.

¹⁵ Chapters 11 and 12 in Isaac Heinemann’s *Darkhe ha-ʿAggadah* (Jerusalem, 1970³), especially pp. 111-113, provide several examples, e.g., נפתולינפתולתי in Gen 30:8 = (*GenR* 71.8), הרצבות in Ps 73:4 = הרדים ועצבים (*bShab* 31b), Munbaz, king of Adiabene = מבזבוז ממון (*PesR* 25, p. 126b). See also *GenR* 23.7 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, pp. 228-229) = *ySheq* 6.2, 50a where biblical *ʿad ko* becomes the basis for a midrash on Acco. In fact, such word-play inexactitude goes back to the Bible where etymological explanation of names can be based on “similar sounding root[s]”, e.g. Noah from *nḥm* (Gen 5:29), Cain/Qayyin from *qnh* (4:1), Japheth from *pth* (9:27); see R.S. Hess, “A Comparison of the Onomastica in Genealogical and Narrative Texts on Genesis 1-11,” *Proceedings of the Tenth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem, 1990), Division A, pp. 68-69.

¹⁶ See my article “Geographia Rabbinica: The Toponym Barbaria” (forthcoming in *Journal of Jewish Studies* 49.2, Autumn 1998) for references to these and other sources that mention an East African Barbaria. The assumption that Barbaria in our text means ‘those who act in a barbaric manner’ led Michael Satlow into believing that the *Sifre* has the Cynics in mind (“Jewish Constructions of Nakedness in Late Antiquity,” *JBL* 116 (1997) 453. Clearly, however, “Barbaria” paired with “Mauretania” refers to a specific place.

On the other hand, although the Rabbis may have heard of the Blemmyes (and Nobae), they might not have known precisely where they were situated. “Blemmye” may have merely connoted dark-skinned Africans in general. Several scholars have concluded that this is the case among many Greek and Roman writers. Woolley and MacIver noted that the name Blemmyes was apparently “used loosely for the southern negroes,” and concluded that the Greek geographers, when dealing with the remote parts of the earth, were apt “to apply the name of a familiar people to any other tribe that shared at all their characteristics. Thus the Blemmyes could be set down as far afield as the slopes of Atlas.”¹⁷ L.P. Kirwan also pointed out that different writers in the Roman period seem to have had different ideas as to where the Blemmyes were situated. “This apparent inconsistency among the different authorities only confirms the impression gained from a study of the later geographers, that the name Blemmyes was applied by the writers of the Roman period to a collection of nomad tribes scattered about the Eastern Desert between Abyssinia, Egypt, and the Red Sea.”¹⁸ More recently, Theodore Papadopoulos has found the same situation in later Greek sources. He shows that the “vague, confused, and contradictory” references to the Blemmyes by classical and Christian writers are due to a lack of specific knowledge of these peoples.¹⁹ “Blemmyes” in these writers does not refer to a specific ethnic or political group, but to several nomadic tribal units who inhabited the Nubian desert east and west of the Nile and frequently attacked neighboring territories. “Generally the ethnic designation ‘Blemmyes’ acquires among ancient authorities a very generic connotation and is used to cover a great number of desert tribes east and west of the Nile, and such generic use is a source of confusion.”²⁰

Such lack of specific knowledge may have been the case for the Rabbis as well. By “Blemmyes” they too may have understood black Africans in general. If so, it would not be surprising to find them describing the extent of the “Blemmyes” land as going from Barbaria in East Africa to Mauretania in West Africa. Similarly Strabo (17.3.1) and Juvenal (10.148-150) described the east-west extent of Africa as being between Mauretania and the Nile (they added a

¹⁸ *The Oxford University Excavations at Firka*, p. 48. See also his “Comments” (above, n. 8), p. 69. Similarly G.W.B. Huntingford, *The Historical Geography of Ethiopia*, ed. R. Pankhurst (Oxford, 1989), p. 46.

¹⁹ Some writers situate the Blemmyes along the Nile in Nubia (e.g. Eratosthenes apud Strabo 17.1.2; cf. 53), others in Libya (P. Mela 1.4.23, 1.8.48), and still others put them further west (Dionysius Periegetes [2nd century CE?] 219-220, *Geographi Graeci Minores*, ed. C. Müller [Paris, 1855 and 1861] 2:114) near Cerne.

²⁰ Papadopoulos, *African Byzantine*, pp. 9, 17ff; quotations from 9 and 18. Ammianus uses the name to refer to Nubians in general, i.e. those from the Nile valley south of the cataracts (Bunbury, E. H., *A History of Ancient Geography among the Greeks and Romans from the Earliest Ages till the Fall of the Roman Empire* [London², 1883] 2:683). W. B. Emery had also suggested that among Greco-Roman writers “Blemmye” denoted all black Africans (*Egypt in Nubia* [London, 1965], p. 232); see also E. A. W. Budge, *A History of Ethiopia* (London, 1928), p. 100. Is the description of Blemmye as *Mauroi*, as found in the Greek “Ammonius Narrative,” an indication of attempts to specify what had become an all too generic term? See P. Mayerson, “The Ammonius Narrative: Bedouin and Blemmye Attacks in Sinai” in *The Bible World: Essays in Honor of Cyrus H. Gordon* (New York, 1980), p. 143. Mayerson dates the narrative to the late 4th century (against the accepted 6th-century dating), contemporaneous with the Blemmyes attack on Raithou which is the subject of the narrative. The Syriac version of the narrative is that published by A. Smith Lewis, *The Forty Martyrs of the Sinai Desert* and more recently by C. Müller-Kessler and M. Sokoloff (above n. 5).

third point in the south seeing Africa as a triangle bounded by Mauretania, the Nile, and Ethiopia).²¹

Even if the Rabbis knew that the Blemmyes (and Nobae) were situated in East Africa, a Mauretania-Barbaria merism representing the breadth of the Blemmyes' land would not be surprising, for the two areas may have been contiguous in the Rabbis' minds, as it was to some classical writers. "It is very probable that the concept of a truncated Africa sometimes led people to think that Mauritania was beside the countries on the Red Sea."²²

Thus the lack of geographically accurate knowledge may have led *Sifre* to think of Barbaria and Mauretania as located near to each other, and as the extent of Blemmyan and Nobaeian land.^{23 24} This possibility may perhaps receive support from the conjunction of two beliefs of antiquity: that the Blemmyes were located at the source of the Nile, and that the Nile's source was in Mauretania.

As to the first belief, Theocritus (3rd century BCE) and Dionysius Periegetes (2nd century CE?) situate the Blemmyes at the source of the Nile.²⁵ As to the belief that the source of

²¹ Cf. Pausanias 1.33.5: "There are other Ethiopians [besides those south of Syene] who are neighbors of the Mauri [=Mauritanians]," and Orosius (early 5th century) who similarly locates some Ethiopian nations not far from the southern borders of Mauretania Caesariensis and Mauretania Sitifensis (sec. 45-46 in ed. Riese, *Geog. Lat. Min.*, pp. 67-68; 1.2.92-93 in M.-P. Arnaud-Lindet, ed. and trans. *Orose: Histoires (Contre les païens)* (Paris, 1990-91) 1:36). For other sources locating Ethiopians in Mauretania, see J. Y. Nadeau, "Ethiopians," *Classical Quarterly* 20 (1970) 339-349, and "Ethiopians Again and Again," *Mnemosyne* 30 (1977) 75-78. In general, on the propinquity of Ethiopians to the southern borders of North Africa, see J. Desanges, "Le peuplement éthiopien a la lisière méridionale de l'Afrique du nord d'après les témoignages textuels de l'antiquité," *Afrique noire et monde méditerranéen dans l'antiquité: Colloque de Dakar, 19-24 janvier 1976* (Dakar, 1978), pp. 29-41.

²² Jacques Ramin, *Le Périples d'Hannon / The Periplus of Hanno* (Oxford, 1976), p. 86. Cf. Pliny 6.36.198 who puts Cerne near the Persian Gulf.

²³ Could this geographic relationship between the Nobadae and the Mauretians be reflected in the targumic reading, according to some manuscripts, of Gen 10:13 (Ps-Jonathan) and 1 Chron 1:11, ומצרים אוליך, ית [דה"י: ניוטאי, נאטאי] וית מריוטאי. Neofiti margin reads מרטינאי for the last word, which, as Diez Macho notes may be a corruption of מרטנאי, Mauretania. If he is right, and with a *b/w* interchange in ניוטאי (ניוטאי) we would thus have Nobatae and Mauretians. For the targumic readings, see A. Diez Macho (et al.), *Targum Palaestinense in Pentateuchem (Biblia Polyglotta Matritensia)* (Madrid, 1977) 1:64-65; R. Le Déaut and J. Robert, *Targum des Chroniques (cod. vat. urb. 1)* (Rome, 1971) 2:10; for interpretation of the toponyms, see *The Aramaic Bible: The Targums* (Wilmington, Delaware), Volume 1A (1992): Targum Neofiti (trans. M. McNamara) to Genesis, and vol. 19: Chronicles (trans. S. McIvor), ad. locc. For the *b/w* interchange, see the literature listed in D. Goldenberg, "Yerushalmi Sanhedrin" in *In the Margins of the Yerushalmi*, ed. J. Neusner (Chico, Calif., 1983), p. 111.

²⁴ Cf., from a slightly later period, John of Nikios (d. 686) who wrote of "the Barbarians (*barbar*) of the province of Nubia and Africa who are called Mauritanians (*Mōritānes*):" H. Zotenberg, ed., *La Chronique de Jean de Nikiou*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1935) with French translation; English trans: R.H. Charles, London, 1916. Excerpted from Zotenberg (p. 404) and translated into English in Giovanni Vantini, *Oriental Sources Concerning Nubia* (Heidelberg, 1975), p. 34.

the Nile was in West Africa, this was a commonly held opinion – an opinion so strongly held that it was not finally abandoned until the explorations of the 19th century.²⁶ Strabo (17.3.4) reports that “some think that even the sources of the Nile are near the extremities of Maurusia (τοῖς ἄκροις τῆς Μαυρουσίας).” Pliny (5.8.51-52) tells us that Juba II, of the first century CE, revived the theory that the Nile originated in Mauretania, and that (8.32.77) “according to most people” the Nile’s source is located where the Western (Hesperii) Ethiopians live, apparently northwest Africa.²⁷ As Desange says, “The Blemmyes were poetically linked to the Atlas where a tenacious legend fixed the sources of the Nile.”²⁸

Sifre describes the people who come from Mauretania and Barbaria as going naked. Nakedness suggests itself from the verse’s parallelism *belo’ am // begoy nabal*, the word *nabal* connoting ‘shame, immodesty’, especially in Tannaitic Hebrew, the language of *Sifre*.²⁹ Whether the Rabbis had in mind specifically the Blemmyes (and Nobae) or generically black Africans, the description of nakedness is historically accurate. Ammianus Marcellinus (4th century) says of the Blemmyes that they go “half-nude, clad in dyed cloaks as far as the loins,”³⁰ and Papadopoulos cites several authors from the third century CE onward who mention nakedness as characteristic of the Blemmyes.³¹ The characterization of black Africans in general as going naked, is commonly found in classical sources, medieval Christian writers, and Arab geographers.³²

²⁵ Theocritus 7.114 (*Idylles* 1.2); ed., A. S. F. Gow (Cambridge, 1965) 1:62-63; J.M. Edmonds, *The Greek Bucolic Poets* (LCL), pp. 102-103. Dionysius 219-220, *Geographi Graeci Minores*, ed. C. Müller (Paris, 1855 and 1861) 2:114.

²⁶ See J. O. Thompson, *History of Ancient Geography* (New York, 1965), Index, s.v. “Nile, from west,” especially pp. 267-269, and Henri Baudet, *Paradise on Earth: Some Thoughts on European Images of Non-European Man*, trans. E. Wentholt (Middletown CT, 1988; originally published in Dutch in 1959), pp. 14-15. Note also the sources and discussion in Richard Hennig, *Terrae Incognitae* (Leiden, 1944²) 1:127-132, and chapter 5 (“La prétendue source occidentale du Nil”) in S. Gsell, *Hérodote* (Alger, 1915), pp. 203-224.

²⁷ See also Herodotus 2.34, Mela 3.9.96, and Dionysius Periegetes above, n. 19. The idea is also found in Ibn Baṭūṭṭa, see the Index in H.A.R. Gibb, *Ibn Battūta: Travels in Asia and Africa 1325-1354* (New York, 1929), s.v. Niger River (“Nile”).

²⁸ *Catalogue des tribus africaines*, p. 185.

²⁹ See Hos 2:12 (נבלוה) and M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (London/New York, 1903), p. 870a-b, s.vv. נבלוה, נבלוה. Cf. pp. 884b-885a, s.v. נויל ‘to disgrace,’ and note that in Babylonian Talmud Aramaic נויל is used to describe nakedness (bSoṭ 8b). On the meanings in Biblical Hebrew see, in addition to the dictionaries, J. Marböck in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* 5:171-185, esp. 173 on Hos 2:12.

³⁰ 14.4.4. Translation of J.C. Rolfe in LCL.

³¹ *Afrocanobyntina*, p. 24; see also p. 30. Reports of Blemmyes ambassadors, presumably clothed, at the court of Constantine I in 323 do not mean that when back home in Africa, the Blemmyes were not naked. Compare F.M. Deng’s description, in his novel *Cry of the Owl* (New York, 1989), of discarding his clothing when returning from northern Sudan to his Dinka home in the south.

³² See Diodorus (Agatharchides) 3.15.2, 3.24.4, 3.33.4; Strabo 17.2.1 (cf. 16.4.17); Herodotus 4.183; Mela 1.8. Note also the description of one of the borders of Ethiopia given in the Kebra Nagast: “the Sea of the Blacks and Naked Men” (E. A. W. Budge, *The Queen of Sheba and Her Only Son Menyelek*

In summary, the *Sifre* text interprets biblical *be-lo' am* (and *nabal*) as referring to the well-known African Blemmyes (and Nobae). Precisely during the period when *Sifre* was redacted (the third century) the Blemmyes reached the height of their power and constituted a serious threat to Rome. The midrashist alluded to “the Blemmyan terror” in interpreting God’s threat of punishment to Israel.³³ Whether he understood “Blemmye” as the people of that name, or whether the name represented black Africans in general, he enhanced the element of fear by describing them as inhabiting the breadth of Africa (by means of the merism “from Barbaria and Mauretania”) and by going naked, characteristics which are found or implied in Greco-Roman writers.^{34 35}

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[London, 1922], p. 163, sec. 92). For medieval Europe, see Katherine George, “The Civilized West Looks at Primitive Africa: 1400-1800,” *Isis*, 49 (1958) 64 and 66; Paul Kaplan, *The Rise of the Black Magus in Western Art* (Revised Ph.D. thesis, Boston University, 1985), p. 53, quoting the French Dominican, Jordanus Catalani de Severac (around 1330) speaking of Prester John’s Ethiopians. For the Arabic sources, B. Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East* (New York/Oxford, 1990), pp. 52, 122; Tadeusz Lewicki, *Arabic External Sources for the History of Africa to the South of Sahara* (London-Lagos, 1969), pp. 32, 55, 76-77, 79 and 80. See further, André Miquel, *La Géographie humaine du monde musulman jusqu’au milieu du 11^e siècle* (Paris², 1973) 2:44, 144, 193 and 198, who cites several sources. The index to Levzion and Hopkins’ *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources* lists twenty references under “Nudity” (add pp. 17, 354). In regard to the association of nakedness with shame, see Frontinus, *Stratagems* 1.11.17-18.

³³ Cf. S. Fraade’s comments about the “double-facing” character of midrashic commentaries, i.e. the need to see these commentaries as from both an hermeneutical internal-facing and a sociohistorical external-facing perspective (*From Tradition to Commentary*, pp. 14-15).

³⁴ I do not mean to say that the *Sifre* sets up an equation interpreting *be-lo' am* as Barbaria and *nabal* as Mauretania. The biblical lemma in *Sifre* (*be-lo' am* alone), on which the Barbaria/Mauretania interpretation rests, would be sufficient to indicate otherwise. Rather, my point is that *Sifre* took *be-lo' am* (and possibly *nabal*) as referring to the Blemmyes (and Nobae), and described these people as inhabiting the breadth of Africa, that is from Barbaria in the east to Mauretania in the west.

³⁵ A similar idea to that underlying this essay was put forward by Rodney Sadler to explain a biblical reference in a much earlier period. Sadler thinks that “the commonplace association of might and ferocity with Cush is the likely reason the Cushites are mentioned” in Ezek 38:5. “...Cush could be readily employed in Hebrew literature as a commonplace referent for an aggressive and fear-provoking people. Therefore, Ezekiel mentions Cushites because they are well known as a symbol of ferocious might that would lend credibility to the threat in this apocalyptic account of an unknown northern king” (Rodney Sadler, *Can a Cushite Change His Skin?*, New York, 2005, p. 107). So also in Chronicles references to the Kushites have “the function ... of demonstrating the power of YHWH either to punish or to rescue Judah” (p. 131).

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