

Hair like wool

Both Daniel and Revelation compare God's hair to wool. White enslavers used to say the same thing about hair like mine.

by [Melissa Burlock](#) in the [July 2024](#) issue

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(Illustration by Hannah Buckman)

Growing up, I was a PK times two. Dad preached on Sundays in the small sanctuary of our humble church plant. Mom taught Sunday school in the classroom down the hallway. For a half hour each week, she was momma to eight kids instead of just my sister and me.

Mom's assistants were two puppets: Patchy the rabbit and Snowball the dog. Snowball was saved, because he had accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior and was destined for that ethereal abode where all dogs go, including the one made out of a gym sock and a foam ball. Patchy, on the other hand (literally), was the unbeliever, the doubter, the heathen whom faithful Snowball ever endeavored to witness to. This Shakespearean drama of existential stakes for the eternal soul of a brown button-eyed rabbit puppet played out on a weekly basis before a rapt audience of children sucking on Jolly Ranchers. More than 30 years later, poor Patchy still isn't saved. (According to Mom, Patchy's redemption will come when Mom has grandchildren.)

Mom also had a felt board and an assortment of stickable Bible people: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, the disciples. The Jesus sticker was White with straight hair like the rest of them, a thin frame robed in spotless white, aquiline features set in a serene expression. Except Mom had made an ever-so-slight but essential modification. She'd taken a colored pencil and, with a careful hand, very lightly shaded Jesus' face and hands a soft brown. With her brown pencil, Mom resisted centuries of violent whitewashing, both psychological and visual, so that we could recognize ourselves in our Savior.

It was the skeleton of a lesson she built up in my mind from an early age. It grew muscle and skin as I listened to the sermons my dad preached and read his books on hermeneutics, the Black church, apologetics, and liberation theology. I've had to carry it with me, like colored pencils in my imagination's tool kit, through encounters with people who claimed to care about Christian tenets while they failed to call for social justice.

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My whole life, I've had to color in my Jesus. Brown for skin baked beneath a sweltering Middle Eastern sun. Red for that same skin shredded with a Roman

soldier's lead-tipped whip. Black for the blood-drenched soft whorls of hair that looked like wool. Like mine.

At my grandparents' house on Thanksgiving, we'd hold hands around the brightly lit dining room table laden with piping hot deliciousness, an unbroken chain from the youngest cousin to the grayest elder, and say grace, the fragrance of turkey, dressing, macaroni and cheese, collard greens, cornbread, sweet potato pie, and yeast rolls blessing us even before we ate.

In the living room hung a framed portrait of another meal, arguably the most famous in human history: the Last Supper. Ten-year-old me didn't know it was a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's painting. I'd sit on the couch, brown skin sticking to the thick plastic preserving the untouched cushions, looking up at White Jesus and his 12 White disciples. Six men sat on either side of the Western-style table, draped with a spotless white tablecloth and set with silvery saucers and cups. Jesus sat in the middle, his hair spilling in waves over his shoulders.

I imagine da Vinci's palette: dollops of ivory for Jesus' pale skin, blue for the cloth that drapes his wan shoulder, golden brown for his straight hair. I grew up seeing this Eurocentric depiction of Jesus idolized in movies, plays, books, marble statues, stained-glass windows, art galleries, jewelry, Christmas cards, Nativity sets, clipart, and tattoos. I couldn't say how many times I've seen Jesus drawn with the fairest of skin and the straightest of hair textures—probably a thousand times more than I'd guess.

I don't know what Jesus looked like. I don't know details like how tall he was, what his voice sounded like, or what color his eyes were. For a word that is detailed about everything from the colors of threads for weaving tabernacle tapestries (Exod. 26:1) to the tongue-twister names of millennia-spanning genealogies, physical descriptions of Jesus, the Word in the flesh, are surprisingly absent. But there are glimpses of Christ in different translations that stimulate my theological imagination.

In a passage Christians have traditionally interpreted to be describing Jesus during his 33 years on earth, Isaiah tells us, "He wasn't some handsome king. Nothing about the way he looked made him attractive to us" (Isa. 53:2, CEV). In other words, according to this two-sentence sketch, we didn't miss much, looks-wise.

The pictures of God painted in other scriptures are less illuminating than confusing, even frightening in their apocalyptic nature. Daniel says he saw the Ancient of Days on his throne and that the “throne was flames of fire, with wheels of burning fire. A river of fire surged forth, flowing from where he sat” (Dan. 7:9-10, NABRE). In Revelation, John says he saw that God’s “eyes were like a fiery flame. His feet were like polished brass refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing water. In his right hand he held seven stars. . . . and his face shone like the sun at its brightest” (Rev. 1:14-16, NABRE). Then John fainted (v. 17).

Between heaven and earth, how God presents himself is either very brief or wholly alien. But there is one human characteristic, one physical attribute about the Alpha and Omega that stands out to both Daniel and John: woolly hair. “The hair of his head,” John says, “was as white as white wool or as snow” (Rev. 1:14, NABRE). God’s hair is “like pure wool” says Daniel (Dan. 7:9, NABRE). Isn’t it fitting that God would have the hair of a lamb?

White enslavers referred to Black people’s hair as wool as a way to redefine them as less than human. As a means of sadistic punishment, owners hacked off Black people’s hair to the bleeding scalp. Often a White mistress perpetrated the abuse herself if she feared that an enslaved Black woman’s head of long, thick, woolly hair was a source of pride for her or lust for the White master.

The tools that enslaved Black people had to use to care for their hair were another kind of hair trauma, but this painful process was necessarily enacted by Black people on each other. Black women used sheep cards, or “Jim Crow combs,” to try to straighten the coils in their children’s hair on Sundays, the one day of the week that enslaved Black people could see to their hair. A sheep card consists of a handle connected to a horizontal-shaped frame that holds a bed of spikelike teeth, or “teasels,” meant for carding or detangling the shorn wool of sheep in preparation for spinning it into yarn or thread; an enslaved Black mother would’ve used it on her daughter’s hair.

The sheep card took the place of ornate African hair picks, and unhealthy or even toxic materials like axle or bacon grease took the place of the various moisturizing butters Black people used in Africa to clean and soften their hair. Such survivalist practices inevitably led to matted hair and scalp diseases among enslaved people.

Though we've left those sheep cards in the not-so-distant past, oppressive Eurocentric standards of what is deemed beautiful, professional, or "good" hair persist today. On the other side of 400 centuries without a comb, 160 years after the Civil War, and 60 years since Black people won civil rights, Black adults and children are still fired or expelled from school for wearing natural hairstyles. Footage of a White trainer hacking off a Black high schooler's dreadlocks with a pair of kitchen scissors before a wrestling match went viral. These incidents inspired the passing of the CROWN Act (Create a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair) by the House of Representatives, the first legislation of its kind to ban hair discrimination in workplaces and schools.

Black hair is still woolly measured against the White standard, the criterion upheld by popular media, a multimillion-dollar market for carcinogenic chemical hair straighteners, and the worldwide, Western-export image of Warner Sallman's *The Head of Christ*, a White man with long, haloed tresses gracing fragile, white-robed shoulders that would never have the strength to bear my cross up to Calvary.

Isn't it ironic that despite all the sculptural versatility of kinky hair—the twists and cornrows and 'fros and locks—it is straight hair that attracts the exhaustive list of praise from product packaging and R&B singers alike? Straight hair is long and luscious, tamed, professional, and fair. It bounces and it flows like water. It comes in tresses thick enough for a fairy-tale prince to clasp as he scales a tower or to snip a ringlet to stow in a golden locket looped around his neck. The words society uses to describe kinky hair, by contrast, are the adjectives we use for straight hair on a "bad" hair day: wild, untamed, wiry, frizzy.

In the Bible, there aren't a lot of adjectives to describe coarse, curly hair because describing hair as coarse and curly—or woolly—in the tenth century BC was the highest compliment. Hair that is full and textured is attributed not only to God but also to the woman in the Song of Songs: "Turn your eyes away from me, / For they have overcome me. Your hair," the lover says to the maiden who is his beloved, "is like a flock of goats / Going down from Gilead" (6:5, NKJV).

Hair like wool. Hair like my late grandpa's cottony whorls or my late grandma's soft, reddish-brown curls when she removed her straight-hair Sunday wig. Hair like mine, beneath the lace fronts and headscarves, growing amid my scars from central centrifugal cicatricial alopecia. Textured hair that would have become matted enough by blood and sweat to, as Willie L. Morrow speculates in *400 Years without a*

Comb, hold a crown of thorns in place.

At least I can imagine so. I can also imagine Daniel and John before that fiery throne, mouths agape and faces slack, the words of God rushing over them in chariots of waves, the hair of God billowing in an Afro-shaped cumulus cloud, thick and dense and light as air.

Popular depictions of Jesus Christ as a White man with straight blond hair have colonized some people's theological imaginations to the extent that they believe in a god who looked White (i.e., an idol). Conversely, and probably because of the same whitewashed depictions of Christ, I do not think of a skin color or even specific facial features when I think of God. Most Black people don't.

Rather than looking at God like I would my own reflection, expecting to see my image, I look at my Creator like I would an old photograph of my grandma on my mother's side, expecting to find my features hidden in her face—in the flash in her eyes and the curve of her cheekbones—knowing that I inherited them from her, not the other way around. The resemblances aren't coincidental or by my own design, because the sacred I AM isn't made in my image. I am made in his.

God didn't have to color me in; I was a Black woman from the beginning. On God's palette there was brown with warm red undertones for my skin, brown for my eyes, oval-shaped like my grandma's, and black for my kinky, gravity-flouting hair. Hair that was never bad, inferior, or ugly. Hair like pure wool, like God's own. Hair that is divine.