

## EDITORIAL ESSAY

# “Is a Cushite Made in the Image of God?”: Christian Visions of Race in Late Antiquity

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*There has been an increasing interest in classical and late antique studies on the existence of something approximating the modern concept of race in the ancient Greco-Roman world. Scholars of early Christianity have also debated the presence of prejudice based on skin color. The following study seeks to broaden this conversation by including late antique contexts outside of the Roman Empire as well as marginal language communities within the Roman Empire. This paper will demonstrate that anti-Black prejudice—or racism—did indeed exist in the late antique Roman world and that such racism was more pronounced in Roman literature written in Greek and Latin.*

**Keywords:** early Christianity, racism, Coptic literature, Ethiopian

AT the turn of the fifth century, the Alexandrian patriarch Theophilus asked the rhetorical question: How can you say that a Cushite is in the image of God?<sup>1</sup> The patriarch’s statement evokes questions regarding race in late antique Christianity. The following study will explore the nature of race and racism in early Christianity with a specific focus on how this social construct varied across cultural contexts. This study is based upon two fundamental controversial principles that I hold to: 1) the social construct of race existed in certain forms in Late Antiquity and is not unique to the modern world and 2) racism also existed in the ancient world. I define race as a broader social category than ethnicity in which various groups of people are envisioned as belonging to a collective that

<sup>1</sup> *The Life of Apa Aphou, Bishop of Pemje (Oxyrhynchus)*, 638–57, in *Christian Oxyrhynchus: Texts, Documents, and Sources*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell and Thomas A. Wayment (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015), at 646.

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152 *Competing interests: the author declares none.*

transcends empire, ethnicity, language, and religion and that is based primarily on physical characteristics.<sup>2</sup> I define racism in antiquity as the belief that racial groups with lighter skin are inherently superior to those with darker skin.<sup>3</sup> Although this belief system would later become weaponized through race-based colonialism and slavery during the medieval and modern periods, racism remained a worldview in Late Antiquity. The texts surveyed in the following will demonstrate these points. Furthermore, this study will explore how social factors such as race, ethnicity, and language resulted in variegated ways that early Christians talked about race.

Race was a marker of Greek and, later, Roman superiority that elevated the balance between Black and white in contrast to the “barbarians” on either side of the racial spectrum: “Those who are too black are cowards; this applies to Egyptians and Ethiopians. But the excessively white are also cowardly; witness women. But the complexion that tends to courage is in between these two.”<sup>4</sup> Aristotle espoused a vision of biological determinism that stratified humanity with respect to their relative position on the earth:

The peoples of cold countries generally, and particularly those of Europe, are full of spirit, but deficient in skill and intelligence; and this is why they continue to remain comparatively free, but attain no political development and show no capacity for governing others. The peoples of Asia are endowed with skill and intelligence, but are deficient in spirit; and this is why they continue to be peoples of subjects and slaves. The Greeks, intermediate in geographical position, unite the qualities of both sets of peoples. They possess both spirit and intelligence: the one quality makes them continue free; the other enables them to attain the heights of political development and to show a capacity for governing every other people—if only they could once achieve political unity.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Gay L. Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 5–6. Of note is how Byron describes ethnicity as “a relationship between two contrasting individuals or groups of people” (2), while race is described as an “external factor” (5). See Denise Eileen McCoskey, *Race: Antiquity and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 2.

<sup>3</sup> See Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 21; Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 14. Although Erich Gruen conflates “race” and “racism,” I define them separately; see Erich S. Gruen, *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 198.

<sup>4</sup> Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature*, 35.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin Isaac, *Empire and Ideology in the Graeco-Roman World: Selected Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 182. Aristotle’s views on peoplehood were largely influenced by his primary division of humanity into “civilized” people of the polis and “barbarians.” See Julie K. Ward, “Ethnos in the *Politics*: Aristotle and

When the Roman Empire conquered and subsumed Hellenistic society in the late first century BCE, the Greeks were ethnically differentiated from Romans. However, much of Roman society was influenced by Hellenistic civilization, including racism and biological determinism. Marcus Vitruvius repeats a similar method of racially categorizing the world as Aristotle did three centuries prior: “The races of Italy are the most perfectly constituted in both respects—in bodily form and in mental activity to correspond to their valour ... Hence it was the divine intelligence that set the city of the Roman people in a peerless and temperate country, in order that it might acquire the right to command the whole world.”<sup>6</sup> Specifically, Black people (“Ethiopians”) were often contrasted in Greco-Roman literature with Scythians who, in the minds of Greco-Roman society, represented the “white” extreme of humanity. “Ethiopians” and Scythians were often contrasted as polar ends of humanity while the Greco-Roman world inhabited the idealistic middle ground, geographically and racially.<sup>7</sup>

It is true that Greeks and Romans thought of their skin color as a representation of their racial and geographical balance and thus, superiority, to the “white” and “Black” people around them. However, the examples in classical Greek and Roman literature include far more examples of Blackness being disparaged than whiteness. Juvenal satirically commented: “Let the straight-legged man laugh at the club-footed, the white man at the Ethiopian.”<sup>8</sup> The fourth-century Roman poet Ausonius also associated whiteness with purity and Blackness with immorality in his recollection of his dark-complexioned grandmother: “Her name was given as a joke, because of her dark skin (*cute fusca*) she was called ‘Moor’ (*Maura*) back then. But her soul was not black (*atra*); it was brighter (*clarior*) than a swan and whiter (*candidor*) than untrodden snow.”<sup>9</sup> The classical Roman world inherited a Greek vision of race that inconsistently depicted whiteness as foreign and inferior while at times identifying with whiteness. Blackness, however, was

Race,” in *Philosophers on Race: Critical Essays*, ed. Julie K. Ward and Tommy L. Lott (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 14–37, esp. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, 84. See also, Rebecca Futo Kennedy, “Why I Teach About Race and Ethnicity in the Classical World,” *Eidolon* 2017, (<https://eidolon.pub/why-i-teach-about-race-and-ethnicity-in-the-classical-world-ade379722170>).

<sup>7</sup> See Frank M. Snowden Jr., *Blacks in Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 176–77.

<sup>8</sup> Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature*, 32.

<sup>9</sup> Ausonius, *Parentalia*, ed. Hugh G. Evelyn White (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), 56–95, esp. 66. See also, John H. Starks Jr., “Was Black Beautiful in Vandal Africa?” in *African Athena: New Agendas*, eds. Daniel Orrells, Gurminder K. Bhambra and Tessa Roynon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 239–57, esp. 255.

consistently associated with depravity at worst and exotically fetishized at best.

With the exception of the Bible, Christian literature that was produced in the Roman Empire syncretized Greco-Roman anti-Blackness with Christian theology. This is evident in the earliest centuries of Christianity, such as in the apocryphal *Acts of Peter*. In this text, the senator Marcellus reported to his mentor Peter a vision of a demon in the form of a Black woman:

And Marcellus went to sleep for a short time; and when he awoke he said to Peter, "Peter, apostle of Christ, let us boldly set about our task. For just now as I slept for a little I saw you sitting on a high place, and before you a great assembly; and a most evil-looking woman, who looked like an Ethiopian, not an Egyptian, but was all black, clothed in filthy rags. She was dancing with an iron collar about her neck and chains on her hands and feet. When you saw her you said aloud to me, "Marcellus, the whole power of Simon and of his god is this dancer; take off her head!"<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the most extensive theological treatment of race and Blackness from a Christian of the late antique period was from Origen's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. Favoring an allegorical interpretation of Scripture, Origen spends considerable time reflecting on the symbolism of the Shulamite's statement of being "Black and beautiful" or, as Origen would think of it, "Black yet beautiful." Origen begins by channeling the voice of the Shulamite in reproaching the anti-Blackness of the Daughters of Jerusalem, thus silencing any contemporary sentiment that Black people are beyond the purview of Christian salvation:

How have you not remembered what is written in your Law, what Miriam suffered who spoke in rebellion against Moses because he took a black Ethiopian (*Aethiopiissam nigram*) as a wife? How have you ignored the true completion of that symbol (*imaginis*) in me? I am that Ethiopian (*Aethiopissa*). I am black (*nigra*) indeed because of my peasant (*ignobilitate*) origin; beautiful on account of penitence and faith.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature*, 17. Anna Solevåg argues that the depiction of the Black woman as a dancer, implying that she was a prostitute, was a conflation of many of the layers of social identity that would have been seen as debased in the Roman world; Anna Rebecca Solevåg, *Negotiating the Disabled Body: Representations of Disability in Early Christian Texts* (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2018), 90.

<sup>11</sup> Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, ed. W. A. Baehrens, vol. 8, *Homilien zu Samuel I, zum Hohelied und zu den propheten kommentar zum Hohelied in Rufins und Hieronymus übersetzungen*, Origenes Werke (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1925), 26–241, esp. 114; English translation: Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, trans. and annotated by R. P. Lawson (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1957). See Num 12:1–16. Byron

Origen highlights the biblical reproachments against anti-Blackness in Numbers 12 and Song of Songs 1. However, he adds his own disparagement of Blackness by referring to African identity as a “lowly origin.” Origen believes the Shulamite to be an “Ethiopian,” which he associates not with the Axumite Empire, but with the Nubian kingdom of Meroe.<sup>12</sup> Origen further demonstrates the importance of Black figures throughout Scripture such as Ebed Melech and the Cushite wife of Moses. The marriage of Moses and the Cushite Origen is believed to be a typological representation of Jesus’ adoption of the Gentiles. However, Origen’s anti-Blackness is evident in his claim that Moses’ celebrated humility is represented most vividly in his marriage to a Black woman. Origen likens a non-Black man marrying a Black woman to the God-man Jesus’ incarnation and suffering on earth.<sup>13</sup>

Origen crystalizes the double-sided theology of race that characterized late antique Roman Christianity: Blackness denotes depravity yet Black people can be saved despite this impairment.

It appears to me that he who is said to be “beyond the rivers of Ethiopia (*Aethiopiae*)” who has been darkened (*infuscatus*) by excessive and over-abundant sin and, having been infected with black evil color (*atro malitiae fuco*), has been rendered black and dark (*niger et tenebrosus*). However, the Lord does not even repel these ones who offer “sacrifices of a troubled spirit and humbled heart” to God, turning to Him in the pretext of clear confession and repentance.<sup>14</sup>

For Origen, Black skin is a symbol of wickedness and a moral “stain.” Origen’s making of Blackness as a marker of depravity allows him to use this motif to emphasize God’s goodness, who “even” accepts the seemingly unacceptable Black person. Origen refers to Ebed Melech from Jeremiah 38 as a “man of a dark and degenerate race” (*obscurae gentis homo et degeneris*) as well as a “foreigner” (*alienigena*), despite any such designation in the biblical text.<sup>15</sup>

describes Origen’s theology of race “color-symbolic spiritualizing”; specifically, a “spiritualizing of blackness and whiteness”; *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature*, 75. Indeed, allegorical interpretations of Scripture are common to Origen. It should be noted, however, that Jerome’s Latin translation of *Commentary* is the only complete surviving copy of the text and may not fully represent Origen’s views; see Lawson, Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 5. Consideration of *Commentary*, however, is included as a sample of how some Roman Christians framed racial categories theologically.

<sup>12</sup> Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 116.

<sup>13</sup> Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 117.

<sup>14</sup> Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 122. See Zeph 3:10; Ps 51:17.

<sup>15</sup> Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 123. Indeed, Rodney Sadler points out that the book of Jeremiah “exalts” Cushites such as Ebed-Melech; Rodney S. Sadler Jr.,

This method of using Blackness as an archetype for fallenness and as an illustration of the extent of God's inclusion would be repeated through numerous early Christian sources from the Roman Empire. For Origen, "Black and beautiful" are contrasting concepts that typologically represent sin and forgiveness: "However, one could say each individual soul that turns to repentance after many sins, that she is 'black' (*nigra*) because of the sins, but 'beautiful' (*formosa*) through repentance and the fruits of repentance."<sup>16</sup> Nowhere in Origen's thought is it stated that Black people are created in the image of God and, as part of God's creation, are "very good."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Origen even adds language to the biblical text, declaring that the Shulamite has been "made white" (*dealbata*) and has "not remained black to the end" (*non in finem in nigredine ista permansit*), language absent from the Song of Songs.<sup>18</sup>

At times, it appears that Origen's "Black = depraved" language is simply an excessively deployed analogy, but that he does not actually think that Black skin is the same as sinfulness:

And finally, it is said about the entire Ethiopian race (*gentem Aethiopum*), in which there is a certain inherited, hereditary blackness (*ex seminis carnalis successione nigredo*), that in those regions the sun radiates with sharper rays, and that bodies that have been burned and darkened, now pass on a true defect (*viti*) to successive progeny. However, it is the reverse with the blackness of the soul (*animae nigredo*); for it is marked, not by the gaze of the sun, but by contempt. Therefore, it is acquired not through birth, but through neglect; and it is repelled and driven away by means of industry.<sup>19</sup>

*Can a Cushite Change His Skin? An Examination of Race, Ethnicity, and Othering in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2005), 97.

<sup>16</sup> Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 125.

<sup>17</sup> Gen 1:31. Origen does claim that the Shulamite's beauty is rooted in her being made in the image of God; Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 128. Origen's concept of her beauty, however, is rooted in being "made white" through salvation. Coupled with his repeated association of Blackness with depravity, this statement cannot be interpreted as Origen stating that Black people are made in the image of God.

<sup>18</sup> Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 125. See Song 8:5.

<sup>19</sup> Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 125. Referring to Blackness as a "defect" demonstrates that Frank Snowden's positive assessment of early Roman Christian views of Blackness is untenable: "Color was inconsequential; in fact, we have seen that they regarded as black all men who had not been illumined by God's light and considered all men, regardless of the color of the skin, as potentially Christians. Ethiopians were by all means to be embraced, for the Church, in the words of Augustine, was to reach even the Ethiopians, the remotest and blackest of men. All who were Christians were the same kind of men"; Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity*, 205. Byron's critique is demonstrated in the texts surveyed here and in her work: "With all due respect to Professor Frank Snowden and others who have been persuaded by his research on Blacks

Nearly every mention of Black skin by patristic Christians from the Roman Empire entailed negative connotations. Whether this was intended to simply be a typological analogy or not, the consistency with which early Roman Christians associated Blackness with depravity profoundly shaped the theology of race for the rest of late antique Roman Christianity. Origen claims that the Shulamite “became black” (*effecta est ergo nigra*) was “made white and fair” (*erit dealbata et candida*) that “her blackness has been cast away” (*abiectaue omni nigredine*), and that she “apologized to the Daughters of Jerusalem for her blackness” (*dicit ergo nunc ad filias Hierusalem pro nigredine sua satisfaciens*).<sup>20</sup> The relationship between Blackness and sinful guilt is further clarified: “This blackness (*ista nigredo*), then, for which you reproach me, is in me because the sun has despised me by reason of my unbelief and disobedience.” Origen follows this by imploring his audience to imitate the faith of the Shulamite, lest “we be made black” (*denigrate*) or “make room for darkness and blackness (*tenebris et nigredini*) in ourselves.”<sup>21</sup> Jerome deployed similar theological framing in communicating his racial imagination: “At one time we were Ethiopians in our vices and sins. How so? Because our sins had blackened us. But afterwards we heard the words: ‘Wash yourselves clean!’ And we said: ‘Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.’ We are Ethiopians, therefore, who have been transformed from blackness into whiteness.”<sup>22</sup>

Roman Christians often used Black people as archetypes for demons, thus exacerbating the association of Blackness with evil. This motif features prominently in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* and its presentation of Black people.

(or Ethiopians) in antiquity, it is clear from the taxonomy developed ... that the ancients were well aware of ethnic and color differences and displayed their understandings (sometimes negative and sometimes positive) in various forms of symbolic representations of Egyptians/Egypt, Ethiopians/Ethiopia, and Blacks/blackness”; Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature*, 151n149.

<sup>20</sup> Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 126. Again, Origen says her Blackness “will be banished completely,” 127.

<sup>21</sup> Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 127. In like manner, Origen says: “We have shown that this occurs wherever a sinful foundation came first, and that a person is darkened or burned by the sun where the condition of sin exists,” 129.

<sup>22</sup> Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature*, 43. Snowden acknowledges that Blackness represented depravity for Jerome and other early Roman Christian authors, yet maintains that this attitude did not represent color prejudice; see Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity*, 201. Again, Byron is correct in demonstrating how this language goes beyond a “metaphorical motif” and had real implications on racial and political dynamics in early Roman Christianity; see Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature*, 57.

One apophthegm tells the story of an ascetic who encouraged his young son to remain strong in the fight against *porneia*:

There he was in *hesychia* for twenty days and he saw the [alien] force coming upon him. It appeared before him as a very foul-smelling Ethiopian woman, so that he could not bear her stench. He would chase her away and she said to him: "I appear to be sweet in the hearts of men but, thanks to your obedience and your labour, God did not permit me to lead you astray and he revealed my evil smell to you."<sup>23</sup>

Another apophthegm states that an ascetic lifted "up his eyes and beheld demons like Ethiopians around him, stimulating his desire."<sup>24</sup> Blackness was also bluntly depicted as unattractive in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. A revered Christian couple—Andronicus and Athanasia—lost their children and the husband traveled alone to Scetis. After some time apart, Andronicus came upon his wife again, who disguised herself as a man. The text implies that part of Andronicus' lack of recognition of his wife was that her skin had been darkened by the sun. The author, however, straightforwardly declares that dark skin is unattractive: "They embraced each other and the dove (Athanasia) recognized her mate, but how could he recognize such wasted beauty and one that looked like an Ethiopian?"<sup>25</sup> The attitude that Blackness is unattractive is likely a product of the broader Greco-Roman world in which the author of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* participated. Such an attitude is not inherent to Christianity because the Bible records no such statements.

Anti-Blackness was also prevalent in authors from Near Eastern backgrounds who wrote in Near Eastern languages. The most prominent Syriac-speaking theologian in the history of this tradition was a fourth-century *mal-phana* ("teacher") named Ephrem the Syrian. Ephrem lived at the border of the Roman and Persian Empires and led a theological academy in the

<sup>23</sup> John Wortley, ed., *Apophthegmata Patrum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 117.

<sup>24</sup> See Wortley, *Apophthegmata Patrum*, 271. David Brakke denies the existence of race in the ancient world and alleges that claims of racism in antiquity are "anachronistic"; see David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 158. Denise Buell rightly points out, however, that "we can only interpret the past from the vantage point of the present" and that there is not even any "single way that all people think or speak about race and ethnicity today"; Buell, *Why This New Race*, 5. Furthermore, the working definition of race in this study as a broader category of human groups based on physical characteristics is clearly present in this example and throughout the samples provided here.

<sup>25</sup> Wortley, *Apophthegmata Patrum*, 451.



Syriac center of Urhoy (Edessa). In one of his most renowned series of *madrashē* (poetic songs for theological instruction), Ephrem makes a comparison between Blackness (“Ethiopians”) and depravity that was common to the early Christian world:

He has made the pearls of Cush (ܩܘܫܐ) exceedingly bright  
 As it is written, to Cush of the Black People (ܩܘܫܐ ܕܩܘܫܐ)  
 How He gave you, He who gave  
 Light to the peoples (ܕܥܡܘܬܐ), to the Black People (ܩܘܫܐ ܕܩܘܫܐ)  
 And to the Indians (ܩܘܫܐ ܕܩܘܫܐ) have his light rays arrived  
 The believer from Cush upon the chariot  
 Saw Philip. The Black man (ܩܘܫܐ) met  
 The Lamb of light (ܩܘܫܐ) while from among the verses  
 He was reading. The Cushite was baptized  
 And he was clothed in light (ܩܘܫܐ) and he was made to shine (ܩܘܫܐ)  
 as he drove away  
 He made disciples and he taught; From Black People (ܩܘܫܐ)  
 He made white people (ܩܘܫܐ); and Cushite women (ܩܘܫܐ)  
 Black women (ܩܘܫܐ), pearls  
 For the Son, He lifted up his Father  
 A bright crown from the Cushites  
 The Queen of Sheba, a lamb who came  
 To the wolf’s location. The light of truth  
 Solomon gave to her. He inspired her  
 While he became a pagan, she left enlightened (ܩܘܫܐ)  
 But they became dark (ܩܘܫܐ), according to their custom  
 The brightness (ܩܘܫܐ) that went down with her  
 The blessed woman, into the House of Darkness (ܩܘܫܐ)  
 Its illumination (ܩܘܫܐ) shined until  
 A new light (ܩܘܫܐ) came.<sup>26</sup>

Like many early Christian writers in the Roman Empire, Ephrem espouses a Christian universalism that embraces Black people despite their “depraved”

<sup>26</sup> Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Faith*, in *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Fide*, CSCO 154, *Scriptores Syri* 73, ed. Edmund Beck (Louvain: Secrétariat du SCO, 1955), 254–55. Jeffrey Wickes notes that Ephrem’s use of “darkness” language also appears in his anti-Semitic rhetoric; Jeffrey T. Wickes, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: The Hymns on Faith* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 385n7. Christina Shepardson highlights how Ephrem’s “dark/light” contrast is one of several poetic images used to disparage Jews in contrast with Christians; Christina Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy: Ephrem’s Hymns in Fourth-Century Syria* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 53–54.

Blackness. Therefore, Ephrem participates in the early Greco-Roman tradition of disparaging Blackness while simultaneously articulating a Christian universalism that includes the Black “other.”

Roman Christian sources also depicted Black Christians as self-deprecating participants in Roman Christian anti-Blackness. Among the best and only examples of a Black Christian voice in the patristic period are the statements attributed to Moses the Black. Moses was and still is one of the most revered of the Desert Fathers who lived in Scetis during the fourth century. Like all early Christian ascetics, Moses’ chief attribute was his humility. In the case of Moses, however, his humility is celebrated at the expense of his Blackness. Moses endures racism from the non-Black Egyptian monks at Scetis: “Another time, a council was convoked in Scete. The Fathers wished to put Moses to the test. They treated him with contempt, saying ‘Why has this Ethiopian come into our midst?’ He, upon hearing this, kept silent. After they were dismissed, they said to him, ‘Father, weren’t you troubled just now?’ He said to them, ‘I was troubled but I did not say anything.’”<sup>27</sup> The audience of the text is led to celebrate Moses as a humble ascetic who patiently endures racist attacks. Another similar story portrays such behavior even more vividly:

It was said of Father Moses that he became a cleric, and they laid the tunic upon him. And the archbishop said to him, “Behold, you have become completely white, Father Moses.” The old man said to him, “Indeed, the outside, O Lord Father; would that the inside were also white!” The archbishop, wishing to put him to the test, said to the clerics, “When Father Moses comes into the sanctuary, drive him out, and go along with him to hear what he says.” So the old man came in and they rebuked him and drove him out, saying, “Go away, Ethiopian.” He left and said to himself, “Rightly have they treated you, ash skin, Black one. As you are not a human, why should you come among humans?”<sup>28</sup>

This excerpt not only involves racial attacks upon Moses but also promotes a theology of race that associates whiteness with purity and Blackness with depravity. Furthermore, this color association explicitly associated depravity with Black skin and the Sub-Saharan African phenotype. And finally, the text celebrates Moses’ acceptance of racial assaults, setting a trend in early

<sup>27</sup> Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature*, 117.

<sup>28</sup> Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature*, 117–18. Brakke minimizes the internalized racial trauma to which Moses, “a truly uncolonized person,” is subjected as “mockery” and “voluntary”; see Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk*, 179. Byron’s analysis is more accurate: “The symbolizing of ‘virtue’ comes at the expense of the Ethiopian’s ethnic and color difference”; Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature*, 117.

Roman Christianity: 1) anti-Blackness is compatible with Christianity and 2) Black Christians are expected to patiently endure racist attacks.

Greco-Roman anti-Blackness crept into Christian literature written by Roman citizens. However, the same disparaging remarks about Black people were absent from Sub-Saharan<sup>29</sup> Black sources outside of the Roman Empire and even in marginalized language groups within the Roman Empire. An example of this is the various recensions of the life of the sixth-century ascetic Daniel of Scetis. In Daniel's biography, there is a lengthy narrative about an Egyptian stonecutter named Eulogius. Eulogius found a treasure and moved to Constantinople, where he flourished under the emperor, until a new emperor brought charges against Eulogius, resulting in the latter's return to Egypt and the monastic life. Daniel received a vision of Eulogius' troubles as a result of his greed and spiritual downfall. Daniel's vision involved Eulogius being dragged away from the imperial court. It is concerning the racial identity of Daniel's envisioned arrestor of Eulogius that the various sources differ. The Greek version of the *Life of Daniel* says that Eulogius was dragged away by "a Black man" ("ἐνὸς Αἰθίοπος").<sup>30</sup> The same wording is found in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*.<sup>31</sup> The Armenian version of the *Life of Daniel* says that Eulogius was carried away by "black demons."<sup>32</sup> The Coptic version of the *Life of Daniel*, however, does not identify the racial or ethnic background of the person.<sup>33</sup> It is of note that the Coptic *Life of Daniel* is of a distinct provenance from the Greek.<sup>34</sup> The Coptic *Life* contains a substantial amount of anti-Chalcedonian material—involving confrontations between the titular figure and the pro-Chalcedonian emperor Justinian—that is not present in the Greek version or its various translations. The Coptic *Life* was produced with a distinct cultural and theological agenda from that of the Greek, and this may have influenced the distinct racial imaginations between the two transmission strands. I am not arguing for a social division between Greek and Coptic-speaking communities in late antique

<sup>29</sup> Or, south of the First Cataract.

<sup>30</sup> Britt Dahlman, *Saint Daniel of Sketis: A Group of Hagiographic Texts with Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, *Studia Byzantina Upsaliensia* 10 (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2007), 154.

<sup>31</sup> Wortley, *Apophthegmata Patrum*, 466.

<sup>32</sup> Tim Vivian, *Witness to Holiness: Abba Daniel of Scetis* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2008), 238.

<sup>33</sup> Ignazio Guidi, ed., *Vie et récits de l'Abbé Daniel le Scété (VI Siècle)*, in *Revue de l'Orient chrétien* 5 (1900): 535–64, esp. 541.

<sup>34</sup> Vivian, *Witness to Holiness*, 5. David Brakke also notes the varieties of racial imagery across various translations of literature regarding Daniel of Scetis; see Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk*, 167.

Egypt.<sup>35</sup> To a degree however, “Greek” and “Egyptian” signaled different layers of identity, and there was some tension between the two.

“Greek” was often a polemical term used by early Christians—many of them Greek—in a religious sense, meaning “pagan.” For example, the *Life of Antony* contrasts “Christians” and “Greeks”: “The Greeks they deceived through illusions, while envying us Christians, disrupting everything, desiring to prevent us on our way up to heaven so that we will not enter that which they left behind.”<sup>36</sup> In this context, “Greek” clearly refers to religious practices in contrast to the Christian tradition. The name “Greek,” however, is ultimately an ethnic identity, not a religion. These categories overlap a great deal, but they are not completely synonymous. Therefore, there are degrees to which names such as “Egyptian” or “Greek” signal ethnic identities that are, to a degree, distinct from what we would call religion. Even in Late Antiquity, early Christians distinguished between various kinds of “pagans.” Athanasius of Alexandria enumerates the various differences between different kinds of “pagans” and differentiates them by ethnicities such as “Egyptian,” “Greek,” and “Persian.”<sup>37</sup> Cyril of Alexandria also speaks against “Greek religion.”<sup>38</sup> Therefore, ancient Christians understood “religion” to

<sup>35</sup> Such arguments were overstated by late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century scholars such as Johannes Leipoldt, *Schenute von Atripe und die Entstehung des national ägyptischen Christentums* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1903), 26. Since the late twentieth century, scholars have rejected any sense of anti-Greek sentiment in early Egyptian Christian literature; Ewa Wipszycka, “Le nationalisme a-t-il existé en Égypte byzantine?,” in *Études sur le Christianisme dans l'Égypte de l'Antiquité tardive 9-61* (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 1996), 18. Modern critiques are valid; there was no hard and fast division between Greek and Coptic speakers. However, modern scholarship has largely not accounted for the persistence of a degree of difference in how the two languages were received and shaped perceptions of the world. For example, Jacques van der Vliet, “Coptic as a Nubian Literary Language: Four Theses for Discussion,” in *The Christian Epigraphy of Egypt and Nubia* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 269–78, esp. 272.

<sup>36</sup> Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, ed. G. J. M. Bartelink (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2011), 196. He makes similar distinctions between “Greeks” and Christians in Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne, *PG* 25 (Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1857), 85–196, esp. 168.

<sup>37</sup> Athanasius, *Against the Greeks*, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne, *PG* 25, 1–94 (Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1857) 45–48. Indeed, the differences and contradictions between the various “pagans” bolstered Athanasius' argument of their fallibility. For the use of “Christian” as a racial/ethnic group, see Buell, *Why This New Race*, 8.

<sup>38</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *Against Julian*, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne, *PG* 76 (Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1859), 490–1065, esp. 564. Here Cyril uses both the terms *δαιμονισμὸν* and *θησοκεῖας* with reference to religion—both Christian and Greek. What is of note is how Greek is an ethnic modifier for religion, highlighting the contrast between Christians and Greeks.

be a distinct category that may be modified by various ethnic identifiers, such as “Greek.” It is overly simplistic, therefore, to simply interpret every instance of the word “Greek” in a religious sense only. A more nuanced approach is needed to take into account the multifaceted nature of social identity.

Greek language and identity were commonly believed to be more sophisticated than languages and identities such as Egyptian.<sup>39</sup> Early Christians, however, would often invert these forms of stratification, especially in monastic contexts. Antony is tested by “Greek” philosophers in the desert, highlighting the social and linguistic hierarchy between the two: “Why did you so greatly inconvenience yourselves, O philosophers, for such a foolish person?” When they said that he was not a fool but that he was very wise, he said to them “Since you came to me, be like me, for I am a Christian.”<sup>40</sup> Although Antony is called a simpleton (ιδιώτη), his ascetic humility elevates him above those whom society would normally see as superior to Antony. The various versions of the *Life of Daniel* also demonstrate an attitude of Greco-Roman superiority and disparagement of Egypt. After Daniel escapes the imprisonment of the Roman emperor, he returns to Egypt to take up his former work of stonecutting. He was hoping to find his former treasure still in its cave. When he found the cave empty, the Coptic text reports his saying: “Get yourself up and work! There’s nothing like this in Egypt!” (ΜΜΟΝ ΦΑΙ ΠΕ ΧΗΜΙ).<sup>41</sup> In the Greek text, Eulogius declares “for here is Egypt” (ὧδε Αἴγυπτος ἐστὶ),<sup>42</sup> expressing his disappointment that, because he is now in Egypt, he will not have the same wealth and status he had in Byzantium. The Armenian and Latin versions express this sentiment more directly: “This is Egypt, and not Constantinople.”<sup>43</sup> In the text, according to

<sup>39</sup> Stanley M. Burstein, *Graeco-Africana: Studies in the History of Greek Relations with Egypt and Nubia* (New Rochelle, NY: Aristide D. Caratzas, 1995), 5. Burstein narrates the origins of Greek exoticization of Egypt as a cultural other whose degree of “civilization” was measured against a Hellenistic standard. See also Jennifer Taylor Westerfield, *Egyptian Hieroglyphs in the Late Antique Imagination* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 5.

<sup>40</sup> Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, 320–22. This common Christian rejection of Greek identity inverted the early Roman tendency to ascribe to Hellenistic identity; see Emma Dench, *From Barbarians to New Men: Greek, Roman, and Modern Perceptions of Peoples from the Central Apennines*, Oxford Classical Monographs (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 46.

<sup>41</sup> Guidi, *Vie et récits de l'Abbé Daniel le Scété (VI Siècle)*, 544.

<sup>42</sup> Dahlman, *Saint Daniel of Sketis*, 162. This same statement appears in Wortley, *Apophthegmata Patrum*, 472.

<sup>43</sup> Vivian, *Witness to Holiness*, 241, 251. The imperial capital and its dominant language disparaged cultural “others,” even when all sides included were Christian; see Bas ter Haar Romeny, “Ethnicity, Ethnogenesis and the Identity of the Syriac Orthodox Christians,” in

sixth-century Egyptians, Constantinople is the source of wealth and power, and Egypt is a place of squalor in which material prosperity is limited. Similar strategies of symbolic geography are repeated in the recension of this story in other language communities. This phrase is entirely absent from the Ge'ez text.<sup>44</sup> These various translations demonstrate a strikingly different vision of Egypt and its value as a place. The Greek, Armenian, and Latin versions depict Egypt as socially inferior to the imperial capital while the Coptic and Ge'ez versions focus on Eulogius' misfortune without making comments on the value of Egypt. Given the varieties of social imagination across the various recensions of this text, it is not surprising that the same text would display contrasting racial imaginations. The Greek, Armenian, and Latin versions depict Eulogius' arrestor as a "Black person," whereas racial identity is absent from the Coptic and Ge'ez versions.

Given the social stratification that existed between Greek and Coptic speaking communities, it is not surprising that anti-Black sentiment was often more present in the former than the latter. Indeed, one of the only examples of anti-Blackness that appears in Coptic literature is one in which such language is rebuked. This linguistic variation may be due to the relative proximity of the Coptic-speaking community to the Black world (i.e., Sub-Saharan Africa). As we have seen above with Ephrem the Syrian, however, anti-Blackness is present in non-Greek literature as well. However, Ephrem and the Syriac-speaking world existed much farther from Sub-Saharan Africa than did the Coptic-speaking world. Therefore, it is not surprising that anti-Black sentiment appears less frequently in Coptic literature. Although Egyptian literature written in Greek is no less Egyptian than that which is in Coptic, there is an intersectionality in Coptic literature of being a marginal language community in the Roman Empire that is proximate to Black communities. *The Life of Apa Aphou* reports a debate between the titular bishop of Pemje and Patriarch Theophilus regarding whether humans are made in the literal image of God. The report of the debate in the *Life* contains an anti-Black statement uttered by Patriarch Theophilus:

Apa Aphou immediately bowed down, saying: "This expression does not hold up. Rather, I will confess that all people are made in the image of God." The Archbishop answered: "How is it that you alone speak concerning this expression and there is no one who speaks in support of you?" Apa

*Visions of Community in the Post-Roman World: The West, Byzantium and the Islamic World, 300–1100*, ed. Walter Pohl, Clemens Gantner, and Richard Payne (New York: Routledge, 2012), 183–204.

<sup>44</sup> F. M. Esteves Pereira, *Vida do Abba Daniel do Mosteiro de Sceté* (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional, 1897), 14. See also Vivian, *Witness to Holiness*, 139.

Aphou said: "I am sure that you will support me and that you will not oppose me." The Archbishop said: "How can you say that a Cushite (ογεθωω) is in the image of God? Or a leper, or a cripple, or a blind person?" The Blessed Apa Aphou answered, saying: "If you proclaim these (things) in this way, you will be fighting against the one who said: 'Let us make humanity in our image and in our likeness.'"<sup>45</sup>

Aphou gently rebukes the patriarch throughout this dialogue, giving the benefit of the doubt that the patriarch had just been led astray by the devil. According to the *Life of Apa Aphou*, Apa Aphou convinced Theophilus of the anthropomorphite position. Regardless of the historicity of this event, what is significant is how the *Life of Apa Aphou* presents Theophilus' belief that Black people (Cushites) are not made in the image of God. Theophilus is presented as lost in heresy. One of several symptoms of his erroneous beliefs is his rhetorical questioning of the image of God in Black people. Black people are compared to those with physical disabilities, a population that is also presented as inferior by the erroneous patriarch. Apa Aphou rebukes these statements, however, along with Theophilus' entire doctrine. In so doing, *The Life of Apa Aphou* presents anti-Black sentiment as an outgrowth of bad theology.

When Black people are mentioned in Coptic literature, there is an absence of disparaging and exoticizing language that often accompanies their presence in literature written in Greek. In fact, ethnic terminology that is more fitting—such as "Nubian" or "Blemmyes"—appear more often than more vague racial terms like "Ethiopian" or "melas."<sup>46</sup> Such is the case, for example, when Africans south of Egypt are mentioned in the writings of Shenoute of Atripe. Shenoute provided shelter for thousands of Nubians and Blemmyes who had come to the White Monastery as refugees during a war between the two groups. In one of his discourses, Shenoute gives thanks to the Lord for the presence of the refugees and their having become familiar with Christianity:

If the entire flock is blessed and all the flocks of Christ are blessed because they follow him—for they have come to know that he is the true God—would that these friends sitting here who belong to the Blemmyes and Nubia would unite with us and follow him, that is, know that he is God! For we have allowed them to mingle with us, and they have entered into

<sup>45</sup> *The Life of Apa Aphou*, 646. For background on the anthropomorphite controversy surrounding Aphou and Theophilus, see Paul A. Patterson, *Visions of Christ: The Anthropomorphite Controversy of 399 CE* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 54.

<sup>46</sup> The Blemmyes were a nomadic group that lived in the desert region between the Nile and the Red Sea. They traded and often came into conflict with the Nubians (or Nobatia) who lived in urbanized communities along the Nile.

God's house, so that they might become sober and understand what the Psalmist said, which they now hear: "The idols of the nations are silver and gold"—and also wood and stone, and also the sun and moon and stars, the things that their Creator made so that they might give light.<sup>47</sup>

By the time of the Arab Muslim Conquest of Egypt in the seventh century, the Nubian kingdoms had embraced Christianity as the imperial religion. Egyptian Christian sources written in Coptic continued to mention Nubians in more humanizing ways than their Greek counterparts. Isaac of Alexandria was the patriarch of Egypt during the late seventh century and endured the threat of religious persecution under the new government. There was a story at the end of the *Life of Isaac* involving the patriarch brokering a peace treaty between two Nubian kingdoms, to the dismay of the Islamic governor of Egypt:

Listen, and I will tell you of this other marvelous deed! It happened at that time that the king of Makouria (†Μακοῦρια) sent messengers to the archbishop with letters telling him how the bishops in his country (†εϥχωρα) were few because of the length of the journey and the time. For they were not able to pass through by (order of) the king of Mauritania (†Μαῦρωτανια) until he had made peace with him.<sup>48</sup> Although the two

<sup>47</sup> David Brakke and Andrew Crislip, *Selected Discourses of Shenoute the Great: Community, Theology, and Social Conflict in Late Antique Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 191. For more on Shenoute's care for the Nubians and Blemmyes, see Ariel G. López, *Shenoute of Atripe and the Uses of Poverty: Rural Patronage, Religious Conflict, and Monasticism in Late Antique Egypt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 57–60.

<sup>48</sup> The Roman province Mauretania (modern Morocco) is unlikely; see Maged S. A. Mikhail, *From Byzantine to Islamic Egypt: Religion, Identity and Politics after the Arab Conquest* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 356n121. The *Arabic History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria (AHPA)* provides different locations for the two disputant nations: "In those days the patriarch addressed letters to the king of the Abyssinians and the king of the Nubians"; B. Evetts, ed., *Arabic History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*, *Patrologia Orientalis* 5 (1904): 2–215, esp. 24. Amélineau differs from the *AHPA* as he identifies the nation of "Mauritania" as the territory of the Blemmyes; see Émile Amélineau. *Histoire du patriarche copte Isaac: Étude critique, texte et traduction* (Paris, Leroux, 1890), xxxv. Rather than identifying "Makouria" with Ethiopia as in the *AHPA*, Amélineau indicates this region encompassing the bishoprics of Dongola, Korti, Ibrim, Bucaras, Saï, Termus, and Suenkur; see xxxiv. Porcher suggests, rather, that Mauritania is correct and that the scribe may have confused "Makouria" for Morocco; see E. Porcher, ed., *Vie d'Isaac Patriarche d'Alexandrie*, *Patrologia Orientalis* 11 (1915): 377n1. This is less likely and requires a greater deviance from the text. Bell follows the suggestion of Amélineau, stating that "Maurotania" is also referenced as the land of the Blemmyes in the *Life of Shenoute*; see Harold Idris Bell, *Egypt from Alexander the Great to the Arab Conquest: A Study in*



kings established in these countries were both Christians, they were not at peace with each other. Since one of them was at peace with the king of the Saracens, this was the king of Mauritania. But the other who was of the great country (†νω† νχωρα) of Makouria was not at peace with the king of the Saracens. It happened that when the archbishop read the king's letters, he knew what was in them. He was grieved much for the sake of the churches, and he immediately wrote letters to the king of Mauritania, giving him counsel and instruction through the words of the holy Scripture as he also said, "You are both Christians!" He wrote many words to him to establish his soul in the orthodox faith of the Son of God. Afterwards he wrote to him, "Do not prevent the men of the upper kingdom from passing through his country when they were going for the sake of their bishop so that the churches would not be deserted lest you will find great guiltiness before God!" When the enemies of our faith knew of these things, they slandered the archbishop before the king, saying, "We tell you, O king, that the king of Makouria has sent messengers with letters to Abba Isaac the archbishop so that he will appoint a bishop for them who they will take to their country. Not only this, but he sent another one to the king of Mauritania counselling him to make peace with the king of Makouria, our enemy. If this happens, O king, they will be of one single mind, and will rise up against us and make war with us."<sup>49</sup>

The governor of Egypt, Abd al-Aziz ibn Marwan, expressed his intent to execute the patriarch. However, Abd al-Aziz received a vision of the apostles Peter and Mark warning against harming the patriarch, which the governor heeded. Just as in the writings of Shenoute, Nubians that are mentioned in the *Life of Isaac* are mentioned without any reference to skin color or physical features. Also like the writings of Shenoute, Nubians are identified by more specific ethnic terminology rather than racial categories.

Athanasius' *Life of Antony* includes problematic racial terminology, typically surrounding demonic imagery, as was done in many early Greco-Roman Christian texts. When the devil was unable to draw Antony into sinful behavior, "he appeared to him in the image of a black boy (μέλας αὐτῷ φαίνεται ταῖς)." <sup>50</sup> When Antony resisted and caused the devil to flee, he is simply called "the Black One (ὁ μέλας)" rather than one who appeared

*the Diffusion and Decay of Hellenism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948), 94n132. The suggestion of Amélineau and Bell is more likely especially in light of the frequent conflict between the Blemmyes/Beja and Makouria; William Y. Adams, *Nubia: Corridor to Africa* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 451–52; George Hatke, *Aksum and Nubia: Warfare, Commerce, and Political Fictions in Ancient Northeast Africa* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 157.

<sup>49</sup> Porcher, *Vie d'Isaac Patriarche d'Alexandrie*, 377–79.

<sup>50</sup> Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, 146. Antony responded to the devil by saying that his "heart is black." See also Aaron P. Johnson, "The Blackness of Ethiopians: Classical Ethnography and Eusebius's Commentary on the Psalms," in *Harvard Theological Review* 99, no. 2

Black. During the early seventh century, an Egyptian bishop named John of Shmun wrote a panegyric on Antony in Coptic. John's Panegyric contains no anti-Black statements such as those found in the *Life of Antony*. Mentions of Antony's combat with spiritual forces of wickedness contain no racial overtone: "He [Antony] fought with the bloodless demons (ΝΑΔΑΙΜΩΝ ΝΝΑΤCΝΟQ) with a blank mind and he cast out the one in whom is found evil, Satan. Like the Cherubim, he delighted in the contemplation of divinity as an incorporeal being (ΒΩC ΑΧΝCΑΡΞ)." <sup>51</sup> Indeed, not only is there no racialization of demons in John of Shmun's *Panegyric*, but the incorporeality of demons is emphasized.

Egyptians occupied a middle place between Black and white in the late antique Roman racial imagination. Egyptians were often called "Black." However, some Roman authors saw Egyptians as not *as* Black as "Ethiopians" or residents of Sub-Saharan Africa south of Egypt. <sup>52</sup> During the third century, Philostratus articulated a racial distinction between Egyptians and "Ethiopians":

It was a market place to which the Black People (Αιθιοπες) bring all the merchandise of the region of Black People (Αιθιοπία); and the Egyptians bring to the same field their own products of the same value, so trading what they have for what they do not have. Now the inhabitants of the frontier region are not yet black but are a similar race in terms of color, for they are not as black as the Black People, but more so than the Egyptians (οὔτω μέλανες, ἀλλὰ ὁμόφθοι τὸ χρῶμα, μελαίνονται γὰρ οἱ μὲν ἦπτον Αἰθιότων, οἱ δὲ μάλλον Αἰγυπτίων). <sup>53</sup>

Despite the Roman tendency to differentiate between Egyptians and Ethiopians, Egyptians were sometimes referred to as "Black" by Greek and Roman authors from outside of Egypt. Some of the earliest and well-known examples are the comments made about Egyptians by Herodotus: "My own conjectures were founded, first, on the fact that they (Egyptians) are black-skinned and have woolly hair, which certainly amounts to but little, since several nations are so too." <sup>54</sup> During the Roman period, scholars such as Lucian of Samosata made similar remarks about Egyptians. Commenting on an Egyptian shipbuilder, Lucian's text describes him thusly: "This fellow

(2006): 165–86, esp. 169–70; David Brakke, *Athanasius and Asceticism* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press), 229.

<sup>51</sup> John of Shmun, *Panegyric on Antony*, in *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 9, ed. G. Garitte, (Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1943), 100–34, 330–65, esp. 338.

<sup>52</sup> McCoskey, *Race*, 62.

<sup>53</sup> Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, ed. F. C. Conybeare (London: William Heinemann, 1921), 6.

<sup>54</sup> Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature*, 40.

is not only dark-skinned, but thick-lipped and too thin in the leg. He spoke in a slovenly manner, one long, continuous prattle; he spoke Greek, but his accent and intonation pointed to his native-land. His hair coiled in a plait behind shows he is not freeborn.”<sup>55</sup> This excerpt from Lucian demonstrates both the racial and linguistic factors that led to Egyptians’ characterization in Greco-Roman literature. Egyptians were included in the racial category “Black” in a distinct manner from that of “Ethiopians.”

The racial imagination of Egyptians, themselves part of the broader Greco-Roman world, was, however, deeply complex. Although Egyptians were referred to as Black, Egyptians referred to Black people in an othering manner that differentiated Black from Egyptian. The social differentiation between Greek and Coptic speakers in Egypt, however, led to a variegated appearance of anti-Black statements. Egyptian statements of anti-Blackness appeared more commonly in literature written in Greek, such as in the cases of Origen, Athanasius and the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. The Coptic and Ge’ez versions of the *Life of Daniel*, however, as well as *The Life of Apa Aphou* demonstrate a different vision of Blackness than their Greco-Egyptian counterparts. It is likely that the degree to which Egyptians themselves were racially stratified in the late antique Roman Empire and to which the Coptic language was disparaged led to a diminishment of racist rhetoric in Coptic Christian literature. The linguistic distinctions among late antique Egyptians should not be overstated; Egypt was a multilingual society, and all aspects of society were inseparably influenced by Greek and Egyptian cultural influences. However, the differences with which race, specifically Blackness, were constructed across the language groups cannot be ignored.

A final consideration should take into account how sources created by Black Christians during the late antique period deployed racial categories. Christian literature from Nubia and Ethiopia is sparse during Late Antiquity but picks up heavily during the medieval period. It is still worth mentioning, however, the few extant sources created by late antique Sub-Saharan African Christians. Because much of late antique Christian racial discourse centers on Blackness, it is fitting to center the voices of those who would have identified

<sup>55</sup> Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature*, 40–41. On Greco-Roman “othering” of Egyptians and other marginal ethnic groups of the empire, see Greg Woolf, “Becoming Roman, Staying Greek: Culture, Identity and the Civilizing Process in the Roman East,” in *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 40 (1994): 116–43, esp. 119. Woolf gives examples from classical writers such as Cicero who presented *humanitas*—the status of a community being “civilized”—as a gift that the Romans learned from the Greeks and were now called to “give” to the rest of the “barbarians.”

as Black by both modern and ancient standards. During the patristic period, Sub-Saharan African Christians deployed racial categories rarely and positively. This fact, in and of itself, is pertinent. Most of the people in the ancient world who were obsessed with Black people and who talked about Black people were not, themselves, Black people. Consider, for example, the most important written evidence of early Christians in the Ethiopian Empire centered in Axum. King Ezana famously encountered a foreign Christian named Frumentius, with whom he established Christianity as the imperial religion of the Axumite Empire. In his renowned stelae commemorating his victory over the Nubians, Ezana also indicates his Christian faith. These multilingual stelae, however, make no reference to race, nor deploy racial categories:

I Ezanas, King of the Axumites (Ἀξωμιτῶν) and Himyarites (Ὀμηριτῶν) and of Reeidan (ΡΕΕΙΔΑΝ) and the Sabeans (Σαβαειτῶν) and of Sileel (ΣΙΛΕΗΛ) and of Khasoa (ΧΑΣΩ) and the Bejas (Βουγιαειτῶν) and of Tiamo (Τιαμῶ), Bisi Alene, son of Elle-Amida, a servant of Christ ... I went out to wage war with the Noba (ΝΩΒΑ), because the Mangartha (ΜΑΝΓΑΡΘΩ) and Khasa (ΧΑΣΑ) and Atiaditai (ΑΤΙΑΔΙΤΑΙ) and Bareotai (ΒΑΡΕΩΤΑΙ) told us as they cried out: "The Noba have oppressed us. Help us, because they have oppressed us by killing us!"<sup>56</sup>

Ezana commissioned several stelae to document his victory in multiple languages, none of which identify the emperor, his kingdom, or his African enemies through the common racial categories of the ancient world.

In one of the rare examples of Sub-Saharan African "Christians" deploying racial terminology, such language does not appear in disparaging form. King Silko ruled the northern Nubian kingdom known as Nobatia in the early sixth century and commissioned an inscription documenting his victory over the neighboring Blemmyes:

I, Silko King of the Nobatians and all the Black people (Βασιλίσκος Νοθβάδων καὶ ὅλων τῶν Αἰθιοπῶν), came to Talmis and Taphis. Two times I waged war against the Blemmyes and God (θεός) gave me the victory. After the third time, I won again and I dominated their cities. I occupied them with my soldiers. The first time I conquered them, and they sought a treaty. I made peace with them, and they swore to me by their images (εἰδώλα) and I trusted their oath, as they were honest people (καλοὶ εἰσιν ἄνθρωποι). I went back to my upper regions.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Stephanie L. Black, "In the Power of God Christ': Greek Inscriptional Evidence for the Anti-Arian Theology of Ethiopia's First Christian King," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 71 (2008): 93–110, esp. 101–02.

<sup>57</sup> "Greek Triumphal Inscription of King Silko at Kalabsha," in *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum: Textual Sources for the History of the Middle Nile Region Between the Eighth Century BC*

The mention of a monotheistic God (*theos*) in a Nubian inscription prior to the period of Christianization has led some to speculate that King Silko used the term “God” in a manner similar to Christians.<sup>58</sup> It was in the mid-sixth century when the account of John of Ephesus narrated the official adoption of Christianity in Nubia.<sup>59</sup> Nubians had contact with Egyptian Christians, especially monks, since the fifth century—a notable example being the famed Coptic writer and monastic leader Shenoute of Atripe, who housed thousands of Nubians in his monastery.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, it is highly likely that Silko’s mention of “God” is evidence that Nubians of various social and political strata had been introduced to Christianity. The precise nature of the theology of imperial Nubians in the early sixth century is unclear. The appearance of the words “God” and “Ethiopians,” however, indicates a degree of contact and interchange of ideas between the Nubian and Roman Empires.

This inscription is important for a discussion on patristic Christian visions of race because it is one of the only examples of a Black, Sub-Saharan African source deploying racial terminology in a religious manner influenced by Christianity. The Silko Inscription speaks of God and of Black people. Silko identifies himself as the king of Nobatia but adds to this the claim that he is king “of all Black people (Ethiopians).” In this unique deployment of a racial category by a Black author influenced by Christian thought, the term “Black” is used in a morally and theologically neutral way. The scarceness of Black sources using racial terminology—especially from Christian contexts—limits the conclusions that can be drawn about how late antique Black Christians understood race.

What is clear is that late antique Christians talked about race in varied ways that were largely influenced by geographical, linguistic, and cultural context. When the ancient world talked about race, this usually centered around Blackness and whiteness and the value or lack thereof attached to these categories. Many late antique Christians blended Greco-Roman anti-Blackness with Christian theology. Many Coptic-speaking Egyptians and

*and the Sixth Century AD*, vol. 3, *From the First to the Sixth Century AD*, ed. Tormod Eide et al. (Bergen: University of Bergen Press, 1998), 1149. George Hatke understands “Ethiopians” here to mean Nubians; see George Hatke, *Aksum and Nubia: Warfare, Commerce, and Political Fictions in Ancient Northeast Africa* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 157. Nubians were, however, already mentioned in the inscription. The ambiguously broad way that “Ethiopian” is used across Greek literature implies a broader claim of rule that Silko is claiming among the world of Black people.

<sup>58</sup> See P. L. Shinnie, *Ancient Nubia* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 118.

<sup>59</sup> John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Robert Payne Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1860), 223–24.

<sup>60</sup> Brakke and Crislip, *Selected Discourses of Shenoute the Great*, 11.

Sub-Saharan African Christians, however, shifted this dynamic, even to the point of altering racist language in textual translation.

In modern theological and ministerial conversations about race, the tendency is to center visions of race from Western contexts. This is also true in studies of race in antiquity—that is, to focus primarily on visions of race from Greek- and Latin-speaking contexts. Willie Jennings describes the effects of whiteness in theological formation as creating “an ecclesiastical reality inside a white patriarchal domesticity, shaped by an overwhelming white masculinist presence that always aims to build a national and global future that we should all inhabit.”<sup>61</sup> Jennings’ argument that modern theological formation has been framed by the plantation dynamic is resonant with Dubois’ concept that Black people are tormented by self-image being shrouded in a “veil” of white dominance.<sup>62</sup> Not only is there a growing articulation of the need to decenter Western, or white, voices in defining race in the sectors of theology, but there are also increasing calls to centralize voices of color in the ministerial work of racial justice and reconciliation.<sup>63</sup> This brief study of race in early Christianity contributes to the work of decentering dominant voices, specifically with regard to visions of racial identity. Race, the ancient and modern contexts, is often held captive by the textual, material, and discursive imagination of the dominant Western world. This study has demonstrated that the way in which early Christians talked about race—specifically Blackness—varied across imperial, linguistic, and racial contexts. By highlighting ways that early Christians outside of the realm of the Roman Empire and the ancient definition of “white” deployed racial categories, this study calls for discourse to center visions of race that emerged from nonwhite, precolonial contexts. Racial categories, and the symbols imputed into them, are not unique only to Roman, Western, or white contexts.

<sup>61</sup> Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2020), 82.

<sup>62</sup> Charles F. Peterson, *Dubois, Fanon, Cabral: The Margins of Elite Anti-Colonial Leadership* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 14.

<sup>63</sup> Andrea Smith, *Unreconciled: From Racial Reconciliation to Racial Justice in Christian Evangelicalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 113.