National Post

A biblical 'miracle' that the scholars flubbed

The story of how black Africans rescued Judaism was buried for 150 years. Now it's revealed in a best-seller from a Montreal journalist

BY JOHN FRASER

The unlikeliest best-seller of 2002 anywhere in the English-speaking world must surely be a Montreal journalist's tale of how black Africans in 701 BC rescued Judaism from near-certain extinction, and, by subsequent extension, enabled Judaism's two notoriously fractious offspring — Christianity and Islam — to be born. The book is called *The Rescue of Jerusalem* (Doubleday in Canada; Soho Press in the U.S.) and the more you look into this curious business, as Alice would say, the curiouser it becomes.

The author, for example, first got mired in the tale some years ago when he began teaching Sunday school — which alone makes the Montreal *Gazette*'s Henry T. Aubin, three-time winner of National Newspaper Awards, a hero for our times.

HIS COURAGE COMES FROM FACING UP TO THE SNARKY 12-YEAR-OLD EXEGETES IN SUNDAY SCHOOL

This is not because of the derision he might have faced in the newsroom. Newsroom derision is about as enduring as a newspaper's editorial policy. The courage comes from facing up to snarky 12-year-old exegetes — little Luthers each and every one — who bombard you with the sort of questions that used to amuse Sir Thomas Browne in his *Religio Medici* but are hard to answer at 9:15 a.m. on a Sunday morning: "Please, Sir, if God cursed the serpent by making it crawl on its belly, how did it get around before the curse?"

Curiouser than even this is the singular fact that Henry Aubin, an amateur biblical scholar, has had this best-selling book peer-reviewed by three of the leading academic researchers in the areas he has taken on, and they have all given him what the movie-blurb hacks call "two thumbs up." One of them (University of Chicago professor William H. McNeill, a winner of the National Book Award and author of two influential books, *Plagues and Peoples* and *The Rise of the West*) has changed a major conjectural thesis thanks to Aubin's argument. The accompanying notes and specialized cross-indexing — the sort of thing you normally only see in the densest doctoral theses — form a quarter of the book's pages, and yet the text is both gripping and sometimes downright thrilling.

The thesis, crudely put here, tries to answer one of the great mysteries from the Hebrew scriptures, detailed in the Book of Kings. It was a time (8th century BC) when a brutal Assyrian empire was ascendant and on the move. Having already annihilated most of what the ancient world would have recognized as Israel, the massive army of the Assyrian king was at the gates of Jerusalem. There is a strong case to be made that the last two tribes of Israel were about to disappear along with the other ten.

But something unexpected happened, so unexpected the Bible calls it a miracle, and maybe it was. The massive hordes of Assyrian troops were somehow repelled and retreated to their homeland. Jerusalem survived. The Jewish cult grew and was eventually able to put down sufficiently sturdy spiritual roots that it was able to survive a later crushing defeat. The biblical "miracle" account cites an intervention from an angel. Academic scholarship does trade in miracles very often, and for over a century and a half, scholars have surmised that some sort of plague or pestilence afflicted a sufficient number of Assyrian soldiers as the assault on Jerusalem was about to begin, and that their leaders called it a day.

Dramatically, however, Aubin sets out to prove that there was no pestilence. Instead, soldiers from the land of Kush — also known as Nubia — marched northeast from the Nile Valley and, in a pre-emptive action designed to protect their own homeland, stopped the Assyrians in their tracks. Nubians were black — a crucial element in this tale — and the leader of their expeditionary force was a resourceful general named Taharqa, or Tirhakah in the biblical usage. He went on to become a pharaoh of Egypt, proving along the way that Nubian culture — black culture — was as vibrant and significant as any other in ancient Africa or the other biblical lands.

All of this is meant to resonate with contemporary significance. Aubin got into this business in the first place because he and his wife had adopted a child of African descent and discovered that the heroic or mythic figures from history that had enthralled him in his youth — all white — were less than wholly satisfactory to his black son. When he was approached to help out at his United Church congregation in Montreal, he tried the usual dodges to avoid teaching Sunday school ("I know so little about the Bible," "I'm not sure I'm the right person," etc. etc.), but soon enough succumbed to the lure of the business. You'll just have to take my word for it that teaching Sunday school has more than transitory rewards.

Along the way, Aubin encountered a century and a half of deliberate obfuscation, and even racism, in past scholarly accounts of the Nubian "miracle" that had actually saved Judaism. Curiously, prior to African colonization by European powers, the role of Taharqa and the African rescue of Jerusalem were widely acknowledged. In the 19th and much of the 20th centuries, part of "the white man's burden," it seems, was to eradicate any trace of black social and cultural sophistication or ascendancy.

HE ENCOUNTERED A CENTURY AND A HALF OF OBFUSCATION, EVEN RACISM, IN THE ACCOUNTS

The fun of the book is all bound up in the scholarly hunt, and Aubin, while no academic slouch (he has degrees from Harvard and Strasbourg), brings his journalistic skills to the fore. For some time now, a number of academics — think of David Suzuki in science, Michael Bliss and Jack Granatstein in history, Janice Stein in peace-and-conflict studies, Mark Kingwell in philosophy — have been adept at using media outlets to further the public's understanding of complex issues. This is appreciated and usually rewarding. Nevertheless, it is really exciting to see a brilliant journalist turn the tables and teach the academics a thing or two.

Saturday Post

John Fraser's column will appear every week on the books page of the Saturday Post.