

Introduction to *Stolen Legacy* (1954) by George G. M. James

~ Prof. Manu Ampim

“The term Greek philosophy, to begin with is a misnomer, for there is no such philosophy in existence.” – George G. M. James

Professor George G. M. James was born in Guyana, South America and he earned several degrees from Durham University in England. James also earned certificates in the United States to teach mathematics, Latin, and Greek. He later served as a Professor in the areas of logic, Greek, language studies, philosophy, mathematics, and social sciences including his last five years at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. In 1954, he published the groundbreaking work, *Stolen Legacy*, which challenged the idea of the “immaculate conception” of Greek philosophy, but unfortunately James died mysteriously in the same year as the publication of his book when he left Pine Bluff on a visit to Nashville to see relatives in Nashville, Tennessee.¹

In *Stolen Legacy*, James contested the hegemony of mainstream Western scholarship in the mid-20th century, a time when the so-called Greek miracle in philosophy and science had been assumed as a demonstrable fact for the previous 150 years.² George G. M. James opposed this idea and presented a compelling case that challenged the very foundation of Western civilization, as he argued that the Greeks stole and plagiarized from North African teachers in the ancient Egyptian mystery system.

Professor James indicated that the aim of the book was as follows: “[T]o show that the true authors of Greek philosophy were not the Greeks; but the people of North Africa, commonly called the Egyptians; and the praise and honour falsely given to the Greeks for centuries belong to the people of North Africa, and therefore the African Continent. Consequently this theft of the African legacy by the Greeks led to the erroneous world opinion that the African Continent has made no contribution to civilization, and that its people are naturally backward. This is the misrepresentation that has become the basis of race prejudice, which has affected all people of color” (p. 7).

Professor James makes a series of compelling points:

- First, he indicates that the teaching of the Egyptian philosophy and mystery system reached surrounding lands such as Ionia in Asia Minor before reaching Athens, Greece.
- “Greek Philosophy” was alien to the Greeks and their condition of life, as the period from Thales to Aristotle (640-322 BCE) was a period of constant internal warfare with themselves, and external warfare with their common enemy the Persians, and this environment was therefore unsuitable for producing philosophers.
- The genesis of Greek enlightenment was two-fold: the Persian invasion in 525 BCE, led by Cambyses, allowed Greek immigration to Egypt for the purpose of their education; and second this enlightenment continued with Alexander’s conquest in 332 BCE, when the Greeks gained possession of Egypt and full access to the manuscripts, royal libraries, and Egyptian teachers.
- Greek science started in the shadow of prison bars. The Greek government based in Athens viewed so-called Greek philosophy as foreign in origin and treated it accordingly. The first Greek philosophers were victims of relentless persecution at the hands of the Athenian government: Anaxagoras was imprisoned and exiled; Socrates was imprisoned

and condemned to death before he eventually died by drinking poison hemlock; Plato was sold into slavery; and Aristotle was indicted and exiled.

- The Greeks in Athens were enemies of philosophy and thus persecuted philosophers because of their foreign teachings. They remained against philosophy until Alexander's conquest of Egypt in 332 BCE, which provided his teacher Aristotle with unlimited access to the Egyptian royal libraries, manuscripts, and teachers. The pupils of Aristotle then compiled a history of "Greek philosophy" and began producing a large number of scientific books on various subjects, and thus the world must question the source of these scientific works.
- The authorship of the individual doctrines is extremely doubtful, as there is a complete absence of essential information concerning the early life and training of the so-called Greek philosophers, from Thales to Aristotle. The history of Greek philosophy has presented to the world a number of men whose lives it knows little or nothing about, but expects the world to accept them as the true authors of the doctrines which are alleged to be theirs.
- The chronology of Greek philosophers is mere speculation and thus there is variation in dates (this not only includes the pre-Socratic philosophers such as Thales, Pythagoras, Anaximenes, Xenophanes, Heraclitus, etc., but also Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, who appear in history about the age of 18 and begin to teach at 40 years).
- The Egyptian theory of salvation became the purpose of Greek philosophy (James calls this theory the *Egyptian mystery system*).
- The Egyptian mystery system was a secret order and the publication of its teachings was strictly prohibited, and this is why initiates such as Thales, Pythagoras, and Socrates never wrote down their philosophies.

As it is commonly taught, the Western intellectual tradition as well as the history of Western philosophy, always begins with an investigation of ancient Greek thought. From Thales to Aristotle, the Greeks passed on to Western culture a spirit of rational inquiry that is their own intellectual property, and it is widely held that the Greek inquiry into knowledge serves as the foundation for all subsequent inquiries. However, James questions this notion as he informs the reader that:

"For centuries the world has been misled about the original source of the Arts and Sciences; for centuries Socrates, Plato and Aristotle have been falsely idolized as models of intellectual greatness; and for centuries the African continent has been called the Dark Continent, because Europe coveted the honor of transmitting to the world, the Arts and Sciences," (p. 7).

A case in point is the main contribution attributed to Pythagoras (6th century BCE). High school students across the United States learn geometry and are taught that Pythagoras discovered the square of the hypotenuse or the "Pythagorean theorem" of $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$. It is known, however, that there is no evidence that Pythagoras himself worked on or proved this theorem, or that he worked on any mathematical problems. He produced no writings. It was not until five centuries after he lived that there was any mention of Pythagoras in connection with this theorem. Besides, it is well-documented that he followed the advice of Thales and traveled to Egypt where he spent 22 years learning mathematics, astronomy, and music from Egyptian priests, before he migrated to Croton, Italy and established a school. Thus, Professor James indicates that calling the theorem of the square of the hypotenuse ($A^2 + B^2 = C^2$) the "Pythagorean Theorem" is

dishonest because the Egyptians taught Pythagoras and other Greeks the mathematics that they knew. Both the Moscow Mathematical Papyrus and the Rhind Mathematical Papyrus (unfortunately these are two of the many ancient African documents named after European people and places) clearly demonstrate that the theorem and other advanced mathematical knowledge was known to the Africans in Egypt more than a 1,000 years before Pythagoras lived!³ Even Aristotle later acknowledged that Egypt is the cradle of the “mathematical arts.”⁴

MAIN STRENGTHS OF THE BOOK

Throughout this work, Professor James substantiates each point with an impressive listing of sources. He uses Western sources, both the ancient Greek writers themselves and modern writers, to document the major problems and discrepancies with the authorship of the “original” Greek works. Also, his membership in a secret order (as noted by Dr. ben-Jochannan) and his knowledge of Greek and Latin allowed James to present and analyze these sources with important insight.

Further, a main argument of James is that an independent and original Greek “philosophy” does not exist, and it has now been shown by other scholars that the word “philosophy” itself is not of Greek origin. For example, the Congolese linguist Dr. Théophile Obenga argues that the compound word “philosophy” does not have either a Greek or an Indo-European etymology. There are two elements of the word: the first is the adjective *philos* (meaning “love, cherish, dear, friend”), but there is nothing comparable to *phil* or *philos* in other Indo-European languages and thus *philos* cannot be explained in Greek and is thus not of Greek origin.

The second element of the compound word philosophy is *sophos*, meaning “one who knows, learned, intelligent.” The derivative *sophia* means “ability to do” or “wise,” and in modern Greek it means “knowledge or wisdom.” Yet, the word *sophos* does not have a Greek or Indo-European root. In other words, linguistically, “philosophy” (either part: *philos* or *sophos*) does not have a Greek etymology and is not of Greek origination.

This is not so hard to believe particularly if we consider the widespread credit that the various Greek writers gave to the Egyptians for originating the arts and sciences. These writers include Herodotus, Plato, Aristotle, and Isocrates. For example, the Athenian orator Isocrates (436-338 BCE) was quite explicit about Egypt being the cradle of philosophy: “He [Pythagoras] came to Egypt, and became the disciple of the people there; he was the first to bring philosophy to Greece.”⁵

Given these facts, an Egyptian etymology for *sophos* is very plausible. “Sba” is an Egyptian verb meaning “learn, teach, instruct, wise, educate, intelligence.” The Egyptian “b” becomes “ph” (b→ph) in Greek, and the Egyptian “p” becomes “f” (p→f) in Greek. Thus, *sba* (Egyptian: learn, teach, intelligence) becomes *sophos* (Greek: learned, intelligent), with the derivative *sophia*, and the compound *sophon*, hence *philosophia*.⁶

LIMITATIONS OF STOLEN LEGACY

Although Professor James’ book is an important pioneering work in the mid-20th century which reveals a heavy layer of misinformation regarding the immaculate conception of “Greek philosophy,” perhaps the biggest shortcoming of the work is that James did not read the original Medu Netcher (hieroglyphic) texts from Egypt. He mainly used Greek sources to discuss the specific details of ancient Egyptian philosophy, and this led to some errors in fact and interpretations. James’ work does not recognize that the Greeks changed

and corrupted many ideas and practices, even when they are clearly borrowing from them, and thus it is not possible to learn the specific details of Egyptian philosophy and thought without referring to the Medu Netcher primary sources. For example, all original names of people and their personal titles, gods, legends, and places were changed by the Greeks, and concepts were also significantly altered. One glaring mistake is James' claim that regarding the doctrine of self-knowledge, which is attributed to Socrates, the words "Man, Know Thyself" is written on the outside of ancient Egyptian temples. Actually, no such words are written on *any* of the temples in Egypt.⁷

Library of Alexandria

One final issue regarding criticisms of *Stolen Legacy* should be noted here. The critics of Professor James' work often focus heavily on his repeated statement that the Greeks looted and ransacked the Library of Alexandria.

Strictly speaking, Alexandria was not an ancient Egyptian city in the sense that it was founded in 331 BCE by Alexander III of Macedon (or Alexander "the Great") during his brief visit of a few months in Egypt. Alexander established Greek rule in Egypt, and after Alexander's death his general Ptolemy became the new ruler of Egypt. Under the dynasty of Ptolemy kings, Alexandria became Egypt's political capital and the most important city of the Hellenic world. The Alexandrian Museum was founded by Demetrius of Phalerum, who was a follower of Aristotle and counselor to Ptolemy I (Soter) who suggested to the king the idea of establishing a great research center with a universal library attached to it. Ptolemy and Demetrius had a particular goal in view, and they needed to collect at Alexandria the books throughout Egypt and from all of the peoples of the world if they were to amass the universal library that they envisioned. The expansion of the library, which was located within the museum, was handed down to Ptolemy II (Philadelphus) in 283 B.C., when he became the new king of Egypt, and it was perhaps during his reign that the monarch began the practice of attracting scholars, housing and funding them in the museum.⁸

The critics of Professor James' work point out that Alexander III (356-323 BCE) and Aristotle (384-322 BCE) could not have looted the Royal Library of Alexandria because it did not yet exist until some decades after 322 BCE, and this allows them to hastily dismiss James' *entire* argument about the lack of Greek genius and originality. While the Great Library was created under Ptolemy I shortly after the lives of Alexander and Aristotle, it is also true as James argues, that the Greeks did not set up a great museum and library at Alexandria and create recognized scholars through their own native ability. Rather, the Greeks stripped other Egyptian libraries and temples of their books in order to establish the new library at Alexandria. However, James further argues that there must have been an earlier library at the Alexandrian site that was looted and ransacked, because the Greeks did not have a tradition of establishing libraries. In other words, "the Greeks did not carry culture and learning to Egypt, but found it already there" (pp. 46-47). Let us explore this point.

There were no significant public libraries in ancient Greece itself. The first major "Greek" library was the Alexandrian Library created in the 3rd century BCE, and the second one established was the Pergamon Library in modern Turkey, built in the 2nd century BCE. The fact that there were no significant libraries created during the flowering of Greek thought during the earlier classical era (510-323 BCE) should cause the critics of James to ask: how is this possible if the Greeks are solely responsible for their alleged genius? Why did the Greeks immediately

create major libraries in regions conquered by Alexander after 332 BCE, but could not create these same institutions in mainland Greece even during their acclaimed classical era? *Athens was the center for arts, learning, philosophy, and the home of many prominent writers and philosophers, yet it did not have a significant public library.* Plato's Akademia (founded in 385 BCE) was north of Athens and dedicated to Athena, goddess of wisdom, but there was no library created. Later, in 335 BCE Aristotle founded the Lyceum near Athens and it was there that he wrote treatises and dialogues, and gathered books for its collection, which became the first public library in European history. However, there is no evidence that this library gained any real significance. In 331 BCE, just four years later, Aristotle's student Alexander III established the city of Alexandria which gave the Greeks unlimited access to ancient Egyptian books, wisdom, and teachers. It is obvious that Aristotle and his students were beneficiaries of this new African knowledge, and thus they wrote a stunning number of books soon after gaining access to this knowledge. It is noteworthy that Aristotle's library at the Lyceum never had anywhere near the prestige or quantity of books of the main library on African soil, the renown Alexandrian Library. It is also important to note that although Athens is widely regarded as the cradle of "Western Civilization," yet no public library existed there before the time of Aristotle, and even then his library *near* Athens must have been miniscule in comparison to the massive Alexandrian Library, which grew to the size of an estimated 700,000 book collection.

These facts regarding the Alexandrian Library support Professor James' case that the Greeks simply took knowledge from other cultures and are now given sole credit for the wisdom of others. *It is a spurious argument that the Greeks out of a sudden inspiration of genius created their first major library in a foreign land, but somehow could not create a significant one at home.* If they were truly bringing superior genius to Egypt, then it would be logical to assume that they would bring their cultural practices with them, rather than creating brand new practices and institutions through some new, unknown, inspiration. Whether it can ever be proven that there was an earlier library at Alexandria, as James asserts, remains to be seen but we can say that the sudden "immaculate conception" of Greek philosophy and science is no longer a mystery if we look at the historical context that James was attempting to provide with his discussion of this library. In other words, the historical evidence points in the direction that James is more likely correct that the Greeks found an earlier library at the Alexandrian site and expanded on this foundation, rather than creating a brand new institution through their own ingenuity.

AIM OF THE BOOK

Professor James was well meaning in his attempt to present historical truth but was perhaps naïve to believe that, "By this dissemination of the truth about the civilization of individual peoples, a better understanding among them, and a proper appraisal of each other should follow" (p. 7). In this section, "The Aim Of The Book," he indicates that the historical make believe stories of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle have been presented as the "models of intellectual greatness; and for centuries the African continent has been called the Dark Continent, because Europe coveted the honor of transmitting to the world, the Arts and Sciences" (p. 7). James seems sincere in his effort but he clearly miscalculated the depth of the entrenched self-interest of the Western intellectual and political forces when he added,

"I am happy to be able to bring this information to the attention of the world, so that...all races and creeds might know the truth and free themselves from those prejudices which have corrupted human relations."

James is on more solid ground when he indicates that with this new knowledge “the people of African origin might be emancipated from their serfdom of inferiority complex, and enter upon a new era of freedom, in which they would feel like free men, with full human rights and privileges” (pp. 7-8).

Professor George G. M. James’ work has been reprinted and revived since the mid-1970s and it has now become a classic in some circles. His main thesis that the Greeks stole credit for the contributions of Africans in Egypt is not diminished by his non-use of Medu Netcher primary sources. Nor is this thesis weakened by James’ assertion that the Greeks “converted” the Royal Library of Alexandria into a research center in order to study there and receive instruction from Egyptian priests and teachers, until these teachers died out. Professor James’ main point that the Greeks did not carry culture and learning to Egypt, “but found it already there, and wisely settled in that country, in order to absorb as much as possible of its culture” is broadly consistent with the historical facts.

April 12, 2013

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¹To date no significant biography of Professor James has been written, and thus dates are not available for certain key events in his life. Dr. Yosef ben-Jochannan, a student of Professor James, indicates that James’ death may have been a result of him publishing *Stolen Legacy*. Ben-Jochannan indicates that James was a high priest in the Order of Mysteries System (O.M.S.) and that he revealed too many secret teachings, known only by initiates, and that James’ life was snuffed out by those who wanted to maintain control over the people James wanted to free mentally. (See: Yosef ben-Jochannan, *In Pursuit of George G. M. James’ Study of African Origins in “Western Civilization”* 1980, pp. 8-9).

²See: Martin Bernal, *Black Athena*, volume 1: *The Fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785-1985* (1987), pp. 215-223. Professor Bernal demonstrates that in the late 18th century scholars at the University of Gottingen in Germany led a successful “Europocentric” and racist campaign to invent the miracle of independent Greek genius.

³ See: Théophile Obenga, *African Philosophy: The Pharaonic Period, 2780-330 BC* (2004; originally published in 1990), pp. 421-498.

⁴ See: Théophile Obenga, *Ancient Egypt & Black Africa* (1990), p. 53.

⁵ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-56.

⁷ “Egypt” is a Greek name and it is a corruption of the original name *Hikaptah* (“house of the ka of god Ptah”). *Hikaptah* became *Egyptos*, and then *Egypt*. The original name of the

country is *Kemet* (meaning “the black country or land” in reference to the native people, rather than the soil).

⁸ The Library was established sometime in the early 3rd century BCE (perhaps in the 290s if not a few years earlier) but no ancient source indicates an exact year.