

Article

Race, Racism, and the Hebrew Bible: The Case of the Queen of Sheba

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Abstract: The Queen of Sheba, best known for visiting Solomon at the height of his rule, is commonly understood to be one of the most famous Black queens of the Bible. However, biblical texts record nothing of her family or people, any physical characteristics, nor where, precisely, Sheba is located. How did this association between the Queen of Sheba and Blackness become naturalized? This article answers this question by mapping three first millennium textual moments that racialize the Queen of Sheba through attention to geography, skin color, and lineage in the writings of Origen of Alexandria, Flavius Josephus, and Abu Ja'afar al-Tabari. These themes are transformed in the Ethiopic text the *Kebrā Nagast*, which positively claims the Queen of Sheba as an African monarch in contrast to the Othering that is prominent in earlier texts. The *Kebrā Nagast* has a complex afterlife, one which acts as the ground for the also-complex modern reception of the character of the Queen of Sheba.

Keywords: Queen of Sheba; Kings; Chronicles; Origen; Josephus; Tabari; *Kebrā Nagast*



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In January 2020, Alma, a Jewish feminist digital platform, published a piece titled “The Black Jewish Queen of Sheba You Probably Didn’t Learn About in Hebrew School”. Drawing on the accounts in Kings, Chronicles, and later midrashim, the article’s author asserts that the Queen of Sheba, most famous for her visit to Solomon’s court at the height of his rule, was Black, Jewish, and wiser than Solomon. The article depicts the Queen of Sheba as a feminist power icon who is systemically underrepresented, particularly in Jewish spaces. Six months earlier, the BBC had published a video titled “Why is the Queen of Sheba portrayed as white?” which included an interview with Jess Hagan, the writer of the award-winning play “Queens of Sheba”, who suggested that depictions of the Queen of Sheba that suggest she is not Black—such as the European oil painting shown in the video—require an explanation, not least because, in Hagan’s view, the Queen of Sheba is an icon of Black femininity.¹ These accounts are fairly representative of popular understandings of the Queen of Sheba. Based on the rhetorical force of their identification of the Queen of Sheba as Black, one might be somewhat surprised, then, to read the accounts of the Queen of Sheba in the biblical books of Kings and Chronicles and note that in these central, scriptural sources, there is no mention at all of any of her physical features. This is not particularly unusual in a biblical context, where physical features often go unremarked.² The relative silence around any part of how she looked, let alone any racial associations she might have, implies that this contemporary association came from non-biblical sources. The wealth of the land of Sheba, the wisdom of its queen, her judgement, and her religious affiliation are all given attention, but nothing at all is said about her skin, her ancestors, or where, exactly, Sheba is located. In other words, although the Blackness of the Queen of Sheba is a commonly held and significant aspect of the way she is understood in the modern world, this facet of her identity is not based in scriptural texts. When and how, then, did it come to be natural to view the Queen of Sheba as Black?

This paper offers an account of the most influential moments in our archive of material about the Queen of Sheba which discuss what can be identified as racialized features, how those moments were transformed in later iterations of the narrative of her visit, and how

the late antique and medieval sources laid the groundwork for modern understandings of the Queen. I argue that texts that discuss the geographic location whence the Queen of Sheba came (whether Ethiopia, Egypt, or Yemen), her skin color, and her lineage are utilizing strategies of race-making to lay claim to the Solomonic past. It is not the goal of this paper to suggest that the Queen of Sheba is not Black. Absence of (biblical) evidence is not evidence of an absence (of Blackness, in this case). It might be tempting to reduce the disconnect between biblical reticence and modern assertiveness to some moment of invention between now and then, but to do so would belie the complexity both of race (as a mutable, culturally contingent category) and of the Queen of Sheba's reception history. There are more complex literary and social dynamics at play that offer a window into the historical process of race-making as it intersects with the reception history of the Queen of Sheba.

"Race, Racism, and the Hebrew Bible", is a timely but historically complex topic to tackle, not least because modern understandings of race and racism were not operant in the period that biblical texts were written, although other forms of race-making may have been present.³ Despite the historical incongruity, in the modern period the Bible was used to articulate racist concepts (e.g., the belief that the "curse of Ham" is a curse of Blackness, or the Cushites were a despised Other) and etiologies of race.⁴ In contrast to this approach, Black diaspora communities associated figures like Hagar with Black enslaved women in positive acts of reclamation, a dynamic that is certainly at play with respect to the Queen of Sheba. Recent scholarship has done much to de-naturalize these associations; while the understanding of Hagar or the Cushites as Black figures tells historians certain truths about the beliefs and/or lived realities of those who promulgate said views, they also come with attendant modern assumptions that can obscure the textual and historical dynamics of biblical texts. Rodney Sadler, for example, has argued that although Cush was a known African polity, there is no evidence in biblical texts that the Cushites were understood in a racialized or inherently negative manner; rather than viewed as an abject Other, they were powerful, even potentially threatening, allies to the powers in Jerusalem in the Iron Age.⁵ Relatedly, Nyasha Junior has argued that the view of Hagar as a model of Black womanhood emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and was not a critical feature of earlier periods.⁶ Neither of these arguments deny the existence of Black figures in the Bible, but instead they historicize some of the ways that race became a prominent feature of the reception history of the Bible.

This article will contribute to this line of scholarship by historicizing the racialization of the Queen of Sheba—that is to say, by tracing the history of reception of the character that lays between the characteristically laconic scriptural sources and the positive identification of the Queen of Sheba with Blackness in modern thought. In order to articulate this history, the article will first establish the theoretical language of racialization and the framework of Premodern Critical Race Studies as explained by Margo Hendricks and Geraldine Heng. Biblical and first-millennium sources on the Queen of Sheba will be explored under three thematic foci: geographic origins, skin color, and lineage. The writing of Origen of Alexandria, Flavius Josephus, and Abu Ja'afar al-Tabari are given special attention as the earliest sources that explicitly discuss these themes. Skin color, geography, and lineage are not the only modes by which the race of the Queen of Sheba was articulated, but they appear early in our archive of materials and are transformed significantly in the final text under discussion, the *Kebrā Nagast*. The *Kebrā Nagast* is the single most important text for understanding the modern reception of the Queen of Sheba as Black, inasmuch as it inverts the Othering seen in earlier texts and models the positive reclamation of the Queen that is common in modern media.

1. Racialization and Premodern Critical Race Studies

This paper uses the term "racialization" to describe the dynamic process by which the Queen of Sheba came to be understood as Black. Nyasha Junior's *Reimagining Hagar* traces the links between Hagar and Blackness, and in doing so contextualizes the intersection

of race and biblical studies. Junior notes that different ethnicities—a related but distinct concept—receive differentiated treatment in the Hebrew Bible, and that sources from the ancient world reflect an awareness of phenotypical differences, but those were often attributed to environmental or primordial reasons, rather than the biological reasoning that is used as a cover in modern racist discussions.⁷ She notes that although black skin is often described or mentioned in ancient sources, such uses do not map onto racial categories and there is no consistency between different texts. Despite this and “despite the lack of physical description in the text, some biblical characters have become identified as Black or linked with Blackness”.⁸ The Queen of Sheba is one such character.

Rodney Sadler offers a cogent synthesis of various theories of “race”, noting that it is a political category, not one that can be traced solely to hereditary, genetic, or phenotypical features.⁹ Rather, Sadler notes that a precursor to racism is “racial thought”, and it is racial thought that is the object of his investigation. Through a chronological study of Hebrew writing from the Iron Age through the Rabbinic period, Sadler argues that biblical writings do not reflect racial thought, which is to say that they do not assume an essential and inherent link between, e.g., negative behavioral patterns, somatic features, group ontological differences, and legitimating ideology. Although Sadler’s monograph does not claim to be a definitive statement about racial thought in all forms of biblical literature, his work nevertheless suggests that biblical texts do not straightforwardly reflect racial thought, and that racial associations with biblical figures emerge outside of biblical texts.

Sadler’s work on the Cushites, and his persuasive argument that we do not see evidence of racial thought towards this group, as well as Junior’s discussion of the process by which Hagar came to be associated with Blackness, together open up space for us to consider diachronically how race became such a significant feature to popular understanding of the Queen of Sheba, in what Margo Hendricks has called a “structuring process” of race-making visible in some premodern materials.¹⁰ Hendricks’ articulation of premodern critical race studies undergirds this article: she argues that race is not a one-time event or state of being, which we can divide into “before” race and “after” the concept gained traction. Rather, Hendricks invites scholars to identify key moments and processes by which we can better understand the structuring process of race-making—i.e., the dynamic means by which race or racial associations emerged and garnered cultural currency.

Heng’s *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* usefully distinguishes between the multiple locations of race in the premodern world: epidermal race, which indexes race by skin color and bodily features, but also cartographic race, the result of “marking differences of place through the insertion of distinctive objects, narratives, and peoples that it locates into place as stakeholders for the meaning of a site”.¹¹ One of her crucial insights is that biological or somatic understandings of race have dominated discussions of race in the premodern world, and in order to counter this tendency, she “fan[s] out attention to how religion, the state, economic interests, colonization, war, and international contests for hegemony, among other determinants, have materialized race and configured racial attitudes, behavior, and phenomena across the centuries”.¹² Utilizing Heng’s methodological insights, this paper will focus on the elements of cartographic race, epidermal race, and discussions of the lineage of the Queen of Sheba in order to draw out multiple ways that racial attitudes about the Queen of Sheba have been articulated. This history has cumulatively become the ground upon which modern understandings of the Queen of Sheba as Black rest.¹³

2. Geography: Where Is Sheba?

2.1. Sheba in the Hebrew Bible

Strong’s Concordance lists 17 mentions of Sheba (a region, rather than a character) in the Hebrew Bible, eight in Kings and Chronicles in reference to the Queen of Sheba, with nine other references scattered across Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Psalms, and Job. These include Job 1:15, which states that raiders from Sheba enslaved the people of Job’s household, as well as Psalm 72:10, which says kings from Sheba and Saba would offer tribute (קָרְיָבוּ).

מֶלְכֵי שֶׁבָּא וְסָבָא, אֲשֶׁרָּר) to Israel. The references never articulate the geographic proximity (or lack thereof) of Sheba, nor is it associated with anything beyond material wealth, whether in the form of the wealth of the Queen of Sheba of Kings and Chronicles, the gold of the tribute mentioned in Psalms, or the raiders described in Job. This is not unusual for place names in the Hebrew Bible—indeed, biblical archaeology has a long and hotly-debated history of arguments about the historical location of cities like Gath, Sodom, etc.—but it tells us, as modern scholars, that we cannot assume the location of the Queen of Sheba’s kingdom.¹⁴ At most, we know that Sheba is associated with desert trade, but it is evoked less as a known entity and more as a far-off, wealthy land, akin to mid-twentieth century American references to “Timbuktu”.

Much scholarship assumes that the land of Sheba is Saba, a port city on the southern Arabian peninsula in modern-day Yemen.¹⁵ When not an independent (and relatively small) city-state, Saba was variously controlled by kings in Yemen as well as rulers from across the Red Sea in Ethiopia.¹⁶ The later history of interpretation of the Queen of Sheba is marked by the variety of associations between Saba and various hegemonies to claim a connection between the figure who visited Solomon and later Arabian and African histories.¹⁷ There are many reasons to make this assumption. For one, the distinctive spelling in Latin letters collapses in Hebrew; an unpointed shin could very well have been read as a sin instead, suggesting a direct linguistic overlap. Further, in many other Semitic languages, especially Arabic, and Ge’ez, Saba and Sheba are spelled in exactly the same way, leading writers such as Muslim polymath al-Tabari to assert that the Queen of Sheba was from Yemen. Because of the philological reasons as well as longstanding traditions, modern scholarship often naturalizes the assumption that biblical Sheba is the historical Saba.

There is some evidence that more caution is warranted before fully endorsing such a position. As noted at the opening of this section, at least one biblical writer portrayed Sheba as a location distinct from Saba, as Psalm 72:10 refers to kings of Sheba and Saba (שֶׁבָּא וְסָבָא) as two poetically parallel but separate locations. It very well may have been that other biblical authors—such as the authors of Kings and Chronicles—considered themselves to be describing what we know today as Saba. However, the connection cannot be assumed. I suggest here an epistemologically cautious approach: it is entirely possible early writers, editors, redactors, tradents, and communities understood the references to Sheba to be references to the city-state Saba, of which we have significant archaeological evidence. However, we also know that not all biblical writers considered Sheba and Saba to be the same. Holding space for this uncertainty allows us to understand that later associations between the Queen of Sheba and specific locations do not evoke or occlude an obvious or natural connection, but rather make specific, historicizable claims which we can interrogate to better understand the process by which the Queen of Sheba’s Blackness became obvious (at least, to modern eyes).

2.2. *The Queen of Egypt, Ethiopia, and/or Yemen*

In his *History of the Jews*, Josephus, the late first century Jewish historian, describes the Queen of Sheba as “The Queen of Ethiopia and Egypt”. Here, Josephus is translating “Saba” as “Ethiopia”, which mirrors the Septuagintal translation of Cush (and Seba, with which it was associated) into “Ethiopia”.¹⁸ Other than this, Josephus’ retelling of the story of the Queen of Sheba’s visit does not depart significantly from either the Masoretic or Septuagintal versions of the narrative. With characteristic expansion into the interior state of the Queen and her emotional reactions to Solomon, Josephus follows the early narrative in plot points and detail. Here we see the work of cartographic race: Josephus inserts a distinctive (biblical) narrative into a place in order to generate meaning of the location of Egypt and Ethiopia. Josephus is the first writer in our archive of materials about the Queen of Sheba to introduce a clear connection between the Queen of Sheba and Africa. This is picked up by Origen of Alexandria, who uses Josephus’ identification of her as a queen of Egypt and Ethiopia as justification for understanding her as the Black beloved of the Song of Songs.

3. Skin Color

Skin color is not an especially useful index of racial thought. As Junior notes, the identification of certain groups with certain physical characteristics, especially skin tone, shifts over time in culturally contingent ways.¹⁹ Heng has a sharper critique: “color as the paramount signifier of race—the privileged site of race—is too commonly invoked as the deciding factor adjudicating whether racial attitudes and phenomena existed in premodernity.”²⁰ She argues that the binary of white and black was used in theologically fruitful paradoxes in medieval literature precisely because “a signifying field has stabilized to the point that enables such play, and to the degree that allows paradox to be formed.”²¹ The Blackness of the Queen of Sheba was first discussed in the writings of third-century Christian exegete Origen of Alexandria, which established (part of) the symbolic ground upon which later discussions of the race of the Queen of Sheba flourished.

In the mid-third century (~260 CE), Origen wrote his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* in Greek, which was preserved in a Latin translation that Rufinus of Aquileia composed in the fourth century. Origen associates the Queen of Sheba with the beloved of the Song of Songs, who says that she is “Black and beautiful” in Songs 1:5.²² He pairs this assertion with his argument for the metaphorical nature of Song of Songs triggered by verse 1:2b (“your breasts are better than wine”). Origen argues that the beloved was the Queen of Sheba, who symbolically represents the Gentile Church making a union with Solomon (i.e., Israel), and is also allegorically equivalent to the Cushite wife of Moses. Origen argues that the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon as described in Kings and Chronicles must be an allegorical story, because her praise of Solomon—of his house, his food, his servants—is too ordinary; someone praising Solomon *must* be doing so in order to value his extraordinary spiritual position, not the daily mundanities of his household. Thus, while Origen is our earliest extant example of the association of the Queen of Sheba with Blackness, he does so by piling referents and allegorical meanings onto his reading of the Queen of Sheba (and the Song of Songs).

Heng writes that, particularly in medieval European literature, there is a distinction between “hermeneutic blackness in which exegetical considerations are paramount and often explicitly foregrounded, and physiognomic blackness linked to the characterization of black Africans in phenomena that extended beyond immediate theological exegesis. It is equally vital, of course, to recognize that distinct, and distinguishable, discourses on blackness might also at times converge and intertwine for ideological ends.”²³ Indeed, Origen’s exegesis of the Song of Songs represents precisely such a discursive moment, one that fuses these two concerns, the somatic and the symbolic. Because of this, it is not useful to draw too much of a contrast between historical and allegorical significance, as for Origen these were complementary epistemological modes, but it is notable that in the moment the historical claim of the Queen of Sheba’s Blackness was made, it was already explicitly interwoven with broader symbolic significance rather than proffered as a link to a specific racial group.

Although the Blackness of the beloved does not function in Origen’s third century context the way it does in our contemporary world, it does mark a significant moment in the history of reception of this character, one which is most often associated with the Blackness of the Queen of Sheba. Origen was a hugely influential figure who inspired “Origenist” Christians in the centuries after his death; these Christians were condemned as heretics and participated in what has been called the “Origenist Crises” of the late fourth and sixth centuries.²⁴ In the wake of these controversies, Origen was not held up as a Church Father or mainstream thinker. Despite the complex afterlife of Origen’s writings, this moment in the *Homily on the Song of Songs* is often used to exemplify the early association between the Queen of Sheba and Blackness.²⁵ This may be a case where a particular textual moment seems significant in retrospect more than a reflection of Origen’s actual influence, but it speaks to the fact that the Queen of Sheba’s foreign status was linked to particular, differentiated physical attributes at a relatively early period, which was picked up in new and creative ways in the late antique and medieval world.

4. Lineage

In this final thematic section, I will depart slightly from Heng's framework, which has proved so useful thus far. In the Introduction to *The Invention of Race*, Heng notes several times that genealogy is far less important to premodern discourses about race than has often been assumed by scholars of antiquity and the European Middle Ages.²⁶ However, discussions of the lineage of the Queen of Sheba do not necessarily foreshadow the modern preoccupation with biological race, but rather work in tandem with cartographic race to emplace her and her ancestors (or descendants) and delineate her distinctiveness from Solomon.

The most important first millennium commentator who discusses the Queen of Sheba's ancestry is Abu Ja'afar al-Tabari, who discusses the Queen of Sheba in his *tafsir* (commentary) on the Qur'an as well as in his *tarikh*, a universal history of the world from creation until the Abbasid period.²⁷ Al-Tabari's *tafsir* contains longer statements, with detailed chains of transmission attesting to various details of the life of the Queen; al-Tabari's *tarikh* is more condensed, with Qur'anic material re-ordered to form a tighter narrative and much abridged chains of transmission.²⁸ In both, al-Tabari asserts that the Queen of Sheba came from Yemen.²⁹ Al-Tabari cites others who say that the Queen of Sheba was part jinn, although he never asserts as such himself.³⁰ When the Queen of Sheba visits Solomon, according to al-Tabari, the jinn under Solomon's control became afraid that they would have a child together. They feared this child because he might rule them eternally, unlike Solomon, whose control was limited to the span of his lifetime.³¹ The jinn suggested that the Queen of Sheba had donkey legs underneath her skirt in order to dissuade Solomon from having a romantic interest in her.³² In order to verify this rumor, Solomon has his supernatural servants set up the glass floor so that he would have an opportunity to verify what the Queen of Sheba's legs looked like.³³ Thus, a certain preoccupation with the presumed monstrousness of the Queen of Sheba's body is closely intertwined with a particular understanding of her genealogy as a part-jinn, part-human individual. This is closely connected with other inappropriate aspects of the Queen of Sheba's person: she comes to test Solomon with riddles and asks him about the color of God, a question which is so out of bounds that Solomon faints in response. It is at this point when the rumors of the Queen's legs are introduced, suggesting that her inappropriate curiosity is closely linked to her inappropriate body.

It is notable that the Queen of Sheba is not associated with Africa in the writings of al-Tabari but rather with Yemen, although, of course, Yemen is a short hop from the Horn of Africa across the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden and was at times controlled by Ethiopian polities. Al-Tabari's ninth-century moment in the history of interpretation of the Queen of Sheba marks a tendency, picked up by later writers, to associate the Queen of Sheba's Othered body with her lineage (inasmuch as the jinni assert that the Queen's demonic lineage caused her to have donkey legs). One intriguing aspect of this interest in her lineage is the fact that it stands in some contrast with the family ties that most interest the authors of the *Kebrā Nagast*; where the *Kebrā Nagast* dwells extensively on the children and descendants of the Queen of Sheba, it never discusses her parents or ancestors. In contrast, al-Tabari and other Muslim interlocutors explore, albeit briefly, her non-human ancestors, and give little if any attention to her descendants (except inasmuch as they might threaten the jinni). This concern with lineage is not in and of itself an example of racial thought, but it is a previously-unseen thematic interest in the Queen of Sheba that came to have enormous influence on later interpretations of her character.

5. The Kebrā Nagast

The *Kebrā Nagast* (the "Glory of the Kings") positively identifies the Queen of Sheba, there named Makeda, with the community of the compilers of the text; in other words, it claims her as *ours* in a way that was different from the narratives of the Queen of Sheba that came before and much of what came after. It is the single most important text for under-

standing the positive identification of the Queen of Sheba with Blackness in the modern world. It was written in order to claim the Solomonic past through the Queen of Sheba, claiming the two biblical monarchs as the ancestors of the Solomonic dynasty, which ruled Ethiopia between the thirteenth and the twentieth centuries.

The book, the longest premodern engagement with the Queen of Sheba, is a compilation of a number of sources that tells a selective history of Ethiopia from the period of the biblical patriarchs. The *Kebrā Nagast* collates earlier traditions and builds on biblical frameworks, including, of course, the biblical texts of 1 Kings 10:1-13 and 1 Chronicles 9:1-12, which detail the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon's court and the resulting son who, years later, took the Ark of the Covenant back to Ethiopia.

The *Kebrā Nagast* reflects a wide array of Syriac, Coptic, and Arabic literary influences, detailed impressively by David A. Hubbard in his 1956 dissertation.³⁴ Written in Ge'ez, the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahedo Church, it was translated into German, French, and English, beginning in the nineteenth century.³⁵ Before that, its chapter titles and brief summaries were known in Portuguese and French literature as early as the last quarter of the sixteenth century. Although not everyone would readily recognize the title, the themes and narratives represented there have been widely adapted in the Western world.³⁶ The Ethiopic text was, according to a colophon found in many early manuscripts, translated from Arabic in the first half of the fourteenth century CE, which in turn was a translation of an earlier Coptic text. Scholars such as Gizachew Tiruneh and Muriel Debié have argued that some form of the text may have existed as early as the sixth century CE, because that is the latest "king" of whose glory is spoken in the text.³⁷ Recent work by Wendy Belcher and Stuart Munro-Hayes suggests that the *Kebrā Nagast* that we have is a snapshot of a dynamic Ethiopian tradition,³⁸ but the Ethiopic version we have now dates itself to the thirteenth century, which suggests that it is best to consider it a culturally contingent creation that reflects earlier traditions such as the first millennium sources already discussed.

The account of the relationship between the Queen of Sheba and Solomon in *Kebrā Nagast* was used to explain the reign of the Solomonic royal family of Ethiopia, which ruled the country from the thirteenth to the twentieth century. The Solomonic royal family claimed to be the true inheritors of the Aksumite Empire, which ruled the Ethiopian highlands and various environs from the first century BCE to the ninth century CE. The Solomonic family made this claim to distinguish itself from the Zagwe dynasty, which ruled Ethiopia from the tenth to the thirteenth century, between the Aksumite and Solomonic periods. Complicating the claims to Aksumite heritage is the relative paucity of evidence from Ethiopia before the Middle Ages. As Aaron Butts has noted, our evidence of Aksumite rule—while certainly more substantial than evidence of the Zagwe dynasty—is relatively thin on the ground; we have coinage, monumental stone thrones, and archaeological architectural evidence, but relatively little writing or other textual evidence that might help us to understand Aksumite Christian self-conception of the relationship between Solomon and Ethiopia.³⁹

The *Kebrā Nagast*, uniquely, presents the Queen of Sheba as a shrewd politician, moral exemplar, and native queen to the community for whom the text was written, a distinct departure from the foreign status that marks her appearance in the Hebrew Bible; Christian Gospels; and early Jewish, Christian, and Muslim accounts, although, as Luis Salés points out, the text is marked by an androcentric perspective that ultimately disempowers the Queen over the course of the narrative.⁴⁰ The *Kebrā Nagast* devotes some forty chapters (of over one hundred) to the Queen of Sheba, detailing her visit to Solomon, their conversation together, and the complex circumstances that led to a sexual relationship between the monarchs. Here, she is an intelligent, self-assured woman, as Belcher has highlighted: by claiming her as indigenous to Ethiopia, and moreover asserting that the son produced of their union inherited the Ark of the Covenant and Solomon's blessed status, the *Kebrā Nagast* offers a relatively positive vision of the Queen of Sheba that stands in some con-

trast to earlier and contemporaneous Jewish, Muslim, and Latinate Christian traditions that suggest she is monstrous or demonic.⁴¹

In the *Kebrā Nagast*, the Queen of Sheba (Makeda) is a wise queen. She learns of the wisdom of Solomon from Tamrin, a local merchant who had traveled to Jerusalem. She had worshipped the sun but is persuaded to worship the God of Israel because of what she learns of Solomon and Israel. She visits Solomon and they have an extended philosophical discussion; on the last night of her visit, he tricks her into having sexual intercourse with him and gives her a ring to give to their child to identify themselves. The Queen of Sheba has a son, Menelik I, who eventually comes to visit his father. He is feted and beloved in Jerusalem, and when he decides to return to his mother's kingdom to rule, many of the sons of Jerusalem's elites were sent with him. This group of young men takes the Ark of the Covenant from the Temple and successfully return home with it. This text is the basis for the widespread belief amongst adherents of the Ethiopic Tawahedo Orthodox Church that the Ark of the Covenant is held in a church in Lalibela.⁴²

The Ethiopic text does not describe the physical appearance of the Queen of Sheba in terms of her Blackness, nor does it concern itself with her ancestors. Instead, there is a repeated concern with her descendants. The birth of Menelik I is the beginning of the Solomonic dynasty in Ethiopia, according to the text, and in this we can clearly see an interest in reproduction and social status within Ethiopia. Intriguingly, Ethiopians are described as Black in the *Kebrā Negast*, but only by outsiders. One of Menelik's attendants from Jerusalem, Azariah, teaches the Ethiopians how to obey the laws of Israel, and in so doing mentions their Black faces in passing, to contrast with the lightness of their hearts under the laws of the God of Israel. The only other time the Blackness of Ethiopians is mentioned is in chapter 64, when Pharaoh's daughter who seduced Solomon into worshipping idols (cf 1 Kings 11) describes Menelik as of a foreign people and color—Black—in order to emphasize how lost the Tabernacle is to Solomon, to persuade him to turn to new gods. This argument is not persuasive to Solomon, for he asserts that the Egyptians and the Ethiopians are both descendants of Ham, and therefore the pharaonic princess is as foreign to Solomon as Makeda and Menelik. These discussions show that the Ethiopian translators were aware that Israelites and Ethiopians were understood to be distinct epidermically, to utilize vocabulary from Heng, but also suggests they understood themselves to be closely related to Egyptians and did not view these differences as a source of inferiority. Indeed, the fact that these statements are placed in the mouths of non-Ethiopians underscores that the skin color of Ethiopians generally was only notable to non-Ethiopians.

The *Kebrā Nagast* was extremely influential in Ethiopia and the global African Diaspora, and also in early modern and modern Europe and America. Belcher's upcoming project on the Queen of Sheba and the global influence of the *Kebrā Nagast* will offer a fuller picture than can be surmised here, but consider two nineteenth century examples.⁴³ Karl Goldmark's 1875 German opera, *Die Königin von Saba*, which centers on an invented love triangle between the Queen of Sheba, an ambassador of Solomon's court, and the ambassador's beloved. In the opera, the Queen of Sheba is a seductive, beautiful figure with whom Solomon's advisor, Assad, falls in love, going so far as to blaspheme against God in his praise of her, ruining his wedding day. There, the Queen of Sheba's desirability is a major feature of her character, even more than her wisdom or wealth. Similarly, the 1862 French opera, *La reine de Saba*, by Charles Gounoud, inspired by the poetry of Gérard de Nerval, presents the Queen of Sheba as a beautiful figure who breaks up an engagement, although this time, it is her own engagement to Solomon broken through her inconvenient love for Solomon's court sculptor. In these, in the surviving stills from the now-lost *Sheba*, starring Betty Blythe, and in Neil Gaiman's 2001 *American Gods*, we can see several examples of the romantic and sexual potential of the Queen of Sheba, realized as a celebration of her wisdom and power in the medieval *Kebrā Nagast*, flattened in modern European and American imagination. These are familiar Orientalist sexualized fantasies that have particular cultural currency because of the racialization of the Queen of Sheba. We see aspects of modern racial discourses, particularly the sexualization of Black women and children,

lending a distinct cadence to narratives of the Queen of Sheba that are relevantly similar to but distinct from the *Kebrā Nagast*.⁴⁴

Despite this European and American treatment as a Black woman, the claim that the Queen of Sheba is the ancestor of the Solomonic royal house does not necessarily mean that the text makes the claim that she is Black. Indeed, many Ethiopians understand themselves to be Habesha rather than Black.⁴⁵ Moreover, Ethiopia is home to many different ethnic groups, including the Oromo and Amhara, who see themselves as categorically distinct from one another. Hailie Selassie, the last emperor of the Solomonic House of Ethiopia and messianic figure of Rastafarianism, has been accused of acts of ethnic cleansing against the Oromo people.⁴⁶ Despite the importance of Selassie and the Queen of Sheba to many diasporic African communities, then, in some ways to read her as a Black figure generally is to undermine the specificity of the claims made about her lineage, which are made to justify the dominance of the Solomonic house over other Ethiopians.

While portions of the *Kebrā Nagast* speak to late antique concerns (particularly the focus on King Ezana, a sixth century figure, as has been noted by Debié) our evidence extends to the early Solomonic period, in the thirteenth century at the earliest.⁴⁷ More significant than even this complex web of evidence, however, is the fact that the earliest manuscripts of the *Kebrā Nagast* have a colophon that notes it was translated from Arabic in the thirteenth century.⁴⁸ These colophons also assert that the Arabic was in turn a translation from earlier Coptic texts. This translational matrix suggests that the *Kebrā Nagast* is best understood not only as an example of Ethiopic scribes understanding their local history through the universalized figure of Solomon, but also as a result of an international, multilingual contact and exchange of ideas between different groups. The *Kebrā Nagast* is essential for understanding the racialization of the Queen of Sheba in the modern world, and the power of this text is best understood in light of the transformation of earlier accounts of the Queen of Sheba, where she is Othered and racialized to various degrees.

6. Conclusions

What does historicizing the racial dynamics of the history of interpretation of the Queen of Sheba do? Kimberly Anne Coles and Dorothy Kim write in a forthcoming volume: “Race is a strategy. Each time that we examine the strategies that naturalize structures of power, we better understand the strategies themselves – and how these polemics serve specific interests”.⁴⁹ Tracing modern perceptions of the Queen of Sheba back to the laconic early sources that first discuss her offers a lens to consider some of the complex dynamics of biblical reception history, which, following Gadamer, is often understood in terms of “filling in the gaps” of a limited frame of material. This model can be helpful but does not, in my view, account for the drastic differences between different iterations of the story of her visit to Solomon, which include divergent motifs, themes, secondary characters, literary genres, etc. I have, in the preceding pages, attempted to sketch where and why certain motifs about the Queen of Sheba emerged in our record of materials, which cumulatively lay the groundwork for a naturalized relationship between the Queen of Sheba and Blackness. By tracing the lines of tradition by which the Queen of Sheba came to inhabit the complex position she has today, this argument underscores the contingent, fraught history of the racialization of this particular figure, a contingency not dissimilar to the process by which race became an operant category in the modern world. This is to say that the insidious effects of race and racism notwithstanding, they are also social constructs with a history, one we can learn in the hopes of deconstructing and hopefully undermining their pernicious effects.

The preceding argument is based not on all or even most references to the Queen of Sheba in Jewish, Muslim, and Christian history, but rather on the most important elements of our remaining evidence. In the distinct visions of the Queen of Sheba portrayed in the *Kebrā Nagast*, al-Tabari’s *Tarikh*, Origen’s *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, and Josephus’ *Antiquities*, which display important innovations in the reception of the figure, the texts show how a character from brief scriptural passages came to be understood as one of the

most important Black figures from Israel's past. Further study might explore how both the modern sexualization of the Queen of Sheba and her status as a venerable ancestor are historically intertwined with her Blackness, or how the not-infrequent association with animal legs in ninth-century and later texts functioned as another trajectory of racialization. The production of the racial identity of the Queen of Sheba has a rich history. It is, among other things, the history by which her genealogy, bodily features, and association with Africa come into our archive of materials about the Queen of Sheba. The *Kebrā Negast* is not a singular moment of invention—it is not the point at which the Queen of Sheba became Black—but it is a singularly important moment in the history of reception of the Queen of Sheba. Under the constraints of space and evidence, I have highlighted the most important early ambiguities and historically contingent claims made about the person of the Queen of Sheba, showing how later interpreters—from medieval Christian writers to modern Hollywood depictions—rely on the often-contradictory earlier bodies of tradition that serve as a ground to a rich field of possibilities about the Queen of Sheba.

In a general sense, the case of the Queen of Sheba underscores the point made by Edward Said in *Beginnings*—the originary moment of a tradition offers far less heuristic value than does the events and moments that connect present traditions to the past.⁵⁰ Said argues that origins are divine, rhetorically useful moments highlighted as part of an ideological program to construct or attribute a particular character to the history told. Origins are moments of rupture, unlike what comes before or after. Rather than origins, Said argues that scholars should concern themselves with beginnings, which precede a middle and an end of a story and are definitionally and inherently tied up with what comes afterwards. The Queen of Sheba amply demonstrates the value of this argument, inasmuch as the biblical origins of the Queen do very little to explain the later history of reception of the figure, including and especially the racialization of the Queen.

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Notes

¹ (Kaplan 2020; BBC Reel 2020).

² This is not always the case, as characters such as Saul, David, and Absalom are described as beautiful, with some attention to their bodies; Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, however, are not given this treatment within the context of Kings or Chronicles.

³ The period at which concepts of race and racism become operant is a complex, debated issue; Geraldine Heng provocatively argued that race was invented in Medieval Europe in her important 2018 volume on the topic. Scholars such as Sarah Pearce have argued that the rhetoric of the title downplays the history of racialized thinking that is visible in earlier non-European (particularly Islamicate Jewish and Arabic) texts: (Pearce 2020).

⁴ See discussions in (Goldenberg 2003; Haynes 2002). The intersection of the Hamitic Hypothesis with modern depictions of biblical scenes has been fruitfully explored in (Reed 2021).

⁵ (Sadler 2009).

⁶ (Junior 2019, pp. 101–31). Junior's work is in conversation with a significant and growing body of scholarship that has explored the reception of biblical figures in African American communities, including (Wimbush 2000; Weems 2003, pp. 19–32; Smith 2017).

⁷ (Junior 2019, p. 7). For a fuller discussion of the treatment of different ethnic groups in the Bible, see Rainey (2018).

⁸ (Junior 2019, p. 8).

⁹ (Sadler 2009, p. 6).

¹⁰ (Hendricks 2019).

¹¹ (Heng 2018, p. 33).

¹² (Heng 2018, pp. 181–82).

- 13 This is not to say that those who understand or represent the Queen of Sheba as Black are aware of every earlier iteration, but rather that the existence of multiple overlapping-but-distinct discourses of the race of the Queen of Sheba acts as the ground upon which later iterations of the character are built.
- 14 Pioske (2018, pp. 85–133), offers a useful overview of the debates surrounding the location of cities such as Gath.
- 15 Examples of this tendency include Jamme (2003, pp. 450–51), whose entry in the *New Catholic Encyclopaedia* is labeled “Saba (Sheba)”; (Bienkowski and Millard 2000, p. 266) who similarly conflate the two names in the *Dictionary of the Ancient Near East*. Bryce (2009) similarly labels a map in the *Routledge Handbook of People and Places of Ancient Western Asia* as “Saba (biblical Sheba)”. Note that these examples include a dictionary, an encyclopedia, and a handbook, so the inclination to flatten the potential differences is naturalized in several volumes that serve as introductory texts.
- 16 (Bowersock 2013; Hatke 2013; Schippmann 2001).
- 17 This is explored in Stinchcomb (2020).
- 18 Josephus *Antiquities* 8: 165–75. On the translational relationship between Seba, Cush, and Ethiopia, see (Sadler 2009, pp. 29–30). Sadler notes, following Müller, that the difference between Sheba and Seba may be a mere dialectical difference, but I would argue that this possibility does not undermine the fundamental ambiguity of the location of Sheba.
- 19 (Junior 2019, pp. 5–6).
- 20 (Heng 2018, p. 42).
- 21 (Heng 2018, p. 42).
- 22 This phrase has also been translated as “I am Black *but* beautiful”, understanding the Hebrew *vav* as oppositional rather than conjunctive, but this choice speaks more to the assumptions of later translators than to any inherent meaning of the text. See (Lowe 2012, pp. 544–55).
- 23 (Heng 2018, p. 185).
- 24 For an overview of the Origenist crises, see (Clark 1992).
- 25 See (Lowe 2012) which notes twice (544–45) that the Queen of Sheba is “often” linked to the beloved of the Song of Songs before adopting such an identification (albeit briefly and in passing, see 545).
- 26 (Heng 2018, pp. 24–25).
- 27 (Gilliot 1994, pp. 237–79; Shah 2013, pp. 83–139; Martensson 2005, pp. 287–331).
- 28 For more on Ibn Abbas in Tabari and ibn Kathir, see (Jaffer 2007).
- 29 Al-Hamdani (d. 945), a fellow ninth- and tenth-century writer most famous for his geographic and historical account of Yemen, also repeats the claim that Bilqis was a member of the Yemeni royal family. See the (Al-Hamdani 2004, pp. 132, 136, and 152).
- 30 Al-Tha’labi (d. 1035), an eleventh-century Muslim writer, picks up on this tradition from al-Tabari and asserts that she was the queen of Yemen, part jinn and part human. Discussed in (Lassner 1993, pp. 51–52).
- 31 (Al-Tabari 1960, scts. 582–83).
- 32 This particular tradition is picked up in some later European depictions of the Queen of Sheba, which suggest she had donkey or goose legs; see the discussion in (Baert 2004, pp. 289–349). Intriguingly, in several of the narratives in which she is described as having animal legs, she is also associated with the Gentile Church that comes to Israel, complicating what might otherwise seem to be a straightforward example of racialization. These traditions did not have a discernable impact on the *Kebrā Nagast*, which offers no suggestion that the Queen of Sheba might be anything other than an exemplary human.
- 33 (Al-Tabari 1960, sct. 583).
- 34 (Hubbard 1956).
- 35 This history of this reception is first discussed in English in Budge ([1922] 2000, pp. xv–xxi).
- 36 Perhaps the most famous twentieth century example is the Spielberg film *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*. The claim that the Ark of the Covenant was removed from Jerusalem and taken elsewhere has a multifaceted afterlife. For the broad influence of the *Kebrā Nagast*, see (Belcher 2009, pp. 441–59).
- 37 See (Tiruneh 2014, pp. 51–72).
- 38 (Belcher 2009, pp. 441–59; Munro-Hay 2006). For more on the ideological context of the *Kebrā Nagast*, see (Beylot 2004; Hendrickx 2012).
- 39 (Butts 2018).
- 40 (Salés 2020, pp. 1–2). Salés crucially integrates gender studies and a feminist perspective into his literary reading of the text, arguing that Pauline “androprimacy” undergirds the presentation of the Queen of Sheba.
- 41 For more on medieval Latinate traditions about the Queen of Sheba, see (Baert 2004, pp. 289–349). For more on late antique and early medieval Muslim and Jewish accounts, see Lassner (1993).
- 42 (Belcher 2009, pp. 441–59).
- 43 See Belcher, “The Black Queen of Sheba”, forthcoming.
- 44 See (Thompson 2012).

- 45 (Habecker 2012, pp. 1200–19).
 46 (Woldemariam 2019).
 47 (Debié 2010, pp. 255–78).
 48 (Tiruneh 2014, p. 54).
 49 (Coles and Kim 2021, p. 1).
 50 (Said 1985, pp. 1–26).

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