

# The 2020 Census Part I: Bleaching MENA'S and the Bible

***“I’m shouting into this void saying that we’re not white and no one is listening.” ~ David Shams***

Like Michael Myers of the *Halloween* movie franchise, the proposed 2020 Census question refuses to die. Having lost the 2020 battle, the Trump administration is still considering inserting the question into the 2030 census. This citizenship question stalks immigrant populations threatening to reallocate billions of federal dollars and to redistrict several congressional seats. However, that’s not the only controversial part of the Census. Today, this weighty instrument that once listed “Hindu” as a race needs careful reexamination.

Consider this interesting box on the Census form. Under the question of race, citizens are asked to state what kind of “White, Black, or American Indian” they identify as. Examples under “White” include German and Irish, which one would expect. However, other choices now include “Lebanese and Egyptian.” The Census website further defines “White” as “A person having origins in any of the *original peoples* [emphasis added] of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa.”

## **Voices from Within the MENA Veil – Stripped, Erased...Bleached**

Many American’s whose ancestry and origins are from the Middle East and Northern Africa find this new racial classification of “White” insulting and culturally dismissive. Laura Doan in an article for The Daily Texan cites that “many MENA (Middle Eastern and North African) people don’t have a white identity, but they are defined as white by the U.S. Census Bureau and almost every college application.” Here are how some MENA Americans are responding to this classification.

*It was such a weird thing to grow up and be told, “You should be proud to be Jordanian. You should be proud of where you come from.” None of these forms are allowing me to feel proud of it, because I’m just white according to them.”*

Sarah Shabbar

*Léa Sleiman '22, a Lebanese student from Beirut...has always embraced her Lebanese heritage...However, when Sleiman arrived in the U.S., she began to experience an identity crisis. “Because my ethnicity and culture were not recognized in America, I was stripped [of] my identity.”*

Leen Rhazi

*I’m shouting into this void saying that we’re not white and no one is listening.*

David Shams

*I am a brown person. How do I know?...When it’s dark outside and I’m walking by myself, white people sometimes cross the street to avoid passing me...My origins are from Egypt. Every day, I live my life in America as a brown person. Defining me as white and likening me to a European, as the census does, is absurd...to compel everyone from the Middle East and North Africa to*

*select "white" on the census is to force us to participate in our own official erasure.*

Moustafa Bayoumi

*As someone who is half European and half Syrian, I can assure you that white and Middle Eastern are two very distinct races, holding different levels of esteem within American society, and should thus be listed as two separate options on all demographic surveys.*

Chloe A. Shawah

*It's another erasure of both Middle Eastern and North African people.*

Persis Karim

## **Bleaching the Bible**

There is something dangerous about the systematic whitening of the Middle East and North Africa through the 2020 census. Not only does it rob MENA Americans of their culture and heritage, but it also perpetuates this misrepresentation of biblical figures as "white" and/or European.

If you open Genesis 2:14 with one hand and scan the globe with the other, it's easy to see that the Euphrates River flows through Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. It's also easy to surmise that the river Gihon "which goes around the whole land of Cush" (Gen. 2:13) is now known as the Nile River, which flows through Sudan and Egypt. This proves that Adam and Eve's home was most likely close to the intersection of North Africa and Southwest Asia.

As we keep reading, we see that Moses and Paul resembled Egyptians, not Scandinavians (Ex. 2:15-19; Acts 21:37-38). They, like Moustafa Bayoumi, were people of color. Since they are the premier literary and theological contributors of the Old and New Testaments (respectively), the accuracy of their cultural and racial identity is imperative.

In a world where pseudo-scientists and philosophers have determined that whiteness is a superior racial classification, it was only a matter of time before artists and historians began bleaching these biblical figures. This is why in most art depicting the first couple their complexion is pale as though they lived near the Thames or Volga Rivers. It is why the premier contributors of Scripture, Moses and Paul, are portrayed as European philosophers. The agenda of colonialism required these authority figures to be portrayed as White.

But what about Jesus? As Dr. William Barber II would say, he was "a brown-skinned Palestinian Jew." Jesus' family actually lived as refugees in Egypt without arousing unwanted attention. This fact alone makes it clear that historically Jesus was a person of color.

## **The Case of the Great White Washing**

Which means that the greatest act of cultural appropriation in history is the white washing of the Biblical world. Before black-faced comedy and red-skinned mascots, racist theologians vandalized the Bible invalidating every person of color within it by attributing them with a white face. For 500 years, European artists have whitewashed the biblical cast with paintbrushes. And today, politicians continue trying to bleach them with questionnaires like the one that appear in the 2020 census.

To preach the superiority of the European race *and* the Bible, colonizers gentrified North Africa and Southwest Asia. With the goal of subduing black

and brown minds, white supremacists can't promote a Bible full of melanin rich characters as it contradicts their scientific and philosophical beliefs. These kind of intentional acts of bleaching have led many to dismiss Christianity and agree with Malcolm X:

*The whole church structure in this country is white nationalism, you go inside a white church – that's what they're preaching, white nationalism. They got Jesus white, Mary white, God white, everybody white – that's white nationalism...Don't join any church where white nationalism is preached. Why, you can go to a Negro church and be exposed to white nationalism. 'Cause...when you walk in a Negro church and see a white Jesus and a white Mary and some white angels, that Negro church is preaching white nationalism.*

## **Abandon or Awaken?**

Does this mean we should abandon the Bible? Who gives up a treasure so valuable that thieves smuggle and disguise it for centuries? Let's not remove the Bible from our lives; let's remaster its scenes. We might not be able to repaint the Sistine Chapel, but we can reread the Bible with corrective lenses. Just as filmmakers remaster Black and White movies to add vibrant colors in places where there was only grey, our imaginations can restore the bleached passages of Scripture. When we do this, we'll see a Jesus who, as Nathan Brown puts it in his book *For the Least of These*:

*was a refugee, escaping across a border under cover of darkness, then seeking to build a new life in a foreign country...Jesus knew what it was like to live on the margins of society, under the constant threat of violence...[he] lived with the vulnerabilities of poverty...As a teacher who did not fit in with the dominant religious culture, he knew what it was to be persecuted. As a victim of the violent and powerful, Jesus experienced the worst of human injustice, torture, and brutality; he was left a horrifically disfigured body barely recognizable to his human family.*

Jesus subjected himself to these injustices in order to break down the "middle wall" separating people from God and each other. This makes it possible for us all to be fellow citizens in the household of God (Eph. 2:11-19).