

Sacred & Profane, Season 3, Episode 2

Black and Beautiful Transcript

[00:00:00] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** I'm Martien Halverson Taylor,

[00:00:02] **Kurtis Schaeffer** and I'm Kurtis Shaeffer.

[00:00:04] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** And this is Sacred and Profane, a show where we explore how religions shape us and how we shape religions. And today on the show, we're going to dove into a story about a very particular religious text that's at the center of an age old problem, one that we will likely never resolve. How to translate?

[00:00:34] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Translating a well-loved text is always a challenge, and as you and I both know, Martien, translating a text that people take to be scripture ups the stakes. It's tempting to just say the meaning of a word in one language is just the same as its counterpart in another. With the big challenge of translation is that so much is interpretation. The translators choice. So often it's not neat and tidy. There are many ways to interpret the world and the words we choose reflect this.

[00:01:02] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Absolutely. And the way we choose to translate can have a profound effect on how people experience a text, how they find meaning or how they find themselves in a text that they consider sacred. So here's an example. Let's take Psalm 23, one of the most recognized passages in the Bible.

[00:01:27] **Reader** The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want he may it me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters, he restore my soul, he leadeth me in the path of righteousness for his namesake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me.

[00:01:54] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** That's the passage from the King James version, which remains a hugely influential English translation of the Christian Bible. It was a massive undertaking involving dozens of scholars who translated books from multiple ancient languages. It was first published in 1611, and it's never been out of print.

[00:02:31] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Even 400 years later, people have a very emotional reaction to these particular words. For many English speaking people, the King James version is the Bible. My preferred translation is the new revised standard version, which was published in nineteen eighty nine. Here's what it's translation of Psalm 23.

[00:03:01] **Reader** the Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his namesake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley I fear no evil for you are with me.

[00:03:27] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** So I could explain to my students why this is a better or at least a more accurate translation of the Hebrew. But in some ways that's beside the point to them. This translation, one that gets rid of the these and the doubts that we just don't use anymore sounds off to them. It doesn't sound like the Bible for many people reading the Bible, King James old fashioned language, the familiar language seems better. It makes the text sound more ancient and maybe even a little mysterious.

[00:04:03] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Yeah, that's right, so translation decisions do have an emotional impact, and sometimes even the most subtle decisions can also affect the ways we see and understand both the texts we're reading and the contemporary world. Changes in the translation of a single word can change the meaning of an entire passage.

[00:04:23] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Which brings us to an equally well-loved passage of the Bible that has resisted TIDEY translation for centuries, and that has a lot more at stake. It's a passage from the song of songs.

[00:04:38] **Dr. Renita Weems** I first fell in love with the book of song of songs because of its deep, rich complexed, nuanced possible meanings. It is about a multiplicity of things. It is about, in many ways, what the reader brings to the text.

[00:05:00] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** That's Dr. Renita Weems, the renowned scholar of the Hebrew Bible, and she's also an ordained pastor.

[00:05:07] **Dr. Renita Weems** You want me to read it now?

[00:05:09] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Yeah, that would be great if you would read aloud.

[00:05:16] **Dr. Renita Weems** I am black and beautiful, o daughters of Jerusalem. Like the tents of Qedar, like the curtains of Solomon. Do not gaze at me because I am dark, because the sun has gazed on me. My mother's sons were angry with me, they made me a keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept.

[00:05:49] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Now, as we mentioned, this is a passage from the Song of Songs. It's a book in the Bible that stands out for a lot of reasons.

[00:05:58] **Dr. Renita Weems** First and foremost. It doesn't mention God, there is no mention, no explicit mention of God that absolutely stands out in sacred text, text, otherwise books, otherwise we're God or the deity is mentioned all the time.

[00:06:17] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** And it's about love.

[00:06:19] **Dr. Renita Weems** It is about sex and love and power.

[00:06:24] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Now, some have said that it's an allegory for the love of God, and it has certainly been read that way for millennia. But it is on an ancient and literal level, a collection of songs about earthy human love, erotic desire and sex, about a woman who knows she's beautiful and desirable, who is very comfortable in her own skin. And given who she is and where she comes from, she is dark skinned.

[00:06:57] **Dr. Renita Weems** A black skin lover, lovers who are in love with each other, who are coquettish toward each other, who are romantically involved with each other, but also whose love is elusive.

[00:07:16] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** It's also the only sustained piece in the Bible that is written primarily in the voice of a woman.

[00:07:24] **Dr. Renita Weems** And that is a rarity in scripture. It is scandalous, if you will. It is provocative. It was embarrassing in some ways, yet it was still sacred.

[00:07:39] **Kurtis Schaeffer** So this passage is provocative for several reasons on that literal level, as Dr. Wemyss points out. But there's another reason that people argue over this particular passage, and it has to do with a single word.

[00:07:53] **Dr. Renita Weems** It is about that 'vav', isn't it?

[00:08:01] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** That word in Hebrew is veh. And it is written with a single Hebrew consonant VOV, it's a tiny conjunction, but it packs a punch because it has been translated one of two ways. Dr. Weems translates that word as, and

[00:08:22] **Dr. Renita Weems** I am black and beautiful, o daughters of Jerusalem,

[00:08:27] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** But- and this is important - in written Hebrew 'vov' can mean 'and,' but it can also mean 'but.' And that's how it's translated in the King James version.

[00:08:43] **Dr. Renita Weems** But here I think is where we bring our own cultural baggage. The vov itself is neutral, it can be translated as 'and' and it can be translated as 'but.'

[00:09:02] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** So the Bible is full of these short but meaningful descriptions, descriptions that are strung together with the same conjunction. Let's take this one from First Samuel, 16 12, where a young David is first described

[00:09:19] **Reader** And he sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and withall of a beautiful countenance, and goodly to look to.

[00:09:30] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** So here the King James version is happy to translate the Hebrew conjunction, the as, and that makes perfect sense, looking at the Hebrew. But think for a moment about how the meaning would change if we translated it as but he was 'ruddy but beautiful', as if his ruddy complexion were a problem, I've never seen a description of David where that conjunction was translated as, 'but' handsome. So it's clear that translators don't see a contradiction between his coloring and his attractiveness.

[00:10:05] **Kurtis Schaeffer** But the King James translators seem to imply there is a contradiction between blackness and beauty in the song of songs, the woman can't be both black and beautiful. She must be black, but beautiful.

[00:10:18] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Yes. And as we know in English, skin tone is often linked to beauty. Think of the word fair as in 'mirror mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?' Fair has a double meaning here, as both white and beautiful. English idioms often use blackness and darkness as the metaphorical opposite of fairness. The idea that white was beautiful and black was not was already a well-worn image by Shakespeare's time. So much so that when Shakespeare wrote a series of sonnets to an anonymous woman with dark hair and olive skin, many of them boiled down to "she is black, but beautiful."

[00:11:06] **Reader** In the old age, black was not counted fair. Or if it were, it bore not beauty's name. But now is black beauty's successive heir, and beauty slandered with a bastard shame.

[00:11:28] **Kurtis Schaeffer** That cultural baggage around black skin was definitely around when the King James version was being translated by its presumably white translators. But as Dr. Weems reminds us, there is nothing in the original Hebrew that makes that kind of cultural distinction between blackness and beauty.

[00:11:45] **Dr. Renita Weems** That is a translation decision clearly down through the years, and especially if you're reading something like, I guess the King James, which is sacred in some very conservative traditions. It has been translated as. But and I think that is because of translators on assumption that anyone who is declaring that she is black must know that that is not necessarily beautiful. And so therefore they would translate it as black, but beautiful. And I think that to choose black, but as opposed to and is a decision that one makes based on cultural baggage and not the Hebrew itself.

[00:12:30] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** So, by the way, this is not a new problem, right from the start, people argued about translating these and other well-loved poems and stories from the original Hebrew into Aramaic, into Greek and so on. And they were anxious about it because translations fundamentally change a text. And we can see that in this single word as we move from the written Hebrew into other languages. In Greek, the phrase was black and beautiful. Latin translators decided on black, but beautiful.

[00:13:06] **Kurtis Schaeffer** So we might be tempted to see this and a translation as a more modern fix, because it recognizes that blackness and beauty are not mutually exclusive. A translation that perhaps echoes the public discourse around race coming out of the civil rights movement. But, Martien, it doesn't that switching back and forth in the Greek and Latin versions really show that translation is something every generation has to reevaluate.

[00:13:31] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Yes. And we should mention that while there were ancient translators who went with black and beautiful, there are still scholars today who translate that conjunction as but a but that does violence. The revised standard version, which is a popular American translation from the 1950s.

[00:13:51] **Reader** I am very dark, but comely, o daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Qedar, like the curtains of Solomon. Do not gaze at me because I am swarthy, because the sun has scorched me. My mother's sons were angry with me. They made me a keeper of the vineyards. But my own vineyard I have not kept.

[00:14:18] **Kurtis Schaeffer** In this revised standard version, we can also see major differences in the adjectives and I think here we see the power of a translation to change our impression of what the text is about.

[00:14:33] **Dr. Renita Weems** We bring our identity with us of our experiences with us. We have also brought a historically down through the centuries, our own racism, our own racial biases, our own sexist biases.

[00:14:51] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** As Dr. Weems shows us, it's not only that translation is power, but also translations that are not quite right, that don't capture the nuances of the original, they can have profound consequences.

[00:15:08] **Dr. Renita Weems** I am very clear some of these are translation issues, and I hope that I'm able to bring some of the best of my own training and work, for example, in this translation here in verse five, to be able to help my audience, who oftentimes, though

not exclusively I audiences that I tend to work with most are fairly conservative in their reading. And if they are those who believe that the King James these and vowels and is that is the language of God, that it is the divine language, then it is my task is my responsibility and my joy to be able to help them understand that these are translation issues and to be able to bring the best of my own work as a Hebrew scholar, as someone who reads Hebrew, to bring to to audiences what the original Hebrew actually says or the range of means within the original Hebrew. I like to say it that way. I want them to see that this is this is rich and nuanced and complex language. This is not narrative prose. This is poetry.

[00:16:24] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Translation can show us in ways that might surprise us not only the diversity, but the joy and the openness of the ancient world, but it can also reveal its misogyny and its prejudice.

[00:16:38] **Dr. Renita Weems** I mean, as precious as the Bible has been for someone like me, has been formative for me, been an important part of my formation. It has also bruised me. It is very much so patriarchal. It is very much so places there that are misogynistic. But there are also places I have found as a young woman who grew up in a black church tradition. I've also found some beautiful healing, transformational portions of the text song of songs, or certainly has been one of those particular kinds of books. For those of us who have been on the on the margins, we have found a book that helps us to talk about race, race in the Bible, racism, and as a black woman, as scholar, also sexism.

[00:17:31] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** So one of our graduate students found a remarkable passage from Martien Luther King's writings, and I would love to just read it, of course, I can't do it in his cadence, but it gets to this very question. He says, I come here tonight to plead with you, believe in yourself, and believe that you are somebody. Somebody told a lie one day. They couched it in language. They made everything black, ugly and evil. Look in your dictionaries and see the synonyms of the word black. It's always something degrading and low and sinister. Look at the word white and it's always something pure and high and clean. Well, I want to get that language right tonight. I want to get that language so right that everyone here will cry out. Yes, I'm black. I'm proud of it. I'm black and I'm beautiful.

[00:18:29] **Dr. Renita Weems** It is something about the perennial nature of of racism and oppression. You have to have some sense of your own self worth, your own sense of self love to assert that. But it does help in this case for those of us who are Christian, Judeo Christian, to have this text in front of us or as a part of our sacred tradition, as much as I am a Bible scholar and as much as I've been shaped by this text and I hold it very sacred, even if I didn't have this text, I still have had to assert and insist that blackness, that blackness is not negative, it is not pejorative, and that we are not the scum of the earth.

[00:19:12] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** The truth is, the translation of this one conjunction is something that each generation will probably have to work out again and again, and that ambiguity offers ways for us to explore the richness and the complexity of the ancient world and ancient texts, even as it also frustrates us.

[00:19:33] **Kurtis Schaeffer** As translators, we will always fight our own cultural baggage. But as Dr. Weems reminds us, acknowledging the prejudices deeply ingrained in our own language about race, about gender is the place we have to start.

[00:19:48] **Dr. Renita Weems** Continues to matter, it continues to resonate down through the centuries. So perhaps the text will help us to interrogate our own baggage that we have brought to notions of blackness and beauty.

[00:20:28] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Sacred and profane was produced for the Religion, Race and Democracy Lab at the University of Virginia. Our senior producer is Emily Gadek. our program manager is Ashley Duffalo. Kelly Jones is the lab's editor special thanks to Ashley Tate and Helen Buckwalter for their research assistance. Today's guest is Dr. Renita Weems. You can find some of her scholarship on our website and you can find her show. The Woman is Salon podcast on iTunes.

[00:21:05] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Music for this episode comes from Blue Dot Sessions, you can find out more about our work at Religion Lab Dot Virginia Edu or by following us on Twitter at the religion lab.