

Module 02: Unthinking Decision? Why Did Slavery Emerge in Virginia?

Evidence 2: A true discourse of the three Voyages of discoverie

A

Introduction

George Best served as an officer on Martin Frobisher's 1576 expedition in search of the Northwest Passage and published an account of the voyage two years later. In the course of describing Frobisher's passage into Arctic waters, Best speculated on people's ability to live in the world's different climactic zones, a discussion which led him to conjecture why Africans, or Ethiopians, as he called them, were black. George Best, of course, did not speak for all Englishmen, although other sources suggest that his views were not unusual.

Questions to Consider

- What did Best conclude was the source of Africans' blackness?
- What does Best's explanation imply about Africans' value as humans? What does he imply about Europeans, Asians, and Native Americans?
- How do Best's Africans compare to the Powhatans described by John Smith?
- How might opinions such as those held by Best and Smith influence Englishmen's views of African and Native American workers?

Document

Others againe imagine the middle Zone to be extreme hot, because the people of Africa, especially the Ethiopians, are so cole blacke, and their haire like wooll curled short, which blacknesse and curled haire they suppose to come onely by the parching heat of the Sunne, which how it should be possible I cannot see: for even under the Equinoctiall in America, and in the East Indies, and in the Islands of Moluccae the people are not blacke, but tauney and white, with long haire uncurled as wee have, so that if the Ethiopians blacknesse came by the heat of the Sunne, why should not those Americans and Indians also be as blacke as they, seeing the Sunne is equally distant from them both, they abiding in one Parallel. . . .

Therefore to returne againe to the blacke Morres. I my selfe have seene an

Ethiopian as blacke as cole brought into England, who taking a faire English woman to wife, begat a sonne in all respects as blacke as the father was, although England were his native countrey, and an English woman his mother: whereby it seemeth this blackness proceedeth rather of some natural infection of that man, which was so strong, that neither the nature of the Clime, neither the good complexion of the mother concurring, could any thing alter, and therefore, wee cannot impute it to the nature of the Clime. And for a more fresh example, our people of Meta Incognita (of whom and for whom this discourse is taken in hande) that were brought this last yeere into England, were all generally of the same colour that many nations be, lying in the midst of the middle Zone. And this their colour was not onely in the face which was subject to Sunne and aire, but also in their bodies, which were stil covered with garments as ours are, yea the very sucking child of twelve months age had his skinne of the very same colour that most have under the Equinoctiall, which thing cannot proceed by reason of the Clime, for that they at least ten degrees more towards the North then wee in England are.... whereby it followeth, that there is some other cause then the Climate or the Sonnes perpendicular reflexion, that should cause the Ethiopians great blacknesse. And the most probable cause to my judgement is, that this blacknesse proceedeth of some natural infection of the first inhabitants of that Countrey, and so all the whole progenie of them descended, are still polluted with the same blot of infection. Therefore, it shall not bee farre from our purpose, to examine the first originall of these blacke men, and howe by a lineall descent they have hitherto continued thus blacke.

It manifestly and plainly appeareth by holy Scripture, that after the generall inundation and overflowing of the earth, there remained no moe men alive not Noe and his three sonnes, Sem, Cham, and Japhet, who onely were left to possesse and inhabite the whole face of the earth: therefore all the sundry descents that until this present day have inhabited the whole earth, must needs come of the off-spring either of Sem, Cham, or Japhet, as the onely sonnes of Noe, who all three being white, and their wives also, by course of nature should have begotten and brought forth white children. But the envie of our great and continuall enemy the wicked Spirite is such, that as hee could not suffer our olde father Adam to live in the felicitie and Angelike state wherein hee was first created, but tempting him, sought and procured his ruine and fall: so againe, finding at this floode none but a father and three sonnes living, hee so caused one of them to transgresse

and disobey his fathers commaundement, that after him all his posteritie should bee accursed. The facte of disobedience was this: When Noe at the commandment of God had made the Arke and entered therein, and the floud-gates of heaven were opened, so that the whole face of the earth, every tree and mountaine was covered with abundance of water, hee straitely commaunded his sonnes and their wives, that they should with reverence and feare beholde the justice and mighty power of God, and that during the time of the floud while they remained in the Arke, they should use continencie, and abstain from carnall copulation with their wives: and many other precepts hee gave unto them, and admonitions touching the justice of God, in revenging sinne, and his mercie in delivering them, who nothing deserved it. Which good instructions and exhortations notwithstanding his wicked sonne Cham disobeyed, and being perswaded that the first childe borne after the flood (by right and Lawe of nature) should inherite and possesse all the dominions of the earth, hee contrary to his fathers commandment while they were yet in the Arke, used company with his wife, and craftily went about thereby to dis-inherite the off-spring of his other two brethren: for which wicked and detestable fact, as an example for contempt of Almighty God, and disobedience of parents, God would a sonne should bee borne whose name was Chus, who would not onely it selfe, but all his posteritie after him should bee so blacke and lothsome, that it might remaine a spectacle of disobedience to all the worlde. And of this blacke and cursed Chus came all these blacke Moores which are in Africa, for after the water was vanished from off the face of the earth, and that the lande was dry, Sem chose that part of the land to inhabite in, which now is called Asia, and Japhet had that which now is called Europa, wherein wee dwell, and Africa remained for Cham and his blacke sonne Chus, and was called Chamesis after the fathers name, being perhaps a cursed, dry, sandy, and unfruitfull ground, fit for such a generation to inhabite in.

Thus you see, that the cause of the Ethiopians blacknesse is the curse and naturall infection of blood, and not the distemperature of the Climate; Which also may bee proved by this example, that these blacke men are found in all parts of Africa, as well without the Tropickes, as within, even unto Capo de buona Speranza Southward, where, by reason of the Sphere, should be the same temperature that is in Sicilia, Morea and Candie, where al be of very good complexions. Wherefore I conclude, that the blacknesss proceedeth not of the hotenesse of the Clime, but as I saide, of the

infection of blood, and therefore this their argument gathered of the Africans blacknesse is not able to destroy the temperature of the middle Zone. Wee may therefore very well bee ascertained, that under the Equinoctiall is the most plesant and delectable place of the worlde to dwell in; where although the Sunne for two houres in a yeere be direct over their heades, and therefore the heate at that time somewhat of force, yet because it commeth so seldome, and continueth so small a time, when it commeth, it is not to bee wayed, but rather the moderate heate of other times in all the yeare to be remembered.

[An accompanying map depicts Meta Incognita to be a series of islands north of Canada.]

Source:

George Best, "A true discourse of the three Voyages of discoverie, for the finding of a passage to Cathaya, by the Northwest, under the conduct of Martin Frobisher Generall: Before which, as a necessary Preface is prefixed a twofolde discourse, conteining certaine reasons to prove all partes of the World habitable. Penned by Master George Best, a Gentleman employed in the same voyages" (1578), in Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations Voyages Traffiques & Discoveries of the English Nation Made by Sea or Over-land to the Remote and Farthest Distant Quarters of the Earth at any time within the compasse of these 1600 Yeeres* (Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons, 1903-1905), 12 vols. Best's "Discourse" in vol. 7, 250-283. Excerpt above transcribed from pp. 261-265 of a copy in the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia.