

Black and Beautiful: Skin Color in the Biblical Song of Songs

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Abstract

Biased racial inferences can be found in several popular Bible translations, exhibiting disparaging views of dark-skin and dark-skinned peoples. Among them are two verses from the first chapter of Song of Songs (Song of Solomon / Canticles). Bahá'ís are skeptical of translations and interpretations that imply racial bias based on the overarching principle of the Oneness of Humanity. This study looks at the Hebrew text of these verses from the perspectives of morphology, syntax, and Biblical idiom to gain insights into a contextually accurate translation of this controversial passage.

White supremacists have used Biblical verses to denigrate dark-skinned people (Johnson). Additionally, popular translations, such as the King James and New International Version, whether with racist intent or not, render these verses in a way that portrays dark skin as an undesirable trait (Bergant, p. 13). This paper examines one such passage, Song of Songs 1:5.6. Bahá'ís hold both race equity and divine inspiration of the Bible as fundamental spiritual verities. They are naturally interested in clarifying the meaning of these verses. This paper uses standard scholarly tools, including consideration of context, morphology, and Biblical idiom, to re-examine the verses' perspective of skin color.

Song of Songs, otherwise titled Canticles in Catholic Bibles and Song of Solomon in others, contains a series of poems, often presented in dialogue, expressing the love between unnamed young lovers. The girl is called a Shulammitte, שׁוּלַמִּית, a rare term with various suggested meanings. The one most relevant to the poem might be a derivation from "shalom," meaning peace or complete. The boy, in turn, is referred to as "king" (Song of Songs 1.4; 1.12; 7.5), often mistaken for King Solomon. However, Solomon is a distant figure in the poem (Song of Songs 3.11). The girl's use of a royal reference for her lover is probably best seen as a playful term of endearment. When understood in this way, both young lovers are identified as noble and righteous.

The book is renowned both for the sensual passion that it portrays and for the extravagant sensuousness of its imagery. (Bergant p. vii)

The song is a series of poems, much of it depicting the boy and girl lavishing praise on each other. It has been called "erotic" (Bergant, *ibid.*) but may more appropriately be considered a chaste romance without sexual acts beyond kissing. The first poem opens with the girl expressing her affection for her beloved.

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine... Draw me, we will run after thee... we will be glad and rejoice in thee, we will remember thy love more than wine: the upright love thee.
(1:2, King James Version)

The emotional warmth of these expressions carries the reader into a realm of ethereal youthful love. Notably, not only is the girl enchanted by her lover, but she also sees that others are attracted to him.

One of the book's themes is the resistance to their love from the girl's brothers and the "daughters of Jerusalem." The girl next turns her attention to these daughters. In this context, the verse related to skin color appears, rendered in the King James and many traditional translations in a way that implies that darker skin is undesirable.

I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon. Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me: my mother's children were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards; (1:3-6, KJV)

I am black but beautiful, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Cedar, as the curtains of Solomon. Do not consider me that I am brown, because the sun hath altered my colour: the sons of my mother have fought against me, they have made me the keeper in the vineyards: (1:3-6, Douay)

We will examine the girl's motives for saying "Look not upon me" a bit later. But first, let's take a bit more in-depth look at the phrase translated as "I am black, but beautiful." The translation is controversial due to reading in racial implications by some interpreters, specifically the mistaken idea that her dark skin was due to her ethnicity.

Scholars trace this mistranslation to the Latin Vulgate, 4th century C.E. (Lowe), and its popularization to medieval times.

...the genesis of a linguistic model occasioned by a mistranslation... was taken up in the Renaissance and had an enduring global impact. I call this model the "black but..." formulation, and it is to be found in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries throughout written texts and reported speech, in historical as well as literary works. It was modeled grammatically and ideologically on the statement "I am black but beautiful" ... in 1: 5 of the "Song of Songs." (Lowe)

The King James Version (1611) codified the negative portrayal of dark skin for many modern Christians.

Here's how KJV reads: "I am black, but comely [beautiful], O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of

Solomon” (v. 5). Those who read Hebrew will recognize that the KJV has failed its readers.

The failure comes in verse five’s opening. The KJV’s translation team renders “שחורה אני ונאווה” as “I am black, but comely [beautiful].” But as Old Testament scholar Wilda Gafney observes, this translation choice is grammatically impossible. The conjunction ו at the start of נאווה means “and”—not “but.” Moreover, as Gafney argues, because there isn’t a “but” in Hebrew, authors writing in Hebrew must compile “a bunch of stuff to make a disjunction”; they can’t simply use a conjunction that means “and.” (Cartagena)

The level of misunderstanding and misinterpretation is magnified by examining the context of Song of Songs 1:5. It plainly states that the girl’s darker complexion had nothing to do with race or ethnicity. Instead, she was tanned due to working in a vineyard and her exposure to the sun, not ethnically Sheban, Kushite, Ethiopian, or African. In modern usage, dark skin has taken on racial significance and, in the minds of many readers, raises broader questions about the Bible’s view of people of color. The original context of the poem has nothing whatsoever to do with race.

Yet the relationship between skin color and beauty is present in the poem and is worthy of exploration. In the above translations, there is tension between “black” and “beautiful,” giving the impression that the girl sees herself as attractive *despite* her sunburnt complexion, implying that dark skin is viewed as a negative trait. If this is what the girl believes and says, it naturally carries repercussions for people who may have dark skin for other reasons; race or ethnicity.

Is this tension the original biblical poem’s intent or a result of the translators’ biases? Much hinges on the translation “but.”

Significantly the original Hebrew expression “ו” usually means “and.” It is only translated as “but” when the context demands it. However, in the vast majority of cases, the article prefix means “and.” For this and other reasons, many translations portray “black” and “beautiful” as conjunctive rather than oppositional.

This conjunctive use can be seen as far back as pre-Christian times.

The Septuagint, which is often abbreviated by the Roman numerals LXX, is the Greek translation of the Old Testament; the translation of the Song of Songs is usually assumed to have been completed by 100 BC, probably in Alexandria. It is generally agreed by Old Testament scholars that the translation aimed to be as literal as possible, prioritizing the sacrality of the original over fluency or clear understanding. The Septuagint has the Greek word καὶ (meaning —and— in both classical and patristic Greek, with a larger range in classical Greek) in 1:5. (Lowe)

The third-century Christian scholar, Origen, likewise understood blackness as complimentary.

In the mid-third century (~260 CE), Origen wrote his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* in Greek, which was preserved in a Latin translation that Rufinus of Aquileia composed in the fourth century. Origen writes that the beloved of the Song of Songs...is “Black and beautiful” in Songs 1:5. (Stinchcomb)

Many modern translators agree:

Young's Literal Translation (1862)

Dark am I, and comely.

New American Standard Bible (1971)

“I am black and beautiful.

Contemporary English Version (1995)

My skin is dark and beautiful.

GOD'S WORD® Translation (1995)

I am dark and lovely.

International Standard Version (2011)

I'm dark and lovely.

Aramaic Bible in Plain English (2015)

I am black and beautiful.

Literal Standard Version (2020)

I [am] dark and lovely.

New Revised Standard Bible – Updated Edition (2021)

I am black and beautiful.

Howard University professor Alice Ogden Bellis raises a valid point regarding the connotations of the word “black” to modern readers.

“... the “black and beautiful” translation racializes a passage that does not deal with race or ethnicity.... Although the battle against racist language in society and biblical scholarship is ongoing, this verse is not the right battleground. (Ogden Bellis)

An important aside is the positive view of Kushites in many other Biblical passages. Bellis elaborates:

The Hebrews were aware of the power and importance of the darker-skinned people called Kushites (or Ethiopians in the Septuagint). Kush and Kushites were well known; the words כּוּשׁ and כּוּשִׁי occur over fifty times in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁹ In general, the biblical authors viewed them as skilled warriors (Jeremiah 46:9, Ezekiel 38:5, 1 Chronicles 1:10), wealthy, (Isaiah 45:14, Job 28:19, Daniel 11:43, Psalms 68:31), and physically handsome (Jeremiah 13:23). (Ogden Bellis)

Another evidence of the girl's attractiveness is the comparison in Song of Songs 1:6 to "the tents of Kedar" and "the curtains of Solomon." The significance of these favorable comparisons should not be overlooked. According to various commentaries, Kedar was an Arabian tribe who was noted for their black, goat-skin tents (Qedarites – Wikipedia). The metaphor underscores blackness as an attractive trait.

The curtains of Solomon probably refer to his outdoor pavilions. (Compare Isaiah 54:2) Her similitude to rich King Solomon's curtains adds to the picture of the girl as both noble and attractive. Thus, both similes emphasize the girl's physical beauty and provide a positive image of her "blackness."

When the boy speaks, he praises her in glowing terms. She is repeatedly compared to objects of value and beauty, explicitly stating that she has no negative physical traits.

I have likened you, my darling,
To a mare in Pharaoh's chariots:

Your cheeks are comely with plaited wreaths,
Your neck with strings of jewels.

We will add wreaths of gold
To your spangles of silver...

My beloved to me is a bag of myrrh
Lodged between my breasts.

My beloved to me is a spray of henna blooms
From the vineyards of En-Gedi.

Ah, you are fair, my darling,
Ah, you are fair,
With your dove-like eyes! (1:9-15, JPS)

Most noteworthy is the boy's appraisal:

Every part of you is fair, my darling,
There is no blemish in you. (4:7, JPS)

The original Hebrew for “There is no blemish in you” reads: מוֹם אֵין בְּךָ. (mum ‘en bak). Mum can also be translated as “defect” or “deformity.” The girl has no such flaw. The words of the boy and girl are full of praise for each other, using an array of colorful compliments. Undoubtedly, they view each other with starry eyes and are enraptured by each other’s physical beauty.

Why, then, in verse 5, does the girl command the daughters of Jerusalem, “Look not upon me because I am black (sunburnt)”? In view of the statement that she has no blemish, it makes little sense to imagine that the girl does not want to be seen because of embarrassment about any aspect of her physical appearance.

We can better understand the phrase “look not” (אַל-תִּרְאֶה) from a comparison of the use of the Hebrew idiom in other passages. For example, when God rejects King Saul, we find a similar Hebrew phrase used precisely this way.

But the LORD said unto Samuel, *Look not* on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him. (1 Samuel 16:7, KJV. Compare Proverbs 23:31)

The phrase “look not” is not to be understood as telling others to ignore a negative quality, for Saul’s physically imposing stature would be a positive trait. Rather the idiom is used to warn against drawing an inappropriate inference from his stature.

Recognizing the Hebrew idiom informs our understanding of the Shulamite’s expression, “Look not upon me because I am dark.” She is not expressing her own assessment but warns the daughters of Jerusalem against any significance they might attach to her sunburnt condition.

... the Shulamite explains to them (the girls of Jerusalem) why she is swarthy (1:5-6). She is on the defensive, as if expecting them to look down on her. (Fox)

Insight into a proper rendering of these critical verses can also be gained by a closer look at the Hebrew term for black, שִׁחֹר (shichor). The word sometimes means pitch black such as the color of the raven (Song of Songs 5:11). It can also have a broader meaning, referring to any dark color, such as brown or black hair (Leviticus 13:31; Ecclesiastes 11:10). The related term שַׁחַר (shachar) means “dawn.” It never refers to the dead of night but rather the beginning of the day when light first appears in the sky. In those contexts, shachar specifically refers to non-black darkness. The Hebrew Bible has no term for grey or tan. Accordingly, shichor carries a range of meanings, including black or, more generically, any dark shade, depending on context. In the case of the Shulamite’s suntan, the appropriate translation would not be “black.”

Looking back at the overall message of Song of Songs and its place in the Biblical canon, we find emphatic support for its inclusion even though God is not mentioned anywhere in the book. At its surface level, the book contains a series of secular love

poems. Why then is it considered sacred and included in the Hebrew Bible? Rabbi Akiba (2nd century C.E.) gave it superlative praise:

All the world is not worthy of the day that the Song of Songs was given to Israel; all the writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies. (Bergant. Compare Yitzhaki)

Referencing Rabbi Akiva as the source, the Midrash describes the book of Shir HaShirim (Song of Songs) as being “Kodesh Kodashim,” the holiest of the books of the Bible (Shir Hashirim Rabba 1, Medrash Tanchuma Tetzaveh 5, etc.)

Its role as sacred text stems from a long tradition of allegorical interpretations, where the romantic attraction becomes a metaphor for the relationship between God and God's people. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá echoed the long tradition of Jewish and Christian interpreters.

The divine Words are not to be taken according to their outer sense. They are symbolical and contain realities of spiritual meaning. For instance, in the book of Solomon's songs, you will read about the bride and bridegroom. It is evident that the physical bride and bridegroom are not intended. Obviously, these are symbols conveying a hidden and inner significance. - (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 459)

Love metaphors are not limited to Song of Songs but are a common trope in Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Bahá’í sacred scripture.

And as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you. (Isaiah 62:5, JPS)

For the wedding of the Lamb (Christ) has come, and his bride (his followers) has made herself ready. (Revelation 19:7, (NIV)

God will then raise up a people loved by Him, and loving Him (Qur’an 5:54, Rodwell)

I (God) have breathed within thee a breath of My own Spirit, that thou mayest be My lover. (Hidden Words, Arabic # 19)

It is characteristic of this genre that love is idealized. It is pure, unblemished, perfect. God and His worshippers are wholly committed and faithful to each other. There is no room for lovers to exhibit negative characteristics in these contexts.

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. (Deuteronomy 6:5, JPS)

...a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. (Ephesians 5:27, KJV)

There is a mosque... In it are men who love to be purified; and Allah loveth those who make themselves pure. (Qur'an 9:108, Yusuf)

O God! make my heart good and pure, freed and sanctified from all save Thy love." (Some Answered Questions, p. 91)

Physical beauty, thus, becomes a symbol of spiritual beauty, purity of heart, gratitude, devotion, the whole complex of divine virtues and becomes independent of physical appearance. Individuals may have aesthetic preferences for a variety of traits regarding who one finds physically attractive. Yet, in the context of the holy books, true beauty is spiritual. Literal prettiness takes a back seat to spiritual qualities.

Grace is deceptive, beauty is illusory. It is for her fear of the LORD that a woman is to be praised. (Proverbs 31:30, JPS)

Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry or fine clothes. Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. (1 Peter 3:3-4, NIV)

Allah does not look at your appearance or your wealth, but He looks at your hearts and your deeds. (Sahih Muslim, 4651).

God does not behold differences of hue and complexion; He looks at the hearts. He whose morals and virtues are praiseworthy is preferred in the presence of God... the question of color is of least importance. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í World Faith, p. 267)

Translators and interpreters err if they cast dark skin color in a negative light by translating שִׁחֹרָה אֲנִי וְנֹאֲוָה (shichorah 'ani v'na'oh) "I am black but comely." First, "and," not "but," is the more usual translation of the Hebrew conjunction, "v^e." Second, translating v^e as "but" is based on a misreading of the context, misinterpreting the Hebrew idiom "look not," as if the Shulamite were embarrassed by her sunburn... Third, the Hebrew idiom "look not upon..." is elsewhere used for positive traits of secondary importance, such as King Saul's military prowess compared to his unfaithfulness to God. Here, the Shulamite cautions the daughters of Jerusalem not to attach the wrong meaning to her sun-darkened skin. Fourth, the metaphors "tents of Kedar" and "curtains of Solomon" esteem blackness. Fourth, "black" inappropriately racializes the verse for modern readers. Fifth, while "black" is a common rendering of "shichor," in this context, its use fails to recognize the wider semantic range of the term to include other dark colors. Sixth, the common translation, "comely," is unclear to many readers. A more common term, such as pretty, lovely, or beautiful, is preferable. In conclusion, translations that imply a disparaging view of dark-hued skin are inappropriate given the Song of Songs' syntax, idiom, and genre. "Swarthy, I am, and lovely" would be a better translation.

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