

This article appeared in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 93 (2003) 557-579. © 2003 by the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania. All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations used for purposes of scholarly citation, none of this work may be reproduced in any form by any means without written permission from the publisher. For information address the University of Pennsylvania Press, 3905 Spruce Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104-4112.

Review Essay

The Image of the Black in Jewish Culture

David M. Goldenberg

Abraham Melamed, *The Image of the Black in Jewish Culture: A History of the Other*. London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003. Pp. 295.

A theory not uncommonly heard in and out of the academic world is that anti-Black racism originated with the ancient rabbis. The Talmud and Midrash, it is claimed, first expressed that sentiment which led eventually to the horrors of racism in western civilization.

These claims are not of recent vintage. Seventy five years ago, Raoul Allier, Dean of the Faculté libre de théologie protestante of Paris, urged Christian missionaries to protest what he saw as anti-Black talmudic passages, “born in the ghetto, of the feverish and sadistic imagination of some rabbis.”¹ In this country, the claim made its first appearance about forty years ago in academic circles and was quickly repeated in works of all sorts, in history, sociology, psychology, religious studies, and theology.² A professor at the University of Pennsylvania not long ago summed up the view: In its “depth of anti-Blackness,” rabbinic Judaism “suggests how repugnant blacks were to the chosen people,” and how the Jews viewed Blacks “as the people devoid of ultimate worth and redeeming social human value.”³ It wasn’t long before this assault spread beyond the university campus to the African American community. Black biblical scholars and theologians repeated the claims and, at times, drew explicit connections to recent history. Charles Copher, a minister in the United Methodist Church and formerly Dean of the Faculty and Professor of Old Testament at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, wrote: “Racial myths [were] created and employed by the first interpreters of the so-called Old Testament, the ancient Jewish rabbis. They then continue through the use of myths inherited from the rabbis.... As is well known, the Old Hamite Myth was used by Jews down through the ages, and was adopted by Euro-American interpreters of the Bible to justify the enslavement and later segregation of the Negroes.”⁴

¹ *Une énigme troublante: la race nègre et la malédiction de Cham*. Les Cahiers Missionnaires no. 16 (Paris, 1930), pp. 16-19, 32.

² See David Goldenberg, “The Curse of Ham: A Case of Rabbinic Racism?” in *Struggles in the Promised Land*, ed. Jack Salzman and Cornel West (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 21-51.

³ Joseph Washington, *Anti-Blackness in English Religion, 1500-1800* (New York, 1984), pp. 11 and 15.

⁴ “Racial Myths and Biblical Scholarship: Some Random Notes and Observations,” in Copher, *Black Biblical Studies* (Chicago, 1993), pp. 121.

Jewish academics rose to defend the faith and, first in 1980 and then during the 1990s, a few articles were authored by American scholars in Jewish studies. Written from different perspectives and within different academic disciplines, the rebuttals seem to have muted some of the attack in recent years. But their efforts may all be for naught in the face of the latest onslaught. A new full-scale study has now appeared by a professor of Jewish Studies in Israel, Abraham Melamed, who claims that the attackers of the Talmud and Midrash were right all along. In fact, Melamed goes much further than his like-minded predecessors. In his book, *The Image of the Black in Jewish Culture*, originally published in Hebrew one year ago, Melamed argues that rabbinic Judaism developed an image of the Black as ultimate Other – as inferior, animal-like, ugly, dirty, sexually promiscuous, violent, cruel, and by nature a treacherous slave (passim, the fullest list is on p. 99). This image, absent in the Bible and truly an “authentic product of rabbinical culture” (3), then permeated medieval Jewish culture and continued into modern times. Needless to say, this book, written by an Israeli, a Jew, and a professor of Jewish studies no less, will cause considerable damage to Black-Jewish relations in this country. The book is a dangerous book, not only because of the harm it will cause but because it will do its damage on the basis of terribly faulty scholarship.

On the face of it, it sounds strange that the Rabbis of Israel and Babylonia during the first few centuries of the Common Era, would be so concerned with the black African. But Melamed has a theory: the rabbinic anti-Black attitude developed in accord with “the conceptual framework of recent postmodern theories of the ‘other’,” which explain “the mechanism by which an ethno-religious minority group, considered by the dominant majority to be the inferior ‘other,’ identifies its own other” (from the back cover of the book; similarly on p. 7). The mechanism comes into play due to “the usually subconscious psychological needs, and economic and social interests of the male elite” (3). In this case, the minority Jews, considered by the dominant Europeans (Greeks and Romans) to be inferior, identified the Black as its own inferior other. They focused on the Black because in Greece and Rome of antiquity, although most slaves were not Black, most Blacks were slaves, former slaves, or of inferior social classes, and their conspicuous color easily identified them. Black and slave thus became almost synonymous terms (62-63, 94). This led to negative attitudes toward Blacks in Graeco-Roman culture, which then influenced Jewish society during the rabbinic period. Although these attitudes originated from outside the Jewish world, the rabbinic view of and sentiment toward Blacks was more extreme than that of the Hellenistic world (67) because rabbinic culture has a “strong tendency to withdrawal, to regard aliens with great suspicion even if and when they agree to internalize Jewish values” (68). The subconscious glue that held all this together was the universal negative connotations of blackness, which were then transferred to dark-skinned people.

These are the theoretical underpinnings of Melamed’s study which are used to explain his findings of a negative sentiment toward Blacks in rabbinic literature. Whether Melamed has proved his thesis depends upon the answers to three questions: whether his theoretical underpinnings are historically grounded, whether his methodological approach is properly nuanced, and whether his readings of the rabbinic texts are correct. In fact the answer to all questions must be in the negative. Given Melamed’s credentials it couldn’t have been otherwise because, like those who preceded him, he has no expertise in the area about which he writes. Melamed is a scholar of medieval and early modern Jewish thought. He has no training, nor has he ever written about, rabbinic culture and literature in late antiquity, the focus of the first, and crucial, part of his book. The result, as we shall see, is a book that is seriously flawed in almost every respect: it is sophomorically conceived, amateurishly implemented, and sloppily produced.

The Theory: Historically Uninformed and Methodologically Unsophisticated

The very underpinnings of Melamed's reconstruction are based on a number of historical errors. As Melamed has imagined things, skin color is the means through which the "psychological, economic, and social factors" operated to instill an anti-Black sentiment in rabbinic society. An important pillar in his argument is the Greek ideal of beauty. According to Melamed the Greeks admired light skin and as a consequence, anyone with dark skin, such as the Jew and the Black, was perceived as unaesthetic (31-32). Dominated by Greek culture holding such views, the Jewish other distinguished himself from the Black other. "When the ruling majority culture ... placed the Jew along with the black in the group of inferior others, Jews increasingly tended to differentiate themselves from blacks. It began in the time of the Sages.... It is a common phenomenon in mass psychology that repressed groups long to find and repress their inferiors" (32, see also 43). Because the Jews were not truly white but a shade between black and white, they especially had to distinguish themselves from the Blacks "defining them as totally other" (4, similarly 32-33).

In this reconstruction three fundamental problems are immediately apparent. First, the Greek admiration for light skin was for female light skin only. Aristotle noted that the Greeks saw the typical woman as light-skinned and the typical man as dark-skinned, a perception well illustrated by the women in Aristophanes' play who attempted to look like men by, among other things, staying in the sun all day to become as dark as possible.⁵ As Melamed himself recognizes (48), the same perception continued into the Roman period, where the ideal male somatic type was of a pale-brown complexion and the ideal female complexion was decidedly lighter, the *femineus pallor*.⁶ Why, then, should a preference for lighter skinned women translate into a general antipathy toward dark-skinned Jews or black Africans as Melamed thinks (35, 92, 97, passim)? It would make as much, if not more, sense to say that a preference for darker skinned men translated into a sympathy for dark-skinned Jews and Africans.

The second problem with Melamed's reconstruction is his claim that the Greeks saw the skin color of the Jew as noticeably darker than their own complexion. Surprisingly, he offers no proof for this assertion. Instead, in a paragraph of admirable obfuscation, he opens with a declaration that the Greek ideal of beauty, among other things, "defined as aesthetic a light skin," that because of this and other physical features "a common denominator was created" between the Black and the Jew (31). Melamed then moves on to find a parallel between broad-footed Africans in rabbinic literature and flat-footed Jews in pseudo-scientific literature of the 19th and 20th centuries, and he finally ends the paragraph with a comparison between Shylock's black cloak in the *Merchant of Venice* and the black Moor in *Titus Andronicus*. Are a black cloak and a Moor meant to provide evidence of the Jew's skin color? Are Shakespeare and 19th-century literature quoted to provide evidence for classical antiquity? Are these Melamed's proofs for his assertion that the Greeks saw the Jews as dark skinned? Melamed refers to Hellenistic claims that the Jews were expelled from Egypt because they were lepers, which "made them blacks" (31), but there is no such Hellenistic source. In fact, no proof could be provided because the Jew's dark complexion did not become noticeable until he became part of the lighter demographic landscape of Europe north of the Mediterranean basin. The Greeks and Romans, however, shared

⁵ Aristotle, *Generation of Animals* 1.20 (727b). Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazusae* 64, and note the scholiast's remark quoted by Benjamin B. Rogers in the LCL edition. Regarding Aristophanes' *Clouds* 1012, see K.J. Dover's remarks in his edition and commentary (Oxford UK, 1968), ad loc.

⁶ Lloyd Thompson, *Romans and Blacks* (Norman Oklahoma, 1989), pp. 32, 35, 51, 131-134.

the same dark coloring as the Jew. As the classicist, Lloyd Thompson wrote, in the Roman perception the only physical feature that distinguished the Jew was his circumcision, not his skin color.⁷

We encounter the same problematic use of sources later in the book when Melamed tries to force his interpretation of a rabbinic midrash (*pTa'an* 1.6, 64d). He thinks that the words of the midrash “the raven went forth different from other creatures” mean that the raven, originally white, turned black (81, 115). Not finding any rabbinic text to buttress this interpretation (in fact, the parallel midrash in the Babylonian Talmud excludes such an interpretation), Melamed turns to Latin literature and quotes Ovid’s folktale of the originally white raven becoming black as punishment for excessive chattering (81). Ovid to prove rabbinic literature, Shakespeare to prove classical literature – it’s all the same.

The third problem concerns Melamed’s proofs for a Jewish admiration of gentile (i.e. Greek and Roman) light skin. Melamed claims to find evidence of this in rabbinic sources but, in fact, his proofs are all based on later material or on misunderstood rabbinic texts (33). His support from the 8th- or 9th-century *Pirqei de-Rabbi Eliezer* is obviously irrelevant for determining rabbinic views in late antiquity. Not only was *Pirqei de-Rabbi Eliezer* composed at least six to ten centuries later than the classical rabbinic texts, but it derives from a different cultural milieu. Melamed’s other support is a talmudic statement that a Jew should not show favor to idolaters in the Land of Israel (so not to encourage their immigration), which is understood by the talmudic authors to mean that one should not publicly praise an idolater for his or her good works or good looks. It is clear from the talmudic discussion, however, that the rabbinic objection was to the public proclamation, not to the recognition or even admiration of beauty. The Talmud even mandates that one ought to praise God for creating an outstandingly beautiful person, be he or she even an idolater, as Rabbi Shim’on ben Gamaliel was said to have done when he saw a beautiful gentile woman pass by (*bAZ* 20a). Clearly, this talmudic discussion says or implies nothing about a general Jewish admiration for the gentile appearance nor for gentile light skin, as Melamed thinks. In sum, Melamed’s theoretical underpinnings disappear: the Greeks and Romans did not admire light skin in a man, they did not see the Jews as darker, and there is no evidence that as a consequence the Jews admired gentile light skin.

Melamed’s lack of methodological sophistication confuses not only different times and cultures but also different types of antiblack sentiment. A number of rabbinic (and biblical) statements depict dark skin (of men) as the result of various physiological (hunger, illness) or psychological (sadness, gloom) causes. So, for example, Lamentations 4:7-9 contrasts the gaunt, dark look of a starving person with the clear, radiant skin of health. In postbiblical literature, “his/her face became black” is commonly found as a figure of speech to indicate distress or sadness, such as in the *Thanksgiving Hymns* 5:32-35 (1QH xiii 32-35) of the Dead Sea Scrolls: “The light of my face has become gloomy with deep darkness, my countenance has changed into gloom.” Do these expressions reveal a negative sentiment toward a normal dark complexion, and consequently toward black Africans? In an astounding conceptual leap, Melamed thinks so (22, 91, 97). But these descriptions of dark skin – found, by the way, also in Akkadian and early Arabic literature

⁷ Thompson, *Romans and Blacks*, pp. 64-66. Similarly, Shaye Cohen speaking of both Greek and Roman authors (“‘Those Who Say They Are Jews and Are Not’: How Do You Know a Jew in Antiquity When You See One?” in *Diasporas in Antiquity*, ed. Shaye Cohen and Ernest Frerichs, Atlanta, 1993, pp. 3-4; idem, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, Berkeley, 1999, pp. 29-30).

as well as in our contemporary idioms – reflect only how the ancients – and we – see the starving and/or depressed physiognomy. The negative reaction is toward the underlying ill health, not toward its chromatic expression.

Similarly, Melamed fails to distinguish between anti-Black sentiment and ethnocentrism (e.g., 61). Scholars who have dealt with race relations in antiquity stress this point: ethnocentrism is not tantamount to racism. Building on the work of the sociologist H. Hoetink, who studied Caribbean society, they note that ethnocentrism is a universal phenomenon that gives aesthetic preference to the somatic norm of any given society.⁸ When assessing attitudes toward the Black, a proper analysis would differentiate between somatic ethnocentrism, gender color preference, underlying physical or psychological conditions, and true anti-Black racist sentiment. Melamed, instead, in a most confusing manner lumps them all together.

Misreading the Evidence

Whatever historical inaccuracies and methodological manglings Melamed foists on the reader, ultimately the truth of his claim rests upon whether the ancient sources say what he claims they say. Unfortunately, time after time Melamed's misreadings of the rabbinic sources are apparent. A paradigmatic example of the many types of problems found in the book occurs in Melamed's treatment of one talmudic story. *bQid* 39b-40a reports that a certain Rabbi, fleeing the sexual advances of a woman, hid all night in a dangerous bathhouse and was protected by "two bearers of the Caesar (שני נושאי קיסר שמרוני)," a reference to the bearers of the imperial litter (Melamed's translation "armour bearers" is no doubt copied from the English translation and is incorrect). Melamed jumps on a variant reading of "Kushites" (כושאי) for "bearers" (נושאי), printed in the margins of the standard editions of the Talmud, and asserts that "the original text obviously referred to black slavery in the Roman world" (100). This reading of the story would put the Blacks in a positive light, which contradicts Melamed's thesis, so "the language of opposites" is invoked to say that the Blacks are really white angels (101).

Melamed's reading of this text is mistaken at several levels. The reading "Kushites" is found only in the late anthology *Aggadot ha-Talmud*; all extant manuscripts of the Talmud have נושאי or obvious corruptions of it. Litter bearers were chosen for their strength and thus are aptly cast as protectors. The Aramaic כושאי is out of place in the Hebrew line. Finally, regarding Melamed's strange interpretation that the story refers to angels, it is apparent that he relied on the popular Art Scroll translation of the Talmud, which accepts the angelic interpretation suggested in the 19th-century traditional commentary *Ben Yehoyada* of Joseph Ḥayyim ben Elijah al-Ḥakam. There is no question that a correct reading of this talmudic text does not find Blacks in the story. The difference between כושאי (Kushites) and נושאי (bearers) is in the two very similarly written letters, כ and נ. Clearly, "Kushites" is just a scribal error.

Within the space of two paragraphs Melamed commits five errors (aside from his adoption of an incorrect English translation): he doesn't notice that the word *kusha'ei* is Aramaic, not Hebrew;

⁸ Frank Snowden, *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks* (Cambridge MA, 1983), pp. 75-79, and *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Graeco-Roman Experience* (Cambridge MA, 1970), pp. 171-179; Lloyd Thompson in *Romans and Blacks*, passim; see index, "somatic norm image."

he refers to the Munich manuscript of the Talmud as reading *kusha'ei*, while this manuscript in fact does not support such a reading; he supplies no reference for a statement that Goths and blacks were often bodyguards of the emperor; the reading of the story as a parable and the bodyguards as angels is entirely unwarranted; finally, a translation error from the Hebrew to the English version is found in the reconstructed “original” reading of the text, “two imperial black armor-bearers.” The text had either “black” or “armor-bearers,” not both.

The types of errors exhibited in this example are repeated throughout the book. Let us start with text critical issues. Ever since the discovery of medieval rabbinic manuscripts more than a century ago, a sine qua non of scholarship dealing with the rabbinic world and its literature has been the use of variant readings found in the newly discovered materials. For a number of reasons the rabbinic corpus, especially the Babylonian Talmud, was textually corrupted during the course of its transmission. It is by now axiomatic that research in any way dependent on these texts must have recourse to all extant readings. For several rabbinic works, critical editions exist and, although they need updating based on newer discoveries, they facilitate the search for an accurate text. Melamed, however, is seemingly unaware of all this, for the use of critical editions is all but absent from his book. The result is an overwhelming impression of dilettantism. His historical reconstructions based on incorrect readings very often lead him to make one error after another. Following are a few examples.

Melamed sees a “link between drunkenness and skin color” because of a rabbinic text (*bQid* 49b) that he reads as: “Ten [measures] of drunkenness descended to the world: nine were taken by blacks (*kushim*)” (97). The correct reading, however, found in the Munich and Oxford manuscripts, the first printed edition, and even recorded as an alternative reading in the standard editions of the Talmud, has “blackness” in place of “drunkenness.” Of course, “blackness” is the correct reading and makes perfect sense, while “drunkenness” makes no sense at all. In Hebrew the difference between the two words (שחירות-שכרות) is slight – in one letter only – and scribal corruption readily occurred. The correct reading “blackness,” by the way, was incorporated into the German translation of the Talmud (ed. L. Goldschmidt) in 1932, and it is recorded in a footnote in the English translation published by the Soncino press (ed. I. Epstein) in 1938. Melamed was led to his misreading, again, because he did not investigate variant readings and relied instead on the standard printed edition of the Talmud or, perhaps, on the English translation.

Melamed even sees a Black-drunkenness connection in biblical times. Jeremiah’s “Can the Kushi change his skin?” (13:23) to describe the sinning Israelites is not just a metaphor of immutability but it is used deliberately in the context of Israelite drunkenness and promiscuity because these are “two attributes later attributed to the black” (57). In other words, Jeremiah used a metaphor based on that which didn’t exist in the future and he expected the people to understand him.

Because Melamed is so sure that the Rabbis considered Blacks to be drunkards and because he misunderstood a midrash (to be discussed later) to say that Canaan became black, he omits crucial words in a text that would undermine these beliefs. Regarding the biblical story of Noah’s drunkenness in Genesis 9, he quotes a rabbinic text (*NumR* 10.2 and 8) that “mention[s] penalties for drunkenness, connecting it directly to the punishment of Canaan: ‘so wine caused ... the world to be cursed’” (99). The words that he omitted are “a third of” (“so wine caused a third of the world to be cursed”), referring to Ham, from whom, together with his two brothers Shem and Japhet, the world was populated. Ham, not Canaan, was punished.

Another example of Melamed’s inability to deal with text-critical issues is apparent when he

discovers a discussion of Black hair styles in rabbinic literature (250n61). The talmudic reference to the hair style of the *kushim* (*bNaz* 39a), however, is but a scribal error for *kuthim* ‘gentiles,’ as can be seen by consulting the manuscript evidence and medieval and early modern quotations which preserve the original pre-censored *goyim*. This hair style (*belurit*) of the gentiles is mentioned a number of times in the rabbinic corpus in regard to a custom of Greek and Roman youth to offer their hair to the gods upon reaching puberty. Anyone familiar with rabbinic literature would immediately recognize “*belurit* of the *kuthim*” as a common, well-known, topic of rabbinic discussion, and would have therefore suspected *kushim* as a corrupt, and incorrect, reading.

A midrash found in the printed edition of *GenR* 60.3 includes the Kushite among those who would have been inappropriate for marriage to King Saul’s daughter. Of course, Melamed (105) does not deal with the readings of several manuscripts and medieval quotations of *Genesis Rabba*, which do not have “Kushites.” Nor does it occur to him that the fact that the two parallels to this story in the rabbinic corpus (*LevR* 37.4 and *bTa’an* 4a) make no mention of a Kushite, may be relevant to his discussion.

Melamed completely misunderstood the story of Rabbi Akiba’s encounter with a ghost (*KallahR* 2.9). The description of the ghost as naked and black as coal leads Melamed to conclude that “the blackened man ... had become an authentic black, and, stereotypically, naked as well.” (247n44). The ghost’s blackness and nakedness, however, are not due to any stereotyping of the Black but to the fact that the ghost has just emerged from hell, where the fires have burned him. Several versions of this story, which Melamed was obviously unaware of, explicitly mention this detail.

Misunderstanding the Text

When text-critical issues are not relevant, that is, when the reading of a text is secure, Melamed misunderstands what he reads in almost every instance.

Probably the most important text for Melamed’s thesis is a midrash (*GenR* 36.7) in which, he claims, Canaan becomes black. Since the Bible (Gen 9:25) makes Canaan the ancestor of all slaves, a rabbinic story that considers Canaan to have also been the ancestor of all Blacks has powerful ramifications. The notion that Blacks descended from Canaan is not new. It is found in Arabic literature from the 9th century onward and in the Syriac Christian work, the *Cave of Treasures*, as early as the 4th (or possibly the 3rd) century. But it is not found in rabbinic literature. Despite the numerous times that Melamed repeats his claim of the midrashic blackening of Canaan (22, 36, 64, 85, 86, 88, 89, 97, 99, 248nn47, 50, 51), the midrash does not say this. It says, rather, that Ham, the father of Canaan, turned black. The difference is important since Ham, according to biblical genealogy, was also the father of the Egyptians, Kushites (Nubians, Ethiopians), and Putites (Somalians or Libyans), who were seen as dark-skinned. In other words, the rabbinic Ham-turned-black midrash is an etiology meant to account for dark-skinned people (humanity’s original couple was, of course, the color of the midrashic authors) and has nothing to do with slavery. Melamed misunderstood the midrash which has Noah declare to Ham that his “seed” (*zar‘o*) will become dark-skinned. “Seed” refers to Ham’s descendants in toto, not only to one of them (Canaan), as Melamed thinks. The variant reading “may that man be” (euphemistically for “may you be”), is only a different way of saying the same thing, i.e. the curse fell on Ham and thus all his descendants. That the curse fell on Ham is clear also from the midrashic juxtaposition of this midrash with a second midrash of Ham becoming black, as noted by Theodor in his critical edition of *GenR*. Thus, Melamed’s key support for a Black-slave

connection via a rabbinic curse of blackness on Canaan does not exist.

The rabbinic linkage of the very light skinned and the very dark skinned in some texts (e.g. *Ginzei Schechter* 1:86) is not due to their mutual “inferiority,” as Melamed thinks (251n62a), but because the lightest and the darkest skinned people act as a merism representing all the peoples of the world. The same merism occurs in Graeco-Roman sources and in New Testament literature.⁹

“Black skin is presented as a wound that does not heal – in every way a defect” (78). Let us see how Melamed comes to this conclusion. The rabbinic text (*bShab* 107b) states that liability for wounding someone on the Sabbath applies only if the wound is permanent. Proof is brought from Jeremiah 13:23, “Can the Kushite/Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots (*ḥabarburah*)?” with the last word being read exegetically as if it were *ḥaburah* (wound). Thus the idea of immutability in the verse is applied to a wound. The exegetical link is linguistic, not topical (and even if it were topical, the link would be between the leopard and the wound). To say that by making this exegetical connection the Rabbis presented Black skin as a wound is as valid as saying that the Rabbis presented certain illicit sexual unions (Lev 20:11, 12, 13, 16) as speaking with the dead through mediums and spirits (Lev 20:27), for they derived the method of punishment for the former from the latter on the basis of a shared linguistic expression (דמיהם בם) (*bKer* 5a).

A similar error occurs when Melamed discusses the midrashic link between Ham’s sin of looking at his father’s nakedness (Gen 9:22) and Isaiah 20:4, “The king of Assyria will lead away the Egyptian captives and Kushite exiles, young and old, naked and barefoot, with buttocks uncovered to the shame of Egypt.” Since Egypt and Kush descended from Ham, the Rabbis saw the verse in Isaiah as an indication of Ham’s punishment. Melamed claims that the motivation for the rabbinic connection of these two verses was anti-Black sentiment. Since the Isaiah passage is “the only text in the Bible where the black is portrayed in an unambiguously degrading way ... it was no accidental choice of the Midrashic author’s [sic] to use it” (82). Aside from overlooking the fact that the verse mentions Egyptians as well as Kushites, Melamed errs in seeing anti-Black sentiment behind the midrash. It was not anti-Black sentiment that motivated the rabbinic midrash but linguistic similarity: Ham “saw his father’s nakedness (*erwah*)” and was therefore punished by going into exile “with buttocks uncovered to the shame (*erwah*) of Egypt.”

Melamed misreads *bBekh* 44b-45b in three different, and egregious, ways. First, he thinks that a reference to “one whose looks are black” means “an actual black” (243n28), while it actually concerns dark-skinned Jewish priests, not black Africans. Second, he thinks that a passage is concerned “about groups disqualified from the commandment of redeeming the male firstborn... [in which] the black appears among the deviants” (74), but the passage is concerned, once again, with Jewish priests and that which disqualifies them from serving in the temple; there is neither firstborn nor Black in this passage. Third, he is convinced that a discussion of defective sex organs “fits in well with the accepted stereotype [of promiscuous Blacks]” (244n28), whereas the discussion of sex organs and of skin color constitute two separate and unrelated categories, and in neither case are Blacks under consideration.

⁹ See David Goldenberg, “Scythian-Barbarian: The Permutations of a Classical Topos in Jewish and Christian Texts of Late Antiquity,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 49 (1998) 87-102.

Such mistakes occur throughout the book, such as when Melamed claims that the Rabbis identified Potiphar as a Black slave (83). Melamed was thinking of Potiphar's wife (*MidPs* 7.3), and she is identified as a Black (or, black) but not a slave. Another example: the statement in *LevR* 17.5 (p. 382) that "Ham sinned and Canaan was punished" is not a reference to Canaan turning black, as Melamed thinks (80). It is, rather, a reference to the biblical punishment of Canaan's enslavement.

Many of Melamed's misunderstandings of the rabbinic material are the forced results of imposing his theories on the texts. For example, commenting on the selling of Joseph by the Ishmaelites (Gen 39:1), a midrash notes that this is not what would be expected: "Usually the light-skinned (*germani*) sells the dark-skinned (*kushi*), but here the dark-skinned sells the light-skinned" (*GenR* 86.3). Instead of seeing this as a reflection of reality, Melamed explains the passage in a most convoluted way in order to advance his mistaken view that the Rabbis admired a light complexion. The midrash, says Melamed, sees the white "as having the perfect complexion and hence necessarily a born master" (102). In another case, his misunderstanding results in a reading of a biblical text that is self-contradictory. He admits that there is no indication in the Bible that Miriam's objection to Moses' Kushite wife (Numbers 12) was the Kushite's skin color, and yet he claims that Miriam's punishment fit the crime in that "her own skin turned white with a disease – 'leprous as white as snow'" (56). The logic displayed here escapes me.

Melamed sees black color, black people, and black slaves everywhere in rabbinic literature. The twisted reasoning he uses to arrive at such conclusions may be illustrated by the following example. He thinks that a midrashic parable (*GenR* 86.4) compares Potiphar's wife to a bear because the Rabbis saw her as a dark-skinned Kushite and a bear has dark fur (95). The comparison with a bear, however, has nothing to do with a bear's dark fur. The parable, rather, is meant to show the hidden danger of Potiphar's wife, as seen in the biblical story (Genesis 39), just as a performing bear dressed up in fine clothes and jewels is dangerous despite outward appearances.

Melamed assumes an implicit connection between slave and Black and reads that assumption into every possible rabbinic text. As we saw, he misunderstood *Genesis Rabbah* to say that Canaan was turned black. What drove him to this misunderstanding is the assumption that since Canaan was punished by slavery in the biblical account, the Rabbis must have understood that he was Black, "since in the socio-economic reality of their time slavery was identified more and more with the black" (86). Discussing the *she-lo' 'asani* morning prayers, Melamed says that the words "hast not made me a slave" for all intents and purposes means the Black since rabbinic literature sees the Black "as slave by nature" (73)! Another Black-slave connection lies behind Melamed's mistaken notion that the Rabbis saw Potiphar – not his wife – as a Black. How did Melamed come up with this idea? The Bible describes Potiphar as a slave and a eunuch (Gen 39:1). He must therefore have been Black (83). Melamed finds additional proof in the fact that "Potiphar" is elsewhere (*GenR* 86.3) linked by the Rabbis with the Hebrew root *p'r*, which Melamed thinks refers to sexual immodesty, a characteristic of Blacks in Melamed's reading of the Rabbis. So, of course, Potiphar has to be Black, and if he is Black, he must be a slave (83). (Incidentally, *p'r* in the rabbinic idiom does not mean sexual immodesty.)

Where Melamed is forced to admit that there is no connection between Black and slave, he makes the connection anyway. Referring to the story of Ham's blackening in the ark, Melamed says, "This tradition links the punishment with a blackened skin, not slavery, though we have already noted the historical connection between the two" (80). At one point he is confused why the rabbinic text doesn't explicitly mention the connection he is sure must exist. He wonders why the

Rabbis didn't identify Eliezer, the Canaanite slave of Abraham, as a Black, since, according to Melamed's thinking, Canaan was the ancestor of Black slaves: "He [Eliezer] should, then, have been identified as a black, which he is not" (103). This is indeed a problem, but as this example shows so clearly, the problem is not in a rabbinic inconsistency but in Melamed's mind, for it is only there that a Black-slave connection exists.

To buttress his theory that the Black is perceived by the Rabbis as the ultimate gentile, Melamed points to a midrash (*LevR* 6.6), "where the Romans [the archetypical gentiles] are specifically identified with darkness, hence their possible association with the blacks" (217). But in this text, the Romans are specifically *not* identified with darkness. It is Egypt, not Rome, that is there identified with darkness.

A rabbinic story (*NumR* 9.34) of a black (*kushi*) couple who gave birth to a white child, is misunderstood by Melamed, once again, because of his agenda. Since the Rabbis, "were so uncomfortable about the birth of children who were too black, they regarded the truly extraordinary case of the white child born to the black couple in a positive light, a positive deviation from the natural order" (76). For this reason, Melamed thinks, Rabbi Akiba legitimized the birth of the white child. "Obviously, he would have reacted differently in the reverse direction," that is, if it were a black child born to white parents. The issue in this story is not somatic preference but law – is the white baby the child of the black couple? Akiba's answer would have been the same "in the reverse direction."

Of course, since the couple was black, Melamed assumes that the story reflects the stereotype of the Black as sexually promiscuous (76-77). He notes a post-talmudic (*Sefer ha-Musar*) story of a black child born to white parents and comments that it reflects the belief that "if one thinks of sin during coitus, the child will be defective – and the black child is an example" (244n30). Not at all. The blackness of the characters connotes neither promiscuity nor sin. These stories constitute a literary topos and are commonly found across cultures and times. They are meant to show the possibility of the implausible by means of "maternal impression" (the mother looking at an object at the moment of conception) and thus to absolve the mother of suspicions of adultery. These stories, whether from classical Greece or 18th-century England, are mostly told about white parents (because they are told in white societies), which by Melamed's logic would mean that they reflect a stereotype of the white as sexually promiscuous. The rabbinic story is of a dark-skinned couple because it takes place in Arabia, whose inhabitants are dark-skinned. Several medieval Jewish sources record the story in both directions – dark-skinned parents with a light-skinned child and vice versa.¹⁰

Another example of Melamed reading his agenda into a legal text concerns Rabbi Ishmael's (2nd century) statement that the Jews were not as dark as the Kushites nor as light as the Germans (*mNeg* 2.1). Melamed mistakenly thinks that this reflects a rabbinic preference for a midway skin color and a disparagement of the too dark and too light (36, 60, 68). I have no doubt that the Rabbis considered their own skin color as ideal, for such ethnocentric conceit is universal. R. Ishmael's statement, however, is not an expression of chromatic preference. It is, rather, a legal qualifier explaining that the brightness of the skin discoloration (*baheret*), mentioned among the

¹⁰ See, e.g., Moses Gaster ed., *The Ma'aseh Book* (Philadelphia, 1934), pp. 648-649, #248, and pp. 240-244, #134; "Baraita de-Masekhet Nidah" in Ch. Horowitz, *Tosfata 'Atiqata* 5:56; J. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* (New York, 1939), p.187 and note.

biblical diseases, is to be based on the relative skin color of the Jews, for whom the biblical laws were prescribed.

A similar misunderstanding of legal material occurs when Melamed discusses a rabbinic account of a conversation between the Jewish high priest and an Arab that took place on Yom Kippur (*NumR* 2.26). In the course of conversation the Arab's saliva trickled onto the high priest's clothing and the high priest was declared ritually unclean to serve in the temple on the holy day. Remarkably, Melamed wonders whether the Arab's "blackness is linked to his ability to defile" (245n35). This story obviously exemplifies certain laws of ritual purity and implies nothing about the "Arab's blackness."

Ignoring Contradictory or Problematic Evidence

Melamed glosses over evidence that contradicts or is otherwise problematic to his theory. Often he just ignores the problem. Sometimes he will say that the evidence is an exception but not provide an explanation as to how such exceptions could occur or what their significance might be. When he does attempt an explanation, it is so feeble that it amounts to an avoidance of the problem. Some examples follow:

The rabbinic positive attitude toward Jeremiah's savior, Ebed-melekh the Kushite (e.g., he is considered one of the select few who did not die, but entered paradise alive; *KallahR* 3.23 and elsewhere) is mentioned only incidentally at the end of a discussion (58). Melamed offers no explanation as to how such a positive view can be sustained in what he believes is an anti-Black rabbinic environment.

Melamed notes but does not explain how the Rabbis (*GenR* 60.7) could interpret Laban's name, which means 'white', as "burnt white with wickedness" (245n32). Hardly an interpretation at home in an anti-black, pro-white environment.

Melamed notes that references to Blacks – especially what he considers negative references – are "numerous" in the Babylonian Talmud but few in the Palestinian Talmud (65). The proportions should be reversed according to Melamed's theory, since it was in Palestine, under Graeco-Roman cultural and economic influence, where the low position of the Black was in evidence, not in Persian Babylonia. No explanation is offered, nor is the matter even considered problematic.

A feeble attempt to deal with contradictory evidence involves the story mentioned earlier of the Rabbi who hid in the bathhouse to escape the sexual advances of a woman and was protected by Blacks (following Melamed's misreading). But according to Melamed's thinking, the Rabbis saw Blacks as sexually promiscuous, not as protectors of rabbinic chastity. Melamed's answer: in this story Blacks appear in the context of sexual promiscuity since the woman is pursuing the rabbi (101). This answer is tantamount to arguing that the Pope promotes abortion since so many of his pronouncements appear in the context of discussions on abortion.

Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer 24 says that God blessed Ham with dark skin. This certainly does not indicate an anti-Black sentiment in rabbinic literature. Melamed's explanation? "This is simply the exception that proves the rule" (90).

Demetrius, the Hellenistic-Jewish chronographer and exegete, could accept the idea that Moses married a Black woman (*Num* 12:1) because Demetrius "worked in an Hellenistic cultural

environment” (119). But according to Melamed, Hellenistic culture was just as anti-Black in this regard. The Greek ideal of feminine beauty, Melamed acknowledges, excluded dark skin. Indeed, Melamed argues that it was Greek culture and aesthetics that influenced the Jews (32).

Without doubt the most inventive dodge Melamed uses to dismiss unwanted evidence is something he calls “the language of opposites.” Whenever Blacks appear in a positive light in rabbinic literature and they can’t be explained away, the text really means Whites but the rabbinic author is using “the language of opposites.” My favorite example is the story of the Rabbi in the bathhouse, where, as we saw, Melamed’s Blacks became white angels. Not only is this reading unwarranted, but Melamed’s very use of the rhetorical device is flawed. “Language of opposites” is Melamed’s translation of *leshon sagi nahor* in the original Hebrew book. But this term describes the substitution of a positive expression for a negative aspect of reality, i.e., a euphemism. Thus a blind person is called *sagi nahor* ‘full of light,’ from which the term was generalized. Obviously then this rhetorical device would not be used to explain the substitution of Blacks for Whites, since Blacks always carry a negative connotation according to Melamed. Similar misuse of the term occurs when Melamed tries to understand why the midrash (e.g. *Sifre Num* 99) treats the biblical Kushite as a positive metaphor for the good or beautiful (93, 116). As for Melamed’s inclusion of Joseph under this rubric (93, 94), well, I have no idea what he means, since Joseph is never characterized as black or as a Kushite.

Intertextuality Gone Wild

Although he never defines his method of reading texts, Melamed’s approach is heavily intertextual. This allows for the “associative identification of dark skin color with the deviant, inferior and defective” (77-78, 245n36). Wherever ‘black’ and ‘*kushi*’ occur or are implied in rabbinic literature the words are made to bear some or all the negative connotations of fear, violence, bestiality, promiscuity, deviance, etc. Of course, intertextuality is a valid approach to reading texts. The problem in using such an approach lies in determining boundaries. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. Here are some examples of Melamed’s boundless associations.

A rabbinic term for youth is “black” (*tishḥoret*) referring to hair color (e.g. *Avot* 3:12). The association of black hair color with youth is obvious, but Melamed would rather see the origin of this term in a metaphor based on the negative connotations of blackness. Since “premodern culture unequivocally preferred age to youth,” the rabbinic association of youth with black hair and age with white hair is really “a metaphor for a positive change in the human condition” (15). What would Melamed do with the parallel *sheḥorei ro’sh* (‘black heads’), which in early rabbinic sources means ‘men’ as opposed to women and children (*mNed* 3.8)? In this case the preferred category (men) is depicted as ‘black’ – how would Melamed reconcile this with black negative connotations? An even wilder example of Melamed’s intertextual associations concerns the etymology of the “black widow” spider, which is commonly derived from the fact that after mating, the female eats the male, thus assuring its widowhood, which is illustrated by its black ‘clothing’ of mourning. According to Melamed, there is much more to it, for “a widow is no longer in awe of her husband, indicating the intense danger inherent in her.” Thus, the spider’s color “indicates not only mourning, but a reminder that the creature is once again dangerous,” as a woman is before and after marriage (18). Other absurd associations abound, e.g. “a shadow of himself” means “one who shows the ravages of suffering,” since a shadow is dark (21). Of course, the phrase derives from the insubstantial nature of a shadow compared to the substantiality of the person himself. For the same reason “a shadow of a doubt” indicates a small degree of doubt and does not derive from the negative association of darkness and uncertainty

(21). Probably the most ridiculous of these associations concerns a talmudic account (*bShab* 31a) of a pagan's attempt to try Hillel's legendary patience with various questions, one of which is why Africans have broad feet. Melamed sees here an "associative link" between the Black's feet and Satan's cloven hooves (31-32).

Melamed applies his intertextual associations of dark skin even to descriptions of inanimate objects. Thus dark-colored citrons (*ethrogim*) are invalid for performing the religious obligation required by Lev 23:40 because of the negative connotations of blackness. Contrary to what Melamed thinks, however, the rabbinic prohibition of dark citrons (*mSuk* 3.6) does not indicate an existential dread of dark skin (see 245n36). The Rabbis ruled out black *ethrogim* (as well as other abnormal colors and shapes) for the same reason that a grocer would not display a rotten black banana. Unless he were a postmodern intertextual grocer, he would just consider this good business practice.

Nor would a postmodern wine merchant stay in business very long. Melamed cannot understand why a midrash (*bShab* 62b-63a) "identifies white wine as inferior and red wine as preferable," since "the dichotomy between positive [i.e. light colored] and negative [i.e. dark] points in the opposite direction" (250n60). Of course, the midrashic author was using metaphors drawn from the real world. I doubt that even the most esoteric wine critic would judge the quality of wine based on "the dichotomy between positive and negative" associations of light and dark colors.

Melamed's intertextual associations extend as well to the biblical text. The plaint of the peasant maiden in Song of Songs 1:5-6 ("I am black but beautiful, O daughters of Jerusalem.... Don't look at me that I am black, for it is the sun that has darkened me") is not a reflection of the opposing realities and attitudes of the rural and urban classes, as Bible scholars take for granted. These lines rather indicate a fear that "the individual who has such a [suntanned] complexion could be identified with one who is naturally black – with all the negative aesthetic and moral connotations" (43).

A final example of intertextual madness concerns the Ham-became-black midrash, which, as mentioned above, is a key source for Melamed's theory. Although this rabbinic midrash is not connected with the biblical story of Noah's drunkenness, Melamed conflates the two accounts and thinks that Ham was blackened "because of his conduct with the drunken Noah" (49 et passim). This allows him to declare that according to the midrash the "descendants [of Ham and Canaan] were to suffer perpetual slavery and black skin for ever" (68), despite his acknowledgement that the midrash speaks only of Ham's dark skin and says nothing of slavery (80). But the linkage of blackness and slavery is crucial for Melamed's theory of a rabbinic contempt for Blacks. The way he imaginatively constructs the linkage shows what can be done when all controls are lifted. A different rabbinic text (*bNid* 17a), states that although sex should be a private affair, if privacy is not available one is permitted to engage in sex in the presence of slaves. Melamed now intertextualizes this text into the midrash: "Since Ham did not preserve his modesty by abstaining from sexual relations in the ark before others, his punishment fits the crime and he becomes a slave in whose presence sex is permitted" (80). Presto! Ham, who did *not* become a slave in the ark nevertheless becomes a slave in the ark by means of a most uncontrolled reading of the text.

Linguistic Ignorance

The problems I have thus far pointed out are of misreadings or misunderstandings of texts. The

same level of scholarship is exhibited in many other ways as well. There are numerous linguistic errors, mostly of confused etymologies, roots or meanings. The Hebrew root *‘rb* meaning ‘pleasant’ is not related to *‘oreb* ‘raven’ as Melamed thinks (19); *‘oreb* derives from a root with an initial *ghayn* while *‘rb* ‘pleasant’ has an original *‘ayn*. Nor is there any evidence that *šaharut* ‘darkness’ and *šahar* ‘dawn’ are related (19). *Kush* is not a Hebrew word, but Egyptian; nor is it unique to Hebrew but occurs in several Ancient Near Eastern languages to designate the black African (24). *Mar’eh* in a story in *Genesis Rabbah* does not mean ‘mirror’ but ‘image’ or ‘picture’; מראה לבן is not ‘white mirror’ whatever that may mean (38-39). Melamed must think that since מראה means ‘mirror’ in Modern Hebrew, it must have the same meaning in the midrash but, of course, Rabbinic Hebrew is not the same as Modern Hebrew. There is no “etymological link,” nor did the Rabbis intend one, between the name Ham and the words *hamas* ‘violence’ and *hamor* ‘donkey’ (80). Biblical Hebrew *saris* can mean ‘officer’; it doesn’t only mean ‘eunuch’ (94). The word *shigayon* in Psalm 7:1 does not mean ‘error’ (111). Arabic *sakhab* does not mean ‘eunuch’ nor does it derive from ‘Slav’ (122). Latin *albus* is a description of color, not body build (66). It is highly questionable whether German *schwarz* derives from Latin *sordes* as Melamed, with certainty, claims it does (24). Other strange linguistic connections are based on what Melamed terms “phonetic similarity.” Thus, he connects *afriqi’im* and *mei afsai’im* (128). An even better example concerns the Hebrew *bazah*, which means ‘humiliation.’ Sometimes this verb is used in the context of sexual humiliation, so Melamed notes the irrelevant and etymologically unconnected fact that Aramaic *sha’baz* means ‘testicles’ (247n43). The Hebrew word ‘Shabbos’ is even closer; what should we conclude from that?

Ignorance of Primary Sources and Secondary Literature

Another indication of the scholarly level of this book is the author’s lack of familiarity with both primary sources and relevant scholarly studies. Melamed is not aware that Jeremiah’s metaphor “Can the Kushi change his skin?” (Jer 13:23) is already found in Egyptian sources well before Lucian (12), nor that what he quotes as Maimonides (5) is actually from the Mishnah. Contrary to what Melamed believes, Origen did not translate the Bible into Latin (64). What is quoted as Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (118) is actually the Fragment Targum. Bible scholars would not agree that “the Septuagint [was] translated into Greek by seventy Jewish elders” (64), nor with the statement that the Septuagint “faithfully follows” the Masoretic text of Scripture (64). Melamed is unaware of rabbinic interpretations that Moses did indeed sleep with his Kushite wife, mentioned in Numbers 12, a notion that Melamed is sure “would have been abhorrent to the Sages” (119). Melamed cites “Rashi’s” commentary on *Pirquei Avot* (228n4), which however, although attributed to Rashi, is not his.

As far as modern scholarship is concerned, Melamed is unaware of several studies dealing with texts discussed in his book. To take just three examples, concerning the midrash on Eliezer, the servant of Abraham (103), Melamed does not know of an article by this reviewer that deals with the midrash;¹¹ he is unaware of M.B. Lerner’s important paper in *Asufot* 2 (1988) on the story of R. Akiba and the ghost (247n44); and he is still using Bernard Lewis’s *Race and Color in Islam* (1971), which has long been superseded by that author’s *Race and Slavery in the Middle East* (1990). Awareness of these works would have appreciably altered Melamed’s comments. Of course, there are numerous other studies that would have corrected his work in less important ways. One example: Menahem Kister’s research showing that Ben Sira 25.17 דוב is a variant

¹¹ “Geographia Rabbinica: The Toponym Barbaria,” *JJS* 50 (1999) 53-73.

spelling for צאף ‘grief’ and does not mean ‘bear’, as Melamed thinks (18).¹²

Disregard of Scholarly Conventions

It is disconcerting to find a purported scholarly work making unsupported claims. A rabbinic parable, drawn from the real world, speaks of one who rebelled against the king and minted coins with his own image. When the king discovered this insubordination, he decreed that “the face [of the coins] be blackened and the coins invalidated” (*GenR* 36.7). Melamed says that the decree refers to the face of the rebel himself and not to the face of the coins because a coin can be “cleaned and restored” (88). Aside from the fact that this interpretation has rendered the parable otiose, Melamed offers no evidence for his assertion that the parable cannot refer to the blackening of coins. Is there numismatic evidence supporting his assertion? How did one invalidate a coin in the late antique Near East? What does the expression “blacken a coin” mean in the Graeco-Roman context? Could it mean ‘to efface’? Could “blackening” not be accomplished in a way that the coin could not be “cleaned and restored”? No such questions bother Melamed. He merely asserts.

Statements unsupported by references appear on almost every page of the book. No reference is supplied for the statement that Pliny refers to the rabbinic Mountains of Darkness (23). No reference is supplied for “Owens” nor is the name found in the bibliography (66); I assume that the name is a mistranslation from the Hebrew and should be Evans, although the reader will still not know which Evans (there are two in the bibliography), which book, and which page. It would have been nice to have a reference for the declaration that the Greek ‘Ethiopian’ means “one whose skin shines” (23), even if Melamed is not so sure a bit later: “burnt or shining” (55, 62).

Although he is wrong that in a midrash “‘Germans’ are described ... as white, handsome and natural masters” (68), it would help the reader to know which midrash Melamed had in mind. It may or may not be true that dogs and ravens are considered as contemptible animals in the eyes of the Rabbis (80), but a reference for the assertion would have helped the reader determine whether it is. It would have also been helpful to know the source for the statement that later midrashim understood’s Ham’s (or Canaan’s) punishment as injury to his sex organs (80). “Some see [a passage in *bSuk* 53a] as evidence of a favorable attitude” toward Blacks (101). Who sees the passage that way? Where? Melamed (incorrectly) translates *qartanit* as ‘city woman’ and adds that other versions “mention a Carthaginian woman” (251n64a). Which versions? Where? Sometimes the reference to a statement will appear a hundred pages later, sometimes it will never appear. Other times only a book title will be cited or the reference will be vague and inaccurate. The statement, for example, that “in ancient Rome there was a very large black community of slaves and freedmen of low status” (216), is referenced by “above, Chapter 4, Section 1, esp. note 19,” which note refers to “Thompson [*Romans and Blacks*], throughout the book and in the conclusion.” But the only statement by Thompson that I could find quantifying the amount of Black slaves in Rome was this: “The overwhelming majority of slaves in Roman society was always white” (p. 104).

Missing references are not the only cause of bibliographic frustration to the reader. Incorrect citations of authors, sections, and pages are too common. “*Vayikrah Rabbah* 11.17” on p. 95 should be “*Genesis Rabbah* 86.4”; “*Nazir* 38a” on p. 250n61 should be *Nazir* 39a. “Pieters,”

¹² “Be-Shulei Ben Sira,” *Leshonenu* 47 (1983) 134.

who is constantly referenced, is really Pieterse and he should be cited as Nederveen Pieterse (and Young Gregg should be cited as Gregg). Some citations lead nowhere, such as the cross-reference to “chapter 3, section III” (233n54), which doesn’t exist. Others go somewhere but add nothing, such as the reference to Preuss on 245n37a, who merely translates the talmudic text under discussion. Still others do not support the statement for which they are cited, such as the references to *GenR* 42.3 and *LevR* 11.7 on p. 103, or that to Thompson on p. 68 (n. 22). Sometimes the errors are found in the English version of the book but absent in the original Hebrew, such as the reference to Genesis 15:1 on p. 92 (it should be 16:1), or *Avot de’ Rabbi Nathan* 16:2 on p. 32 (it should be 15:2), or the quotation from *GenR* 8.2 found on p. 82: “Cush a Benjamite – ish Yemini” (it should be “ben Yemini”), but the fact that these errors are not found in the Hebrew version is, of course, no comfort for the English reader. Other scholarly conventions are often disregarded, which further adds to the image of dilettantism. To take two examples, Josephus is cited in the footnotes (242n15) and indexed in the bibliography as “Flavius” (no improvement over the Hebrew version of the book, p. 304, where Josephus is indexed under יוסף, בן מתתיהו), and *Midrash Rabbah* is sometimes cited according to ed. Vilna and sometimes following ed. Warsaw. Such inconsistencies abound.

The Translation

As noted earlier, the book under review is a translation from the Hebrew original (under the title: היהפוך כושי עורו) published a year ago. Unfortunately, the translation is as problematic as the content. Sometimes errors can be attributed to the translator, Betty Sigler Rosen, unconsciously anticipating the author’s mistaken meaning, such as “leprous as white as snow” for Numbers 12:10 “leprous as snow” (56), and perhaps also in the error “a descendant of Ham” (103) for “a descendant of Canaan.” The translation “those whose hair is black” for the mishnaic תשחורת (15) is not a translation but an interpretation (the Hebrew word does not indicate what is black), which derives from the incorrect quote of the mishnaic text as בני תשחורת in the Hebrew version of Melamed’s book. Usually the errors originate in the translator’s lack of familiarity with the topic. Thus ששה סדרים became “six volumes” (215), *Minḥat Yehudah*, a 13th-century work, became *Minḥat Ben Yehudah* (48), Samuel Krauss’s name came out as a phonetically transcribed “Kreuss” for the Hebrew קרויס (248n47), “R. Pepa” the amora for R. Papa (74), and “Baber” for “Buber” (249n55, 275-276; the transcription is at least understandable as being derived from the spelling באבער as found on the title-page of the various texts edited by Buber, but what shall we say for Melamed’s transcription בעבער in the Hebrew version of the book, p. 305?). Other times errors are due to common mistakes such as dittography (*Mishnah Sanhedrin* 4:45 for 4:5), or the loss of a character (*Sanhedrin* 12: for 12:3) (both on p. 5), or other common typos such as “*Philosophical Quarterly*” (241n13) for “*Philological Quarterly*,” or perhaps even “Aristophanos” (112) for Artapanus (ארטאפאנוס). In a single footnote one word (לא) was inadvertently deleted from the Hebrew and another word (“He”) was incorrectly inserted (245n36). The first error reverses the intent of the passage, and the second error turns an *ethrog* into a human being (“He who resembles a black man”). דנטיב רהיק does not mean “had been sent away” (118). Presumably the translation of נתקלל as ‘damaged’ instead of ‘cursed’ (84) is due to misreading the Hebrew as נתקלקל, but it unfortunately occurred in a crucial passage. Another mistranslation in a crucial passage is ‘stung’ for עקושות (169); the Hebrew is a variant for עקומות in the text and both words mean ‘crooked.’ I don’t understand how כושי in the Hebrew text became *shahor* in the English (71), but it too appears in an important passage. (Nor do I understand the significance of putting the translation of this word, “Black,” in upper case here and in a few other places, e.g. 245n36, while almost everywhere else in the book the word is in lower-case.)

Such mistakes are minor but because they happen so often they make for frustrating reading. Sometimes, however, they can provide comic relief. Here are some examples. *Midrash Shoher Tov on Psalms*, called thus because of its opening words from Prov 11:27, becomes “*Shoher Tov’s Midrash on Psalms*” (249n55), and Louis Ginzberg’s *Ginzei Schechter* becomes “the Schechter *Genizah*” (251n62a). We cannot blame the translator for mistaking Melamed’s פו in the original Hebrew book as “86” rather than “chapter six” (71) because פו appears in the Hebrew text without the standard sign for an abbreviation. But Melamed did abbreviate פרק ב (‘chapter two’) properly as פ"ב in the Hebrew book, which the translator nevertheless misunderstood as a numeral with the result was that “chapter two” became “80.2” (247n44). Another misunderstood numerical value is the translation of “31” for מ"א (105). The incorrect statement (56) that “Nimrod is described as another son of Cush, but elsewhere he appears as the son of Shem (Gen 10:28) and Keturah (Gen 25:3)” would raise eyebrows until you look in the Hebrew and see “Esau ... acted like Nimrod. Sheba is described as another son of Kush, but elsewhere he appears as the son of Shem and Keturah,” and you realize that “Sheba ... “ was presumably understood as a relative clause describing Nimrod (“who comes [שבא] described as...”). My favorite of these laughable errors is the translation of the name Samuel bar Nissim Masnuth as “Samuel bar Nissim of Snuth,” reading the unvocalized Masnuth as *mi-snuth* (263n87). Sometimes, however, no amount of sleuthing can explain a mistranslation of the Hebrew and you must posit an intermediary step, such as where “black-eyed Cush” (55) appears for the Hebrew “Kush,” which, I presume, was freely translated as “blackened Cush” and was then misread. Or where a reference to Maimonides’ *Hilkhoh Avodah Zarah 77:14*” (33) appears for the Hebrew הלכות ה' עבודה זרה in which, I imagine, (a) עבודה זרה was abbreviated originally as ע"ז, and read as 77, its numerical equivalent, and (b) the Hebrew ה' ע (chapter 10, halakhah 4), was written or seen without the punctuation divider and thus became 14. In a few cases I cannot at all account for the translation. So, for example, I am at a loss to explain how בעברית חל מעבר משימוש בסימן לשוני שצ"י (35) became “Hebrew has an old verbal symbol related to geographic and ethnic origin” (24). Hebrew sources are not alone in suffering from the translator’s lack of familiarity with the material. Note, for example, the citation of Tacitus as “Book 5, pp. 2-4” at 231n36. Although the translator is presumably the originator of these errors, Melamed is the final editor and thus responsible for the English translation, as he should be and as he states explicitly he is (viii).

Transliteration of Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, or Greek words is weird and inconsistent, and does not conform to any scheme I know. Here are some examples: Hebrew *het* is transliterated as *k* (15, 228) or *h* (244n28) or *ch* (54); *kh* appears not only for *khaf* (73) but also for *qof* (80); *kaf* is transliterated as *k* or *h* (54, 73), or in a single footnote as both *h* and *c* (244n28). Of course, an undageshed *taw* is transliterated as *th* but so, inexplicably, is *tet* (54, 96). *Yod* also proved to be problematic: sometimes it appears (as *i! ma'asiv, maraiv, panaiv*, 93, 233), other times it doesn't. In Aramaic the definite article final *alef* is not indicated in transliteration although we also find spellings with *h* (e.g. *Tosephtah*, 71) as if it were a Hebrew word with final *heh*.

Some transliteration errors are due to mistaking the vocalization of the Hebrew word, e.g. *Bamidbar* for *Bemidbar* (passim), a particularly grating example because it occurs dozens and dozens of times and because the word is well known as the Hebrew name of the biblical book of Numbers. *Zota* for *Zuta* is common (e.g., 110, 251n68) although the word is correctly written in the index. Other cases of incorrect transliteration indicate a lack of knowledge of Hebrew grammar: *ve'mefuham* for *u-mefuham* (82), *u-b-ma'asiv* for *u-v-ma...* (93); a *shwa nah* for *shwa na*, e.g. *toldot* (233, 234), *iggrot* (247n41) although elsewhere *shwa na* is indicated by *e*. Incorrect transliteration is especially common in Aramaic words, e.g. *itata* for *iteta*, *shafirta* for

shapirta, *denasiv* for *dinesiv*, *malkata* for *malkheta* (117-118). Although the translator could not be expected to know Aramaic, checking the vocalization in any printed Targum would have avoided these infelicities. In Greek we find the incorrect transliteration *Aethops* (55) although the word appears correctly as *Aithiops* in the Hebrew version of the book (p. 69). We can't blame Melamed for that error but we can blame him for transliterating the etymology of Ethiopian as *oitho ops* (English, 62; Hebrew, 77). Arabic is obviously unknown to the translator. Thus she transliterates the Judeo-Arabic אסוד as *asud*, reading the *waw* as a vowel rather than a consonant (*aswad*), and the Judeo-Arabic אלאביץ (i.e., *al-bayaḍ*) as *al-avitz* (102, 136, 138).

Conclusion

In sum, this book exhibits a glaring lack of control of the relevant sources, a superficial grasp of methodological approaches, an ignorance of text-critical issues, and an inability to deal with philological matters. The result is an incorrect and simplistic reading of ancient texts by one who sees the past from a millennia-removed perspective without the training or tools to move beyond his own very limited, confused postmodern cubby hole. Two other points are worth mentioning because they are indicative of the underlying problem with the work. First, the book is difficult to read because it, like the “scholarship” exhibited in it, reflects a lack of structure and control. Topics and texts are intermingled and appear everywhere and anywhere. Second, is the author's attitude toward prior studies of the topic. I don't know whether it is hubris or an accurate assessment of his own abilities that motivates Melamed to dismiss opposing views without engaging them (7), but I do know that it is not the mark of scholarship. It is hard to believe that Haifa University Press, the publishers of the original Hebrew version of the book, subjected the manuscript to peer review, and it is equally hard to believe that Routledge Curzon, the publishers of the English version, checked the accuracy of the translation.

This review has been based on the first of half of the book, which deals with my area of expertise.¹³ Someone else can review the second half dealing with the medieval and modern periods. Perhaps Melamed is better equipped to deal with these later periods.

13

The texts covered in this review, plus many others in rabbinic and nonrabbinic literature of late antiquity, are fully discussed in my book, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton University Press), due out this fall.