Claremont Colleges
Scholarship @ Claremont

CGU Faculty Publications and Research | CGU Faculty Scholarship

1-1-1992

# Ascetic Behavior and Color-ful Language: Stories About Ethiopian Moses

Vincent L. Wimbush
*Claremont Graduate University*

Recommended Citation
Wimbush, Vincent L. 1992. "Ascetic Behavior and Color-ful Language : Stories about Ethiopian Moses." Semeia no. 58: 81-92. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed August 3, 2011).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the CGU Faculty Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in CGU Faculty Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

# ASCETIC BEHAVIOR AND COLOR-FUL LANGUAGE: STORIES ABOUT ETHIOPIAN MOSES

*Vincent L. Wimbush*
*Union Theological Seminary*
*New York City*

## ABSTRACT

The characterization of the fouth–century Black (Ethiopian) monk named Moses in late ancient Christian hagiographic narratives opens wide a window not only onto particular understandings of, and propaganda about, ascetic piety and religious orientations to the world, but also ancient (non-black) Christian sensitivies to racial/color differences. Four ancient sources—Palladius' *Lausiac History*, Sozomen's *Ecclesiastical History*, the anonymous *Apophthegmata Patrum*, and *Acta Sanctorum*—are analyzed on the basis of a recent translation.

## *I*

Given the nature of their sources, and given the influence and challenges from other fields and disciplines, the fields of ancient studies (including the study of ancient Christianity) are now more than ever forced to question the notion of texts as *simple* sources for historical-reconstructive and historical-interpretive purposes. They are being challenged to engage seriously the problems inherent in relating the study of history and rhetoric, history and textuality, history and the critical study of literature, history and discursive strategies. It seems most useful and appropriate at the outset, rather than attempt to make general comments about how the field of ancient Christianity should draw the lines in such matters, to turn attention to particular motifs and issues in a particular complex of ancient Christian texts that can help focus and problematize the issues so as to provide suggestions for further work.

## *II*

I should like to draw attention to two motifs—racial-color differences and ascetic piety; how the former functions as part of the discursive strategies for the valuation and commendation of the latter in a particular complex of ancient Christian texts; what this function suggests first and foremost about the perspectives and orientations of the writers and collec-

tors of such texts, and what these perspectives and orientations might reveal about the presence and influence of Black African peoples in ancient Christian literature. My discussion is (by design at this point in my own thinking and research) introductory, exploratory and schematic.

In the first paragraph of her essay entitled "Virginity as Metaphor: Women and the Rhetoric of Early Christianity," Averil Cameron makes the following provocative statement about the limited perspectival character of the extant ancient Christian literature and its implications as such for scholarship, including, but not limited to, the study of the presence and influence of women in early Christianity:

> The rhetoric of the early church was a *male* rhetoric, and it is only recently that readings of it have not also been *male* readings. Thus the entire debate about the "position of women in the early church" has taken place, and still must take place, within a framework of *male* textuality (Cameron:184; emphases mine).

In this passage and in subsequent remarks in the same essay Cameron directly addresses the problem of the complex relationship between history and (the rhetoric of the) text by arguing that the most pressing intellectual challenge—even if ultimately the primary concern is for historical-reconstructive work, especially with a view to "setting the record straight" about the role of women in early Christianity—is an examination of the "misogynistic" *rhetoric* of ancient Christian texts.

> "The question of how women really fared in the early Christian world is a second-order question, to be approached only after [examination of] the rhetoric of texts" (185).

Although there are some differences in approaches and nuances, the issue of the Black presence and influence in biblical antiquity, including Near Eastern, Greco-Roman and Christian antiquity, has been raised from a methodological perspective similar to the one regarding the role of women in ancient Christianity. Both issues, for example, obviously arise from those who have been defined as more or less on the margins of established scholarship. There have been numerous critical and not so critical revisionist histories designed to isolate the African influences upon western civilization, including early Christianity (Bernal). Given the history of racism in the West, including western scholarship, and Christianity as part of its ideological arsenal, there should be little wonder that more than the establishment of the "facts" is and has been at stake in debate about the African presence and influences in biblical traditions. Nevertheless, most critical scholars—African, African American and others—will acknowledge the complexity and problematic nature of the is-

sue, especially the extent to which we are dependent upon *literary* sources.

Since Christianity has almost from the beginning been a literary phenomenon, we are quite dependent upon literary sources for answers to most of our basic questions about it. This includes the question about the Black African presence and influence in ancient Christianity, as well as fundamental questions about Christian self-definitions and orientations. For such questions examination of different rhetorical strategies may provide a helpful heuristic key and a most useful beginning.

This essay cannot possibly explore all of the rhetorical strategies that may be discernible in early Christian literature; it is designed only to be a springboard for further research and discussion by focusing upon one example of a discursive strategy that involves the interfacing of the *rhetoric* of racial-color differences and the *rhetoric* of ascetic piety. Such a strategy as part of an effort to commend ascetic piety is likely not only to contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon of asceticism in Christian antiquity, it might also provide a clearer understanding of the methodological challenges involved in an effort to understand among other topics the Black presence and influence in early Christianity. This is, at any rate, the aim of the present essay. Since ascetic behavior can with justification be viewed as reflective of specific types of orientations to and understandings of the world and of the self in the world, literary strategies that attempt to persuade readers of the value of ascetic behaviors very much need to be understood. Such a strategy that is found to make use of the rhetoric of, and draw upon reactions to, racial-color differences represents a fascinating find, begging serious consideration.

## *III*

The are very few actual references to Black peoples in ancient Christian texts. Where there are such references they are often pregnant with symbolism, often to emphasize, at the expense of credulity, the universality of Christian salvation (cf. e.g. Acts 8:26–40; Snowden; Courtes). Such few references "work" the symbolism far too much to be accepted as unproblematized recording of social (viz. interracial) dynamic and history.

References in Greek and Roman literature to the color "black" without direct connection to Black people are much more numerous. These references also are used symbolically. Such symbolism is in fact so pervasive that it makes much more complex the matter of the Black presence and influence in antiquity, including Christian antiquity. The situation certainly warrants the serious study of the *language* of color differences, no matter whether the goal be to clarify the "historical record" regarding

racial diversity, or to understand more about aspects of ancient sensibilities and mentalities

Augustine's statements about color differences serve as an example of the popular ancient Christian symbolization and spiritualization of color

> Ask yourself what sort of servant you really value You may have a servant who is handsome, tall, and finely built, but a thief, a rogue and a swindler, and you may have another who is dwarfish, ill-featured, and foul-skinned [*colore tetro*], but trustworthy, thrifty, and steady Now which of these two, I ask you, do you really value? If you judge by the eyes in your head, the one who is handsome but dishonest wins if by the eyes of your heart, the one who is ugly but reliable (Augustine, Second Discourse on Psalm 33 15, *Ennar rationes in Psalmos*, cited by Frost 2)

And in an obvious reflection upon the provocative pre-Pauline primitive Christian theme struck by the apostle Paul in Galatians 3 28 (Meeks 88, 155), to the effect that old human types and divisions—"Jew and Gentile," "Greek and barbarian," "slave and free," "male and female"—are "put off" in the ritual of baptism

> whoever is born anywhere as a human being, that is, as a rational mortal creature, however strange he may appear to our senses in bodily form or color or motion or utterance, in any faculty, part or quality of his nature whatsoever, let no true believer have any doubt that such an individual is descended from the one who was first created (*de civitate Dei* 16 8, cited by Frost 2)

Such sentiments were part of and need to be understood in light of the ancient aristocratic Greek and Greco-Roman and Christian ethos that tended toward the relativizing, even rejection, of (accidental) worldly goods, attributes, situations and circumstances, in light of increased emphasis on the cultivation of the self, the mind (*nous*) and the spiritual (*pneumatika*) With beginnings among aristocratic intellectuals in the Greek classical period, such an ethos emphasized the absolute superiority of the intellectual and spiritual over all other pursuits and interests, all worldly situations and circumstances The (socio-economic-political) consequences of such intellectualizing and spiritualizing sentiments and interpretations for many in ancient societies was often the maintenance of the status quo—to the clear advantage of aristocrats, the disadvantage of all others prone to receive the pronouncements of elites as truth

The example of slavery is the clearest and most dramatic example from history of the effects of the aristocratic spiritualizing and intellectualizing ethos and its rhetoric Although the topos did not begin with him, Aristotle is probably the most influential figure from the Greek classical period in the debate about "natural slavery," whether some human beings—notably non-Greeks, *barbaroi*—are slaves by nature (de Ste

Croix:417 n. 17). I agree with de Ste. Croix (417) that statements made by Aristotle establish in a powerful way the intellectualist, spiritualizing ethos that led to the socio-economic-political "non-reality" of slavery. It is a fateful argument that, along with others, provides ideological basis for the relativizing of the world in the Hellenistic and late antique periods, and helps account for the ancient Christian adoption of such an ethos (409–52).

> . . . [H]e is by nature a slave who is capable of belonging to another (and that is why he does so belong), and who participates in reason [*logou*] so far as to apprehend it but not to possess it. . . . [T]here exist certain persons who are essentially slaves everywhere and certain others who are so nowhere. And the same applies also about nobility: our nobles consider themselves noble not only in their own country but everywhere, but they think that barbarian noblemen are only noble in their own country—which implies that there are two kinds of nobility and of freedom, one absolute and the other relative . . . in so speaking they make nothing but virtue and vice the distinction between slave and free, the noble and the base-born. . . . [I]n some instances it is not the case that one set are slaves and the other freemen by nature; and also that in some instances such a distinction does exist, when slavery for the one and mastership for the other are advantageous, and it is just and proper for the one party to be governed and for the other to govern by the form of government for which they are by nature fitted . . . (*Pol.* I.2.13, 18–19).

The ancient Christian sources that draw directly upon the intellectualist and spiritualizing ethos and in which the more heuristically fruitful references to color differences are found—for the sake of addressing both historical and literary questions—are among different types of narrative materials. Narrative, part of the "literature of edification" of ancient Christianity, has been argued to be a most appropriate and powerful propaganda tool for ascetic piety (Harpham: 67f.). It is among a certain cluster of narrative forms—historical, hortatory, panegyric writings—where we find an interesting combination of intellectualist color symbolism, through the eulogistic characterization of a Black person, and the commendation of a type of ascetic piety. This total combination is so rare for the literature of antiquity in general that it begs attention. Moreover, because my interest has for some time encompassed both ascetic piety of the type in evidence here and the Black presence and influence in early Christianity as separate issues, the literature that allows both to be taken up cannot possibly be ignored.

## *IV*

Ethiopian Moses, or Moses the Black, is characterized as an ideal monk in four ancient sources—Palladius' *Lausiac History* (c. 420); Sozomen's *Ecclesiastical History* (c. 443–448); the anonymous *Apophthegmata*

*Patrum* (late 6th century); and *Acta Sanctorum* (10th century).[1] In many ways these represent typical hagiographic texts from ancient Christianity. Kathleen Wicker's examination of the sources has recently led her to conclude that the Moses characterization functioned variously to commend the ascetic lifestyle as the superior lifestyle (Palladius, Sozomen), to instruct and edify those who have accepted the monastic life (*Apoph. Patr.*), and to provide a model of monastic perfection (*Acta Sanc.*) (Wicker:333).

Wicker also argues that these sources "reflect" perceptions of racial-color differences in antiquity. In their "histories" addressed to literate audiences far away from Africa, Palladius and Sozomen, Wicker suggests, seemed unconcerned about the issue of Moses' color. Moses is simply noted as an "Ethiopian," a Black African. The *Apoph. Patr.* and *Act. Sanct.*, because they contain explicit valuations based on Moses' color, are said to reflect contemporary attitudes about racial-color differences in Egypt and throughout the Greco-Roman world (334).

Although I would make the same basic divisions among the four text-sources, I would nuance the arguments so as to make it clear that all of the texts more or less reflect the same (white or non-black) perspective regarding racial-color differences (especially, the color, black). The difference between the first category of (seemingly benign) texts and the second category of (more explicitly prejudiced) texts lies only in *literary* strategy. All of the texts reflect a view of Moses *on account of his color* as "other," as alien, as polar opposite. This perspective is consistent with classical and post-classical references to Black Africans (Cortes). *Apart from his color there is no reason for the stories, first oral, then written, about Moses.* His heroic ascetic piety was not singular. His ascetic piety provided such a perfect counterpoint (He's too good to be true!) to (the white, non-black view of) his color that it would normally—given the usual logic and scepticism of historical and literary criticism—cast great doubt about the historicity of Moses. The point should be, however, that differences between the text-sources about him should be seen as differences in the sophistication of literary strategy, not in real attitudes about color differences. The Moses story itself, in whatever version, was not about a pious man who happened to be Black; it was about a *Black* man whose blackness alone was important. The latter served as a symbol of all forms of lower, imperfect existence that were other than, and in *polar opposition* to, the the ideal religious life, *viz.* the ascetic life.

Palladius's initial identification of Moses as "Ethiopian by birth," and "black," functioned to explain, and provide dramatic narrative effect for, further characterization of him as recalcitrant slave, robber and murderer. The apologetic nature of the "history" is clearly set forth: "I am obliged," says Palladius, "to tell about his wicked behavior in order to demonstrate

the excellence of his conversion." Moses' "wicked behavior" is all the more onerous and dramatic because he is black, the "other," the assumed polar opposite of the visualized good. The conversion of such a man was thought to be good drama, enough to sell the reader on the ascetic life.

According to Sozomen's account, which was clearly dependent upon Palladius's account, "Moses the Ethiopian" was before conversion a man of ill repute. So disreputable was he considered that it was said that "no one else ever made such a change from evil to excellence," that is, to "the height of monastic philosophy." That the pre-conversion Moses could be considered to have been so radically and uniquely notorious can be understood not only as propaganda for the ascetic lifestyle, but also a sharing of strong assumptions and prejudices regarding Ethiopians between writer and intended audience. Direct prejudicial statements were not, therefore, required for the story; only the mention of Moses as Ethiopian, with the underlying assumption that something (viz., being black) about being Ethiopian made one different was required.

The very late (tenth century) and anonymous writing entitled "The Life of Moses The Ethiopian" obviously drew from earlier sources, and reflected the ascetic (viz. monastic) traditions and values of the time. (330 n 9). Its importance for us lies in its rather clear reflection of the ancient well-springs and western historical trajectory of the assumption that being Ethiopian and Black represented otherness, foreignness, from the perspective of non-blacks.

The efforts to include Ethiopian Moses in the economy of salvation are much too nuanced and clever for comfort (*pace* Snowden:169–95; cf. Wicker:334 n. 37). Moses as an Ethiopian is seen as representative of a far distant and strange people, in the same way that Scythians are seen as a far distant people in the opposite direction.

> "The kingdom of God has not been closed to slaves or evildoers, but they are within it who, as is fitting, have made use of repentance and prefer to live righteously and according to God. And it has by no means been closed to Scythians or Ethiopians." (*Acta Sanct.* 1; Wicker:344)

The contrasting of Moses' skin color and slave status with his ascetic piety is consistent and striking: "He . . . who had a black-skinned body, acquired a soul more brilliant than the rays of the sun." He was said to be "vulgar and worthless," "wayward and ignorant" (*Act. Sanct.* 2; Wicker: 344). But after having been touched by "divine grace," and having joined the ascetic life, he became "pitiful in appearance, abject in manner, contrite in spirit, totally restrained . . ." (*Act. Sanct.* 4; Wicker: 345). At first sight of him the other monks, all of whom we must assume to be non-black, were afraid. But the fervency of his contrition and piety matched or

countered the "blackness" of his sins, symbolized by his skin color. This as the moral of the story is made unmistakably clear:

> As infamous as he was for evil, so greatly did he shine as an expert in perfection. . . . Moses was indeed a great monk, and was talked about by everyone. The desert, the mountains, the city, and all the surrounding areas resounded with Moses, Moses, Moses. And here it seems to me that Moses alone has changed his appearance, even though an Ethiopian is never completely washed clean. For indeed, he cleansed his soul, if not his body, with the hyssop of repentance, and he made it more brilliant than the sparkling suns . . . (*Act. Sanct.* 6; Wicker: 346).

The anonymous sixth-century alphabetical collection of the *Apoph. Patr.* is in many ways the most important of the sources about Moses. Intended for the edification of monks, it includes the most powerful connection between color symbolism and ascetic piety. The popular prejudice against Ethiopians is made clear in the contemptuous question "Why has this Ethiopian come into our midst?" Such a question is used by the editor to point to and counterpose the rigor and constancy of the ascetic piety of the Black man called Moses. The more he is hassled by the other (white) monks, the more exemplary he becomes as an ascetic: "I was troubled but I did not say anything" (*Apoph. Patr.* 3; Wicker: 339).

Indication of the view of blackness and of Moses as Black man who is also convert and fellow monk and cleric can be found in the statement the archbishop is made to speak upon laying the tunic upon Moses: "Behold, you have become completely white, Father Moses." In the response Moses is made to give,—"Indeed, the outside, O Lord Father; would that the inside were also white,"—the point that the ascetic life signifies radical transformation or change of identity is made most dramatically through the employment of color symbolism and color contrast.

More officially sanctioned hassling of Moses on account of his racial and color difference ensues and Moses again accepts such treatment with humility characteristic of the ascetic: "Rightly have they treated you, ash skin, black one. As you are not a man, why should you come among men?" (*Apoph. Patr.* 45; Wicker: 340). Because Moses was a Black man—from the perspective of the editor and audience assumed to be odd, even to be held in contempt—the point of the story is to emphasize how very pious he was as an ascetic. As pious an ascetic as he was considered foreign and different. And his foreignness was on account of his skin color.

## *V.*
## *Summary Conclusions*

The color symbolism in the stories told, transmitted and written about Moses point to provocative questions and suggestions to be pursued regarding at least two important issues—(1) the presence and views of Blacks in Christian antiquity from the perspective of non-Blacks; and (2) the motives and self-understandings reflected in certain forms of ascetic behavior among non-Blacks.

The texts about Moses suggest that the ancient Christians followed a widespread trend among Greeks and Romans with respect to color symbolism (Courtes; Snowden; Steidle). The texts at first glance suggest that Black peoples in particular were included within the circle of the elect without problem. On more careful reading, however, it appears that Moses *as a Black man* was much too important a symbol of the superiority of ascetic piety to be beyond doubt as to whether he was an historical figure, or as to whether his characterization in the stories reflects ancient Christian racial inclusiveness (*contra* Snowden). In other words, the stories are worked too hard by different communities and traditions to reflect *both* the attractiveness and superiority of the ascetic life *and* the simple openness and inclusiveness on the part of Christian—especially monastic—communities. The problem lies in the fact that not only is the symbolism rather heavy and thick—almost too nuanced (again, Moses being *too* good to be true; the opposites *too* radical)—not only is Black Moses *rare* among early Christian spiritual athletes and heroes as preserved in the oral and written legacies of ancient Christianity, but the advancement of the attractiveness and superiority of the ascetic life is done at the expense of Moses, not just as individual, but as representative of Black peoples.

The texts and their use of Moses and color symbolism would seem at first to suggest a reading of monastic ascetic piety as radical, as defined by totalities and absolutes, radical opposites—the world (and for some, including even other tamer Christian [=ascetic] lifestyles) against those who have adopted the monastic-ascetic lifestyle. The radical opposition of the color "black" against the color "white" in general, and Moses as living example of black peoples and their assumed sinful state and "other-ness," served well the advancement of a certain type of ascetic propaganda. The ascetic lifestyle seems to be associated with the adoption of radical commitment, the living of life in radical discipleship, an orientation to the world that spelled distance, critique, resistance. This ascetic orientation to the world was understood to parallel the foreignness that dark-skinned peoples were considered to represent by those transmitting the tradition to experience.

Yet it is important not to fall uncritically under the aesthetic discursive strategy that is in the working of the symbolism in these texts to the point that *historical* dynamic, and realities are forgotten (Palmer). To be sure, asceticism as valorized in the literary characterization of Moses was supposed to be histrionic, stark and radical. But in the employment of such symbolism in literary form the ascetic communities and traditions behind the texts reflect aspects of certain types of historical-political realities, prejudices and sensibilities. They betray the extent to which certain ascetic communities were not, actually could not have been, otherworldly (and apolitical!), according to popular notions and much scholarly argumentation regarding the "religious" life. Such communities accepted widespread cultural concepts, assumptions and prejudices, and even attempted to advance their cause by playing upon (actually texturing) such.

The lesson here is not that religious people were or could be found to be hypocritical or less than perfect—or something of the kind. The important lesson is that the literary games played with asceticism and loss of world, with their use of color symbolism, can tell us something about *history* and *discursive strategies*, about mentalities, or visions of the world in history and how they come to expression.

Through the color-coded discourses about asceticism we can learn much about the character of the *worldliness* of a particular *loss-of-world* ethos and its corresponding required behavior. From a reading of the texts about Moses, asceticism cannot be considered world-rejection in any absolute apolitical sense. It must be understood as a type of world-orientation involving selected renunciation, or reprioritization of the world, complete with selected cultural (even minority culturalist) and political assumptions and prejudices. This insight of course squares with the notion that ascetic behavior is not simply rejection of the world, but involves the embracing of an ideal (Fraade). The color symbolism in the Moses texts points the reader to the importance of seeking to discover and account for the *worldly* choices of renunciation.

## NOTES

[1] I owe gratitude to my friend and Claremont colleague Kathleen O. Wicker not only for her collection and translation of the relevant sources, but also for her encouragement of my interpretive efforts.

## WORKS CONSULTED

Aristotle
1927 *Politics*. Trans., with an introduction and notes by H. Rackham. Cambridge: Harvard University.

Bernal, Martin
1987 *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*. vol. 1. London: Free Association Books.

Cameron, Averil
1990 "Virginity as Metaphor: Women and the Rhetoric of Early Christianity." In *History as Text*. Ed. A. Cameron. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Courtes, Jean Marie
1979 "The Theme of 'Ethiopians' in Patristic Literature." In *The Image of the Black in Western Art*. Vol. II.1. By Jean Devisse. Gen. Ed. L. Bugner. Tr. William Granger Ryan. New York: William Morrow and Company.

De Ste. Croix, G. E. M.
1981 *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World: From the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Felder, Cain, ed.
1991 *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Interpretation*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Fraade, Steven D.
1986 "Ascetical Aspects of Ancient Judaism." In *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible Through the Middle Ages*. Vol. 13 of *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*. New York: Crossroad.

Frost, Peter
1991 "Attitudes Toward Blacks in the Early Christian Era." *Second Century* 8.1:1–11.

Meeks, Wayne A.
1983 *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*. New Haven: Yale University.

Palmer, Bryan D.
1990 *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Snowden, Frank M., Jr.
1970 *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Steidle, P. Basilius
1958 "Der 'schwarze kleine Knabe' in der alten Mönchserzählung." In *Benedictinische Monatschrift* 34: 339–350.

Wicker, Kathleen O.
1990 "Ethiopian Moses (Collected Sources)." Pp. 329–48 in *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Source Book*. Ed. Vincent L. Wimbush. Minneapolis: Fortress.