

# The Black Devil: the adjective μέλας in Septuagint, New Testament, Epistle of Barnabas and the Sheperd of Hermas\*

[El diablo negro: el adjetivo μέλας en la Septuaginta, Nuevo Testamento, Epístola de Bernabé y el Pastor de Hermas]

María José BROTONS MERINO  
Universidad de Valladolid  
mjbrotns@gmail.com

*Colours are the product of language under the influence of culture*  
(John Lyons)

**Abstract:** In Early Christian Literature, particularly in the *Epistle of Barnabas* (4:10 and 20:1), the Devil is named ὁ Μέλας, appellative translated as “the Black”. Our reflections lead us to search for the origin of the link between black and devil in previous literature: first in Greek Literature, where we find an ambiguous use of μέλας, and second in the Bible, since the *Epistle of Barnabas* is written in a Christian context. But, the negative connotation of μέλας in Septuagint is not so clear and it is in the New Testament, where the study must be extended to σκοτός (“darkness”) to find a direct relationship with evil.

**Key words:** black; darkness; shadows; devil; demon; Septuagint; New Testament; Early Christian Literature.

**Resumen:** En la Literatura cristiana primitiva, particularmente en la Epístola de Bernabé (4:10 y 20:1), el Diablo es denominado ὁ Μέλας, apelativo traducido como “el Negro”. Una reflexión permite buscar el origen del vínculo entre negro y diablo en la literatura anterior: primeramente en la literatura griega, donde encontramos un uso ambiguo de μέλας, y en segundo lugar en la Biblia, ya que la *Epístola de Bernabé* está escrita en un contexto cristiano. Sin embargo, en la connotación negativa de μέλας en la Septuaginta no está clara, y es en

el Nuevo Testamento donde el estudio debe extenderse a σκότος (“oscuridad”), para encontrar una relación directa con el diablo.

**Palabras clave:** negro; oscuridad; sombra; diablo; demonio; Septuaginta; Nuevo Testamento; Literatura cristiana primitiva.



### Introduction

Colour symbolism has always been present in all cultures, especially in Ancient Greece, a visual and aesthetic culture.<sup>1</sup> There is a vast literature on colour terms in Greek literature.<sup>2</sup> The first studies by W. Gladstone state that each colour adjective expresses different shades and tones of the same colour.<sup>3</sup> In Ancient Greek literature there are examples of the relationship between certain colours and evil, error and power, as for example πορφύρεος (“purple”) versus λευκός (“white”), which denotes worship and divinity, fate of the gods or victory in war.<sup>4</sup> Light and darkness are the parameters on which Ancient Greek civilization builds its colour scale, clearly found in the Bible.<sup>5</sup>

\* This paper has been carried out within the framework of the Research Project “*Language of Colour in the Bible: from Word to Image*” (FUSPBS-PPC09/2015).

<sup>1</sup> N. V. Baran, “Les caractéristiques essentielles du vocabulaire chromatique latin (Aspect général, étapes de développement, sens figurés, valeur stylistique, circulation)”, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II.29.1 (1983), p. 332: “la tradition de l’emploi des termes de couleur se perd dans la nuit des temps”.

<sup>2</sup> We highlight some studies dedicated exclusively to colour in Ancient Greece: E. Irwin, *Colour Terms in Greek Poetry* (Toronto: Hakkert, 1974); P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, *Studies in Greek color terminology*, vol. I Glaukos (Leiden: Brill, 1985); L. Cleland *et al.*, *Colour in the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Michigan: John and Erica Hedges, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> W. Gladstone, *Studies on Homer and the Homeric Age*, vol. III (Oxford, 1858), p. 458, cited in C. Rowe, “Conceptions of colour and colour symbolism in the ancient world”, *Eranos* 41 (1942), p. 327, n. 1.

<sup>4</sup> LSJ, v.s. λευκός in a positive sense, as to refer to clean water in Homer or bright sun in Sophocles. *ThWNT*, W. Michaelis, v.s. λευκός, λευκαίνω IV, 241-243.

<sup>5</sup> See S. Beta & M. M. Sassi, *I Colori nel Mondo Antico* (Siena, 2001), pp. 12-18 and Ch. Rowe, “Conceptions of colour and colour symbolism in the ancient world”, *Eranos* 41 (1942), pp. 326-364.

As far as we know, all historical societies have tried to somehow justify human error calling it sin or mistake, and in any case intending to keep man away from responsibility for their own actions. Demons belong to the collective imagination of every culture, especially the ancient ones, and the Devil has been present in Christian mindset as agent and explanation of evil from its origins, just as ancient Greeks reflected in their pantheon every manifestation of nature and human behaviour.

This need to explain evil and find an agent responsible for it, leads to the search for a colour representation identifying it as it appears in the apostolic text the *Epistle of Barnabas*, where the Devil is referred to as *ὁ μέλας* (Barn. 4:10 & 20:1), or in *The Shepherd of Hermas*, where black is used to describe the head of the beast, together with other colours (Vis. 4:1.10). Although this reference does not reappear in Early Christian literature, black is the colour chosen by the artist of *Commentaria in Apocalypsin* for representation of the abyss in the vision of the four horsemen.<sup>6</sup>

From the 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards, especially in the West, black is considered the diabolical colour par excellence and darkness of hell justifies the dark and black aspect of beings living there.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the question arises naturally, from where do the authors of the *Epistle of Barnabas* and *The Shepherd of Hermas* take the linking between black and the Devil and evil? Do they pick a Hellenistic tradition or do they take up exclusively the Biblical tradition?

---

<sup>6</sup> In the *Commentaria in Apocalypsin* circulating in Spain after the 9<sup>th</sup> century we can see representations of the Devil and demons in black and dark blue; see, J. Bassegoda Nonell, "El Beato de Liébana", *Revista de Arquitectura* 2 (2008), pp. 40-42.

<sup>7</sup> See M. Pastoureau, *Black: The History of a Color* (Princeton - Oxford: Princeton University Press 2009), p. 40.

To answer these questions we are going to study the term μέλας in Hellenistic and Biblical literatures, since the *Epistle of Barnabas* and *The Shepherd of Hermas* appear in a Hellenistic context, in which reading the Septuagint and the New Testament<sup>8</sup> was common in Christian worship.

#### *Epistle of Barnabas and Shepherd of Hermas*

The *Epistle of Barnabas* is an anonymous text dated between 134-135 AD. All handbooks identify Barnabas as a 2<sup>nd</sup> century author not to be confused with the Apostle.<sup>9</sup> The *Epistle of Barnabas* is especially characterized by its syntactical construction without any order of elements. This stylistic characteristic enhances the spontaneity with which its unknown author intends to share his religious experience with the first Christian communities and to lay the foundations of the Church. However, this aspect has also raised questions about the authorship of the *Epistle*, which today is attributed to Barnabas.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> The influence of the New Testament in the Apostolic Fathers has been studied in depth by A. Gregory & Ch. Tuckett (eds.), *The Reception of the New Testament in the Apostolic Fathers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 63-68; in general, the influence of the New Testament in each author and the importance it had for the composition of his works is studied in detail. Nevertheless, the discussion focuses on whether these authors turned directly or indirectly to some copy of the New Testament, since cites and allusions in their works reveal their good knowledge of the Biblical texts.

<sup>9</sup> Most handbooks identify Barnabas as a 2<sup>nd</sup> century writer (ca. 117-119) and not with the Apostle. See, L. W. Barnard, *Studies in the Apostolic Fathers and their background* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1966), pp. 41-55; F. X. Gokey, *The Terminology for the Devil and Evil Spirits in the Apostolic Fathers* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1961), pp. 99-120 and G. Filoramo & D. Menozzi, *Storia del Cristianesimo l'Antichità* (Roma-Bari: Editori Laterza, 1997), p. 156, n. 1. Specifically, C. Osiek, "The Apostolic Fathers", in Ph. F. Esler (ed.), *The Early Christian World*. 2 vols. (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 41-55, asserts: "Barnabas the companion of Paul is the author, from earliest traditions the text has been ascribed to that name".

<sup>10</sup> It is believed that Barnabas played an important role in the formation of the Church along with Saint Paul, whom he accompanied in his preaching of the Gospel, even to Cyprus, his homeland. See, D. Ruiz Bueno, *Los Padres Apostólicos*, col. «Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos» 65 (Madrid, 1993), p. 749 and G. Filoramo, Giovanni & D. Menozzi, *Storia del Cristianesimo l'Antichità* (Roma-Bari: Editori

As just mentioned, the starting point of this article is passage 4:10,<sup>11</sup> where Barnabas refers to the Devil with the epithet μέλας. From this first reference onwards, the author adds that the path of evil is full of obstacles and the Black walks that path of darkness. In Barn. 20:1 he describes the path of the Black (ἡ δὲ τοῦ μέλανος ὁδός) as “of eternal death with punishment”<sup>12</sup> and warns against the danger of pride, hypocrisy, adultery and other sins.

*Patristic Lexicon* of Lampe defines the appellative ὁ μέλας, “the Black” in 4:10 and in 20:1 as a synonym for “the Evil One”.<sup>13</sup> G. Kittel also addresses this passage of the *Epistle* to relate the term μέλας with the Devil.<sup>14</sup> The use of the adjective qualifying in Barn. 20:1 and their use with article draws attention as it appears in the first passage of Barn. 4:10. It is a word that we can include in the scope of the opposition of the Lord of the world of light before the Lord of the world of darkness or Kingdom of demons. It is not fortuitous that talk of the devil in this letter as ὁ μέλας since intends to emphasize the role of the dualism between God and Devil, this as archon who heads an entourage of demons. In this image we see that μέλας denotes black and at the same time it has a negative connotation, since stones represent the faithful that deviate from the path of faith. “The Black”

---

Laterza, 1997), pp. 94-104, although he does not specify whether he refers to Barnabas the apostle or the author of the epistle.

<sup>11</sup> Bart D. Ehrman (ed. and trans.), *The Father Apostolic*, vols. I-II (London: Loeb Classical Library, 2003), Barn. 4:9.

<sup>12</sup> We find a similar reflection in the *Didache* on the path of death, where all the ills and vices converge. *Didache* V, 2.

<sup>13</sup> G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1982), s.v. μέλας, p. 840.

<sup>14</sup> G. Kittel, G. Friedrich & G. W. Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans and Exeter, The Paternoster Press, 1985). See *ThWNT*, W. Michaelis, s.v. μέλας IV, p. 549. Furthermore, in chapter 18:1 Barnabas begins to expose his theory of the two paths, that of light and that of darkness; in that of light are the angels of God, but in that of darkness they are the angels of Satan and it is where the prince of the present century of iniquity rules. He then goes on to develop this theory, focusing on the path of darkness, which is related to evil and the devil. Therefore, after exposing the way of light, the twelve commandments, and warning of the danger of arrogance, hypocrisy, adultery and other sins, in 20:1 the author goes on to describe the path of the black.

is used in Barn. 4:10 as a several reference to evil figures as Satan, ὁ μέλας (“the Black One”).

On the other hand, the *Shepherd of Hermas* (ca. 144 AD) is a hardly studied text, but very interesting for the information it contains. Consisting of three parts, *Visions*, *Commandments* and *Parables*, it is the work of a “compiler”. No doubt this is a controversial work for its symbolic content and authorship, plus, in early Christianity it was a candidate to join the testamentary canon. The symbolism is the most outstanding feature of this work, embodied in the figure of the Church and the whole Christian community. It is above all a prophetic book whose purpose is to provide comfort to the Christians of the second century, for whom the question of sin and redemption was a major concern.<sup>15</sup>

In the *Shepherd of Hermas* the term μέλας is employed eighteen times (Shep. 22:10; 24:2; 78:5; 83:4; 85:1-2 and 4-5; 86:5; 90:8; 92:1-3; 96:1). The most interesting ones for our study are: Vis. 4:1.10, Sim. 9:6.4 and Sim. 9:15.3, because μέλας denotes black colour and it is also associated to the Beast and to human sins.

In his fourth vision Hermas sees a beast that represents the difficulties that can only be overcome with faith (Vis. 4:1.10) and he uses four colours to describe it:

εἶχεν δὲ τὸ θηρίον ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς χρώματα τέσσερα·  
**μέλαν**, εἶτα πυροειδὲς καὶ αἱματῶδες, εἶτα χρυσοῦν, εἶτα  
 λευκόν

“Now the beast had four colours on its head - **black**, then fiery and bloody, then golden and lastly white”.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> See Leslie W. Barnard, *Studies in the Apostolic Fathers and their background* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1966), p. 57; Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Satan: The Early Christian Tradition* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 44-45.

<sup>16</sup> Michel Pastoureaux, *Black: The History of a Color* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 39 completes this idea of *The Shepherd of Hermas* saying that for the early Christians black and white represented the opposition between good and evil. We also know that Satan was represented in two colours, red and black, especially from the year 1000 onwards.

The first colour of the beast is black. While the visions of Hermas follow the literary model of Jewish-Christian apocalypse,<sup>17</sup> they do not have as protagonist a specific demonic figure related to the end of time. They do speak of a multi-colour beast, which is probably not related to supernatural evil, but to a figure representing the end of time<sup>18</sup>. Nevertheless, being a symbolic text itself, we seem to find a more complete demonology displayed in Vis. 4, where the multicolour beast represents the earthly world, black and dark red evil,<sup>19</sup> golden the possibility of salvation and white the arrival of a new era. As an apocalyptic text, it includes the characteristic of the genre, all present in Vis. 4, where the content focuses on the possibility of repentance before the end of times.<sup>20</sup>

In Sim. 9:6.4 he describes the building of the tower of the Lord, in which stones (men) are described in various ways alluding or mentioning dark colours:

καὶ ὅταν ἐπάτασεν, ἐγένοντο αὐτῶν τινὲς **μέλανες** ὡσεὶ ἀσβόλη, τινὲς δὲ ἐψωριακότες, τινὲς δὲ σχισμὰς ἔχοντες, τινὲς δὲ οὔτε λευκοὶ οὔτε **μέλανες**

“And when he struck them, some of them became **black** as soot, and some appeared as if covered with scabs, and some cracked, and some mutilated, and some neither white nor **black**”.

The black tonality is indisputable due to the presence of the simile of soot and the opposition of antagonistic colours, white versus black.

<sup>17</sup> An apocalypse includes several points: God’s revelation, revelation through a vision or dream, a mediator who interprets the vision which refers to future events, particularly to the end of times.

<sup>18</sup> This is J. Burke’s interpretation, “Then the Devil Left: Satan’s lack of presence in the Apostolic Fathers”, <http://bereaportal.com/then-the-devil-left-satans-lack-of-presence-in-the-apostolic-fathers/> (2005): 18 (20 February 2015).

<sup>19</sup> M. J. Brotóns, *El Diablo en la Literatura Griega del Cristianismo Primitivo: de los orígenes a los Padres Alejandrinos*, PhD Diss. (University Complutense of Madrid, 2015), pp. 187-193.

<sup>20</sup> M. W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), pp. 329-330.

From that moment the black stones take on particular importance and are mentioned on several occasions until they show that they will not be part of the tower. The black tonality is indisputable due to the presence of the simile of soot and the opposition of antagonistic colours, white versus black. From that moment the black stones take on particular importance and are mentioned on several occasions until they show that they will not be part of the tower. This passage is striking; even though grey is not mentioned, it is suggested in the way believers are described as stones “neither black nor white” according to their degree of fidelity.

In Sim. 9:15.3: Δήλωσόν μοι, φημί, κύριε, τῶν παρθένων τὰ ὀνόματα καὶ τῶν γυναικῶν τῶν τὰ μέλανα ἱμάτια ἐνδεδυμένων... ἄκουε, φησί, καὶ τὰ ὀνόματα τῶν γυναικῶν τῶν τὰ ἱμάτια μέλανα ἔχουσῶν... ἡ πρώτη Ἀπιστία, ἡ δευτέρα Ἀκρασία, ἡ δὲ Τρίτη Ἀπειθεία, ἡ δὲ Τετάρτη Ἀπάτη. Αἱ δὲ ἀκόλουθοι αὐτῶν καλοῦνται Λύπη, Πονηρία

“Explain to me, sir, I said, «the names of these virgins and of those women who were clothed in **black** raiment...» «Hear, also», he continued, «the names of the women who had the **black** garments... The first is Unbelief, the second Incontinence, the third Disobedience, the fourth Deceit. And their followers are called Sorrow, Wickedness...»”

It is also a striking passage that takes us almost to the Monastic literature that we will find from the fourth century, in which black becomes the hallmark of sin and the devil. Here we interpret the use of black in the women’s robes as an image related to sin, since each of them represents a sin: incontinence, disobedience, deceit, wickedness, falsehood, folly, backbiting and hatred. There is thus a direct link of black with these sins.



*Μέλας in Hellenistic literature*

The term μέλας (“black, dark, dark blue”)<sup>21</sup> has its origin in the Indo-European form \*mel-n- (“black”).<sup>22</sup> In Greek the use of the adjective μέλας, μελάινα μέλαν becomes common in its simple form and in derivatives as μελαχροιής (Hom., *Od.* 16, 175); μελανθής, μελαίνης (A., *Pers.* 357); μελαγχόλους (S., *Tr.* 573).<sup>23</sup>

The Homeric poems can be considered a reference to know the colour adjectives in Ancient Greek from the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE onwards. In these testimonies the most elementary forms of colour, white and black, are predominant. The formal epithets in the Homeric poems preserve the meanings of an archaic period of the language, leading us to believe that the colour terms used by archaic poets would correspond to the forms they used in everyday language, what means that their audience ought to know these colour references.<sup>24</sup>

In Homer the term μέλας is used mainly to denote the lack of brightness, i.e., the dark tone of other colours as blue, red, etc.<sup>25</sup> For example μέλας describes the colour of blood (*Il.* 4, 149: ὡς εἶδεν μέλαν αἶμα, “seeing the black blood”), of waves (*Il.* 23, 693: μέλαν δὲ ἐ κύμα, “the black wave”), of wine (*Od.* 5, 265: μέλανος οἴνοιο, “the black wine”), etc. Even though translations keep the colour term *black* because probably it suits better to the poetic style of Homeric translations, it is

<sup>21</sup> LSJ, v.s. μέλας, p. 840. We find different translations of the term: “black, swart, dark, obscure”.

<sup>22</sup> The evolution of this form is: A.I. *maliná* “dirty, black”, Lit. *méllynas* “blue”, Lav. *Melns* “black” and Lat. *mulleus* “purple shoe”. Some scholars see a relationship between the etymology of μέλας and *malus* in Latin, but this last form comes from the I.-E. root \**mol-o-* evolving in Greek to μέλος “unfortunate”. DELG, v.s. μέλας, and BDAG, v.s. μέλας.

<sup>23</sup> LSJ, v.s. μελάγροος, ον, μελανθής, ες.

<sup>24</sup> Christopher Rowe, “Conceptions of colour and colour symbolism in the ancient world”, *Eranos* 41 (1942), p. 332.

<sup>25</sup> However, in Greek we find other specific terms for darkness, even making reference to black, as the terms αἰθων, αἰθουψ, and two terms which refer to other colours but always in the sense of dark: οἴνοψ, κυάνεος. See J. M. Pajón Martínez, *Luz y oscuridad en la épica arcaica*, PhD Diss. (University Complutense of Madrid, 2002), pp. 271-276, 335-349 and 356-360. We would like to highlight the use in Homeric poems of οἰνωπός, a term that refers to black.

clear that Homer seems to use μέλας to name the dark colour of the referent of a specific tone by itself: dark red of blood and wine, and dark blue of waves.

Nevertheless, μέλας is also used in Homer to denote black. And thus it refers to μελαίνης νυκτός (“black night”) in *Il.* 15, 324, as does Hesiod in *Th.* 20: νύκτα μελάιναν. This meaning also appears in Anacreon,<sup>26</sup> Euripides (*Alc.* 923 describes black robes, μέλανες στολμοί, as opposed to white *perplos* or *Hel.* 186 πέπλους μέλαινας) or Hippocrates, who in his *Treatises* assigns colours to certain diseases, and black besides referring to the colour, acquires a negative meaning indicating something evil (*Prog.* 13). This negative connotation already appears in Homer and Hesiod when associating μέλας to Ker (*Il.* 2, 859: ἀλλ’ οὐκ οἰωνοῖσιν ἐρύσατο κῆρα μέλαιναν,<sup>27</sup> *Od.* 2, 283: θάνατον καὶ κῆρα μέλαιναν, *Th.* 211: Νύξ δ’ ἔτεκε στυγερόν τε Μόρον καὶ Κῆρα μέλαιναν καὶ θάνατον) or to death (*Il.* 2, 834: μέλανος θανάτοιο “of the black death”)<sup>28</sup> and it is also present in later Hellenistic literature: Solon in *Lg.* 42, 4 describes a bad heart with the adjective μέλας and the same does Pindar in *Fr.* 123, 4 (μέλαιναν καρδίαν); Plato employs μέλας to refer to a defective skin colour *R.* 474e: μέλανας δὲ ἀνδρικούς ἰδεῖν, λευκούς δὲ θεῶν παῖδας εἶναι (“the swarthy are of manly aspect, the white are children of the gods”)<sup>29</sup>. Years later evil genius will be branded as black, as seen in Plutarch *Moralia* 12e, where there is an equivalence between colours and passions.<sup>30</sup> However, we already find an identification of colours and

<sup>26</sup> Widely studied by Edward Irwin, *Colour Terms in Greek Poetry* (Toronto: Hakkert, 1974). The term γλαυκός is mentioned to refer to the colour of a leprous, change or paralysis in Antioch of Athens. See Maxwell-Stuart, *Studies in Greek color terminology*, vols. I-II (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981).

<sup>27</sup> One of the Fates, the daughters of Night, is Ker, who is associated to black and considered the goddess of death in Homer. See, J. M. Pajón Martínez, *Luz y oscuridad*, pp. 637-639 on the identification of Ker with black in Homer and on the same issue in Hesiod.

<sup>28</sup> Hom., *Il.* 2, 834: κῆρες γὰρ ἄγον μέλανος θανάτοιο, “impelled by the Fates of the black death” (cf. Spanish trans. L. Segalá y Estalella, *Iliada* (Madrid: Austral, 1994).

<sup>29</sup> Artemidorus in the *Interpretation of Dreams* talks of black as a colour of evil in several passages: I, 31-35, 69, 73; II, 3, 11; IV, 33, 55 and V, 35, 44.

<sup>30</sup> Plutarch relates cruelty with fiery red (αίμωπόν) or evil with dark brown (ῥοφνινον). See L. Roig Lanzillotta & I. Muñoz Gallarte (eds.), *Plutarch in the Religious and Philosophical Discourse of Late Antiquity* (2012), pp. 239-240. In the chapter “The

passions in Homer when he describes Agamemnon in *Il.* I, 103-104: μένεος δὲ μέγα φρένες ἀμφιμελάινα / πίμπλατ' ("with rage his black heart was wholly filled"). We want to mention that Lucian in *Philops.* 31 employs the term to refer to a demon: ὁ δαίμων μελάντερος τοῦ ζόφου ("the demon is blacker than darkness"). Finally, Marcus Aurelius in *Med.* II, 13 equates ignorance of good and evil in man with the distinction of black and white.<sup>31</sup>

As revealed in this study, μέλας in Hellenistic literature is used to denote black or the lack of brightness of a colour; its darkness is applied to skin, wine, night, robes or other realities as genius, death, fate. It is in these contexts that μέλας acquires a negative connotation.

#### *Μέλας in Biblical Literature*

Since the *Epistle of Barnabas* and the *Shepherd of Hermas* are both written in Ancient Greek and the source of the authors of New Testament writings used to be the Septuagint, we will start studying the Septuagint and then we will analyse the New Testament for the terminological study of μέλας.

#### *Septuagint*

For the analysis of μέλας we have only followed Rahlfs' edition,<sup>32</sup> since we have not found this terms in the Greek Biblical texts of Qumran.<sup>33</sup>

The term μέλας appears five times in the Septuagint to describe two corporal elements, skin and hair, denoting black.

---

colours of the Souls", pp. 235-247, I. Muñoz Gallarte draws a parallel between the apocryphal text of the *Acts of John* and Plutarch; the interesting point of this statement is that it states that the colour of virtue neutralizes passions.

<sup>31</sup> G. Hays (trans.), *Marcus Aurelius. Meditations. A New Translation* (New York: Modern Library, 2002).

<sup>32</sup> A. Rahlfs (ed.) & R. Hanhart (ed. lit.), *Septuaginta: Id est Vetus Testamentum graecae iuxta LXX interpretes* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006). In Qumran manuscripts we find some allusions to darkness and its relationship with evil, for example in 1QS there is a reference to the angel of darkness and it is said that all the sons of darkness are sons of Belial, one of Satan's names.

<sup>33</sup> Florentino García Martínez & Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar (trans.), *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 1997-1998).

Concerning skin colour, μέλας is used to describe both the skin colour of people and animals. In the case of people, μέλας is the qualifier used by the bride in the *Song of Songs* 1:5 to present herself to the daughters of Jerusalem:

**Μέλαινά** εἶμι καὶ καλή, θυγατέρες Ιερουσαλημ, ὡς σκηνώματα Κηδάρ, ὡς δέρρεις Σαλωμων.

“**Dark** am I, yet lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon.”

The meaning of μέλας is determined by the author’s comparing of the bride with the tents of Kedar, which were woven with black wool of goats. We are inclined to think that μέλας refers to black rather than to dark skin.<sup>34</sup> As it was the case in *Republic* (R. 474e) where people are classified in accordance to their skin colour, μέλας seems to contain some negative connotation, as if this skin tone was not common in these people and considered something negative,<sup>35</sup> hence their beauty, καλή, being highlighted afterwards.

As regards animal skin, μέλας is the colour of the raven in the *Song of Songs* 5:11 and of the horses in Zechariah’s visions: οἱ ἵπποι οἱ μέλανες (Zech. 6:2 and 6:6). As we know, ravens are characterized by their black appearance,<sup>36</sup> as well as some breeds of horses. Given the prophetic visionary context of Zechariah’s text, μέλας, as other colours mentioned by the prophet, acquires a symbolic meaning:

<sup>34</sup> See Francisco Cantera & M. Iglesias (trans.), *Sagrada Biblia. Versión crítica sobre los textos hebreo, arameo y griego* (Madrid, 2015), p. 752, where it refers to Robert, who interprets here the use of μέλας as a reference to skin blackened by physical suffering and not to designate the natural colour of skin. Ref. to Lam. 4:8.

<sup>35</sup> Duane A. Garrett & Paul R. House, *Song of Songs. Lamentations*, WBC 23b; Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), p. 132: Her defensiveness about her dark skin, however, implies that her culture does not regard dark skin as attractive.

<sup>36</sup> About the raven symbolism in the Bible see, McLean, John A. Freedman, David Noel, Allen C. Myers, & Astrid B. Beck (eds.), *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*; Accordance electronic edition, version 3.6. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

famine.<sup>37</sup> Thus it acquires a negative connotation common in Hellenistic literature.

Concerning the use of μέλας to describe the hair colour, the first reference appears in Leviticus, when the physical manifestation of ringworm is described in detail:

Lev. 13:36-37: ...περὶ τῆς τριχὸς τῆς ξανθῆς, ὅτι ἀκάθαρτός ἐστιν. ἐὰν δὲ ἐνώπιον μείνη τὸ θραῦσμα ἐπὶ χώρας καὶ θρίξ **μέλαινα** ἀνατείλῃ ἐν αὐτῷ, ὑγίακεν τὸ θραῦσμα· καθαρὸς ἐστιν,

“...for yellow hair; he is unclean. If in his sight the scab has remained, however, and **black** hair has grown in it, the scab has healed, he is clean.”

In this text of Leviticus is clearly perceived that the appearance of black is a sign that the disease has disappeared, thus μέλας denotes not only the hair colour, but that tone is also a sign of recovery and healing.

The second reference is found again in the Song to describe, in this case, the hair colour of the beloved. The colour tone is indisputable since a comparison with a raven is added, which is black as mentioned above. Song of Songs 5:11: βόστρυχοι αὐτοῦ ἐλάται, **μέλανες** ὡς κόραξ, “his locks are bushy, and **black** as a raven.”

Once again μέλας, besides denoting hair colour -its blackness-, also refers to other fact, in this case youth and strength,<sup>38</sup> thus μέλας has a positive connotation.

After the analysis it can be concluded that μέλας in the Septuagint is mainly used as a colour adjective. It denotes black, but not the dark shade of a colour. It is employed for physical descriptions in order to specify hair or skin colour. Its use has sometimes a positive connotation related to health and youth (Lev. 13:37 and Song of Songs

<sup>37</sup> See “Horse” in Ryken, Leland, Wilhoit, & Longman (eds.), *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*. Accordance electronic edition, version 2.1 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

<sup>38</sup> Duane A. Garrett & Paul R. House, *Song of Songs. Lamentations*, 220.

5:1), but also a negative one when it is used both in a real sense (Song of Songs 1:5) or figuratively (Zech. 6:2-4).

#### *New Testament*

For the study of μέλας in the New Testament we follow mostly the article of Lourdes García Ureña dedicated to colour adjectives in the New Testament.<sup>39</sup> The adjective μέλας appears six times,<sup>40</sup> we will focus only on its adjectival function. As in the Septuagint, μέλας is used to describe hair colour and therewith the strength of a person (Matt. 5:36); it also refers to the skin colour of horses (Rev. 6:5 in a symbolic sense as in the Septuagint) and to the colour of the sun when the sixth seal is opened (Rev. 6:12 ὁ ἥλιος ἐγένετο μέλας, “the sun turned black”).<sup>41</sup> As in the Septuagint, μέλας may have a positive connotation when describing hair colour and therewith the strength of a person (Matt. 5:36) or negative when symbolizing famine (Rev. 6:5 & 6:12) depending on the contexts. Despite the use of μέλας in the *Epistle of Barnabas* and *The Shepherd of Hermas* to designate the Devil or things related to him, from what we have studied so far, we can observe that nor in the New Testament μέλας is employed to describe the Devil.

Before concluding this section, we would like to emphasize the reference to a person called The Niger, even though the term ὁ μέλας is not used in Acts 13:1:

---

<sup>39</sup> Lourdes García Ureña, “Colour Adjectives in the New Testament”, *NTS* 61 (2015), pp. 219-238.

<sup>40</sup> Matt. 5:36; 2 Cor. 3:3; 2 John 1:12; 3 John 1:13; Rev. 6:1 and Rev. 6:12. Since in 2 Cor. 3:3; 2 John 1:12 and 3 John 1:13 μέλας appears in the neuter used as a noun already lexicalized in Ancient Greek to name ink. As demonstrated by L. García Ureña, “Colour Adjectives”, p. 225, the term τό μέλαν is used to mean “black pigment” or “ink” from the Greek literature: ref. to its use in Pl., *Phdr.* 276c, D., 18, 258; Plu., *Mar.* 841e and Plin., *HN* 35.

<sup>41</sup> The image of a dark day or the sun covered by darkness is also found in Joel 3:4, Amos 5:20; Mic. 7:8; Nah. 1:8; Zeph. 1:15. See, D. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, col. «World Biblical Commentary» 52b (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 390. The apocalyptic passage describes the arrival of the final judgement; by using μέλας with a colour value rather than σκότος, which is the most common term in the Old and New Testaments to describe darkness, the author tries to highlight the danger and evil that will arrive with the end of times.

Ἦσαν δὲ ἐν Ἀντιοχείᾳ κατὰ τὴν οὖσαν ἐκκλησίαν  
προφῆται καὶ διδάσκαλοι ὃ τε Βαρναβᾶς καὶ Συμεὼν ὁ  
καλούμενος **Νίγερ**

“There were at Antioch, in the congregation there,  
certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called  
**Niger.**”

It is the only use of *Νίγερ* in the Bible and it is employed to refer to the colour as transcription of the Latin adjective *niger, nigra, nigrum*.<sup>42</sup> It is a common nickname in Rome to refer to someone with dark skin.<sup>43</sup> In Acts it is probably used for the dark colour of Simeon’s skin, being a descendant of a prisoner from the Romanized coast of North Africa.

#### *Darkness*

Since the analysis of *μέλας* in Hellenistic and Biblical literatures does not provide conclusive data to say that the author of the *Epistle of Barnabas* finds inspiration in that literature to refer to the Devil as ὁ Μέλας and that the principal source for the writers of Early Christian literature is mainly the New Testament, we have extended our study to *σκότος* and *σκοτία*, because they are also used to denote the lack of

<sup>42</sup> Another term that is used as a nickname with a negative connotation is *αιθίοψ*, which refers to the black colour of the Ethiopian people, which begins to be used, particularly in Egyptian Monastic literature, with a negative meaning and even directly related to demons, as Ath. Al., *V. Anton.* 21 and in *H.Mon.* 3, 4, where a small Ethiopian is identified with the demon of arrogance. See G. N. Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature* (London - New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 17-23 and 29-37, where the symbolic use of the term “Ethiopian” in apocryphal texts as the *Acts of Peter* and in Monastic literature is developed. His study starts from the ethnic value of the Ethiopian people.

<sup>43</sup> See *Νίγερ*, C. S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. Accordance electronic edition, version 2.1 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993). According to Keener, the adjective *Νίγερ* was a common nickname in Rome to refer to someone with dark skin.

light, i.e. darkness.<sup>44</sup> Light and darkness are present in the universal language of religious symbolism. Their use in Hellenistic literature, in the Septuagint and in Qumran is common till the Gospel according to John, where the image of God as light is recurring (1:7-9; 4:24), as well as in the letters of John, which were probably written under the influence of Judaism.

In the Old Testament light symbolizes truth against darkness, which is erroneous.<sup>45</sup> This image looks familiar when we read some texts of Qumran as 1QS1: 5, 9-10 and 19-21, 1QH4: 5-6 and 1QH18: 29, where God is described as “perfect light”.<sup>46</sup> In the New Testament the association between Christ and light in the Fourth Gospel and the contrast light/darkness appear in John 1: 4; 8: 12; 9: 5 and 12: 35 as a feature of evangelical teaching and as a moral element to reveal the truth. The purpose of the phrase *God is light* is to describe the being and nature of God; for example in John 1: 7-9, John presumes with this statement that evil and error find themselves in darkness, as we will see below.<sup>47</sup>

Returning to the study of *σκότος* (thirty times) and *σκοτία* (sixteen times) in the New Testament, these terms are mostly translated as *darkness*. We will stop at those pericopes where there is an opposition light/darkness relevant to our study. In the passages analysed below we will observe that light is identified with God, while darkness seems to be the place of sin and as inference, the Devil.

Even though *σκότος* is used in different gospels (Matt. 6:23; Luke 11:35) and letters (Eph. 4:27; 5:11; Rom. 13:12; 2 Cor. 6:14-15), it is the author of the Fourth Gospel who uses the opposition between *φῶς* and *σκότος/σκοτία* with a theological meaning from the prologue. This is not other than the identification of the Word with light, while it states that those who do not follow Him represent darkness:

---

<sup>44</sup> In Barn. 18: 1 is also used *σκότος* associated with the angels of Satan with a negative connotation.

<sup>45</sup> See, Ps. 119, 130; Isa. 5:20 and Mic. 7:8b.

<sup>46</sup> Florentino García Martínez & Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar (trans.), *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, vol. I.

<sup>47</sup> Stephen S. Smalley, 1, 2, 3 *John*. WBC 51. Accordance electronic edition, version 1.9. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).



John 1:5:

καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν **τῇ σκοτίᾳ** φαίνει, καὶ ἡ **σκοτία** αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν.

“The light shines on in **the dark**, and **the darkness** has never mastered it.”

Later he puts this identification into Jesus’ mouth:

John 8:12:

ἐγὼ εἰμι τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου· ὁ ἀκολουθῶν ἐμοὶ οὐ μὴ περιπατήσει ἐν **τῇ σκοτίᾳ**

“I am the light of the world. No follower of mine shall wander in **the dark**;<sup>48</sup>”

John 12:35:

εἶπεν οὖν αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς· ἔτι μικρὸν χρόνον τὸ φῶς ἐν ὑμῖν ἐστίν. περιπατεῖτε ὡς τὸ φῶς ἔχετε, ἵνα μὴ **σκοτία** ὑμᾶς καταλάβῃ· καὶ ὁ περιπατῶν ἐν **τῇ σκοτίᾳ** οὐκ οἶδεν ποῦ ὑπάγει.

“Jesus answered them: ‘the light is among you still but not for long. Go on your way while you have the light, so that **darkness** may not overtake you. He who journeys in **the dark** does not know where he is going’.”

And the same goes for John 12:46. Later, it is in the first letter of John when not only Jesus but also God is identified with light and the total absence of darkness, and therefor of evil (1 John 1:5):

Καὶ ἔστιν αὕτη ἡ ἀγγελία ἣν ἀκηκόαμεν ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀναγγέλλομεν ὑμῖν, ὅτι ὁ θεὸς **φῶς** ἐστίν καὶ **σκοτία** ἐν

<sup>48</sup> We also refer to Eph. 5:8; 1 John 2:11 and Rom. 2:19.

αὐτῷ οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδεμία.

“This is the message we have heard from him and pass on to you: God is **light**, and in him there is no **darkness** at all.”

However, it is in John 3:19 when a clear link between **σκότος** and evil is drawn (πονηρὰ τὰ ἔργα):

αὕτη δέ ἐστιν ἡ κρίσις ὅτι τὸ φῶς ἐλήλυθεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον καὶ ἠγάπησαν οἱ ἄνθρωποι μᾶλλον τὸ **σκότος** ἢ τὸ φῶς· ἦν γὰρ αὐτῶν πονηρὰ τὰ ἔργα.

“Here lies the test: the light has come into the world, but men preferred **darkness** to light because their deeds were evil.”

Nevertheless, the definitive identification of Satan with darkness is in Acts 26:18, when Luke talking of conversion first employs the opposition φῶς/σκότος and later he explains:

τοῦ ἐπιστρέψαι ἀπὸ **σκότους** εἰς φῶς καὶ τῆς ἐξουδίας τοῦ σατανᾶ ἐπὶ τὸν θεόν,

“turn them from **darkness** to light, from the dominion of Satan to God.”<sup>49</sup>

Thus, **σκότος** is identified with Satan, while φῶς with God. And we find something similar in Paul. In the letters of Paul we highlight the use of **σκότος** to definitely denote a negative referent, represented by the Devil. First in Rom. 13:12 he uses **σκότος** to denote a negative referent, the evil deeds:

ἀποθώμεθα οὖν τὰ ἔργα τοῦ **σκότους**, ἐνδυσώμεθα τὰ ὅπλα τοῦ φωτός.

<sup>49</sup> It is said that Satan is black and an enemy of Christ. This statement by J. B. Russell, *Satan*, p. 62, can refer to where Satan is related to darkness.

“Let us therefore throw off the deeds of **darkness** and put on the armour of light.”

As seen above, Luke (Acts 26:18) is the first who employs the symbolic opposition φῶς/σκότος. But it is in 2 Cor. 6:14-15 where another of the names of the Devil, Belial,<sup>50</sup> appears:

τίς γὰρ μετοχή δικαιοσύνη καὶ ἀνομία, ἢ τίς κοινωνία φωτὶ πρὸς **σκότος**; τίς δὲ συμφώνησις Χριστοῦ πρὸς Βελιάρ;

“For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with **darkness**? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial?”

We do not find this clear link between **σκότος** and the Devil, but we can sense it in other passages of the letters where there is an insistence on relating darkness to evil and evil deeds.

Eph. 5:11: καὶ μὴ συγκοινωνεῖτε τοῖς ἔργοις τοῖς ἀκάργοις τοῦ **σκότους**

“take no part in the barren deeds of **darkness**”

The study of these passages allows us to say that John, Luke and Paul<sup>51</sup> interpret darkness as a place of evil in opposition to God’s light, and confirms the Devil as the opponent of God in the New Testament; this link is the one that the author of the *Epistle of Barnabas* reads and interprets to be able to describe the Devil as Μέλας, as does the author of *The Shepherd of Hermas*.

<sup>50</sup> In the Apocrypha of the Old Testament, the names of the Devil vary: Belial, Mastema, Azazel, Samael or Satan, all of them referring to beings with different origins and functions. Herbert Haag, *El Diabolo. Su existencia como problema* (Barcelona: Herder, 1978), p. 166, where the identification of Belial with Satan is explored.

<sup>51</sup> The authorship of Acts of the Apostles has not been confirmed, although it has been confirmed that it was a comrade of Paul.

### Conclusion

It is clear that both the anonymous writers of the *Epistle of Barnabas* and *The Shepherd of Hermas* have as source the New Testament texts, where the opposition light/darkness to talk about God/evil that appears in John crystallizes in Acts (Acts 26:18) and 2 Cor. in the opposition God/Christ against the Devil. Thus the Devil is totally identified with darkness in the New Testament. Notwithstanding that, oddly enough, nor the author of the *Epistle of Barnabas* nor the author of *The Shepherd of Hermas* employ the term σκότος to mention the devil or what is related to him, as their sources do, but, as seen above, they turn to μέλας, that neither in the Septuagint nor in the New Testament are used to describe the devil.

Throughout this study it has been pointed out that in Hellenistic literature μέλας is an ambiguous term, both in its denotation, because sometimes is used to refer to black and others to the dark tone of any other colour, as in its connotation, sometimes positive others negative. In Biblical literature (Septuagint and New Testament), although the connotative ambiguity is hold, μέλας tends to denote black. This may explain that the term reaches the author of the *Epistle of Barnabas* more defined as a reference to black, being the reason why he decides to use it to refer to the devil, instead of using σκότος. Oddly enough, a few years later it will also be employed by Lucian to describe a type of demon. Something similar can be observed in *The Shepherd of Hermas*, where μέλας is used to describe one of the colours of the dragon, a major symbolic figure to refer to evil, and as inference to the Devil, the evil deeds of man and the robes of the women representing the sins. (Vis. 4:1,10; Par. 9:6,4 and 9:15,3; Barn. 4:10 and 20:1).

We cannot conclude without highlighting that these two anonym authors, who write their works in the late first or the early second centuries, are a good example of the Hellenistic writers who integrate harmoniously the Hellenistic and Judeo-Hellenistic tradition represented in the Septuagint and the Hellenistic-Christian tradition, which are nothing more than different periods of a civilization.