

MISTRANSLATION IN CANT 1:5

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The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible has the Shulammitte woman saying at Cant 1:5, "I am black and beautiful." This is a conscious departure from the wording of the old Revised Standard Version (RSV): "I am very dark, but comely." Representatives of the NRSV translation committee have indicated in both written and spoken forms that the translators made the change to avoid any insinuation that blackness and beauty are to be regarded as necessarily contradictory.¹ However, the committee has mistakenly allowed modern American racial conflicts to skew the rendering of this ancient Israelite religious text.

The NRSV translators made their first mistake in implying that the young lady speaking was from the Negroid race. On average, American readers—to whom this new Scriptural version is principally directed—will be misled by the term "black" to think that she was Black, referred to a person, customarily carries that connotation, while the Hebrew word does not.

One argument in favor of translating the adjective in v. 5 as "dark" is that the basic significance of the word is not limited to "black." The root *šhr* evidently handles the color range of black, gray, and brown. There are, after all, no other words in biblical Hebrew for brown and gray (except perhaps *šēbāh* for "gray").² Even the NRSV itself recognizes the breadth of meaning for *šhr* by rendering it as "dark" in the succeeding verse.

¹See, e.g., Bruce M. Metzger, Robert C. Dentan, and Walter Harrelson, *The Making of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 43. Similar remarks have been expressed at the annual New Revised Standard Version Bible Breakfast, such as the one held in San Francisco on November 21, 1992, and the one in Chicago on November 19, 1994.

²Athalya Brenner, *Colour Terms in the Old Testament*, JSOT Supplement Series, vol. 21 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1982), 99.

Another argument favoring "dark" over "black" in v. 5 is that v. 6 plainly declares that the young woman's complexion resulted from exposure to the sun. Her brothers forced her to tend vineyards, where the scorching sun tanned her skin. Thus, she was dark-skinned but not black—a translation which carries inaccurate connotations of race.³

The NRSV translators made their second mistake in not recognizing that the woman was indeed apologizing for her appearance. This failure arose at least in part due to their first mistake. Once they called the Shulammitte "black," which conjured up the image of a person from the Negroid race, the translators could not very well depict the woman as claiming beauty in spite of her skin color. Yet, the NRSV should read "but" instead of "and" in v. 5.

On behalf of "but" (suggesting an apology) rather than "and" is the fact that in v. 6 the young woman requested those around her to stop looking at her because of her dark complexion.⁴ More importantly, she lamented in the same verse that she had not been able to protect her complexion from the sun while working outside, by order of her angry brothers.

In ancient Israel fair skin seems to have represented the desired complexion for people. Lam 4:7 so paints the looks of (well-born) folks in Jerusalem before its siege and sack. Cant 5:10 describes the man of the poem likewise—in contrast with the woman. Normally, then, the admired ideal of beauty and health included a light hue of skin. This explains why the Shulammitte needed at all to justify her dark coloration by telling what her siblings had done to her.⁵

Although the NRSV is generally a superb translation, at this juncture the translators have seemingly succumbed to tampering with the message of Scripture. Let us hope that in future editions the NRSV will eliminate the incorporation of a social problem from the twentieth century A.D. into a text from the first millennium B.C.

³John G. Snaith supplies a handy summary of this and other matters related to the passage under discussion (*The Song of Songs*, New Century Bible Commentary [London: Marshall Pickering, 1993], 17-19).

⁴Contrary to the opinion of J. Cheryl Exum, the context prohibits us from regarding the opening 'al as asseverative instead of negative—a proposal which would make the woman, in fact, extend a direct invitation for the others to look ("Asseverative 'al in Canticles 1,6?" *Bib* 62 [1981]: 417-419).

⁵Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 101.