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 BROTÓNS 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 σκότος (“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...
The Black Devil: the adjective μέλας.

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. There is a vast literature on colour terms in Greek literature. The first studies by W. Gladstone state that each colour adjective expresses different shades and tones of the same colour. 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. Light and darkness are the parameters on which Ancient Greek civilization builds its colour scale, clearly found in the Bible.

---

* 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).


4 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.

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 needs 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 μῆλας (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.

From the 11th 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. 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?

---

6 In the Commentaria in Apocalypsin circulating in Spain after the 9th 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.

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 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 2nd century author not to be confused with the Apostle. 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.

---

8. 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.


10. 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, where Barnabas refers to the Devil with the epithet μῆλας. 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 μῆλανος ὅδε) as “of eternal death with punishment” and warns against the danger of pride, hypocrisy, adultery and other sins.

Patristic Lexicon of Lampe defines the appellative δ μῆλας, “the Black” in 4:10 and in 20:1 as a synonym for “the Evil One”. G. Kittel also addresses this passage of the Epistle to relate the term μῆλας with the Devil. 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 δ μῆλας 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 μῆλας 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.


We find a similar reflection in the Didache on the path of death, where all the ills and vices converge. Didache V, 2.


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 ThWN, W. Michaelis, s.v. μῆλας 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.
The Black Devil: the adjective μέλας.

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 prophetical 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.15

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, ἔτα πυροειδὲς καὶ αἰματῶδὲς, ἔτα χρυσοῦν, ἔτα λευκόν

"Now the beast had four colours on its head - black, then fiery and bloody, then golden and lastly white."16

16 Michel Pastoureau, 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, 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. 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, 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.

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 ἔπατασσεν, ἐγένοντο αὐτῶν τινὲς μέλανες ὡσεὶ ἄσβολη, τινὲς δὲ ἐψωριακότεσ, τινὲς δὲ σχισματικότεσ, τινὲς δὲ οὐτέ 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.

---

17 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.


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 ὄνόματα καὶ τῶν γυναικῶν τῶν τὰ μέλανα ἱμάτια ἐνδυμένων... ἄκουε, φησί, καὶ τὰ ὄνόματα τῶν γυναικῶν τῶν τὰ ἱμάτια μέλανα ἐχουσῶν... ἢ πρώτη Ἀπιστία, ἢ δεύτερα Ἀκρασία, ἢ δὲ Τρίτη Ἀπείθεια, ἢ δὲ Τετάρτη Ἀπάθη. Αἱ δὲ ἀκόλουθαι 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.
The term μέλας (“black, dark, dark blue”) has its origin in the Indo-European form *mel-n-* (“black”). In Greek the use of the adjective μέλας, μελαίνα μέλαν becomes common in its simple form and in derivatives as μελαχροίς (Hom., Od. 16, 175); μελανής, μελαίνης (A., Pers. 357); μελαγχόλος (S., Tr. 573).

The Homeric poems can be considered a reference to know the colour adjectives in Ancient Greek from the 8th 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, which means that their audience ought to know these colour references.

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. For example μέλας describes the colour of blood (ll. 4, 149: ὠς εἶδον μέλαν αἷμα, “seeing the black blood”), of waves (ll. 23, 693: μέλαν δὲ ἐ κῆμα, “the black wave”), of wine (Od. 5, 265: μέλανος οἶνος, “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

---

21 LSJ, v.s. μέλας, p. 840. We find different translations of the term: “black, swart, dark, obscure”.
22 The evolution of this form is: A.I. maliná “dirty, black”, Lit. mělynas “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 L.-E. root *mol-o- evolving in Greek to μέλος “unfortunate”. DELG, v.s. μέλας, and BDAG, v.s. μέλας.
23 LSJ, v.s. μελάργροος, αν, μελανής, ες.
25 However, in Greek we find other specific terms for darkness, even making reference to black, as the terms άλος, άεφ, and two terms which refer to other colours but always in the sense of dark: οἶνος, 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 οἴνωπός, 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 νυκτὸς ("black night") in Il. 15, 324, as does Hesiod in Th. 20: νύκτα μελάναν. This meaning also appears in Anacreon, Euripides (Alc. 923 describes black robes, μέλανες στολῶι, as opposed to white peplos or Hel. 186 πέπλους μελαίνας) 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. 15). This negative connotation already appears in Homer and Hesiod when associating μέλας to Ker (ll. 2, 859: ἀλλ᾽ οὐκ οἴωνοισ ἔρυσατο κῆρα μέλαιναν, Od. 2, 283: θάνατον καὶ κῆρα μέλαιναν, Th. 211: Νῦξ β’ ἔτεκε στυγερὸν τε Μόρον καὶ Κῆρα μέλαιναν καὶ θάνατον) or to death (ll. 2, 834: μέλανος βανάτου “of the black death”) 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 ἀνδρικοὺς ιδεῖν, λευκοὺς δὲ θεῶν παιδίς εἶναι (“the swarthy are of manly aspect, the white are children of the gods”). Years later evil genius will be branded as black, as seen in Plutarch Moralia 12e, where there is an equivalence between colours and passions. However, we already find an identification of colours and

---

26 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).
27 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.
29 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.
30 Plutarch relates cruelty with fiery red (αἰμωπόν) or evil with dark brown (δραμόν), 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: ἵενες δὲ μέγα φρένες ἀμφιμελάναι / πινπλατ’ (“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 ξέφου (“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.

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.

**Mέλας 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, since we have not found this terms in the Greek Biblical texts of Qumran.

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.
32 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.
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:

Μέλανα εἰμί καὶ καλὴ, θυγατέρες Ιερουσαλήμ, ὡς σχηνώματα Κηδάρ, ὡς δέρες Σαλωμών.

"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. 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, 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, 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:

---

34 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.

35 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.

famine.\textsuperscript{37} 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 τριχῆς τῆς ξανθῆς, ὅτι ἀκάθαρτός ἐστιν. Ἐὰν δὲ ἐνώπιον μείνῃ τὸ δραῦσμα ἐπὶ χώρας καὶ βρίζῃ μέλαινα ἀνατέλη ἐν αὐτῷ, ὑγιακεν τὸ δραῦσμα· καθαρός 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, μέλαινες 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,\textsuperscript{38} 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


\textsuperscript{38} Duane A. Garrett & Paul R. House, Song of Songs. Lamentations, 220.
The Black Devil: the adjective μέλας.

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. The adjective μέλας appears six times, 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 ἱλιος ἐγένετο μέλας, “the sun turned black”).

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 δ μέλας is not used in Acts 13:1:

---

60 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.
61 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.
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. It is a common nickname in Rome to refer to someone with dark skin. 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

---

42 Another term that is used as a nickname with a negative connotation is αἰθίοψ, 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.

light, i.e. darkness.44 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.45 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”.46 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.47

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 that the identification of the Word with light, while it states that those who do not follow Him represent darkness:

44 In Barn. 18: 1 is also used σκότος associated with the angels of Satan with a negative connotation.
45 See. Ps. 119, 130; Isa. 5:20 and Mic. 7:8b.
46 Florentino García Martínez & Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar (trans.), The Dead Sea Scrolls, vol. I.
John 1:5:

καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει, καὶ η σκοτία αὐτὸ ὑπάρχει.

“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 εἰμί τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου· ὁ ἀκολουθῶν ἔμειν ὑμᾶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ.

“I am the light of the world. No follower of mine shall wander in the dark.”

John 12:35:

εἴπεν δὲ αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς· ἐτι μικρὸν χρόνον τὸ φῶς ἐν ὑμῖν ἔστιν. περιπατεῖτε ως τὸ φῶς ἔχετε, ἵνα μὴ σκοτίᾳ ὑμᾶς καταλάβῃ· καὶ ὁ περιπατῶν ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ οὐκ οἴδεν 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 ἀκοράσαμεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀναγέλλομεν ὑμῖν, ὅτι ο ἁλῶν ὁ φῶς ἔστιν καὶ σκοτία ἐν

48 We also refer to Eph. 5:8; 1 John 2:11 and Rom. 2:19.
The Black Devil: the adjective μέλας.

αὐτῶι οὐκ ἦστιν 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 ἐργα):

αὕτη δὲ ἦστιν ἡ κρίσις ὅτι τὸ φῶς ἐλήλυθεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον καὶ ἡγάπησαν οἱ ἀνθρώποι μᾶλλον τὸ σκότος ἢ τὸ φῶς· ἦν γὰρ αὐτῶι πονηρὰ τὰ ἐργα.

“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 ἐξουσίας τοῦ σατάνα ἐπὶ τὸν θεόν,

“turn them from darkness to light, from the dominion of Satan to God.”

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:

ἀποθάμεθα οὖν τὰ ἐργα τοῦ σκότους, ἐνυδατώμεθα τὰ ὁπλα τοῦ φωτὸς.

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,50 appears:

τίς γὰρ μετοχὴ δικαιοσύνη καὶ ἀνομία, ἢ τίς κοινωνία φωτὸς πρὸς σκότους; τίς δὲ συμφωνήσεως 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 ἀκάρποις τοῦ σκότους

“take no part in the barren deeds of darkness”

The study of these passages allows us to say that John, Luke and Paul51 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.

50 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 Diablo. Su existencia como problema (Barcelona: Herder, 1978), p. 166, where the identification of Belial with Satan is explored.

51 The authorship of Acts of the Apostles has not been confirmed, although it has been confirmed that it was a comrade of Paul.
The Black Devil: the adjective μέλας.

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.