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Black and Beautiful: Remembering the Black Bride

In this bouquet offered to a wonderful teacher and colleague it is fitting to turn to the traces left by the book of the Bible most associated with flora and the delights of nature. This is, of course, the Song of Songs, the sole book of the Bible that does not mention God, one that was likened to »a lock to which the key has been lost«,[1] and thought fit to be read only by mature men. The Song inspired memory work in Jews since antiquity, and as Christianity emerged, in Christians too. But this memory work was always cast through an allegorical interpretation of a text so literally erotic in tone. Hence, over the centuries, the Song of Songs attracted a great deal of commentary: rabbis engaged in *midrash*, the mode of commenting through parable, to interpret the Song of Songs, while Christian writers interpreted it allegorically in hundreds of works.

What did all these commentators seek to remember as they engaged with the Song? For Jews, the Song of Songs offered a frame for reflection on the relationship between the people of Israel and their God. Since the Song of Songs recounted in verse a love relationship of great passion, one that went through phases of yearning, encounter, alienation and return, this offered an allegorical framework for the understanding of the history of Israel in its relationship with God. For Christians, the tone was set by Origen in the mid-third century, and since then the Song was interpreted as the story of the Church as it emerged in the fullness of its truth and authority. The book also offered to Christians an occasion to contemplate on the journey of the soul to God.

In this offering to Erik Petry, I have decided to concentrate on a single verse, one that drew particular attention from Jews thinking about Jewish history, and from Christians reflecting on the Church's supersession of the Jewish tradition from which it was born. This is verse 1:5 which reads in the Hebrew Bible: »I am black and beautiful, daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon.« And it is useful to know the verse that follows: »Do not see me that I am blackish, it is the sun that has blackened me. The sons of my mother took against me; they put me to guard the vineyard, my own vineyard I did not guard.«

1 The Five Scrolls with Various Commentaries, ed. and trans. by Joseph Kafah, Jerusalem 1962, p. 26.

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Here speaks the Beloved, she who speaks most lines in the Song of Songs. It sounds as if she is pushing back against an accusation made by the daughters of Jerusalem – her peers? – a comment on her unbecoming blackness. The verse's second half offers similes – like, like: dark like the tents of the nomadic people of Kedar. Indeed, Kedar in Hebrew rests upon the triliteral root k-d-r that means darkness, and by association sadness. The beauty is reinforced by comparison to the sumptuous curtains of King Solomon's palace, Solomon being the author of the Song of Songs, as the book's title makes clear.

By the seventh century, *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* gathered a polyphony of interpretations to the Song of Songs, accumulated over the centuries. It also drew other biblical verses into the discussion of Song 1:5. The verse is associated with the founding event of the relationship of Israel and its God, in the events of Exodus and its aftermath, which constituted the people before its God. These were often occasioned by Israel's error and its repentance:

> Another interpretation of the verse: »I am very dark«: in Egypt.
> »But comely«: in Egypt.
> »I am very dark« in Egypt: »But they rebelled against me and would not hearken to me« (Ezekiel 20:8)
> »… but comely« in Egypt: with the blood of the Passover-offering and circumcision: »And when I passed by you and I saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you: »in your blood you shall live« (Ezekiel 16:6) – in the blood of circumcision.[2]

History is told here as the people of Israel travelled into the desert:

> Another interpretation of the verse: »I am black«: at the sea, they were rebellious at the sea, even the Red Sea (Psalm 106:7); » …but comely«: at the sea, »This is my God and I will be comely for him« (Exodus 15:2).
> »I am very dark«: at Marah, »and the people murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink« (Exodus 15:24)
> »But beautiful«: at Marah, »And the people murmured against Moses, saying, »What shall we drink?« (Exodus 15:24).[3]

So the verse occasioned the telling of history with a moralising tone: Israel is capable of folly, but also of repentance.

2 Shir Hashirim Rabbah, c. 35, p. 29; Song of Songs Rabbah, p. 92.
3 Shir Hashirim Rabbah, c. 35, p. 29; Song of Songs Rabbah, p. 93.

Some rabbis, as early as the third century, offered less historical and more symbolic interpretations:

R. Levi son of Haita gave three interpretations:
»I am very dark« all the days of the week,
»but comely«; on the Sabbath.
»I am very dark«: all the days of the year
»But comely« on the Day of Atonement.
»I am very dark«: among the ten tribes,
»but comely«: in the tribe of Judah and Benjamin.
»I am very dark« in this world,
»but comely« in the world to come.[4]

Note that these commentators refer to our verse as being »but comely«, rather than »and comely« as in the Hebrew bible. This is a significant change, as *but* suggests an opposition between the two terms it links: *black*, and yet despite that, *beautiful*, to put it more starkly. In fact, Jerome (d. 420), the formative translator of the bible into Latin (completed by 405), had done so before the rabbis. Jerome settled in Palestine where he acquired a good knowledge of Hebrew. He did not compose a Song of Songs commentary, but had a lasting effect on the reading of our verse. He rendered the Hebrew »Black and beautiful« as »I am Black but beautiful«, and so suggested that blackness was not compatible with beauty.[5]

How might we interpret Jerome's choice for our verse? Jerome preferred the contrastive sense of *and*, as linking phrases that are dissimilar to each other: »black« as a contrast to »beautiful«.[6] This is not a »mistranslation«, but rather a preference made by Jerome, within the field of interpretation available to him, to exploit the contrast between black and beautiful. And so, in the Christian tradition black and beautiful were drawn as opposites, as beauty/ugliness, and allegorically as sin/virtue. The difference underpinned the use of the verse for Jews and Christians both apart and in exchange.

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4 Shir Hashirim Rabbah, c. 36, p. 30; Song of Songs Rabbah, p. 94.

5 On the dissemination of the Vulgate, see H. A. G. Houghton: The Latin New Testament: A Guide to its Early History, Texts, and Manuscripts, Oxford 2016, chapter 2. Jerome cited the Song 25 times in his important Letter 22 to Eustochium, of 383-384, a manual on the ascetic life.

6 Such uses of *waw* are rare but can be found also in Genesis 4:4 and 1 Kings 2:26.

The highly structured binary treatment opportunities offered by black/beautiful were not always at the fore of the uses of our verse. For a powerful and heavily used genre, that of *piyyut*, liturgical poetry for synagogue services, also used our verse, but in a less homiletic, expository style, than the *midrashim* we have just read. This genre developed in Byzantine Palestine in the late-fifth and sixth centuries, but travelled through the Mediterranean to Italy and ultimately by 1000 to Ashkenazi communities, where they were adopted, but also inspired new versions. The *piyyutim* tended to be made of strings of biblical verses, not so much arranged in order, or interpreted for clarity, but rather combined through complex devices of rhyme, or to create acrostics, and to enhance alliteration. All these demonstrative poetic devices offered verses as acts of worship, pious offerings, rather than as linear historical narrative.

From fifth-century Galilee comes this *qedushta,* a poem for the morning service of Shabbat and festivals.[7] Each verse opens with the first word of a Song of Songs verse, in a celebration of the Torah, and so of the relationship between God and Israel. Our verse yields here the narrative of sin and repentance, and even of apocalyptic expectation, through the comments on its parts:

> I am darkened – indeed, on account of the deed of the calf which I made at Horeb
> But lovely – on account of »We will do, and we will hear!« which I uttered at Horeb [Exodus 24:7]
> Do not look upon me, for I am darkened – like a raven / For the sun has tanned me – when I bowed down to the sun and my House was destroyed [Ezekiel 8:16]

A century later, the greatest *paytan* (writer of *piyyutim*) of the first millennium, Eliezer Haqalir (*c.* 570-*c.* 640), created even more inventive confections with the verses of the Song of Songs. Our verse seems to melt away in a swirl of allusions, as in this *yotzer,* a poetic form to join the recitation of the *shema* – the avowal of faith at morning and evening prayers:

> Draw me after You! Let us run! [Song 1:4]
> He brought me to the house of wine and His banner over me was / He set His splendor over me
> I was black but lovely

7 For a translation and commentary of the whole poem, see Laura S. Lieber: Vocabulary of Desire: the Song of Songs in the Early Synagogue, Leiden 2014, p. 115-172.

He made me a guardian over vineyards / perfumed with myrrh and frankincense
Do not look upon me, that I am darkened
Refrain:
I will glorify You, O Magnificent and Radiant One
Robed, as with a garment, in light
Make light shine upon our darkness
To see (that) »In Your light we shall see light« – O Holy One![8]

What are we to make of these evocations of the Song of Songs? What sort of memory do they encode? The Song of Songs was well known to medieval Jews, as it was read out at Passover, and was much used in homiletics. So they may have identified its verses, and been comforted by its very familiarity in the course of what was complex, never clear, but impressive liturgical poetry. All this existed alongside the more structured, historical *midrashim*, that received a boost when a new accessible translation into Aramaic was created by 800 in Palestine, the *Targum*. Everything that had come before was edited into a clear and authoritative version.[9] This became a popular commentary, with its linear interpretation that avoided the multivocal diversions of *midrash*. The *Targum* was used over centuries by Jews, and by Christians too.[10]

The *Targum* imagined the history of Israel as a sequence of cycles, each characterised by rapprochement, alienation, and return. Our verse forms part of the first, formative cycle, which spans Song chapters 1-5, and tells the history from the exile in Egypt to the time of King Solomon:

When the People of the House of Israel made the Calf, their faces became as dark as [those of] the sons of Cush who dwell in the tents of Qedar, but when they returned in repentance and were forgiven, the radiance of the glory of their faces became as great as [that of] the angels, because they had made curtains for the Tabernacle, and the Shekhinah had taken up its abode among them, and [because] Moses their teacher had ascended to heaven and made peace between them and their King.[11]

8 Ibid. p. 363; on the *yotzer*, p. 390-393.
9 Philip S. Alexander: Tradition and Originality in the Targum of the Song of Songs, in: The Aramaic Bible: Targums in their Historical Context, ed. by Derek Robert, George Beattie and Martin McNamara, Sheffield 1994, p. 318-339.
10 On the wide dissemination and translation of the Targum, ibid., p. 318-319.
11 The Targum of Canticles, p. 81-82.

The Targumist moves to the next verse (»Do not look upon me«) as he turns to the nations, to those outside Israel who cast blame:

> The Assembly of Israel said before the nations: »Do not despise me, because I am darker than you, because I did what I did and bowed down to the sun and the moon. For it is the false prophets who have caused the fierceness of the Lord's anger to be visited upon me. They taught me to serve your idols and walk in your laws, but the Master of the World, who is my [own] God, have I not served, nor followed his laws, nor kept His commandments or His Torah«.[12]

Jewish scholars, like the Targumist, offered memories that strengthened the sense of identity among Jews, by building on the rabbinic tradition and also referring to polemical claims mounted against Jews. But Jewish identity was not uniform. Indeed, an alternative to rabbinical Judaism had developed since the eighth century, one that insisted on living by the letter of the God's word, the Bible, and not the traditions of exegesis and the customs recommended by rabbis – the Karaites. Among the many small communities in Palestine, Egypt, and historic Persia, was an intellectually lively one in early-tenth century Jerusalem. Its members interpreted the Song of Songs as support for their chosen way.

Yefet ben Eli (c. 914-1009) wrote a commentary on the Song of Songs in Judaeo-Arabic, the vernacular of Jews in Muslim lands, Arabic with Hebrew and Aramaic influences written in Hebrew script. He opens his commentary, by explaining that »As to this book, it concerns the Nation of Israel, its repentance and the intense longing [for the celebration] of the appointed times«.[13] Yefet only cited biblical texts, in a commentary that is highly polemical as regards mainstream Judaism. At our verse, he inverts the rabbinical reading, and sets men like himself, the »mourners of Zion«, as the human protagonists of the Song of Songs:

> Know that the first part is a whole song [that is verses 1-4], a conversation between the masters [Karaite leaders] and God. They expressed their yearning and supplication, but the scribe mentioned no answer ever received from God. […] The reason for this is that when the assembly of the masters, while being obedient to God, begs him for the realization of his promise, it receives no answer from him. The truth is

12 The Targum of Canticles, p. 82-83.

13 Joseph Alobaidi (ed. and transl.): Old Jewish Commentaries on the Song of Songs: The Commentary of Yefet ben Eli, Oxford 2010, p. 147-148, and see note 4, p. 148.

> that the realization of God's promises cannot be achieved without the participation of the [whole] nation with the masters in their obedience to God, in spite of the imperfection of such obedience.[14]

What is to be done? First, the breech with God must be healed by return to Jerusalem. Yephet explains that blackness refers to the »ugliness of the masters«, as seen by non-Jews and Israelites alike, a condition due to the blows God had inflicted on them. Yet,

> The expression … *but beautiful* designates the beauty of her obedience to God; an obedience that in natural, not accidental as it is in the case of the color. The reason for the comparison with the [black] color, *the tents of Qedar* is their staying in the kingdom of Qedar where they always lament their condition. This is mentioned in *woe to me that I sojourn in Meshek, that I live in the tents of Qedar* [Psalms 120.5] which demonstrates that they stay in *the fourth kingdom* [Daniel 2:40]… The expression … *like the curtains of Solomon's palaces* refers to Solomon's time when the Israelites were united in the obedience to God.[15]

While colour is an »accident«, an external characteristic, obedience goes deeply to the heart of the relationship with God. While the Karaite only cites the bible, he none the less uses symbolic and philosophical interpretations that leaven the text as moral lesson from history.

* * *

By the end of the first millennium our verse was used to explain the setbacks of Jewish history but also its moments of promise and consolation as moments black or beautiful. In Europe of the eleventh century, new intellectual and devotional frames were emerging, and within them the relationship between Judaism and Christianity was re-examined in new genres and with great intensity. The position of Jews was regulated by increasingly ambitious rulers and their administrations, and by a church able now to use more centralised tools of law and representation.

All this meant that several projects of collection and commentary were under way. In Champagne, the most authoritative commentary on Hebrew scripture was being created by Rabbi Shlomo s. Isaac, Rashi (*c.* 1040-13 July 1105). A little later, from the Christian cathedral schools of northern Europe emerged the collection of biblical commentary, the *Glossa ordinaria*. These formed materials for religious education, for the

14 Old Jewish Commentaries on the Song of Songs, p. 156-157.
15 Ibid., p. 158-159.

composition of sermons, for poetry and devotional writings, it was formative cultural heritage for Jews and Christians.

Rashi synthesised the whole millennium of exegesis, and located it in Northern Europe, for Jews settled and local, yet aware of their state of exile. Rashi's commentary on the Song was composed in his prime (*c.* 1100) and was opened with a preface.[16] He began his treatment of our verse with the literal sense:

> *I am black but comely, etc*. You, my friends, let me not be light in your eyes. Even if my husband has left me because of my blackness, for I am black because of the tanning of the sun, but I am comely with the shape of beautiful limbs. Though I am black like the tents of Keidar, which are blackened because of the rains, for they are always spread out in the wilderness, I am easily cleansed to become like the curtains of Shlomo [Solomon].[17]

The wife's black body may be considered ugly, but that »ugliness« could be washed away to secure her husband's love. Rashi's allegorical explanation saw in blackness a moral defect, and this too could fade away, like tanned skin:

> The allegory is: The congregation of Yisroel [Israel] says to the nations, »I am black in my deeds [i. e., sins], but I am comely by virtue of the deeds of my ancestors, and even some of my deeds are comely. If I bear the iniquity of the [golden] calf, according to Targum the faces of the Bnei Yisroel actually turned black like the skin of the Cushite, when they sinned with the golden calf. After they repented the blackness went away. I can offset it with the merit of the acceptance of the Torah«.[18]

Rashi's moral optimism, looked to a time beyond exile, when the nations – »daughters of Jerusalem« – will make their way to that city.[19]

Rashi's influence was vast, across Ashkenaz and beyond, and his legacy was perpetuated by the dynasty he created. His grandson Rabbi Samuel

16 Kamin: Rashi's Exegetical Categorization, p. 77-84.

17 Mikra'ot Gedolot Haketer: the Five Scrolls, ed. by Menachem Cohen, Ramat Gan 2012, p. 6.

18 Ibid., p. 6.

19 On Rashi's historic approach, see Ivan G. Marcus: Rashi's Historitography in the Introductions to his Bible Commentaries, in: Revue des études juives 157 1998, p. 47-55; on his interpretative method, see Benjamin J. Gelles: Peshat and Derash in the Exegesis of Rashi, Leiden 1981, and Avraham Grossman: Rashi, trans. by Joel Linsider, Oxford 2012, p. 111-132.

ben Meir (*c.* 1085-*c.* 1058) – known as the Rashbam – wrote a prologue to his commentary on the Song of Songs. He encouraged his expected reader to see in the Song of Songs the words of a young woman yearning for her lover: »This is what my lover said to me and this is what I answered him«[20]. The Song is an allegory arising from the literal sense. He illuminated the allegorical meaning while remaining to the literal sense. He also used many French words, to ease his readers' experience.

Despite Rashi's prominence there was continued innovation, like that in an anonymous commentator from northern France, who produced late in the twelfth century *The Way of the Lovers* (*Derekh Hahoshkim*). In this reading of our verse there is narrative clarity and emotional intensity. He even clearly states that blackness is »ugly«:

> *I am black and beautiful, o daughters of Jerusalem.* Now she speaks to her friends, the daughters of Jerusalem, who scorn and mock her, and say that her lover distanced himself from her because she is ugly and black, as the next verse says, »Do not scorn me because I am dark« and therefore she says to them, if I am black, this is not a great ugliness, because I am beautiful and graceful, *avenant* in French, with shapely limbs, and well-contoured, like the form of a palace, and if I am now dark from the sun like the tents of Kedar that are burnt and darkened in the sun and the rains, in the end I will become white like the curtains of Solomon which are spread over his bed, which are of silk or of white linen.[21]

The bride's body is graceful, well-proportioned like a palace; once her body is cleaned it would be as white as Solomon's palatial hangings. Like the Rashbam, this author differentiates between »real« and »acquired« blackness, and goes on to explain how the Beloved came to be black:

20 On the introduction, see Sara Japhet: Two Introductions by Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam) to the Song of Songs and Lamentations, in: Transforming Relations. Essays on Jews and Christians throughout History in Honor of Michael A. Signer, ed. by Franklin T. Harkins, Notre Dame (IN) 2010, p. 205-223; at p. 206-207. For more on the Hebrew commentary tradition in northern France and its affinities to Old French poetry, see Hanna Liss: The Commentary on the Song of Songs Attributed to Shmuel ben Meir (Rashbam), in: MJS-online 12007, p. 1-27, and Marc Kiwitt: Functions and Sources of Vernacular Glosses in Hebrew-French Biblical Glossaries, in: From Theodulf to Rashi and Beyond: Texts, Techniques, and Transfer in Western European Exegesis (800-1100), ed. by Johannes Heil and Sumi Shimahara, Leiden 2022, p. 100-118.

21 The Way of Lovers: The Oxford Anonymous Commentary on the Song of Songs (Bodleian Library, MS Opp. 625), ed. and trans. by Sarah Japhet and Barry Dov Walfish, Leiden 2017 (Commentaria 8), p. 138-139.

> *My mother's sons were angry with me*. They were angry with me and made me guard the vineyards against my will, for I have never guarded my own vineyard because I was respected and stayed inside and they forced me to guard their vineyard. And because I was not accustomed to go out in the sun, I became darkened.[22]

The Beloved regretted the work in the vineyard, and would have preferred being a shepherd »like the daughters of Midian and the daughters of Laban«.

New ideas were infusing the traditions of commentary and composition around our verse. At the same time, prompted by the rise of polemical genres as well as polemical encounters – staged or casual – our verse was located in new settings, too. New genres embedded arose from the urban environments where Jews and Christians lived as neighbours, and in mutual observation. *The Old Book of Contestation/Victory* (*Sefer Nizahon Yashan)*, was composed in Germany in the second half of the thirteenth century, and it offers rebuttals of Christian taunts based on biblical verses. The verses are ordered by biblical book, and at our verse a claim attributed to the »heretics« *(minim)* – that is Christians – that Jews were dark and ugly, while they – Christians – are light and beautiful:

> The heretics ask: Why are most Gentiles fair-skinned and handsome while most Jews are dark and ugly? Answer them that this is similar to a fruit; when it begins to grow it is white but when it ripens it becomes black, as is the case with sloes and plums. On the other hand, any fruit which is red at the beginning becomes lighter as it ripens, as is the case with apples and apricots. This, then, is testimony that Jews are pure of menstrual blood so that there is no initial redness. Gentiles, however, are not careful about menstruant women and have sexual relations during menstruation; thus, there is redness at the outset, and so the fruit that comes out, i. e., the children, are light…[23]

The theme of skin colour and beauty versus ugliness is also discussed in the late-thirteenth century French polemical text *The Book of Joseph the Zealot* (*Sefer Yosef ha-Mekaneh*). Its author, Joseph son of Nathan the Official, was of a family of agents – officials – of the Archbishop of

22 The Way of Lovers, p. 141.

23 The Jewish Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: a Critical Edition of the Nizzahon, ed. and trans. by David Berger, Philadelphia (PA) 1979, no. 238, p. 224. On the use of *minim*, see Grossman: Rashi (fn 19), p. 128-130.

Sens.[24] His teacher, R. Yehiel of Paris, represented the Jewish side in the 1240 Paris Talmud Trial, and Joseph recorded the Hebrew account. Josef deals with the subject-matter while citing Malakhi 2:9: »Therefore have I also made you contemptible and base before all the people, according as ye have not kept my ways, but have been partial in the law«. He reports an exchange between his own father and a convert:

> One convert said to Rabbi Nathan: »You are uglier than any person on earth. And our people are very beautiful«.
> He answered him: »The schwiski (*schwetschken)* which they call prunes (*prunels*) that grow in bushes. What flower do they have?«.
> He said to him: »White«.
> »And the flower of the apple, what is it?«.
> He said to him: »Red«.
> He said to him: »So we are of a clean and white seed and so our faces are dark, and you are from a red seed due to the impurity of menstruation (*nidot)* and so you appear yellow and red. And the reason is: because we are in exile, as it says in the Song of Songs: »Do not see me that I am dark, blackened by the sun, the sons of my mother turned against me, but when I guarded my vineyard I was very beautiful, as it says and thy renown went forth among the heathen for thy beauty« (Ezekiel 16:14).[25]

The Song of Songs was love poetry influenced by ancient Assyrian and Egyptian traditions, but it was treated by the rabbis as allegorical based on a sound literal understanding. It offered verses for *piyyut* and for homiletic exposition. Black/Beautiful had a sufficient amount of implied difference – darkness denoting exposure to the elements, less leisure for bodily care – to be used in the making of moral distinctions. In the last reading we saw something of racialisation, as body and ritual – that of purification following the monthly menstruation – combined to create a pleasing or displeasing appearance. Some Christians saw Jews as ugly, and Jews retorted by speaking of their own ritual purity.

This prompts me to bring into our discussion a different perspective, so as to appreciate how other racialised people responded to our verse. I think here of the poetry of African American writers, who sought to

24 R. Joseph b. R. Nathan Official: Sepher Joseph Hamekaneh, ed. by Judah Rosenthal, Jerusalem 1970 [Hebr.], p. 15-20.

25 R. Nathan Official: Sepher Joseph Hamekaneh, no. 104, p. 95. On this see also, Alexandra Cuffel: Gendering Disgust in Medieval Religious Polemic, Notre Dame (IN) 2007, p. 191-192.

subvert the verse's implication that black/beautiful were opposites. Countee Cullen (1903-1946) grew up in the household of New York's foremost African American preacher, pastor of Harlem's largest church, the Salem Methodist Episcopal Church.[26] In 1927 Cullen assembled the collection *Caroling Dusk: An Anthology of Verse by Negro Poets*.[27] Several poems in this collection echo the Song of Songs, and our verse in particular. The poem »The Dark Brother«, by Lewis Alexander (1898-1945), has a man speak the words of the Song:

»Lo, I am black but I am comely too,
Black as the night, black as the deep dark caves.
I am the scion of a race of slaves
Who helped to build a nation strong that you
and I may stand within the world's full view …«

Black and comely are here combined, with an emphasis caused by »too«. Alexander ends this short poem, again with a gesture to the Song, and its poems of love: »…Though I am black my heart my heart through love is pure, / And you through love my blackness shall endure.«[28]

An echo of our verse resounds in *I, Too* by Langston Hughes (1902-1967), a poem included in Cullen's anthology:

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.
Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
»Eat in the kitchen,«
Then.

26 Charles Molesworth: And Bid Him Sing. A Biography of Countée Cullen, Chicago 2012, on his adoption into Reverend Cullen's household, p. 7-35, esp. p. 12-15.

27 Countee Cullen (ed.): Caroling Dusk. An Anthology of Verse by Negro Poets, New York and London 1927.

28 Ibid., p. 124-125.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed –

I, too, am America.[29]

Here is no bride but a »dark brother«, derided – like the bride – yet sure in his beauty, even if others are late to recognise it.

Remarkable in the fullness of its engagement with our verse is Cullen's own »Black Majesty«, published in his collection *The Black Christ* of 1929. »Black Majesty« celebrates the example of the leaders of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), and opens with a hint to »Black *but* beautiful«, with his own *albeit* [my italics below].

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

Cullen uses the story of the three magi, to offer models for future black men, black leaders.[30] He moves on to a rousing call for optimism: those ghosts – those dead men – have left a message, encoded in his version of our verse. Cullen offers the black beloved of the Song of Songs in one of her traditional guises – since Origen's interpretation in the third century – as an African woman, the Queen of Sheba:

29 Ibid., p. 145-146.

30 On Balthazar, the Black magus, see Kristen Collins, Bryan C. Keene (ed.): Balthazar. A Black African King in Medieval and Renaissance Art, Los Angeles (CA) 2023. Indeed, in *Caroling Dusk*, Cullen included Frank Horne's poem »Nigger. A Chant for Children«, where a »little black boy« is offered a series of heroic Black role models, and among them, »Toussant,…Toussant/ Made the French flee/ Fought like a demon/ Set his people free«, Cullen, Caroling Dusk (fn 27), p. 121. On Cullen's engagement with race, see Nathan Irvin Huggins: Harlem Renaissance, New York 1971, p. 69-71, 205-215; »He obviously decided to reach into the storehouses of homiletic Christian symbols and axioms in order to speak resoundingly of the experience of all African Americans«, Molesworth: And Bid Him Sing, p. 147.

Dark gutter-snipe, black sprawler-in-the-mud,
A thing men did a man may do again.
What answer filters through your sluggish blood
To these dark ghosts who knew so bright a reign?
»Lo, I am dark, *but* comely,« Sheba sings.
»And we were black,« three shades reply, »*but* kings.«[31]

The Bride's affirmation in our verse was reborn in the message of the three dead men: they were black, *but* kings, leaders of Haiti, for a while. However unlikely it may seem judging by the weight of history, black men *could* be kings, and blackness *could* be seen as beautiful.

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Poetry carries memory well. Its rhythms capture knowledge and emotion into a pleasing, enduring whole. But rich verses often draw interpretations that were programmatic, didactic, even ideological in design. So it was in the love poetry that became part of the Hebrew Bible, and subsequently of Christian scripture: the Song of Songs. One of its verses – with its suggestive invocation of blackness and beauty – was particularly suited to commentary and creative uses. The opposing qualities were made to mean the duality of a people's comportment: the desire to please God and the failure to adhere to the highest standards of faith and ethics. Hence the Song of Song's verse 1:5 was read by Jews as a memory of cycles of transgression and penance in a relationship that was never severed. Medieval interpreters like Rashi offered solace for a people understood as living in exile of sorts.

It is also interesting to note that modern African-American poets saw in the verse an offence, a challenge, which they countered with creative vigour. Yet Countee Cullen enhanced the historical memory of a rebellion against slavery in his use of the verse. Poetry appears here to offer solace, hope and sites for memorial practices.

31 The poem was published in: Black Christ and Other Poems, New York 1929, p. 64. See the poem in: My Soul's High Song. The Collected Writings of Countee Cullen, Voice of the Harlem Renaissance, ed. by Gerald Lyn Early, New York 1991, p. 200-201, On Black Christ and other Poems, see Molesworth, And Bid Him Sing (fn 26), p. 144-151.