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**'I am black': Medieval Commentators and the
Meanings of Blackness**

by

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So many of our conversations—in the public square, at the kitchen table, and in the academic conference hall—are currently concerned with the processes by which individuals and groups are excluded from the communities in which they dwell. Our enquiries are a blend of activism and scholarship, policy making, and attempts to put right past wrongs. They are variously informed by personal experience, historical inquiry, real-time reporting of current abuse, and theoretical reflection. We need all these types of knowledge in order to make a better world, and for a reckoning with the past to be possible.

A term central to all these forms of knowledge is race. The idea of race is the product of historical thinking about human hierarchy and difference, and it has been captured in a variety of terms over time. Although the word has medieval origins, in the premodern period it grew into a powerful articulation of a concept in its own right, one that brought order and justification to exploitative practices associated with European conquests and the trade in humans.¹ ‘Racism’ is a fairly recent term, though ‘racist’ behaviour can be identified across history. Since the 1970s in the United States, and arising from the aftermath of the civil rights movement and its discontents, a domain of critical legal studies has emerged with the aim of delineating the persistence of racist conduct even in the presence of laws that endeavour to put an end to it. Racist attitudes to people of colour emerge, according to this approach, not as a set of personal dispositions and prejudices alone, but as structured processes embedded in law and institutions. An important development in the 1980s was the concept of ‘intersectionality’, which considers gender and class as always present in the making of race-thinking.² Since around 2000, medievalists have been paying attention too, led by a cohort of committed critics who are rewriting the history of premodern European and Mediterranean cultures using the term ‘racialization’, which captures the making of race as a process, not as a given.

Racialization is a process whereby a human attribute is used to justify, naturalize, and normalize disparities in power. Hence racialization

¹ Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (Cambridge, 2012).

² Anna Carasthathis, *Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons* (Lincoln, NE, 2016).

may operate on the basis not only of skin colour, but also of religion and ethnicity, marking power dynamics, rights, and social roles. In racialized societies, law and the institutions of state and civil society are implicated in a racialized culture, one expressed in ideas and practices as well as in material and visual representations. Furthermore, for racialization to operate – as it did for Jews in medieval Europe – its subjects need not even be present, as they may form part of an imagined system of signification.³ Around such racialized groups there is a series of what Cord Whitaker has called ‘black metaphors’ for those who are imagined to be black,⁴ or what we may call ‘Jew metaphors’ in a manner that Sara Lipton and Steven Kruger have also fruitfully explored.⁵

In this lecture I shall concentrate on the meanings of blackness as expressed within a particular context: the commentary and devotional elucidation of a verse from the Song of Songs. This is verse 1:5 [4], in a modern English translation that follows the original Hebrew meaning:

I am dark, but comely,
O daughters of Jerusalem –
Like the tents of Kedar,
Like the pavilions of Solomon.

And it is useful to keep in mind the verse that follows:

Don’t stare at me because I am swarthy,
Because the sun has gazed upon me.
My mother’s sons quarreled with me,
They made me guard the vineyards;
My own vineyard I did not guard.⁶

³ Jeremy Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (Berkeley, 1999); Anthony Bale, *The Jew in the Medieval Book: English Antisemitisms 1350–1500* (Cambridge, 2006).

⁴ Cord J. Whitaker, *Black Metaphors: How Modern Racism Emerged from Medieval Race-Thinking* (Philadelphia, 2019).

⁵ Sara Lipton, *Images of Intolerance: The Representation of Jews and Judaism in the Bible moralisée* (Berkeley, 1999); Steven F. Kruger, *The Spectral Jew: Conversion and Embodiment in Medieval Europe* (Minneapolis, 2006).

⁶ Song of Songs 1:5–6, at [https://www.sefaria.org/Song_of_Songs.1?lang=bi], accessed 19 Oct. 2023.

Some context on the Song of Songs is useful here, for it was a book cherished by both Jews and Christians. The Song was part of the Hebrew biblical canon that coalesced by the second century CE. After the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, ritual and religious instruction moved into the sphere of synagogues, with readings of biblical texts forming part of daily, weekly, and festive worship. In Galilee, Rabbi Akiva (c.50–135 CE) saw the Song as ‘the Holiest of Holies’, a phrase otherwise used to describe the innermost space of the Temple. The Song of Songs was read in its entirety at Passover and was widely cited in legal and exegetical works. The Song is a passionate dialogue between two lovers. The speakers yearn for each other, delight in their meeting, describe each other’s beauty, and lament any separation. For the rabbis who interpreted and taught the Song of Songs, the only acceptable approach was allegorical: the book was to be understood as representing the love relationship between God and Israel.⁷

Our verse follows a description of the lovers coming together in private regal spaces.⁸ The Bride asserts her blackness and her beauty; she likens her blackness to the tents of the nomadic people of Kedar, and her beauty to the sumptuous hangings in King Solomon’s palace. She defies an implied slight from the young women of Jerusalem, her peers, and corrects them, as if saying: do not consider me black, it is just the passing effect of the sun. My brothers have forced me to guard the vineyards – to do outdoor labour – hence I have become dark. I have not tended to myself – my own vineyard, my own body. I am truly light-skinned, and remain beautiful, even according to the standards of the urban women of Jerusalem who do not soil their hands.

Our verse’s meanings were given a significant twist when it was translated into Latin by Jerome around 386. His translation of the

⁷ For an introduction to the Song, see Ilana Pardes, *The Song of Songs: A Biography* (Princeton, 2019), and for a survey of commentaries on it, see E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia, 1990).

⁸ For discussion of the Song’s links to ancient Near Eastern love poetry, see Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison, WI, 1985), and on our verse, 100–2.

Hebrew canonical texts, which came to be known as the Vulgate, formed the textual foundation for much of Latin Christian culture over the centuries. Jerome introduced a small but, for our purpose, significant change:

I am black but beautiful, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Cedar, as the curtains of Solomon.⁹

‘Black *and* beautiful’ became ‘black *but* beautiful’ for most Christian readers and commentators. The verse now suggested opposition, and offered a site ripe for polemic and creative criticism.

This challenging ‘but’ was exploited to great effect by Countee Cullen (1903–46), poet of the Harlem Renaissance.¹⁰ His poem ‘Black Majesty’ (1929) opens with a reversal of the ‘but’—with his own ironic ‘albeit’—in a celebration of the memory of three leaders of the slave rebellions and the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804):

These men were kings, *albeit* they were black,
Christophe and Dessalines and L’Overture;
Their majesty has made me turn my back
Upon a plaint I once shaped to endure.
These men were black, I say, but they were crowned
And purple-clad, however brief their time.
Stifle your agony; let grief be drowned;
We know joy had a day once and a clime.

Dark gutter-snipe, black sprawler-in-the-mud,
A thing men did a man may do again.

⁹ Douay–Rheims Bible, Canticle of Canticles (Song of Solomon) 1:4, at [<https://drbo.org/chapter/24001.htm>], accessed 18 Oct. 2023. Emphasis original. ‘Nigra sum, sed formosa, filiae Jerusalem, sicut tabernacula Cedar, sicut pelles Salomonis.’ *Biblia Sacra latina ex Biblia Sacra Vulgatae editionis Sixti V et Clementis VIII* (London, 1977), 428.

¹⁰ On Cullen, see Charles Molesworth, *And Bid Him Sing: A Biography of Countée Cullen* (Chicago, 2012).

What answer filters through your sluggish blood
To these dark ghosts who knew so bright a reign?
'Lo, I am dark, but comely,' Sheba sings.
'And we were black,' three shades reply, 'but kings.'¹¹

Others of his generation also cited the verse and dwelt on the 'but' that suggested a contrast between blackness and beauty.

By the 1960s the translation with 'but' was inverted in the cry 'black is beautiful' to mean 'beautiful *because* black'. 'Black is beautiful' defined a whole resistant aesthetic that celebrated the physical features of those of African descent.¹² And more recently, in the wake of Black Lives Matter, 'black is/and beautiful' has again become a political call that inspires poetry and homiletics. Onleilove Alston, a New York preacher, turned to our verse in 2016:

When we think about the Black woman's body we see even within our scripture translations that there has been an attempt to diminish its beauty because most English translations of Song of Songs 1:5-6 will read I am black BUT Beautiful while in the Hebrew the verse be read I am black AND beautiful. And O my people they do not love your hands . . . Love your hands! Love them . . . The dark, dark liver – love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too.¹³

Reverend Alston here refers to our verse, while also citing Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) with 'love your hands, love them'.¹⁴ 'Black is beautiful' demands respect for the integrity of black bodies and lives; it asserts identity and self-worth. It also invites us to explore how the verse's historical possibilities were expressed and realized.

¹¹ Countee Cullen, *My Soul's High Song: The Collected Writing of Countee Cullen, Voice of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. and intro. Gerald Early (New York, 1991), 200-1. Emphasis my own.

¹² Paul C. Taylor, *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* (Hoboken, NJ, 2016). The verse is echoed in the advertising campaign introducing 'Dark & Lovely' hair straightening cream by SoftSheen Carson in 2013; *ibid.* 106 and fig. 4.1.

¹³ Pardes, *The Song of Songs*, 116-17.

¹⁴ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York, 1987), 88.

Early Christian commentary on the Song looked beyond the letter, just as the rabbis were doing. The Alexandrian Origen was familiar with black Africans, just as he was with the tradition of the Septuagint (second century BCE), the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible – and its commentaries.¹⁵ He opened his exegesis with a long literal treatment of exemplary black female figures, like Moses' African wife, or Solomon's Queen of Sheba. But these are followed by an allegorical reading that touches on the genealogy of Christianity, still emergent in his times:

The Bride knows that the daughters of the former people impute this to her, and that because of it they call her black, as one who has not been enlightened by the patriarchs' teaching. She answers their objections thus: 'I am indeed black, O daughters of Jerusalem, in that I cannot claim descent from famous men, neither have I received the enlightenment of Moses' Law. But I have my own beauty, all the same. For in me too there is that primal thing, the Image of God wherein I was created; and, coming now to the Word of God, I have received my beauty'.¹⁶

In this section the Bride is understood as representing those who came to the Church without Jewish heritage, and who are therefore reproached for lacking illumination, that is, being obscured. The Bride retorts that her illumination – her beauty – comes from being in the image of God and approaching his word and his grace. A polemical field is opened up here between Church and Synagogue – *ecclesia* and *synagoga* – over the Church's roots in Judaism and its supersession over the Synagogue.

¹⁵ Ephraim E. Urbach, 'The Homiletical Interpretations of the Sages and the Expositions of Origen on Canticles, and the Jewish-Christian Disputation', in Joseph Heinemann and Dov Noy (eds.), *Studies in Aggadah and Folk-Literature* (Jerusalem, 1971), 247–75; J. Christopher King, *Origen on the Song of Songs as the Spirit of Scripture: The Bridegroom's Perfect Marriage-Song* (Oxford, 2005), ch. 1: 'Origen and the Spiritual Reading of the Song of Songs', 38–76; and more recently, Peter W. Martens, *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life* (Oxford, 2012), 135–40.

¹⁶ Origen, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, trans. R. P. Lawson (Westminster, MD, 1957), 92.

Origen lived in Caesarea in Roman Palestine, in the same period when Rabbi Yoḥanan (180–279) was also working on an interpretation of the Song and visiting the city. His method was that of Midrash, biblical interpretation through parable and intertextual biblical references. On our verse, he wrote:

It happened once that a provincial lady had a black maidservant who went down with a companion to draw water from the spring, and she said to the companion: Tomorrow my master is going to divorce his wife and marry me. Why? asked the other. She replied: Because he saw her hands stained. Retorted the other: Foolish woman, listen to what you are saying. Here is his wife whom he loves exceedingly, and you say he is going to divorce her because once he saw her hands stained. How then will he tolerate you who are stained all over and black from the day of your birth?

So because the Nations of the World taunt Israel saying: This nation degraded itself; as it says: They exchanged their glory for an ox . . . (Ps 106:20). Israel replies to them: If we who sinned only once are to be punished thus, how much more so are you?¹⁷

Rabbi Yoḥanan suggests it is preposterous to imagine a husband preferring a dark/dirty servant to a wife who only occasionally dirties her hands. The same applies to the relationship—a marriage—between God and the people of Israel: they may sin on occasion—dirty their hands—but the bond is deep and lasting. Here is a polemical rebuttal of those gentiles who claim that the marriage is over and wish to replace the old wife with a new one—the Church. He identifies polemical potential in black/beautiful even without the aggravating ‘but’ that was to serve future commentators.

As Christianity became a state religion and many pagan Romans came to the baptismal font, our verse began to appear in discussions of baptism and conversion. Ambrose, bishop of Milan (d. 397), did not write a commentary on the Song, but he cited it frequently in his works, especially those aimed at people wanting to convert to

¹⁷ Reuven Kimelman, ‘Rabbi Yoḥanan and Origen on the Song of Songs: A Third-Century Jewish-Christian Disputation’, *Harvard Theological Review*, 73/3–4 (1980), 567–95, at 593.

Christianity. He describes the Church receiving postulants dressed in white, Christians-to-be who had removed the clothes of sin:

The church, having assumed these clothes through the bathing of regeneration; she says in the Canticles: 'I am black and lovely, daughters of Jerusalem', black through the fragility of the human condition, beautiful through grace; black, because I am made up of sinners, beautiful by the sacrament of faith.¹⁸

An early Christian tradition developed around our verse in Greek and Latin. It used the pairing of blackness and beauty to figure the individual's progress into faith, as well as *ecclesia's* emergence from dark, unbeautiful *synagoga*.

Even as the Church became established around the Mediterranean, its intellectuals continued to grapple with the challenges of diverse opinions and internal strife. Pope Gregory the Great (d. 604) treated the Song in a short work that was based on Origen's legacy. He influentially taught the history of the Church as a progression from blackness to beauty. He too grappled with the origins and heritage of *synagoga*:

We know that at the origins of the church, when the grace of our redeemer was being preached, there were in Judaea some who believed, and some who did not believe; but those who believed were looked down upon by the unbelievers, and after having suffered persecution, they were condemned as if they had followed the ways of the nations. Hence the Church cries out against them *I am black but beautiful, daughters of Jerusalem*. Black indeed by your judgement, but beautiful by the illumination of grace.¹⁹

Gregory presents the Church as black in the eyes of her infidel persecutors – Jews who have not accepted Christ – but beautiful thanks to the cleansing illumination of grace. Yet the closer one is to the sun of

¹⁸ Ambrose of Milan, *De Sacramentia, De Mysteriis / Über die Sakramente, Über die Mysterien*, trans. Josef Schmitz (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1990), c. 35, 230. Translation into English my own.

¹⁹ Gregory the Great, *On the Song of Songs*, trans. Mark DelCogliano (Collegeville, MN, 2012), 133–9.

grace, Gregory explains, the more aware one becomes of one's sins; that in turn makes one darker too.

In these interpretations, the allegorical approach understands blackness as a moral state, an understanding well embedded within the theology of supersession whereby Christianity came to replace Judaism. Black stood for the state before grace, but also for the state of self-knowledge enabled by grace. It carried a negative valence, but one that could change through conversion, baptism, and self-knowledge. Our verse helped situate the historic movement of *synagoga* towards *ecclesia*, while *ecclesia's* blackness was a shifting state of being with God, touched by God's divine sun rays.

A century later, and from the western edge of Europe, our verse was similarly – and influentially – interpreted by the Venerable Bede (d. 735), a monk of Jarrow in Northumbria, as part of the love story between Bridegroom and Bride, God and his Church. He approached the Song as polemic as well as historical allegory, and he faithfully adapted the commentary of Gregory the Great, the pope who had helped make England Christian.²⁰ Bede sought to give the Song a more coherent shape than commentators before him had done. By adding chapter headings, he divided up the Song and so made of 'discontinuous segments of poetry' a certain dramatic unity.²¹

Bede understood our verse as the Church being black in her afflictions, yet beautiful in her virtues. In fact, the more she suffers, the more beautiful she becomes:

She is undoubtedly black with respect to the misfortune of her afflictions, but beautiful in the comeliness of her virtues, or, rather, in the sight of the judge who sees within she is all the more beautiful the more often she is harassed and, as it were, disfigured by the afflictions of fools.²²

²⁰ Hannah W. Matis, *The Song of Songs in the Early Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2019), 32–4.

²¹ Ibid. 36. For the vast influence of his writings, see Michael M. Gorman, 'Bernhard Bischoff's Handlist of Carolingian Manuscripts', *Scrittura e civiltà*, 25 (2001), 89–112.

²² The Venerable Bede, *On the Song of Songs and Selected Writings*, trans. Arthur Holder (New York, 2011), 44; for the original Latin, see the Venerable Bede,

Alcuin (c.735–804), an English scholar highly placed in the Carolingian court, emphasized in his commentary the history of the Church's tribulations, and here *synagoga* represents all those who opposed the Church:

CHURCH SPEAKING ABOUT HER TRIBULATIONS: *I am black but beautiful, daughter of Jerusalem. Black in the suffering of persecutions, but beautiful in the loveliness of virtues. Like the tents of Cedar, like the curtains of Solomon. Dark in the temptation of demons, beautiful in the mortification of carnal desires.*²³

Turning to the next verse:

Do not consider me Do not wonder if I am despised by men for the eating of temptations. *The sons of my mother fought against me; they set me as the guardian of the vineyard, my own vineyard I did not guard.* The bitterness of persecutions by the sons of the synagogue forced me not to guard the vineyard of Jerusalem, but there are many vineyards, that is, churches in the world to guard.²⁴

Alcuin was followed by the next generation of Carolingian exegetes—Hrabanus Maurus (780–856) and Haimo of Auxerre (d. 855)—in considering blackness in this way: as the mark of persecution suffered by the Church's true followers at the hands of the false.²⁵

A millennium of interpretation resulted in Song 1:5 becoming a site where opposition and progression could be articulated through the use of 'black' and 'beautiful'. Blackness denoted here variously the supersession of *ecclesia* over *synagoga*, the movement of a Christian through life, and the oppression suffered by worthy Christians at the hands of their persecutors. Blackness most commonly afforded a negative quality, but its power to sustain oppositions was not stable.

Opera Exegetica, vol. 2b: *In Tobiam, In Proverbia, In Cantica canticorum, In Habacuc*, ed. D. Hurst and J. E. Hudson (Turnhout, 1983), 195, lines 202–5.

²³ Alcuin, *Commento al Cantico dei Cantici: Con I commenti anonimi Vox Ecclesie, Vox Antiquae Ecclesie*, ed. Rossana E. Guglielmetti (Florence, 2004), 118–19, lines 15–18.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 119, lines 19–24.

²⁵ On these Carolingian commentators, see Matis, *The Song of Songs*.

Jewish Exegesis

While Christians developed this variety of positions, Jewish commentators continued to read the Song as the story of the relationship between God and his people Israel, and with the tools of parable—Midrash. *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* was composed in seventh-century Palestine, and like all Midrash, it drew on earlier rabbinical sayings, displayed side by side, verse by verse, in a variety of voices:

I am black, but beautiful, Daughters of Jerusalem. Like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon:
'I am black' in my deeds.
'But beautiful' in the deeds of my ancestors.
'I am black, but beautiful' said the Community of Israel, 'I am black' in my view, 'but beautiful' before my Creator.
For it is written, 'Are you not like the children of the Ethiopians to me, O children of Israel, says the Lord' (Amos 9:7):
'As the children of the Ethiopians' in your sight.
But, 'to me, O children of Israel, says the Lord'.²⁶

Shir Hashirim Rabbah recounted the biblical events of Exodus and its aftermath. In that light, the commentary also offers:

Another interpretation of the verse: 'I am black', at the sea; 'They were rebellious at the sea, even the Red Sea' (Psalm 106:7); 'but beautiful', at the sea, 'This is my God and I will be comely/beautiful for him' (Exodus 15:2).
'I am black': at Marah, 'and the people murmured against Moses, saying, 'What shall we drink' (Exodus 15:24).
'But beautiful', at Marah, 'And he cried to the Lord and the Lord showed him a tree, and he cast it into the waters and the waters were made sweet' (Exodus 15:25).²⁷

²⁶ On *Shir Hashirim Rabbah*, see Shimshon Dunskey (ed.), *Midrash Rabbah Shir Hashirim* (Tel Aviv, 1980), 5–16, and our text at 29 (in Hebrew); for a translation into English, see Jacob Neusner (ed.), *Song of Songs Rabbah: An Analytical Translation*, 2 vols. (Atlanta, 1989), i. 92.

²⁷ Dunskey (ed.), *Midrash Rabbah Shir Hashirim*, 29; Neusner (ed.), *Song of Songs Rabbah*, i. 92–3.

The adversarial 'but' is absent from the Hebrew Bible, yet it was sometimes used in Jewish commentary, like here, exploiting one of the meanings offered by the conjunction 'and' (*ve*).

There were other ways of using the verse in esoteric fashion within Hebrew liturgical poetry, or *piyyut* – a genre that flourished in Byzantine Palestine, was characterized by metrical confections based on biblical verses, and was offered as an adornment to festival prayer. Rabbi Eliezer Kalir (c.570–c.640) was a leader whose poetry was much adopted by Jews in northern Europe in later centuries. In his treatment, our verses all but melt away in the swirl of allusion, as here, in a poem for Passover:

He brought me to the house of wine and His banner over me
was love
He set His splendor over me
I was black but lovely
He made me a guardian over vineyards/perfumed with myrrh
and frankincense
*Do not look upon me that I am darkened.*²⁸

This clever recombination of familiar snippets of verse is the poet's act of worship, and the supplicant in the synagogue is invited to join in. This is not a site of exegesis, but one of liturgical celebration and poetic exuberance.

Sometime in the eighth century, a historical–allegorical approach to unpicking the Song was introduced in a new annotated translation into the Near Eastern vernacular, Aramaic: the Targum. The Targum's compiler saw in the Song an account of the relationship between God and Israel as a series of cycles from Exodus to the future coming of the Messiah, each cycle containing 'fellowship, estrangement and reconciliation', as its most recent editor, Philip Alexander, has put it.²⁹ Our verse falls within the first, formative cycle, which spans Song of Songs chapters 1–5 and tells the history of Israel from the exile in Egypt to King Solomon:

²⁸ Laura S. Lieber, *A Vocabulary of Desire: The Song of Songs in the Early Synagogue* (Leiden, 2014), poem at 361–89, quotation at 363, lines 9–12.

²⁹ *The Targum of Canticles*, trans. and intro. Philip S. Alexander (London, 2003), 13.

When the People of the House of Israel made the Calf, their faces became as dark as [those of] the sons of Cush who dwell in the tents of Qedar, but when they returned in repentance and were forgiven, the radiance of the glory of their faces became as great as [that of] the angels, because they had made curtains for the Tabernacle, and the Shekhinah had taken up its abode among them, and [because] Moses their teacher had ascended to heaven and made peace between them and their King.³⁰

The Song was read in synagogues at the festival of Passover, when the pact between God and Israel was remembered as shaped in Egypt and reinforced through the trials in the desert. ‘Black and beautiful’ also imbued the drama of alienation in exile with meaning, and expressed hope for a return within contemporary Jewish lifetimes.

New Learning, New Meanings

After the turn of the first millennium, the urban communities of northern Europe saw a growth in schools where men from diverse backgrounds were taught to explore old texts in new ways. One example was the school of Hebrew exegesis in Champagne in northern France associated with Rabbi Shlomo b. Isaac, also known as Rashi of Troyes (c.1040–c.1105). Rashi’s disciples spread his method widely, as they were recruited into teaching and leadership roles across the lands of Ashkenas. At the same time, cathedral schools in Northern Europe became foci for training in the liberal arts and advanced biblical learning. These schools attracted scholars from beyond the local diocese and produced influential works that reached other urban schools, as well as monastic ones. From one such school—Laon—under its master Anselm (c.1050–1117), who lectured there between c.1080 and c.1100, there emerged a gloss to the whole Bible—the *Glossa ordinaria*—which remained the most influential anthology of biblical commentary for centuries to come. Both Rashi’s commentary of c.1075–c.1105 and the *Glossa ordinaria* on the Song of c.1110–20 had a swift and lasting effect on subsequent interpretation in their

³⁰ Ibid. 81–2.

respective faith communities. Furthermore, in the thirteenth century, these traditions became intertwined when exegetes from the priory of St Victor in Paris engaged with the Hebrew Bible through Rashi's exegetical work—a true entanglement.

Rashi's treatment of our verse starts with the literal sense:

I am black but comely, etc. You, my friends, let me not be light in your eyes. Even if my husband has left me because of my blackness, for I am black because of the tanning of the sun, but I am comely with the shape of beautiful limbs. Though I am black like the tents of Keidar, which are blackened because of the rains, for they are always spread out in the wilderness, I am easily cleansed to become like the curtains of Shlomo [Solomon].³¹

The blackness of the body exposed to the elements, like that of workers and vagrants, may affect the husband's love, but the Bride is beautiful in other ways, as in her fine limbs, which may please him. Rashi then turns to the allegorical sense, where blackness denotes a moral defect that may pass, like tanned skin that fades:

The allegory is: The congregation of Israel says to the nations, 'I am black in my deeds [i.e., sins], but I am comely by virtue of the deeds of my ancestors, and even some of my deeds are comely. If I bear the iniquity of the [golden] calf, according to Targum the faces of the Sons of Israel actually turned black like the skin of the Cushites, when they sinned with the golden calf. After they repented the blackness went away. I can offset it with the merit of the acceptance of the Torah [Pentateuch]'.³²

Rashi associates blackness with occasional sin, a stain that can be washed away. The darkness of sin may also be lightened by the virtue of forebears and by the Bride's own good deeds. The Bride is not defined by blackness; her blackness comes and goes, with the sun, with the weather, with the vagaries of human weakness that alternate with virtue. Blackness, nonetheless, has its social cost: 'my husband left me'. Yet Rashi ends on characteristic moral optimism, looking to

³¹ 'Rashi on Song of Songs', 1:5:1, at [https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Song_of_Songs?tab=contents], accessed 10 Oct. 2023.

³² Ibid.

a time when the nations—‘daughters of Jerusalem’—will make their way back to that city.

Around the same time, the *Glossa* on the Song was being assembled from the aforementioned traditions of the first millennium: from Jerome, Gregory, Bede, Alcuin, and others.³³ The *Glossa* offers several possible comments on each section of our verses, and is thus a polyphonic array of citations:

The bride says: *I am black* through afflictions or through penitence
But beautiful in the loveliness of virtues.³⁴

In the next verse the *Glossa* turns to the sun’s effect on skin colour and moral disposition:

The property of the sun is to burn and to illuminate, and so the true sun blackens her [the church] outside with persecutions, and illuminates her by giving her strength to resist.³⁵

The Bride explains she was unable to guard her vineyard while being persecuted by *synagoga’s* sons:

The bitterness of the persecution of the sons of the synagogue caused me to fail to guard the vineyard, because once I had forsaken the teaching of the gospel they compelled me to observe the distinctions of the [Jewish] law.³⁶

The vineyards are Christ’s, and with persecution and dispersal at the hand of the Jews, the vineyards in fact multiplied, each planted wherever an Apostle spread Christ’s word. So Church was afflicted—and made black—by persecution, but great good also resulted from such suffering.

The darkness of the Bride in this set of glosses is that of the persecuted victim, but also of the believer upon whom the sun of justice has shone. The Bride repeatedly identifies the Jews—sons of her mother,

³³ *Glossa ordinaria Pars 22: In Canticum Cantorum*, ed. Mary Dove (Turnhout, 1997), 30–1.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 100–1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.* 102.

synagoga—as her persecutors, those who made her black. Her blackness is thus not her natural colour, nor can it reflect the glory inside her. Blackness here is caused by external conditions, and does not reveal her intrinsic, God-given quality, her inner glory.

The *Glossa* summarized and made available the commentary tradition in which blackness was not seen as an intrinsic attribute. This is also in accordance with contemporary scientific theories about the effect of climate on human appearance and temperament.³⁷ Such explanations were more current in the twelfth century thanks to translations from Arabic medical texts, themselves based on classical works, where skin colour was often discussed in sections on complexions and on generation. These approaches assumed that most people would see darkness as unwholesome or ugly, but also as amenable to change.

Several new directions in understanding the Song were developed over the twelfth century, in new genres and aimed at new audiences. Let us start with a unique comment by the philosopher Peter Abelard (1079–1142), a contemporary of the *Glossa*, in a letter he wrote to Héloïse, his former lover, now the abbess of a nunnery, the Paraclete. Letter five opens with a citation from the Song, rendered in liturgical usage for the vespers of the Assumption and the Nativity of the Virgin Mary:

The bride in the Canticles, an Ethiopian (like the one Moses married), rejoices in her excellent privilege and says: *I am black, but beautiful, daughters of Jerusalem. Therefore the king has loved me and brought me into his bedchamber.* And again: *Do not see me that I am dark, since the sun has darkened me.*³⁸

Abelard's exploration breaks with the traditions we have seen so far:

The Ethiopian woman is black in the outer aspect of her flesh and as regards exterior appearance looks less lovely than other women; yet she is not unlike them within, but in several respects she is lovelier and whiter, in her bones, for instance, and in her teeth.³⁹

³⁷ Peter Biller, 'Black Women in Medieval Scientific Thought', *Micrologus*, 13 (2005), 477–92; on milk, see 481–4.

³⁸ David Luscombe (ed. and trans.), *The Letter Collection of Peter Abelard and Heloise* (Oxford, 2013), letter 5, c. 5, 180–1. ³⁹ *Ibid.* 182–3.



Fig. 1. Detail from the Klosterneuburg Altarpiece: Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (1181). © Jeff Bowersox. Licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0 [<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>].

Abelard contrasts the Ethiopian woman's blackness with the whiteness of her teeth and bones, though soon moves on to reflect on these as metaphors, seeing in the white bones that bear her flesh an image of the body that sustains the soul. Black also signifies the habit that Héloïse and her nuns wear as Christ's brides—or rather, his widows, since their husband died on the cross.

What comes next, as the author enters the bedchamber and considers a man in bed with his black wife, is highly disturbing:

Indeed that disfigurement of blackness makes her love what is hidden rather than open. And any such wife desires private, not public delights with her husband, and would rather be felt in bed, than seen at the table. Moreover, it often happens that the flesh of black women is all the softer to touch though it is less attractive to look at . . .⁴⁰

There are echoes here of classical medical discussions of the sexual properties of black people, as well as of the hyper-sexualization of women of African descent familiar from later periods. Yet Abelard's disdain for the black woman's beauty existed alongside the visual representation of the Queen of Sheba as beautiful and black. Nicholas of Verdun's enamelled altarpiece included a scene depicting the queen bearing gifts to Solomon with all the grace that Gothic art could muster (Fig. 1).⁴¹

Writing about our verse was just an aside for Abelard, but for his great intellectual opponent, the mystic and ecclesiastical activist Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), it was a defining personal engagement. Bernard composed eighty sermons that covered fewer than three chapters of the Song, and of these, five are devoted to our verse. The sermons on the Song were delivered in the chapterhouse to the monks of the Cistercian abbey at Clairvaux, and were also circulated as a little book edited by Bernard in the 1130s. The Bride is the soul whose origin is in God, and who yearns to return to him. To go back to our verse:

⁴⁰ Ibid. c. 7, 184–7.

⁴¹ Helmut Buschhausen, 'The Klosterneuburg Altar of Nicholas of Verdun: Art, Theology and Politics', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 37 (1974), 1–32.

Let us see what was meant by saying: 'I am black but beautiful'? Is this a contradiction in terms? Certainly not . . . Not everything therefore that is black is on that account ugly. For example blackness in the pupil of the eye is not unbecoming; black gems look glamorous in ornamental settings, and black locks above a pale face change its beauty and charm.⁴²

Back to the Bride:

But let us try to see why she calls herself black, and why beautiful? Is she black because of the benighted life she formerly led under the power of the prince of this world . . . and lovely because of the heavenly likeness into which she was afterwards changed as she began to live her new life?⁴³

Here is an abbot speaking to a community of monks about their souls. Informed by Aristotelian categories of form and colour, but soaring in his vision of the soul's journey as enabled by the religious life.

Bernard knew Origen well, and like him dwelt on the soul's journey to God. But he also created new images which aimed to inspire and strengthen his fellow monks. He reminded his monks of the example of the Apostle Paul living in his hermit's body:

O soul of surpassing beauty, even though dwelling in a sickly little body, heaven's own loveliness had not scorned your company, the angels on high did not cast you out, God's brightness did not repudiate you! Is this soul to be called black?

Bernard then turns to the Daughters of Jerusalem, imagining how they would see Paul: 'Black in your estimation, but beautiful in the eyes of God and the angels.' And from Paul to Christ: 'hence He is beautiful in himself, black because of you'.⁴⁴

So by the twelfth century, we find the patristic traditions around our verse reworked to serve the values of a reformed monastic world. This vibrant commentary tradition was carried on after Bernard by Cistercian scholars, and it influenced monastic writers outside the

⁴² Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs II*, trans. Kilian Walsh (Piscataway, NJ, 2010), Sermon 25, 51

⁴³ Ibid. 53.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Cistercian milieu, such as Bernard's great friend William of St Thierry. It existed alongside other monastic traditions, like the heavily Marian interpretations of the Song—and of our verse—offered by Rupert of Deutz (1075–1130) and Honorius Augustodunensis (1080–c.1156). All these thinkers shared the new tools, like the *Glossa*, but developed different interpretations arising from their spiritual and intellectual concerns. And so our verse was put to new uses.

Hildegard of Bingen's (1098–1179) contribution to imagining female blackness is relevant here, although she never explicitly mentions our verse. Her collection of visions, *Scivias* ('Know the Ways'), of 1151–2, deals with the fundamental theology of the Church in new and encountered ways: creation, incarnation, and the afterlife. Part I vision five is devoted to *synagoga*, and one section deals with her colours:

That is why *you see her black from her navel to her feet*, for from the time of her fullest strength to the end of her time she was soiled by deviation from the Law and by transgression of the heritage of her fathers, for she disregarded the divine precepts in many ways and followed the pleasures of the flesh. *Her feet are red, and around her feet is a cloud of purest whiteness.*⁴⁵

Hildegard echoes here the tradition of commentaries on our verse, but arranges them in quite a different manner. *Synagoga's* feet are red because she killed Christ and slipped in his blood. The white cloud denotes those who came to the faith: 'for as Synagogue ended, the Church arose, when . . . the apostolic doctrine spread throughout the world'.⁴⁶ Hildegard cited the Song frequently, in this work and in her liturgical poetry, yet she created her own imagery, unlike any other (Fig. 2).

The 1160s saw the first treatments in the vernacular, which meant our verse began to reach slightly wider audiences. The earliest vernacular

⁴⁵ Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Columba Hart and Jane Bishop (New York, 1990), Vision 5, 133–6, at 134. Emphasis original.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 134; for the Latin, see Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, ed. Adelgundis Führkötter and Angela Carlevaris (Turnhout, 1978), 95. The image faces p. 92 in this edition; on the history of the lost and then recovered manuscript, see pp. xxxii–xxxvii.



Fig. 2. *Synagoga* as the Mother of God's incarnation. Facsimile of Hessische Landesbibliothek Hs. 1, Eibingen Manuscript. Courtesy of Abtei St. Hildegard, Rudesheim-Eibingen, Germany.

prose commentary is in the Bavarian/Alemannic, associated with St Trudpert Abbey in Wurttemberg, possibly for the guidance of a community of nuns:

For this reason it is said of her: I AM DARK LIKE THE TENT OF KEDAR. This means, in my Body I resemble a daughter of Eve. I AM BEAUTIFUL TO BEHOLD LIKE SALOMON'S TENT. That means: my inner sense/soul and my mind and my heart are the tent of the highest king. Salomon the peaceful keeps calm under his tent. There stands his kingly bed.⁴⁷

This text draws on the tradition since Origen, but is also inspired by the Cistercian view of the soul's desire on the one hand, and by contemporary romance literature on the other. Soon, several Old French translations were prepared for female religious, and later for beguines.⁴⁸ Like these religious women, the Bride is dark in penance and humility, but beautiful through her association with the Bridegroom.

A more worldly orientation developed on the basis of the *Glossa* in the works of writers associated with the schools of Paris. The authors were clerics operating in the world: teachers and scholars with careers in government and pastoral leadership. They harvested the fruits of the Song commentaries in support of preaching and in the empowerment of prelates and priests. For example, Peter the Chanter's (d. 1197) commentary was scholastic in the truest sense, that is, aimed at teaching. Indeed, his works have reached us as *reportationes*, lecture notes, not as a literary product per se.⁴⁹ In the making of sermons or manuals, the *Glossa* formed the basis, and concision and ease of use by preachers guided the writing. These university scholars in Paris in turn influenced the new orders of friars, who were bound to preach in the markets but also to advise rulers. It was within this milieu that the

⁴⁷ *Das St. Trudperters Hohelied: Eine Lehre der Liebenden Gotteserkenntnis*, trans. Friedrich Ohly (Frankfurt am Main, 1998), 60-1. Translation into English my own.

⁴⁸ Tony Hunt (ed.), *Le chant des chanz* (London, 2004); Tony Hunt (ed.), *Les Cantiques Salomon translatez de latin en françoys* (Geneva, 2019).

⁴⁹ Suzanne LaVere, *Out of the Cloister: Scholastic Exegesis of the Song of Songs, 1100-1250* (Leiden, 2016) 74-5.

new format of the *Bible moralisée* was invented—the Bible explained and copiously illustrated for the instruction of French royals, as Sara Lipton has shown.⁵⁰

Let us summarize our findings and look forward. We have seen the allegorical tradition begin with Origen and early Latin commentators who turned the Song into a site for reflection on the transition from Synagogue to Church, as well as on the journey of the soul. The verse led to reflections by Gregory on the Church as beset by enemies who make her members black from suffering. And finally, with Bernard, the blackness is but surface, ugliness only seen by the lowly sense of sight, while other, more elevated senses discern the beauty within. Christ was ugly—black—on the cross, yet full of glory. The monks and nuns who strove to imitate Christ were encouraged to seek that inner self and so become one with him.

Alongside these allegorical understandings of blackness as difference, as supersession, as a point from which moral improvement is launched, we have seen occasional comments on living bodies within a social setting. There was the physical ugliness of ascetic living, and the attraction and repulsion of an imagined black female body. Reflection on our verse intersected with the medical, moral, and pastoral discourses of the twelfth century, and soon acquired new audiences too.

Hence new ideas were attached to our verse, and they offer occasional glimpses into the social reality of lived racialization. Written in Germany, the thirteenth-century Hebrew polemical work *Sefer Nizshaon Yashan* ('The Old Book of Contestation') was a collection of rebuttals of Christian attacks on Jews, and was organized book by biblical book, verse by verse. When it comes to our verse, it addresses the claim made by Christians that while they—Christians—were white of skin and beautiful, Jews were dark and ugly:

⁵⁰ Lipton, *Images of Intolerance*.

The heretics ask: Why are most Gentiles fair-skinned and handsome while most Jews are dark and ugly? Answer them that this is similar to a fruit; when it begins to grow it is white but when it ripens it becomes black, as is the case with sloes and plums. On the other hand, any fruit which is red at the beginning becomes lighter as it ripens, as is the case with apples and apricots. This, then, is testimony that Jews are pure of menstrual blood so that there is no initial redness. Gentiles, however, are not careful about menstruant women and have sexual relations during menstruation; thus, there is redness at the outset, and so the fruit that comes out, i.e., the children, are light.⁵¹

There is a great deal to unpack here, but the presence of bodies is palpable, as is mutual observation, and even mutual disgust. The underdog answers with inversion: we may be dark, but we are like the sweet-tasting ripe plums, which may have budded in whiteness but are savoured in their blackness. Moreover, our purity rules mean that we are never touched by menstrual blood, a substance considered impure and harmful in both traditions. Such celebration of the despised blackness is also captured by the African American saying: 'The blacker the berry the sweeter the fruit'. This is the title of Wallace Thurman's novel of 1929, a story of the hardships faced by a dark-skinned African American woman as she seeks education, employment, and love.⁵²

Blackness/beauty in our verse was known and discussed by those who first articulated the destiny of Christianity as it arose from the Jewish and Greek world. It served to reflect on oppositions: between those who chose ascetic rigour and those who did not, between keen Christians and those who persecuted them, between outer lives and inner faith, and between God, who created the soul, and that soul's journey to return to him. It was used by intellectuals to explore Christian history, by monks to probe their vocation, and by female religious to ponder the allegorical figures of *ecclesia* and *synagoga*. In the twelfth century it became associated with human types: racialized thinking is apparent in Abelard's comments on the black wife, and in the

⁵¹ David Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical Edition of the Nizzahon Vetus* (Philadelphia, 1979), no. 238, 224.

⁵² Wallace Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, intro. Allyson Hobbs (London, 2018).

appraisal of the Jewish body in the text we have just seen. Black was an extreme point of reference, as was white; black served as a mark of sin, but also of virtuous suffering and pious self-mortification.

This lecture ends about a century before black Africans became a familiar presence in southern European cities in the course of the fourteenth century, arriving as slaves and remaining as labourers; and some three hundred years before black Africans were bought and sold in the millions as chattels transported across the Atlantic. The traditions of attributing ugliness to blackness, mostly implicit in the period I have discussed, are part of the intellectual underpinnings available to later writers and policy makers as they sought to justify what ought always to be unthinkable: the dehumanization of fellow humans.

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