

A Kerfuffle over Skin Color

Numbers 12:1-15

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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¹While they were at Hazeroth, Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married (for he had indeed married a Cushite woman); ²and they said, “Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?” And the LORD heard it. ³Now the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth.

⁴Suddenly the LORD said to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, “Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting.” So the three of them came out. ⁵Then the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud, and stood at the entrance of the tent, and called Aaron and Miriam; and they both came forward. ⁶And he said, “Hear my words: When there are prophets among you, I the LORD make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams. ⁷Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house. ⁸With him I speak face to face— clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?” ⁹And the anger of the LORD was kindled against them, and he departed.

¹⁰When the cloud went away from over the tent, Miriam had become leprous, as white as snow. And Aaron turned towards Miriam and saw that she was leprous. ¹¹Then Aaron said to Moses, “Oh, my lord, do not punish us for a sin that we have so foolishly committed. ¹²Do not let her be like one stillborn, whose flesh is half consumed when it comes out of its mother’s womb.” ¹³And Moses cried to the LORD, “O God, please heal her.” ¹⁴But the LORD said to Moses, “If her father had but spit in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut out of the camp for seven days, and after that she may be brought in again.” ¹⁵So Miriam was shut out of the camp for seven days; and the people did not set out on the march until Miriam had been brought in again. (NRSV)

I

When you imagine what biblical people looked like, what skin color do they have? For instance, what skin color do you imagine David and Solomon had? Or Ruth and Naomi? When you read the letters of Romans, Galatians, and Philippians, what skin color do you suppose Paul had? When you meditate on the stories about Jesus, do you picture him with white skin, brown skin, or black skin?

When I was a child, I thought people in the Bible were white, just like me. After all, everyone in my family was white. Everyone in my congregation was white. Everyone in my lower-class neighborhood in Elkhart was white. And when I toddled off to Sunday school class, all the illustrations in our Sunday school materials depicted white people, just like me. Moses and Miriam? I thought they were white. The apostle Paul? He was as white as my daddy. Jesus? White like an Easter lily. I grew up supposing all the folks of the Bible looked like white European-Americans.

What about you? When you were a child, what skin color did you think people in the Bible had?

II

Today's story from Numbers 12 practically begs us to consider the skin color of biblical people—or perhaps we should say the skin *colors* of biblical people, since they didn't all look the same. To begin with, this story implies that Moses' wife was black. Verse 1 says she was "Cushite," a word that referred to the people from the land of Cush, located south of Egypt, in what is today the northern part of Sudan. The region of Cush is sometimes also called Nubia, and the people who lived there are sometimes called Nubians. You can call the area south of Egypt either Cush or Nubia, but in any case, the people who lived there had beautiful black skin. We know this partly from Egyptian tomb paintings, which generally portrayed Nubians as black.¹

Numbers 12 does not tell us the name of Moses' wife. The book of Exodus says Moses had a wife named Zipporah (2:21), but in those days men sometimes had multiple wives, so we can't tell if these two women were the same person or not. What we do know is that for the story in Numbers 12, the most important fact about this wife was not her name, but her ethnic origin: she was a dark-skinned Nubian. This is important because in the ancient world people admired the Nubians and respected them.

What color skin did Moses have? That's a harder question to answer since the Bible tells us almost nothing about the physical features of the Jews. Judaism frowned on graven images, so Jews themselves generally didn't draw pictures or carve statues. But we do have at least one literary clue from the Song of Songs (or Song of Solomon), chapter 1, verse 5. Here the female lover is speaking:

I am black and beautiful,
O daughters of Jerusalem,
like the tents of Kedar,
like the curtains of Solomon. (NRSV)

¹ See "Images of Nubians," <https://oi.uchicago.edu/museum-exhibits/nubia/images-nubians>, accessed September 6, 2017.

This Jewish woman exults in the color of her own black skin. Without any shame whatsoever, she calls herself beautiful. She has a healthy and accurate self-image: I am black and I am beautiful. This single text doesn't mean all Jews were black, though some other Jews may also have been black. The general consensus among scholars is that most Hebrew or Jewish people were various shades of brown.

Therefore as we approach this text, picture Moses, Miriam, and Aaron with brown skin, and Moses' Nubian wife with black skin. As far as anyone knows, not a single person in this story had naturally white skin. That would be true of most people in most of the Bible: their skin came in beautiful shades of brown and black.

III

Before going any further, let us be honest with ourselves about the pejorative meanings that North American culture assigns to colors. We are not a color-neutral society. The online Merriam-Webster Dictionary has 13 definitions for the adjective "black," 4 of which carry strongly negative connotations.²

- definition 4: dirty or soiled, as in *hands black with grime*
- definition 6a: thoroughly sinister or evil, as in *a black deed*
- definition 6b: indicative of condemnation or discredit, as in *I got a black mark for being late*
- definition 7: connected with . . . the devil, as in *black magic* or *the black arts*
- definition 9: characterized by hostility or angry discontent, as in *black resentment filled his heart*

By contrast, the same dictionary lists 8 definitions of the adjective "white," 2 of which have strongly positive connotations.³

- definition 2c: marked by upright fairness as in *that's mighty white of you*

² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/black>, accessed September 8, 2017.

³ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/white>, accessed September 8, 2017.

- definition 3a: free from spot or blemish, as in *he's free from moral impurity*, or innocent, as in *the bride's white dress symbolizes her purity*
- definition 3c: not intended to cause harm, as in *a white lie* or *white magic*
- definition 3d: favorable or fortunate, as in *it was one of the white days of his life*

These dictionary definitions show that for speakers of the English language, negative connotations are deeply embedded in the word black, while positive connotations are deeply embedded in the word white. Black is dirty, evil, devilish and hostile. White is fair, spotless, pure, harmless, and fortunate. To be clear, the dictionary editors aren't telling us what these words *should* mean, only what the words *actually do mean* in the English language as used by Americans.

IV

Why do I bring this up? Why should we pay attention to the positive and negative connotations of “white” and “black” in the English language? Because when we read the Bible, we are at great risk for taking those connotations with us and slapping them on top of the text, which then causes us to misunderstand what the text is really saying. The biblical authors wrote in Hebrew and Greek, long before the English language was born. The cultural connotations they brought to the colors black and white were not the cultural connotations we bring to those colors.

In fact, their connotations may have been almost opposite to our connotations. For the people who originally wrote and read Numbers 12, black skin color was beautiful, exotic, and exciting. Remember that woman in the Song of Songs? “I am black and beautiful.” Black skin color was what those ultra-cool Nubians had. Brown skin was—at least for the Hebrews—normal, ordinary, and healthy. And white skin color? Oooh, that was a big problem. White was the color of leprosy, that awful skin disease that sometimes plagued people who lived in the ancient near East. White skin carried deeply negative connotations. White, leprous skin was a sign of God's displeasure.

Here, then, is how we might understand this text.⁴ Miriam and Aaron are envious of their black-skinned Nubian sister-in-law. In their cultural world, this Nubian wife of Moses has high social standing and a great deal of honor. Because Moses is married to such a cool, classy woman, he also has high social standing—probably a higher social standing than his sister Miriam and his brother Aaron have, who apparently weren't lucky enough to marry Nubian spouses. Out of envy, Miriam and Aaron start to complain about their brother. You will notice that in verse 3 the author of the story goes out of the way to clarify that in reality Moses was “very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth.” Moses could have been haughty about being married to a Nubian, but he wasn't. He was actually a humble person, which means that Miriam and Aaron's complaint is totally unjustified.

God gets mad at Miriam and Aaron for being so envious of their brother's social and religious standing (v. 9). As a sign of divine displeasure, God makes Miriam's brown skin leprosy for 7 days, turning it as white as snow. The story doesn't say why Miriam got leprosy but Aaron didn't. Maybe she was the primary instigator of this kerfuffle, and Aaron went along with it. In any case, let me underscore again: in that culture, having white skin was not a good thing at all. If you think about it, there is a certain elegant justice in God's decision to turn Miriam's skin white. She who complained about having a black-skinned Nubian sister-in-law is now afflicted with the temporary shame of having white skin. Aaron, at least, admits that he and Miriam have messed up and sinned “foolishly” (v. 11).

When I read this story as a resident of the United States in 2017, three questions rise to the surface. The three questions are these:

1. What difference does it make to us that our biblical ancestors in faith were mostly brown-skinned and black-skinned?
2. In our current cultural context, how can we stop using language that portrays white as good and black as evil?

⁴ Here I've drawn from Miguel A. De La Torre, *Reading the Bible from the Margins* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003), 14-23; and Mukti Barton, “The Skin of Miriam Became White as Snow: The Bible, Western Feminism, and Colour Politics,” *Feminist Theology* 27 (2001), 68-80.

3. How can we resist attempts to privilege white persons, or to demean brown and black persons?

However we answer those questions, let us continue to pray for the healing of the nations.