

‘Many Shall Come From the East and West’

Baptism Announcements of African and Asian Reformed Christians in the Eighteenth-Century Dutch Republic

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While baptisms of African and Asian people in the Dutch Republic have been studied on an anecdotal and often very local basis, a systematic analysis of these baptisms presents a gap in the literature. This article seeks to fill that lacuna by taking the announcements of baptisms of African and Asian people in the eighteenth-century Dutch Reformed Church (the public and privileged church of the Dutch Republic), as reported on in the periodical *Boekzaal der Geleerde Wereld*, as its point of departure. These baptism announcements not only provide valuable information on the distribution and origin of the (formerly) enslaved people who were baptised in the Dutch Republic, but also show a more inclusive and at times even anti-slavery theology among the ministers involved in these baptisms.

Hoewel het dopen van Afrikaanse en Aziatische mensen in de Republiek der Nederlanden op anekdotische en vaak zeer lokale basis is bestudeerd, zijn deze dopen nog niet systematisch geanalyseerd. Dit artikel wenst deze leemte in de historiografie te vullen door de doopberichten van Afrikaanse en Aziatische mensen in de achttiende-eeuwse Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (de publieke en geprivilegieerde kerk van de Republiek), zoals vermeld in het tijdschrift *Boekzaal der Geleerde Wereld*, als uitgangspunt te nemen. De doopberichten geven niet alleen waardevolle informatie over de verspreiding en herkomst van de (voormalige) tot slaaf gemaakte mensen die in de Republiek werden gedoopt, maar laten ook onder de predikanten die bij deze dopen betrokken waren een meer inclusieve theologie zien, die soms zelfs tegen de slavernij gekant was.

Introduction: The case of Maria Zara Johanna Niabi¹

On 24 September 1794, something extraordinary happened in the Remonstrant Reformed Church of Delft, a city in the Dutch Republic. In the presence of a large crowd, Maria Zara Johanna Niabi, an African woman, was baptised (Figure 1). Although rare, it did happen from time to time that men and women originating from Africa or Asia were baptised in Dutch churches.² However, to the best of our knowledge, this is the only instance that an image of such a baptism has been preserved. Moreover, the illustration can be combined with a long and fascinating account of the baptism in the records of the church:

The 24th of September on Wednesday night was baptised in this church, by Rev. A. van der Meersch, an African young daughter, who was named at Holy Baptism Maria Zara Johanna. As witnesses stood the overseer Johannes Guus, and Ms. Zara Turfkloot, wife of Rev. Van der Meersch, who also led her to Holy Baptism. According to her own information she was born in Zoogwoin, on the Coast of Guinea, a day's travel from St. Elmina, and probably about 24 years old. Her father's name is Cajo Sainquo Niabi, and her mother's name is Masa Oribo. She arrived from Demerara in America with Mr. Hekker, who bought her there as a slave, in a public auction. His Honour [i.e., Mr. Hekker] refused her to be inducted into the Christian faith, and when the Church Council of the Remonstrant Reformed Church found out about this, it assisted her in this, finding her to be a Religious and honest soul, too noble to live in an un-Christian state of slavery any longer. Oh, could her miserable peers enjoy freedom with her, and the Christians be less Barbarians, and Slaves!³

- 1 The research for this article has been conducted within the NWO project 'Church and Slavery in the Dutch Empire: History, Theology and Heritage', no. 406.21.FHR.016.
- 2 See map in Dienne Hondius and Niek Hemmen, *Gids Kerk & Slavernijverleden. Een eerste verkenning* (LM Publishers 2023) 18, and its data 19-27.
- 3 Stadsarchief Delft, Doopregister Remonstrantse Gemeente 1674-1809, 24 September 1794, inventory no. 14.108, folio 33. Translation (with adaptations): Michel Doormont, 'An African baptism in Delft, 1794', <https://gcdb-doormontweb.blogspot.com/2016/08/an-african-baptism-in-delft-1794.html>, accessed 5 April 2024. Original text: 'Den 24sten September op woensdagavond is in de kerk gedoopt, door D^o A. van der Meersch, ene Africaansche Jonge

Dochter, de welke bij den H. Doop is genaamd Maria Zara Johanna; als getuigen stonden den opziener Johannes Guus en Meijuffrouw Zara Turfkloot Huisvrouw van D^o van der Meersch, dewelke haar ook ten H. Doop geleiden. Volgens haar eige opgaaf is zij geboren te Zoogwoin op de kust van Guinée, een dagreis van St. D'elmina en volgens waarschijnlijkheid omtrent 24 Jaren oud; haar vaders naam is Cajo Sainquo Niabi; en die van hare Moeder Masa Oribo. Zij was gepatrieerd met den Heer Hekker van Demerarij in America, dewelke haar als slavin heeft gekogt, aldaar in publieke veiling; Zijn ed. weigerde haar tot den Christelijken Godsdienst te laten inweiden, daar den Kerkenraad der Remonstranten hier van kennis bekomen hebbende, heeft haar hier in geassisteerd vindende in haar een Godsdienstig,



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Figure 1. Print depicting the baptism of Maria Zara Johanna Niabi in the Remonstrant Reformed Church in Delft, 24 September 1794. Maker unknown. Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Public domain. <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.509465>.

This entry in the church records contains a wealth of information. First of all, it offers a lot of personal details about the names, parents, origins and life course of an enslaved African woman, Maria Zara Johanna Niabi. Secondly, it reveals something about the tensions between the (formerly) enslaved and their (former) enslavers. The power imbalance between Niabi and her enslaver becomes apparent, as the latter, Christoffel Johan Hecke ('Hekker'), prohibited her to be baptised in his own Dutch Reformed Church.⁴ Thirdly, although the record does not make it very explicit, Niabi's agency can be seen through her eventually getting baptised after all. Hecke's refusal did not stop Niabi from putting forward her will to become a Christian. It is unclear whether she turned to the Remonstrant Reformed Church herself or if the Remonstrant minister came to know about her in another way. Irrespective, the minister, Abraham van der Meersch, saw sufficient grounds to baptise Niabi in his church. In doing so, Niabi contested her (former) enslaver. Finally, the anti-slavery stance of Van der Meersch shows clearly in this record: not only does he call slavery an 'un-Christian state', he also wishes for other enslaved people to obtain their freedom – criticising his fellow Dutch Christians as barbarians in the process. Given this anti-slavery attitude, one wonders whether Van der Meersch's baptism of Niabi can be interpreted as an act of criticism, resistance even, directed at the involvement of Dutch society and of his fellow Christians with slavery.

The case of Niabi shows how the baptisms of African and Asian people, as religious *rites de passage*, form an excellent locus to study on the one hand the agency of (formerly) enslaved people in the Republic, by navigating their complex and oftentimes precarious position vis-à-vis (former) enslavers; and on the other hand the role of churches, ministers, the Bible and theology either critiquing slavery and racialised understandings of the world order, or confirming the status of (formerly) enslaved people as well as the claims of ownership and service made by their (former) enslavers.

With this article we contribute to the field of religious history as well as to the knowledge of the lives of African and Asian people in the Dutch Republic, as part of migration history. Over the past decades the interest in African and lesser so in Asian communities in the Dutch Republic, and Europe at large, has grown.⁵ While baptisms of African and Asian people in

en eerlijk gemoed, te edel om langer in ene onchristelijke slavernij te leven. Ach mogten hare ongelukkige lotgenoten met haar vrijheid genieten; en de Christenen minder Barbaren en slaven zijn!'.⁴

4 Nancy Jouwe, Gerrit Verhoeven and Ingrid van der Vlis, *Rapport slavernijverleden van Delft* (Delft 2023) 58, 60-61.

5 See for some recent publications Carl Haarnack and Dienne Hondius, "'Swart' (Black) in the

Netherlands: Africans and Creoles in the Northern Netherlands from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century', in: Elmer Kolfin (ed.), *Black is Beautiful: Rubens to Dumas* (Waanders Publishers 2007) 88-107; Dienne Hondius, *Blackness in the Western World: Racial Patterns of Paternalism and Exclusion* (Transaction Publishers 2014); Jacques Vrij, 'Susanna Dumion en twee van haar lotgenoten. Drie Afro-Westindische vrouwen in achttiende-eeuws Amsterdam',

the Republic have been studied on an anecdotal – and often very local – basis, a systematic analysis of the data about baptisms of (formerly) enslaved people is missing from historiography so far.⁶ The present article seeks to answer this lacuna by taking the announcements of special baptisms in the eighteenth-century Dutch Reformed Church, as reported on in the periodical *Boekzaal der Geleerde Wereld* (Reading Hall of the Learned World), as its point of departure. By doing so, we shed more light on, first, the way African and Asian Christians were perceived conceptually in local Dutch Reformed congregations; second, how they were received practically in these congregations (were they welcome, was it possible for them to be educated and baptised?); and, third, what these baptisms show about the attitude of local ministers and congregations with regard to slavery and racial hierarchies.

While the example from Delft pertains to a Remonstrant Reformed church and there were other churches in the Dutch Republic as well, such as the Mennonites and the Roman Catholic Church, we focus in this article on the Dutch Reformed Church because it held a special position as the Republic's public and privileged church. For this article, we decided to solely focus on the eighteenth century. On the one hand, this is a practical choice, as the religious landscape (including the predominant position of the Dutch Reformed Church) as well as the nature of the baptism announcements changed in the nineteenth century.⁷ On the other hand, this limitation in time also helps to see and acknowledge the specific developments in the

Tijdschrift voor Surinaamse Genealogie. *Wi Rutu* 15:1 (2015) 18-31; Esther Schreuder, *Cupido en Sideron. Twee Moren aan het hof van Oranje* (Balans 2017); Mark Ponte, "'Al de swarten die hier ter stede comen". Een Afro-Atlantische gemeenschap in zeventiende-eeuws Amsterdam', *TSEG – The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 15:4 (2018) 33-61. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/tseg.995>; Elmer Kolfin et al., *Zwart in Rembrandts Tijd* (wbooks 2020); Mark Ponte, 'Francisca, Sara en Willemina. Zwarte Amsterdammers in tijden van slavernij', in: Jan Lucassen and Leo Lucassen (eds.), *Migratie als DNA van Amsterdam, 1550-2021* (Atlas Contact 2021) 131-150.

- 6 See examples in local studies such as Mark Ponte, 'Tussen slavernij en vrijheid', in: Pepijn Brandon et al. (eds.), *De slavernij in Oost en West. Het Amsterdam onderzoek* (Spectrum 2020) 248-256; Esther Captain, Sara Sibilla Verdion and Sibilla van Batavia, 'De verweven levens van een Utrechtse notabele en een Aziatische bediende', in: Nancy

Jouwe, Matthijs Kuipers and Remco Raben (eds.), *Slavernij en de stad Utrecht* (Walburg Pers 2021) 143-151. An exception is the national overview of baptisms that Dienke Hondius and Niek Hemmen compiled, but as they admit themselves, their map is 'still unbalanced and unfinished' ('onevenwichtig en onaf', Hondius and Hemmen, *Gids Kerk*, 6).

- 7 While special baptism announcements continued to be published in the *Boekzaal* until 1863, including occasional announcements of (formerly) enslaved individuals, the amount of information is less extensive (often no names and Bible texts are given) compared to those placed during the eighteenth century, which makes it difficult to compare them with our earlier data. In other respects, the selection of 'exceptional' baptisms seems to have changed as well. For example, baptisms of nobles are less often mentioned, while baptisms of Mennonites

eighteenth-century Dutch slavery debate, that witnessed a rise of anti-slavery sentiments, but no serious attempts to abolish slavery.⁸

With respect to nomenclature it is important to note that we regularly refer to African and Asian inhabitants of the Dutch Republic collectively as ‘black’. In doing so, we follow the conceptualisation of these groups by our sources, as the baptism announcements often use the same terms such as ‘Moor’ and ‘zwart’ (black), as well as the same Bible texts for both African and Asian people.⁹ This finding is in line with recent studies on nomenclature in other European countries, that show that the designation ‘black’ was used for both African and Asian individuals in the early modern period.¹⁰

After introducing the *Boekzaal*, we discuss its baptism announcements in two sections. The first section focuses on the geographical origin of the black people being baptised, their location in the Dutch Republic, as well as their motivation and the attention their baptisms drew. The second section elaborates on the Bible texts mentioned in the baptism announcements and their theological ramifications concerning slavery and racism. Taken together, this article aims to shed light on the multivarious relations between the Dutch Reformed Church, theology, baptism, slavery, racism and colonialism.

Source material: *Boekzaal der Geleerde Wereld*

Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the *Boekzaal der Geleerde Wereld* was the medium of choice in Reformed Protestant circles to distribute newsworthy occurrences and developments regarding decisions of

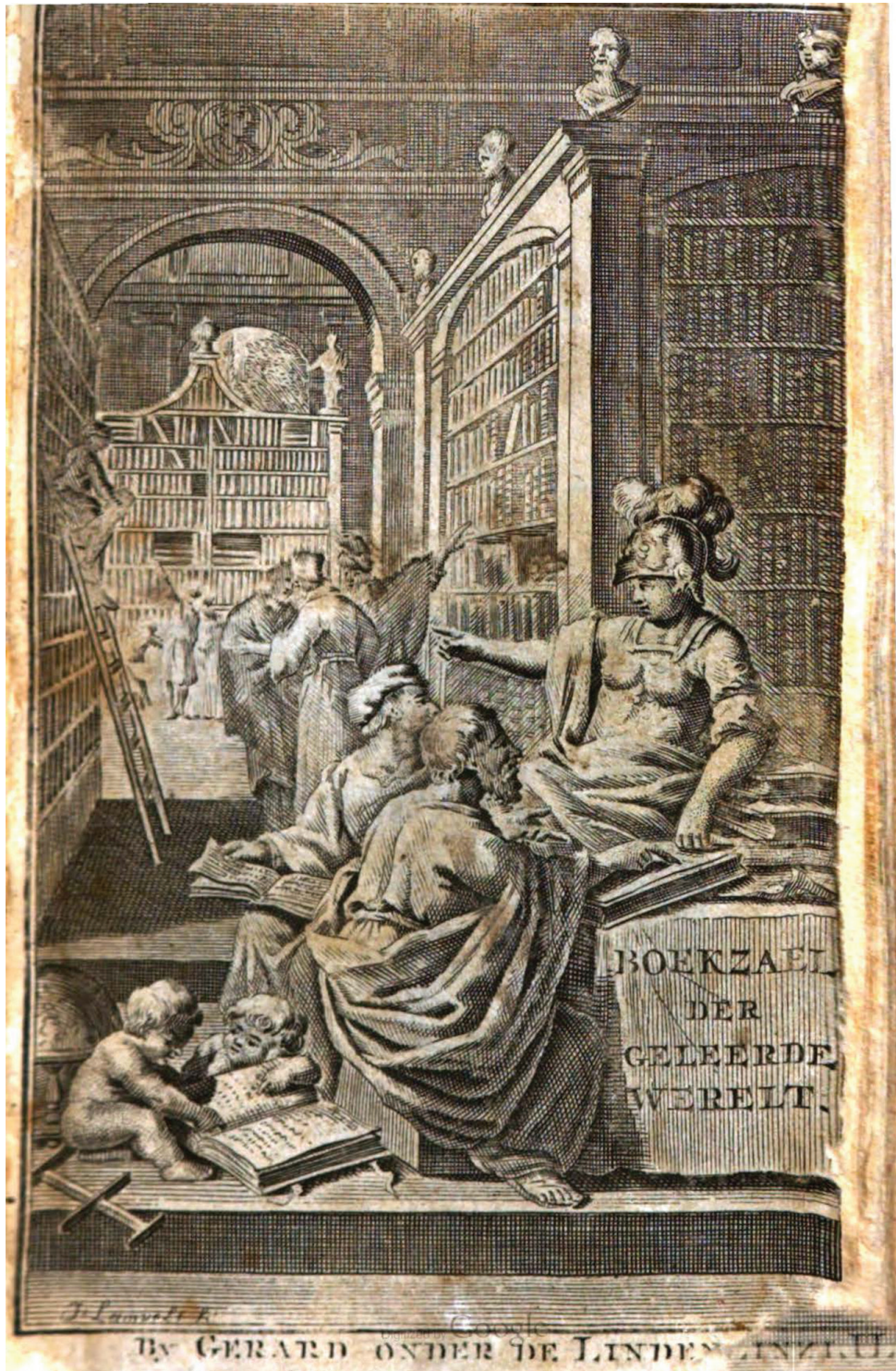
are more often described than in the eighteenth century.

8 See the hermeneutical distinction that Dirk Alkemade makes between anti-slavery and abolition in: ‘Why was Slavery not Abolished in 1798? Humanity and Human Rights in the Batavian Revolution’, *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 139:3 (2024) 47–68. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.12807>.

9 For example, the word ‘zwart’ (‘black’) is used to denote both a woman from the East Indies (*Maandelyke Uittreksels, of Boekzaal der Geleerde Waerelt* 86 [1758] 101) as well as an African enslaved person in Suriname (*Maandelyke Uittreksels, of Boekzaal der Geleerde Waerelt* 93 [1761] 618). Interesting is also the term ‘Asian negress’ (‘Asiatische Negerin’), used for a Muslim woman (*Maandelysche Uittreksels, of Boekzaal der Geleerde Waereld* 146 [1788] 573). See also the

discussion in section 4 of this article. N.B. While some of the quoted sources contain language now deemed racist and harmful, for the purposes of this article we felt that it was important to maintain the original terms.

10 Imtiaz Habib argues that his use of the term black community in early modern England ‘is meant to denote a group of people bound by a common history of direct or indirect English enslavement, benign or brutal, and having common ethnic or cultural characteristics, not as a group of people who necessarily share a common interest and communicate with each other or who even know each other but as a term that is a starting point for identifying a set of people in the historical significance of their plurality.’ Imtiaz Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500–1677: Imprints of the Invisible* (Routledge 2016) 11.



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Figure 2. Front page of *Boekzael der geleerde werelt*, volume 2 (1716). Google Books. https://www.google.nl/books/edition/Maendelyke_uittreksels_of_de_Boekzael_de/WPBdAAAAcAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=o.

regional and national church assemblies and events in local churches in the Dutch Republic (Figure 2).¹¹ The title resembles an earlier periodical, namely the *Boekzaal van Europe* (1692-1700), edited by Pieter Rabus, which was one of the first popular scholarly periodicals in the Republic, and consisted mainly of book reviews. Due to censorship and a dispute with the publisher, Rabus's periodical would come to an end at the beginning of the new century.

Several periodicals tried to take the place of *Boekzaal van Europe*, but it is safe to say *Boekzaal der Geleerde Wereld* (henceforth: *Boekzaal*) was its most successful successor; Inger Leemans and Gert-Jan Johannes even labeled it as a true continuation.¹² It is true that the periodical still very much focused on book reviews; however, unlike the original periodical, the content was of a far more conservative nature and was primarily concerned with ministers, proponents (ministers in training), and church administrators. Rietje van Vliet would therefore rather see them as separate periodicals. The periodical's changed nature can also be noticed in its growing attention for church news. Reviews and citations of books, focusing mostly on their theological and religious aspects, dwindled, whilst vacancies for posts as ministers, academic news and updates from local churches occupied more and more space in the periodical. In doing so, the *Boekzaal* aimed to keep the Reformed Church personnel updated on ecclesiastical life.¹³

As part of this tendency, reports of notable baptism services found their way to the *Boekzaal*, informing the readers of important or rare baptisms in the Republic. These announcements varied from children of nobility or royalty to Jewish and black people converting to Christianity.¹⁴ These announcements were not limited to the *Boekzaal* but can be traced in various newspapers and periodicals. Many of these announcements dealt with

11 The periodical was published under various names throughout its existence. Between 1715 and 1811, although the spelling would differ, it was published as *Maandelyksche Uittreksels, of de Boekzael der Geleerde Waereld*, from 1811 to 1816 as *Boekzaal der Geleerde Wereld*, of *Tijdschrift voor Letterkundigen* and it continued as *Boekzaal der Geleerde Wereld, en Tijdschrift voor de Protestantsche Kerken in het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden* between 1816 and 1864. Finally, the title would be changed to *Stemmen voor Waarheid en Vrede*, which was published up until 1925. As there are many variants of the original title, we have chosen to use the shortened, later variant of the title in the main text of this article, which is congruent with modern Dutch spelling. In the footnotes we refer to the title of the

periodical in which the corresponding volume was published.

12 Inger Leemans and Gert-Jan Johannes, *Worm en donder. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1700-1800: de Republiek* (Bert Bakker 2013) 163-68.

13 Rietje van Vliet, 'Boekzaal der Geleerde Wereld (1715-1863)', in: Idem (ed.), *Encyclopedie van Nederlandstalige Tijdschriften. Nederlandstalige periodieken tot de aanvang van het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden (tot 1815)*, retrieved online: <https://www.ent1815.nl/b/boekzaal-der-geleerde-wereld-1715-1863/>, accessed 23 May 2024.

14 Royalty: for example the baptism of Prince Willem v on 10 April 1748. *Maandelyke Uittreksels, of Boekzaal der Geleerde Waerelt* 68 (1749) 458. Jews: for example the baptism of Haijim Mordechai on 22 December 1772 in Maastricht.

conversions elsewhere in Europe. The first announcement we have found of a special baptism in the Dutch Republic appeared in the *Ordinaris dinsdaeghse courante* of 8 April 1670. It concerned the baptism of a man, Jan Willemsz., who was enslaved by stadholder Willem III:

The Hague on the 6th of April. Yesterday the Moor of His Highness the Prince of Orange was baptised in the Great Church here / and was named Jan Willemsz.¹⁵

While the account was given in a newspaper, traces of the baptism service itself surprisingly cannot be found in the baptism register of the Grote Kerk (Great Church).¹⁶ After the baptism of Jan Willemsz., it took fifty years before another case in the Republic was published in the media – which was also the first time such a case was reported in the *Boekzaal*.

Baptism announcements in the *Boekzaal* hold unique information, as touched upon with the case of Niabi. Whereas regular baptism registrations in church records rarely go into detail on the services, most of the baptism announcements of black people in the *Boekzaal* do. Traces of the origin and life course of these persons are sometimes given as background information, making it possible to discover more about their lives in slavery or in freedom. As mentioned before, the announcements often also include the Bible texts that were used during the services, which offers us a look into the theological convictions of the ministers involved.

The *Boekzaal* has other connections to colonialism and slavery as well. Firstly, it published updates in its church news section on the development of Reformed Churches in the Dutch colonies in Africa, America, and Asia. Apart from announcements of baptisms in the Republic, a few examples of baptised enslaved individuals in the colonies are given. Secondly, the correspondence of the church council of Suriname shows that, at least for the inclusion of their news updates, the *Sociëteit van Suriname* (Society of Suriname, the private company that ruled Suriname in the eighteenth century) funded the costs.¹⁷

We are aware that the use of *Boekzaal* as the main source also holds limitations. The reports do not provide an exhaustive image of all cases of black people who were baptised in the eighteenth-century Republic. For example, non-Reformed baptisms were not recorded. In addition, research has shown

See *Maandelyke Uittreksels, of Boekzaal der Geleerde Waerelt* 115 (1772) 111.

15 's Gravenhagen den 6 April', *Ordinaris dinsdaeghse courante* 14:2 (8 April 1670) 2. All translations of baptism announcements are our own, unless otherwise indicated. Original: 's Gravenhagen den 6 April. Gisteren wierdt de Moor van zijn Hoogheydt den Prince van Oranje

in de groote Kerck alhier gedoopt / en genaemt Jan Willemsz.'

16 Haags Gemeentearchief, *Doop-, trouw- en begraafboeken van 's-Gravenhage, Scheveningen en Loosduinen*, 0337-01, *Doopboek Grote of Sint Jacobskerk (1666 apr-1674 mrt)*, inventory no. 5.

17 Stadsarchief Amsterdam, *Archief van de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk; Classis Amsterdam*,

various other examples of baptisms in the Dutch Reformed Church that were not included in the periodical. However, as it is not feasible to go through the baptism registers of all local churches from the eighteenth century manually, the *Boekzaal* offers a unique overview of baptisms of African and Asian people in Reformed churches in urban centers and rural villages all over the Republic, over a substantial period of time. Existing and future research on local case studies can complement, nuance, or correct our findings.

Historical data on the baptisms of black people in the Dutch Republic

A somewhat unexpected case of a Reformed baptism of a black woman took place in the predominantly Catholic city of Venlo in 1767:

VENLO. On the 14th of June [1767] a Negress from the West Indies was, after being educated thoroughly in the Teaching of Faith, [and] on the basis of a dignified Confession, accepted as Member of the Reformed Church, and baptised, on which occasion the Well-Honourable highly Learned Mister D.C. Schmidtman preached [on] Ps. LXXII: 9a. *The inhabitants of barren places will kneel before his face.*¹⁸

From this announcement, we learn a few things: the origin of the black woman, the steps she took before she was accepted into the Reformed Church, and the Bible text that the minister preached about during the baptism service. At the same time, crucial information is lacking, such as the woman's name and status. This case from Venlo is not only interesting because it took place in the Catholic Generality Lands, but also because it can be traced through multiple sources.¹⁹ The Venlo baptism register gives away the name of the woman: Jacoba Leijlard.²⁰ Her baptism registration does not determine whether Leijlard was free or enslaved. Officially, once enslaved

archive no. 379, 'Acta Conventus Deputatorum', *Handelingen van de gezamenlijke vergaderingen van Surinaamse kerkenraden (1761-1791)*, inventory no. 222, 500. Letter from minister Paul Snijderhans to the Classis of Amsterdam, 3 June 1780.

- 18 *Maandelyke uittreksels of Boekzaal der Geleerde Waereld* 106 (1767) 107. Original: 'VENLO. Op den 14 Juny is alhier eene Negerin uit de West-Indiën oorspronklyk, na grondig in de Leere des Geloofs onderweezen te zyn, op eene deftige Belydenis, tot Lidmaat der Hervormde Kerk aangenomen, en gedoopt geworden, predikende by die gelegenheid de Wel-Eerw. zeer Geleerden

Heer D.C. SCHMIDTMAN, over Ps. LXXII: 9a. De ingezetenen van dorre plaatsen zullen voor zyn aangezigt knielen.'

- 19 The Generality Lands only became part of the Republic in the nineteenth century and were exploited as buffer zones between the provinces in the north and the Habsburg territories in the south. See, for instance, Jonathan Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall, 1477-1806* (Oxford University Press 1995) 387-388, 599, 601, 658-660.
- 20 Regionaal Historisch Centrum Limburg, DTB's RAL en GAM, 11.01, Doopregisters, 1751-1797, entry 1942, 243.

	Africa	Asia	America	Unknown
1720-1729	-	-	1	-
1740-1749	1	-	-	-
1750-1759	1	6	2	-
1760-1769	-	-	5	1
1770-1779	1	1	5	-
1780-1789	5	3	3	1
1790-1799	1	1	3	-
Total	9	11	19	2

Table 1. Baptism of black people in the Dutch Republic and their former location.^a

^aTable 1 gives an overview of the baptised individuals’ former location, as mentioned in the baptism announcements. Some of them were enslaved in Africa and transported to the colonies in the West Indies. They can be found under the section Africa. Numbers based on *Boekzaal der Geleerde Wereld*, vols. 12-171.

individuals arrived in the Dutch Republic, they became free, as slavery did not legally exist within the European borders of the Republic – the free soil principle. In practice, enslaved people who were entitled to freedom had to take their case to court – something they were not often able to do.²¹

Leijlard is one of the in total 41 black people who feature in baptism announcements in the *Boekzaal* between 1721 and 1799.²² As indicated above, it should be stressed that this number does not represent the total number of baptisms of Asian and African individuals in that period. Considering the small numbers of announcements, it is hard to distinguish trends over time. With regard to their location of departure, the largest group of baptised individuals (46 percent) came from Dutch colonies in America (Berbice, Demerara, Essequibo and Suriname), as can be seen in Table 1. If we combine the number of individuals from the American colonies with those originating from Africa (as most of the enslaved persons in the American colonies had an African background), their total number forms 68 percent of all mentioned baptisms. Although the announcements do not cover all baptisms of black individuals, it is striking how African Christians are dominating the numbers,

21 See Tim van Polanen, ‘Snak, Claas and Bastiaan’s Struggle for Freedom: Three Curaçaoan Enslaved Men and Their Court Cases about the Free Soil Principle in the Dutch Republic’, *BMGN – LCHR* 126:1 (2021) 33-58. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.10746>; Gustaaf van Nifterik, ‘Arguments related to slavery in seventeenth century Dutch legal theory’, *Tijdschrift voor Rechtsgeschiedenis* 89:1-2 (2021) 158-191, 161-162, 188-89. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718190-12340005>; Filip Batselé, *Liberty, Slavery and the Law in Early Modern Western Europe: Omnes Homines aut Liberi Sunt aut Servi* (Springer 2020) 17, 176-178. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-36855-5>.

22 One baptism announcement describes a baptism in Rees, Germany. This case is excluded from the analysis.

while recent studies show that slavery was also omnipresent in the Asian territories of the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (voc).²³ However, the greater distance between the East Indies and the Republic, as well as the voc rule against bringing enslaved people to the Republic, might have contributed to this disparity.²⁴

In general, the information in the announcements – including details regarding the backgrounds of enslaved individuals – is similar for people coming from Africa, America, and Asia. Moreover, largely the same racial terminology is used to describe people from Africa, America, and Asia, such as the terms ‘*heiden*’ (heathen) and ‘*Moor*’. An exception is the N-word, which appears only once in the baptism announcements to address a person originating from Indonesia, but was often used in other articles and book reviews of the *Boekzaal* to designate people from the Dutch colonies in the Atlantic Ocean or Africa. This term was also widely used in those colonies at the time to describe enslaved people.

As mentioned before, the announcements cover a wide variety of locations in the Republic. From to-be-expected cities with seaports in Holland to smaller settlements (such as Anjum, Bruchem, St. Andries, Ransdorp, and Ressen) and cities further inland (such as Arnhem, Breda, ’s-Hertogenbosch, Maastricht, and Zwolle). This phenomenon in itself is no surprise since Company personnel came from all regions, and some even from abroad,²⁵ but it clearly shows the widespread presence of black individuals throughout the eighteenth-century Republic. What immediately stands out is the fact that cities in Holland and Zeeland are not overrepresented, while Holland (Amsterdam) and Zeeland (Middelburg and Vlissingen) were the most prominent locations connected to the trading companies. Moreover, we know from studies on baptisms in those cities that black people were also baptised there.²⁶ Since research by Dienne Hondius and Mark Ponte has shown that, at least in Amsterdam, black individuals were present from the early seventeenth century onwards,²⁷ our hypothesis is that the familiarity inhabitants of Amsterdam, Vlissingen, and Middelburg had with their black fellow citizens resulted in less

23 See, for instance, Matthias van Rossum, *Kleurrijke tragiek. De geschiedenis van slavernij in Azië onder de voc* (Verloren 2015).

24 Jacobus Anne van der Chijs, *Eerste deel*, 1602-1642, *Nederlandsch-Indisch plakaatboek*, 1602-1811 (Batavia: Landsdrukkerij / The Hague: Nijhoff, 1885) 409-410.

25 Lodewijk Petram, ‘Where the voc crews came from’, *Maritime Careers: The Life and Work of Dutch Merchant Marine Sailors, 1700-Present*,

retrieved online <https://www.maritimecareers.eu/2018/06/11/where-the-voc-crews-came-from/>. Accessed 12 May 2024.

26 The map by Hondius and Hemmen shows six baptisms in Amsterdam and six in Walcheren, of which four in Vlissingen. Hondius and Hemmen, *Cids Kerk*, 18-27.

27 Dienne Hondius, ‘Black Africans in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam’, *Renaissance and Reformation* 31:2 (2008) 87-105; and Ponte, “Al de swarten”.

Province	Baptisms
Drenthe	-
Friesland	1
Gelderland	5
Groningen	-
Limburg	4
Noord-Brabant	12
Noord-Holland	2
Overijssel	4
Utrecht	1
Zeeland	2
Zuid-Holland	10
Total	41

Table 2. Geographical distribution of baptisms corresponding to the current-day provinces in the Netherlands.

Numbers based on *Boekzaal der Geleerde Wereld*, vols. 12-171.

frequent announcements of their baptisms in the *Boekzaal* than one might expect. Rietje van Vliet explains that the regional church assemblies (called *classes*, sg. *classis*) selected ministers that provided the *Boekzaal* with updates on church news from their region.²⁸ In other parts of the Republic, where the local inhabitants and churches were less used to the presence of black people, these ministers would perhaps have been more likely to report their baptisms in the *Boekzaal*.

Table 2 shows the geographical distribution of baptisms of black people per current-day province of the Netherlands. The case of Jacoba Leijlard in Venlo has already been discussed, but another Catholic region stands out: Noord-Brabant. Like Limburg, this region was part of the Generality Lands in the south. Assuming that the overrepresentation of Noord-Brabant is not coincidental, an explanation could be that the inclusion of black Christians in these Reformed Churches was more likely because the Reformed congregations in this Catholic province were smaller and would, therefore, perhaps be more eager to include and/or report on new Christians (Figure 3). To better understand this geographical distribution, more research has to be done on local baptisms that are not present in the *Boekzaal* on the one hand, and local church policies concerning baptisms on the other hand.

We have already discussed some aspects regarding the baptised individuals, but have yet to disclose who these people were and why they did engage with the Reformed Church. Coming from various Dutch colonies, black people accompanied their enslavers to the Republic, where they often remained in servitude. Others were brought over and gifted to kin.²⁹ The

28 Van Vliet, 'Boekzaal der Geleerde Wereld'.

29 Mark Ponte, 'Slavernij in Nederland?'

baptism announcements are not clear on the exact status of the people being baptised, and slavery itself is rarely mentioned. For example, the ‘*Afrikaansche Moor*’ (‘African Moor’) Christiaan (last name unknown) seems to have been free at the time of his baptism in ’s-Hertogenbosch in 1757. In the announcement, a brief overview is given of how he had been enslaved in Suriname and was taken to the Republic by his enslaver and eventually freed. After his manumission, Christiaan was taken into the home of Reformed minister Joachim Mobachius. According to the *Boekzaal*, Mobachius provided a safe home, food, and clothing for him. Christiaan also received schooling and was taught about the Christian faith. After four and half years in the Republic, and being able to speak and read Dutch, Christiaan was baptised. The announcement concludes that afterwards, it would be favourable if Christiaan would go work for another ‘*Heer*’ (‘Gentleman’).³⁰ The latter implicates that the treatment of Christiaan by Mobachius was not solely philanthropical and that Christiaan most likely had to perform labour for him while he was educated in Christianity. This can also be concluded from the baptism registration itself, that indicates that Christiaan was the ‘*knecht*’ (‘servant’) of Mobachius.³¹ It remains ambiguous whether or not Christiaan’s former enslaver had to emancipate him due to the free soil principle, but also how free Christiaan actually was after his status had changed. In the case of Jacoba Leijlard, we learn that the free soil principle was not enacted automatically by setting foot on Dutch territory. At the time of her baptism in 1767, she was still enslaved as the correspondence discussed below shows.

Four years after her baptism, when Leijlard was nineteen years old, her mother Marijtje Chriool appealed for their freedom with a letter she sent to the board of the WIC. The letter was discussed by the WIC board on 11 February 1771. According to the document, Chriool and Leijlard requested their letters of freedom after having experienced ‘the benefits of freedom, that is as precious as life itself, for the brief years they spent here’. If they were to go back to Suriname, they feared to ‘once again be exposed to harsh enslavement [...] and be deprived of all freedoms’.³² The conversion to the Reformed faith was used as an argument for their freedom:

The first Applicant [Marijtje Chriool], currently 38 years old, having arrived together with the aforementioned Steenberg, and her daughter the second Applicant [Jacoba Leijlard], being 19 years of age, was sent by said Steenberg to her mother years ago, during which the second Applicant was taught in the true

30 *Maandelyksche uittreksels of Boekzaal der Geleerde Waereld* 84 (1757) 443-444.

<https://hdl.handle.net/21.12121/749830095>. Accessed 7 May 2025.

31 ‘Zijnde een Africaanse Moor en knecht van de heer Predicant Mobach, oud ruijm 19 jaar, voorheenen genaamt Rudolff.’ Erfgoed ’s-Hertogenbosch,

32 ‘Dat de suppl: wel genegen zouden zijn wederom na Suriname te vertrekken, doch bevreesd waren aldaar arriveerde wederom te zullen



▲
Figure 3. The baptismal font that was probably used for the baptism of Duren on 5 January 1742 in the then Reformed Sint Janskathedraal (St. John's Cathedral) of 's-Hertogenbosch. Duren (last name unknown) originally came from Angola, but was enslaved and brought to Suriname, where he became the property of the Dutch Reformed minister Jan Willem Kals, who named him after his birth place in Germany. Kals, who was known for his critical attitude towards slavery, brought Duren to the Netherlands, but was not able to maintain him. Under his new master, Prince Van Holstein Beek (governor of 's-Hertogenbosch), he was baptised and received the name Christiaan Steinholt.^a When the Reformed congregation had to leave the St. John's Cathedral, the minister took the baptismal font with him to the Grote Kerk (Great Church) in the same city. Photo credits: Rev. Erica Scheenstra.

^aMaendelyke Uittreksels of de Boekzaal der geleerde Waerelt 54 (1742) 86. Compare Jan Marinus van der Linden, *Jan Willem Kals 1700-1781. Leraar der hervormden, advocaat van indiaan en neger* (Kampen 1987), 15, 96-98.

Christian Religion, after which she was accepted as a member and received her baptism by minister Smitman in Venlo, according to the attached testimony, the first Applicant is currently also concerned with being educated in said religion, to also enjoy the benefits religion truly entails.³³

The reason why only Leijlard was baptised can be explained by the fact that she was a child of mixed descent, having a black mother and a white father – perhaps Willem Hendrik van Steenberg himself, their enslaver and a member of the government in Suriname.

As remarked above, religion is used in this letter as an argument to pursue freedom. The willingness of Chriool to educate herself in the way of the Reformed Church is an example of that. Besides, the document also highlights that ‘being in a land without slavery, where freedom is the highest joy’, they ‘had acted accordingly’.³⁴ Both Van Steenberg and Smitman were willing to attest to their behaviour. The request ends with the notion of their loyalty and openness towards the Reformed Church, which is why they should be awarded letters of freedom before heading back to Suriname.³⁵ The board of the WIC settled on the matter on 9 August 1771: since slavery did not exist in the Republic and Chriool and Leijlard were therefore no longer enslaved, they did not need any letters of freedom.³⁶

To conclude this section, we make some remarks about the audiences of the baptisms of black people, as these services must have been quite the happening. Various announcements mention the great mass of spectators who came to see what was for them an extraordinary event. It is unsure whether these services were announced beforehand, or if those present had

werden geëxponeert aan een bittere slavernij, en dus van de vrijheid, die zoo dierbaar is als het leven, en waar van zij nu in die korte jaaren alleraangenaamste vrugten hadden geplukt, geheel en al te zullen werden verstookten.’ National Archives, The Hague, *Inventaris van het archief van de Tweede West-Indische Compagnie* (WIC), 1.05.01.02, *Extracten uit resoluties van de Staten-Generaal betreffende de West-Indische Compagnie*, entry 85, scan 433-435.

- 33 ‘Dat de eerste Suppl: jegenwoordig oudzijnde 38 jaaren, met de Vrouw van Voorn: Steenberg was overgekomen, en haar dochter de tweede Suppl: 19 jaaren door voorn: Steenberg aan desselfs moeder toentertijd te Venlo woonende, ruijm zoo jaaren geleden waeren vooruijtgezonden, in welke tusschentijd, de tweede suppl: onder weezen was

inde waare Christelijke Religie, waar in zij bijden Predikant Smitman te Venlo, ook als lidmaat was aangenomen en gedoopt, volgens de attestatie nevens de voors: requeste gevoegd, ende eerste suppl: beezig zig inde voors: Godsdiens te laten onderwijzen, ten einde meede te kunnen jousseeren van dat waare nut, het geene de gem: Religie waarachtiglijk is meede brengende.’ Ibidem.

- 34 ‘Dat de beijde suppl: haar inmiddels hier te lande zijnde, in welke de vrijheid het grootste genoegen geeft, en waar in geen Slavernij altoos bekend is, hadden geretireert van voorn: Steenberg, en haar vervolgens zodanig gedragen, als bij voorn: Predikant zoude kunnen worden geïnformeert.’ Ibidem.

- 35 Ibidem.

- 36 Ibidem, scan 534-537.

heard about the planned baptism of a (formerly) enslaved person through the grapevine and came out of curiosity. The instance of the abovementioned Christiaan, who was baptised in 's-Hertogenbosch on 13 February 1757, demonstrates the diverse audience that the baptism of a black person could attract. According to the *Boekzaal*, he was baptised 'among a large influx of people, both Catholic and Reformed'.³⁷ Apparently, his baptism was so exciting that the religious division between the attendees was irrelevant for a moment. Another example, albeit from a Remonstrant Reformed Church, is the illustration of the baptism of Niabi (see Figure 1). The print depicts a large crowd crammed together for the service – even with people standing on the stairs and people sitting on large cabinets in the back of the church. The announcement of Elizabeth Catharina's (last name unknown) and Petronella Helena Pijpers' baptism on 20 March 1796 in Lith and Lithoyen shows some of the sentiments and considerations church officials likely had when organising the baptism of (formerly) enslaved individuals:

The ceremony was performed in front of a fairly large and considerable crowd (although I had kept the baptism a secret out of fear of disruption and ridicule). The service was performed quietly and with pleasure, and not without affliction on the part of the speaker, the baptised, and the audience.³⁸

The church officials feared mockery amongst the attendees and therefore decided to keep the service out of the spotlight. However, as noted in the *Boekzaal*, word got out anyway, but the service persisted without any incidents. Did their reluctance come out of fear of the local church or the Reformed religion being ridiculed? Or were they worried for Elizabeth Catharina and Petronella Helena? The baptism announcements do not provide any information on what the experience of the services was like for the baptised individuals. Some might have been overjoyed for finally being accepted in the Reformed Church, whilst others probably felt overwhelmed and uncomfortable, since they had once again been placed in an unfamiliar environment and were put up for display as a curiosity for the local people to witness.

Baptism announcements and theology

While we have little information on how the baptised individuals experienced their baptisms, we do have some indications of how the involved clergy

37 *Maandelyksche uittreksels of Boekzaal der Geleerde Waereld* 84 (1757) 443-444. Original: 'onder een groote toevloed van Menschen, zoo Roomsche, als Gereformeerde'.

38 Original: 'De geheele plechtigheid voor een vry groote en aanzienlyke schaaie verricht (hoewel me dezelve uit vreeze voor ontstichtinge en spotterny geheim gehouden hadt) is in ruste

perceived these special moments. To our surprise, baptism announcements often contain critical notions concerning slavery and, indirectly, concerning racist worldviews, as was the case with the report of Niabi's baptism.³⁹ Another example is the minister Theodorus Paludanus, who baptised three enslaved individuals from the East Indies in Capelle aan den IJssel on 26 April 1750. The baptism announcement concludes with the possibility of publishing a book on these special baptisms.⁴⁰ Although this work was never finalised, Paludanus shared his views on the dehumanisation of enslaved people briefly in another publication entitled the *Kerklyke redevoering* (*Ecclesiastical address*). He argues there that only God should have the power to oppress others. In addition, he reflects critically on the way enslavers and their kin glorified abuse and assaulted enslaved persons.⁴¹ Paludanus was not the only one to write critically about slavery. The following statement was written after the baptism of Filippina Hendrietta van Fortuin on 5 August 1782 in the Grote Kerk (Great Church) in 's-Hertogenbosch:

[O]ne black woman ('Moorinne'), originating from Africa, and coming from the West Indies: who, after becoming free in these liberal Netherlands from the, for the right-minded part of humankind, hateful practice of slavery, [...] is baptised by his Honour [...].⁴²

After reading this statement one might think the Dutch Republic would abolish slavery way sooner than it actually did. Additional research will have to clarify the different viewpoints of ministers on slavery and the baptism of black Christians, in order to answer questions such as whether certain

met genoeg en niet zonder aandoening van Spreker, Doopelingen en Toehoorders afgelopen.' *Maandelyksche uittreksels of Boekzaal der Geleerde Waereld* 162 (1796) 403. The last name of Petronella Helena is retrieved from their baptism registration, see Brabant Historisch Informatie Centrum, *Collectie Doop-, trouw- en begraafboeken Lith*, archive no. 1443, *Nederduits Gereformeerd doopboek 1761-1810*, inventory no. 7, 26-27.

39 While not the focus of the present article, an important ruling by the Synod of Dordrecht (1618-1619) seems to have connected the baptism and the manumission of enslaved people with each other, with the former leading to the latter. The interpretation of this ruling has been the topic of much debate and might have been one of the reasons why enslavers in the Dutch colonial

empire were hesitant to convert their enslaved personnel. See, for instance, Janneke Stegeman, "'De kinderen der heydenen.'" Utrecht, de kerk en slavernij, in: Jouwe, Kuipers and Raben, *Slavernij en de stad Utrecht*, 173-182, 177-178; Robert C. H. Shell, 'Religion, Civic Status and Slavery from Dordt to the Trek', *Kronos* 19 (1992) 28-64.

40 *Maandelyksche uittreksels of Boekzaal der Geleerde Waereld* 70 (1750) 598-600.

41 Theodorus Paludanus, *Kerklyke Redevoering, doorlopende de ingevorderde grote Nieuwjaars-rekening van eens ieders Rentmeesterschap* (Rotterdam: Philippus en Jakobus Losel, 1745) 16-17.

42 *Maandelyksche uittreksels of Boekzaal der Geleerde Waereld* 138 (1783) 347. Original: 'eene Moorinne, afkomstig uit Afrika, en herwaards gekomen

groups or ‘schools’ of ministers were more inclined to baptise (formerly) enslaved people. However, in general, as researchers have shown, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ministers in the Dutch Reformed Church seem to have accepted slavery and the underpinning racial hierarchies.⁴³ Only in the nineteenth century, ministers of the Dutch Reformed Church such as Nicolaas Beets (1814-1903) began to raise their voice against slavery through the combined impulse of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, slave revolts and British abolitionism. Different from the situation in Great Britain, religious dissenters (those who were members of a church that was not the state or public church) did not form an influential anti-slavery movement in the Netherlands.⁴⁴ Although the baptism of Maria Zara Johanna Niabi happened in a Remonstrant Reformed Church, there is hardly any evidence that Remonstrant (or Mennonite, Lutheran or Catholic) Christians in general were more critical of slavery than Dutch Reformed Christians.⁴⁵ As for Johannes Bruining, the minister who performed the baptism of Van Fortuin, he might have found her baptism a good opportunity to speak out against slavery. Bruining might have simply taken inspiration from the Bible, which is where we turn now.

In Table 3 one finds an overview of all the Bible texts that are referred to more than once in the baptism announcements.⁴⁶ In many cases, not only

uit de West-Indien: welke, na dat zy in dit vrygevochten Nederland vry wierdt van de voor het weldenkend Menschdom haatlyke slaverny, [is] door zyn Wel Eerw. gedoopt [...].’

43 See, for example, Ben Ipenburg, “‘Een knecht der knechten sy hy syne broederen.’” *Christelijk geloof en slavernij in het Nederlandse Atlantische koloniale rijk van de zeventiende en de achttiende eeuw* (Sidestone Press 2024); Martijn Stoutjesdijk, ‘Forgetful Remembrance in the Dutch Theological Debate on Colonial Slavery: Preliminary Results of a Quantitative Approach’, in: Ari Ackerman et al. (eds.), *Memory: In Search for Lost Time* (Leiden 2025 – in press).

44 See for the development of the Christian abolitionist movement in the Netherlands, Maartje Janse, *De afschaffers. Publieke opinie, organisatie en politiek in Nederland* (Wereldbibliotheek 2007).

45 On slavery and the Remonstrant Reformed Church, see Simon Vuyk, “‘Wat is dit anders dan met onze eigen handen deze gruwelen te plegen?’ Remonstrantse en doopsgezinde

protesten tegen slavenhandel en slavernij in het laatste decennium van de achttiende eeuw’, *Doopsgezinde Bijdragen* 32 (2006) 171-206; on the Mennonites see Ruud Lambour, ‘Doopsgezinden in de slavernij-economie en slavenhandel van de achttiende eeuw. Een verkennende inventarisatie’, *Doopsgezinde Bijdragen* 48 (2022) 189-209; on the Lutheran Church see Hanna Hirsch, “‘En de zwarte was een schoon blank man’”. *Enkele aspecten van de geschiedenis van de lutherse Kerk in Suriname met het oog op de samenwerking van de kerken in de Nieuwe Stad als multi-etnische gemeenschap* (Amsterdam 1995). On the Catholic Church, see Armando Lampe, *Mission or Submission? Moravian and Catholic Missionaries in the Dutch Caribbean during the 19th Century* (Harrassowitz 2001).

46 There are seventeen Bible verses that ministers referred to once, namely: Genesis 9:21-27; Psalms 40:7-8 and 72:9a; Proverbs 23:26a; Isaiah 42:1, 56:6-7 and 60:3a; Jeremiah 13:23, 38:7-13 and 39:18; Haggai 2:8; Matthew 10:32; Luke 2:32a; Acts 2:5-13 and 10:47; Galatians 3:27-28; 1 Peter 3:21-22.

Bible text	Frequency of use	King James Version with adaptations ^a
Psalms 68:32	3x	Princes shall come out of Egypt; the Land of the Moors ('Moorendland') shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.
Psalms 87:3-5	7x	3 Glorious things are spoken of thee, O city of God. Selah. 4 I will make mention of Rahab and Babylon to them that know me: behold the Philistian, the Tyrean with the Moor; this man was born there. 5 And of Zion it shall be said, This and that man was born in her: and the highest himself shall establish her.
Isaiah 45:22	4x	Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else.
Zephania 3:10	2x	From beyond the rivers of the Moors my suppliants, even the daughter of my dispersed, shall bring mine offering.
Matthew 8:11	3x	And I say unto you, That many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven.
Acts 8 (26ff)	13x	Baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch ('Moorman')

Table 3. Frequently-used Bible texts in baptism announcements.

^aThe *King James Version* is used here because it is close in wording to the Dutch *Statenvertaling*, that was used in the baptism announcements. In some cases, we adapted the text to make the English resemble the Dutch translation more.

the reference to the Bible text but also the text itself is fully quoted in the baptism announcements.

From the six texts that are referred to more than once, it is striking that four of them explicitly refer to 'Moors'. In the *Statenvertaling*, the official Dutch Bible translation at the time, published in 1637,⁴⁷ the term Moors was reserved for Ethiopians or Kushites (a biblical name for Ethiopians) as a *pars pro toto* for Africans.⁴⁸ However, in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch, Moor could refer to almost all non-white peoples, in the first place Africans, but also to Muslims or Mohammedans – for example when writing about members of the Islamic community in Batavia, the capital of the East Indies.⁴⁹ This perhaps explains why the *Boekzaal* speaks about an 'Afrikaansche Moor' ('African Moor'), adding 'Afrikaansche' ('African') as a specification, in the cases of Christiaan, Daniel Frederik Atrim, Jan van Ransdorp, and Jacob van

47 See, for instance, Karel Blei, *The Netherlands Reformed Church 1571-2005* (Grand Rapids 2006) 36.

48 See, for instance, Petrus Jurrianus Gouda Quint, *Woordenboek des Bijbels, inzonderheid ten gebruike bij de Statenvertaling* (Haarlem: De erven F. Bohn, 1866) 276, s.v. 'Moorendland'; compare Pieter

Johannes Veth, *Uit Oost en West. Verklaring van eenige uitheemsche woorden* (Arnhem: P. Gouda Quint, 1889) 125-127, s.v. 'Moor, Mooriaan'.

49 Henk Niemeijer, *Calvinisme en koloniale stadscultuur. Batavia 1619-1725* (Almelo 1996) 137ff. Compare Veth, *Uit Oost en West*, 125-127.



▲
Figure 4. The baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch was also popular in paintings. Rembrandt van Rijn, 'De doop van de Kamerling', 1626. © Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht, photograph by Ruben de Heer.

Hermanstyn.⁵⁰ The series of baptisms on 6 April 1788 shows that Clarinda Mauritia Roedolfina, who originated from Asia, was also characterised as a ‘Moorinne’ (female Moor),⁵¹ and that the biblical story about the Ethiopian Eunuch (see below), or ‘Moorman’ as he was called in the *Statenvertaling*, was applied to a male ‘mysties’ from Batavia (presumably – as his enslaver worked there), as well as to an adult woman from the East Indies.⁵²

If we look at the content of the six Bible texts above, it is striking how universal or inclusive in character they are. They all emphasise that people shall come from ‘the East and West’ (Matthew), from ‘all the ends of the earth’ (Isaiah), from ‘beyond the rivers of the Moors’ (Zephaniah) and out of Egypt and the land of the Moors (Psalm 68), to bring offerings to God, sit with him, to look unto him, or to stretch their arms out to him. In Psalm 87 the fictive citizenship of Jerusalem (Zion) is extended to Egypt (Rahab), Babylon, the Philistine, the Tyrean, and the Moor – in other words: to all the nations of the world.

Special attention should be paid to the Bible story that is mentioned no less than thirteen times in baptism announcements: the baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch. This Bible story, found in Acts 8:26-40, tells the story of a eunuch from Ethiopia who had visited Jerusalem and returned to Ethiopia while reading a scroll of the book of Isaiah in his chariot. The apostle Philip is sent to the eunuch by an angel to help him understand what he is reading. After hearing Philip’s explanation, the eunuch embraces Christianity and asks to be baptised – which Philip does. So, he becomes the first gentile convert in the New Testament. Understandably, the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch became a popular story with both the enslaved persons and the people converting and baptising them (Figure 4).⁵³ For example, the Dutch Reformed minister Jan Willem Kals (1700-1781) reported how he met an enslaved and converted woman in Suriname, Isabella (last name unknown), who referred to the Ethiopian Eunuch as her role model and inspiration.⁵⁴ There are also troublesome aspects to the interpretation of this story: where a minister such as Casparus de Carpentier (1607-1667) saw the eunuch and his focus on reading the Bible as an example of proto-Protestantism,⁵⁵ others used the

50 *Maandelyke uittreksels of Boekzaal der Geleerde Waerelt* 83 (1756) 797-798; 84 (1757) 443-444; 86 (1758) 477-478; *Maandelyksche uittreksels of Boekzaal der geleerde Waereld* 128 (1778) 664-665.

51 *Maandelyksche uittreksels of Boekzaal der geleerde Waereld* 146 (1788) 604.

52 *Maandelyksche uittreksels of Boekzaal der geleerde Waereld* 149 (1789) 188-189; 155 (1792) 474.

53 Dineke Stam, Jessica de Abreu and Lucy Geurts, ‘De doop van de kamerling’, & *Sporen van slavernij en koloniaal verleden* (second

edition, 22 September 2020), retrieved online: <https://magazines.cultureelerfgoed.nl/terugnaardetoeekomst/2020/01/nk1731-abraham-bloemaert-doop-van-de-kamerling-1620-1625>. Accessed 12 June 2024.

54 Compare Martijn Stoutjesdijk, ‘Een zwarte stem in een witte tekst. De totslaafgemaakte christen Isabella in het werk van Jan Willem Kals’, *Kerk en Theologie* 74:1 (2023) 38-56. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5117/KT2023.1.005.STOU>.

story in a racialised discourse, arguing that in the process of conversion and baptism the eunuch actually became white – at least in his soul.⁵⁶ However, as the baptism announcements do not tell us how the ministers preached about Acts 8, we cannot know which turn they took in their sermons.

In an article, Martijn Stoutjesdijk has made a first inventory and analysis of the ways the Bible was used in the Dutch debate on colonial slavery during the seventeenth up until the nineteenth centuries.⁵⁷ According to this research, the focus in this debate was on, first, Bible passages that regulate slavery (such as Leviticus 25:39-46, Deuteronomy 15:12-17, Ephesians 6:5-9, 1 Timothy 6:1-2, et cetera); second, New Testament texts that discuss the relation between physical and spiritual slavery (such as John 8:34 and 2 Peter 2:19); and, third, the Curse of Ham in Genesis 9. As we can see, this list of texts used in the slavery debate is quite different from our list of popular baptism texts (Table 3). This signifies a different focus and occasion when it comes to the baptisms, but might also be indicative of another view on slavery. Bible texts dedicated to slavery laws and regulations do not occur at all in our corpus of baptism announcements and neither does the theme of spiritual versus physical slavery. The Curse of Ham only appears once in the baptism announcements, and is worth discussing at length.

The Curse of Ham refers to a Bible story in Genesis 9:20-27, in which Noah gets drunk after the flood, undresses himself and curses his son Ham (or actually his grandson, Canaan) for not covering him by using the following words: ‘Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.’ In later interpretations – particularly popular in the colonial era, also in the Dutch context – this passage was used to legitimise the slavery of particularly black or African people, as Ham was, erroneously, identified as the ancestor of the Africans.⁵⁸ The announcement in the *Boekzaal* in which the Curse of Ham is referred to, describes how an African Moor was baptised in Rees (now Germany) in 1756 and given the name Daniel Frederik Atlim, with Atlim being his African city of birth. Atlim was educated by one minister Steffens, who also administered the sacrament of baptism. The announcement explicitly mentions that on this occasion Steffens did not preach, but held

55 Casparus de Carpentier, *Den gewitten of bekeerden Moorman. Dat is de onderwijsinghe van Philippus, de belijdenisse en Doop des Moormans en sijn vrolijcke reyse na sijn Landt* (Amsterdam: Abraham vanden Burgh, 1662).

56 Compare Stam, De Abreu and Geurts, ‘De doop’.

57 Stoutjesdijk, ‘Forgetful Remembrance’.

58 On the Curse of Ham in the Dutch context see Martijn Stoutjesdijk, “‘Om dat hunne verw en

gedaante van d’onze verscheiden is.” De Vloek van Cham in het Nederlands debat over koloniale slavernij’, in: Bente de Leede and Martijn Stoutjesdijk (eds.), *Kerk, kolonialisme en slavernij. Verhalen van een vervlochten geschiedenis* (Kok 2023) 134-152. On the older history of the Curse of Ham, see David M. Goldenberg, *Black and Slave: the Origins and History of the Curse of Ham* (De Gruyter 2017).

a short ‘*voorafspraak*’ (‘introductory speech’) on Noah’s blessing in Genesis 9:21-27. A summary of this speech is included in the *Boekzaal*. As it is a unique discussion of the Curse, situated on the level of a local church, we insert the entire quotation below:

Regarding which his Honour noted that there was a special reason for not blessing and not cursing Ham (the curse being pronounced on Canaan, Ham’s youngest son). a. The non-blessing was considered a sign that this lineage would be the smallest in number and the least in stature; the Moors of this lineage, descending from Kush, are less esteemed than the white people descending from Shem and Japhet because of their blackness and lack of standing. b. The non-cursing was regarded as a sign that this lineage, however, would not be wholly and always deprived of the blessings of the Messiah, but that some of them would also be lured out of this [the deprivation of the blessings] and introduced into Sem’s tent, into the true Church, to obtain salvation in the blissful Woman’s seed,⁵⁹ the Lord Jesus Christ; It is evident from the promises specifically made to the Moors, Ps. LXVIII: 32. And LXXXVII: 4. Isa. XLV: 14. Zephan. III: 10. etc. and also from the example of Ebed-Melech, Jerem. XXXVIII: 7-13. And XXXIX: 18. And from the Chamberlain [Ethiopian Eunuch] Acts VIII: 27-38.⁶⁰

This quotation is a strange combination of careful exegesis and a message of inclusivity on the one hand, and derogatory ideas on the other. First of all, Steffens is right to notice that the curse is actually on Canaan, not Ham, his father. However, instead of discussing the curse of Canaan, Steffens debates the ‘non-blessing and non-cursing of Ham’, for which he provides two reasons. First of all, the ‘non-blessing’ part pertains to the fact that this lineage would be the smallest in numbers and that because of their ‘blackness and

59 A reference to Genesis 3:15 in which a distinction is made between the seed of the serpent (that seduced Adam and Eve) and the seed of the ‘woman’, Eve.

60 *Maandelyke Uittreksels of Boekzaal der Geleerde Waerelt* 83 (1756) 797-798. Original text: ‘Waar by zyn Eerw. aanmerkte, dat het niet zegenen, en ook niet vloeken van Cham, (den vloek bepaalt over Canaan, Chams jongste Zonen uitgesproken) byzondere reden gehad heeft. a. Het niet zegenen wierde aangemerkt als een teken, dat dit geslagte het kleinste in getal, en ‘t minste in aanzien zoude wezen; de Moren uit dit geslagt, uit Cus voortgekomen, zyn van wegens haar zwartheid en onaanzienlykheid,

minder geagt, dan de witte menschen uyt Sem en Japhet afstammende. b. Het niet vloeken wierde aangemerkt, als een teken, dat dit geslagte egter niet geheel en altoos van de zegeningen in den Messias zoude versteken blyven, maar dat’ er ook uit deze gouden gelokt en in Sema tente, in de ware Kerke, ingevoert worden, om in het zegenbrengende Vrouwenzaag, den Here Jezus Christus zaligheid te verkrygen; ‘t welk blykt uit de beloften bepaaldelyk aen de Moren gedaan, Ps. LXVIII: 32. En LXXXVII: 4. Jes. XLV: 14. Zephan. III: 10. enz. en ook uit het voorbeeld van Ebed-Melech, Jerem. XXXVIII: 7-13. En XXXIX: 18. En van den Kamerling Hand. VIII: 27-38.’

lack of standing' the Moors deriving from it would be less esteemed than the 'white people descended from Shem and Japhet', thus displaying a clear racial hierarchy with white people above black people. Then, the 'non-cursing' part entails that the lineage of Ham would not stay deprived of any blessing, as the many prophecies or promises in the Bible about 'Moors' (enumerated at the end of the passage) show that they will ultimately join the true Church. In this way Steffens seems to want to harmonise popular colonial ideas about Africans assumingly having the lowest stature, or even being cursed to serve white people as enslaved persons, with the clear biblical promises on the Moors worshipping the one God. With this reasoning, Steffens comes close to the argumentation of Dutch advocates of slavery such as Godefridus Udemans (1581/82-1649), who legitimised slavery by arguing that for many enslaved people it was a path to spiritual salvation.⁶¹

Conclusion

This article is a first attempt to inventory and analyse the baptisms of black – Asian and African – people in the Dutch Republic systematically. We have used the baptism announcements in the periodical *Boekzaal* as our main source, as they provide us with a substantial corpus of (Reformed) baptisms that allows us to make provisional statements about the chronological and geographical distribution of the baptisms of black people in the Republic. Based on these data, we have shown that baptisms of black people occurred everywhere in the Republic – in all provinces and in both urban centres as well as small villages. Moreover, we learnt that people from both the East and the West Indies (the latter constituting the majority of cases) were present, and that the ways they were addressed in the baptism announcements seem to have been roughly the same – they were often designated with the same term, 'Moor'.

While harbouring a great wealth of information, the baptism announcements also evoke numerous questions that this article could not answer, for example why so many baptisms of black Christians in the Catholic Generality Lands were reported on, and what the impact of baptism was on the life courses and status of black Christians compared to those who were not baptised. Also, the issue of agency of these (formerly) enslaved individuals has turned out to be difficult to answer on the basis of the data presented.

Finally, the announcements do not only give information on the distribution, geographies, and life courses of (formerly) enslaved Africans and Asians in the Republic, but also form a unique source to understand the ways

61 Godefridus Udemans, 't *Geestelyck roer van 't Coopmans Schip* (Dordrecht: François Boels, 1640) fol. 192r.

early modern Dutch Reformed theologians viewed non-white people and their inclusion in Christianity. These attitudes are expressed through the choice of Bible texts on the occasion of the baptisms, which are in most cases recorded in the *Boekzaal*. Most of these Bible texts seem to indicate a more inclusive perspective on people with different ethnic backgrounds – especially when compared to the Bible texts that were used in the colonial debates on slavery. These more inclusive Bible texts, combined with incidental explicit anti-slavery statements, leave us wondering whether the baptisms of black people could and should be seen as a form of performative activism, with ministers making clear through the act of baptism that black people too should be seen and treated as humans. To answer that and other questions, more research is needed on the baptisms of black people in the Dutch Republic.

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