

MOSES IN CUSH: DEVELOPMENT OF THE LEGEND

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Numbers 12 presents us with a personal crisis that Moses experienced relating to his wife: *And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married; for he had married a Cushite woman* (Num. 12:1). The text does not elaborate on who this Cushite woman was.

The simple meaning of a Cushite woman is one who comes from Cush. In Biblical times this referred to the entire Nile Valley south of Egypt, which included Nubia (Sudan) and Abyssinia (Eritrea, Ethiopia). This would seem to rule out identifying Zipporah with the Cushite woman, as she was from Midian, not Cush. Still, the traditional rabbinic interpretation does in fact identify Zipporah with the Cushite. The term “Cushite” is interpreted as a term for beautiful, as found in Sifre 99, “all who see her admit that she is beautiful”, her beauty is as obvious as the dark skin of a Cushite. This is the view followed in Onkelos, who translates “Cushite” as *shapirta*, “beautiful”. This identification of the Cushite woman with Zipporah follows the general midrashic approach that Biblical characters for whom little or no information is given are identified with other Biblical figures. It also serves to limit the amount of women that Moses married to only Zipporah.

Even commentators who try to stick to the simple meaning of the text find ways of identifying the Cushite woman with Zipporah. For example, Ibn Ezra explains that since the Midianites dwell in tents in a hot sunny climate, they become dark skinned like Cushites. However, as noted by Rashbam and Hizkuni, the simple understanding is that the Cushite woman was in fact another wife who came from Cush.

It is possible to understand that Moses divorced Zipporah, and then later took another woman, the Cushite. Reinforcement for this view comes from the biblical text: *And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, took Zipporah, Moses' wife, after he had sent her away* (Ex. 18:2). In biblical Hebrew, to be ‘sent away,’ means to divorce: *that he writeth her a bill of divorcement, and giveth it in her hand, and sendeth her out of his house* (Deut. 24:1). Also, we find a parallel in the Book of Jeremiah: *If a man put (send) away his wife, and she* Stanley Schneider, Ph.D., a graduate of Yeshiva University and its rabbinical school, was Professor and former Chairman of the Integrative Psychotherapy Program, Hebrew University, Jerusalem.

go from him, and become another man's, shall he return unto her again? (Jer.3:1). *Mechiltah*, Exodus 18:2, 1, explicitly states that Moses divorced Zipporah when he left Midian for Egypt. Based on all this, it is reasonable to understand that the Cushite woman was another woman whom Moses had married after Zipporah.

But there is another possibility found in the early literature: Moses may have married a Cushite woman prior to his marriage to Zipporah. The story of Moses' journey to the Land of Cush and his marriage to the queen there, is told in full detail by the first century Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus.¹ Josephus' sources are, in part, probably Artapanus of Alexandria² (a Greek historian of Jewish origin, 2nd century B.C.E.) and Alexander Polyhistor³ (a Greek scholar who was enslaved by the Romans, 1st century BCE). Other important sources for us are the later works *Chronicle of Moses (Divrei HaYamim shel Mosheh)*⁴, *Sefer HaYashar*⁵ and *Yalkut Shimoni* (Ex. 2, section 168-169).⁶ These are included in later midrash anthologies.⁷

Josephus based much of his historiographical work on the Greek historians and the Septuagint translation of the Bible, the Alexandrian version. According to Swete (1894/1968), Josephus "possessed a copy of the sacred books which Titus granted him from the spoils of the Temple" (p.371, *fn.* 1).⁸ When Queen Alexandra ascended the throne after Alexander Jannaeus, she took the Pharisees under her protection. Josephus, "a member of the sect of the Pharisees,"⁹ then received status as an important Greek historian.¹⁰ Note that although Artapanus was of Jewish origin, "there is no doubt that Artapanus was influenced by the anti-Jewish historiography of Egyptian writers...and Josephus was dependent on Artapanus."¹¹

The Moses in Cush story is generally not found in the early midrashim or the classic commentators. One exception is the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan with a brief mention of Moses having taken a Cushite Queen when he ran away from Pharaoh, and he separated from her (Num. 12:1). Another exception is Rashbam (to Num. 12:1) who remarks that Moses "was a King in the land of Cush for forty years, and took a Queen, but did not sleep with her." This approach was accepted by Hizkuni. So our earliest sources for this story are Artapanus of Alexandria (as retold by Eusebius of Caesarea) and Josephus. Before continuing, it is important to note that the Greeks related to Moses as not only the greatest of all prophets (Deut. 34:10), but they attached

many qualities and fantasies of grandeur to him. This led to the development of many myths and fables.¹²

These early sources are important because they try to mitigate any lowering of the profile of Moses. Moses remains a great person, above and beyond other mortals: *Now the man Moses was very humble, above all the men that were upon the face of the earth* (Num. 12:3). The Cush narrative is used to enhance his status, making Moses a general, and even king of Cush.¹³

Artapanus describes the story of Moses (as related by Eusebius):
 Merris was betrothed to Chenephres, King of the regions above Memphis...and she being barren, took a suppositious {illegitimate} child from one of the Jews and called him Mouses {Moses}... this Moses when grown up taught mankind many useful things...But when Chenephres perceived the excellence of Moses, he envied him, and sought to slay him on some plausible pretext. And so when the Aethiopians¹⁴ invaded Egypt, Chenephres supposed that he had found a convenient opportunity, and sent Moses in command of a force against them...supposing that ...he would easily be destroyed by the enemy... this war went on for ten years...Then the Aethiopians, although they were enemies, became fond of Moses... But when the war ended, Chenephres pretended to welcome him {Moses}, but in reality continued to plot against him...Then Aaron, the brother of Moses, having learned about the plot, advised his brother to flee into Arabia...He {Moses} made his escape into Arabia and lived with Raguel, the ruler of the district, having married his daughter... Seven fair maidens I see...and Zipporah replies: of dark-skinned Aethiops...¹⁵

This is the earliest mention of Moses being involved with Cush. Here Zipporah is identified as the Biblical Cushite woman, and Moses, although admired by the Ethiopians, was only involved with them in the context of a long war.

Josephus relates a similar story, but with important differences from the version related by Artapanus. Most significantly, Josephus has Moses marrying the daughter of the Ethiopian King and consummating the marriage, and the Cushite woman is not understood to be Zipporah.

Moses...came to the age of maturity...and showed that he was born for the bringing them {the Egyptians} down, and raising the Israelites...The Ethiopians, who are next neighbors to the Egyptians, made an inroad into their country, which they seized upon...they went on to subdue the rest {of

Egypt}...and proceeded as far as Memphis...The Egyptians decided... to make use of Moses the Hebrew, and take his assistance...The King commanded his daughter to produce him that he might be the general of their army...Moses cheerfully undertook the business ...{Everyone} was glad: The Egyptians because Moses would overcome their enemies {the Ethiopians} and Moses would be slain. The Hebrews because Moses would be their general and then they would escape from the Egyptians. But Moses prevented the enemies {from harming him}...He gave a wonderful demonstration of his sagacity...He came upon the Ethiopians before they expected him...he beat them...and made a great slaughter of these Ethiopians. The Egyptian army did not slacken their diligence... Then this accident happened. Tharbis was the daughter of the King of the Ethiopians. She happened to see Moses as he led the army with great courage...She fell deeply in love with him, and upon the prevalence of that passion, sent to him the most faithful of all her servants to discourse with him upon their marriage. He thereupon accepted the offer on condition she would procure the delivering up of the city and gave her the assurance of an oath to take her to his wife, and that once he had taken possession of the city, he would not break his oath to her...When Moses had cut off the Ethiopians, he gave thanks to God and consummated his marriage and led the Egyptians back to their own land.¹⁶

Afterwards, Josephus continues with Moses fleeing Egypt and marrying Ziporah, a Midianite woman, who he does not associate with being a Cushite at all.

Rajak explains Josephus's 'borrowing' textual ideas: "Josephus, we have supposed, took the story from a literary source. But this source and Artapanus probably drew on a common fund of oral material (as well as, possibly, on literature): that is the best way of explaining their complex relationship, and the rich, inventive detail found in both."¹⁷ Shinan similarly comments: "Although Josephus' account is certainly longer and more detailed than that of Artapanus, it appears to be but an expansion of the tradition reflected in Artapanus' writings."¹⁸ Josephus often elaborates on stories and metaphors which are not found in any Greek sources and "of which no trace is found in rabbinic literature."¹⁹

Feldman, a classics scholar and prolific writer, has advanced four major theories regarding Josephus's source for the Moses in Cush story:²⁰

1. Josephus derived it from a midrash now lost, the fact that a parallel for Moses' marriage with the Ethiopian princess is not found in Artapanus but appears only in later midrashim would argue for this explanation.
2. Josephus had an Alexandrian Jewish source. This source is usually identified as Artapanus, but Artapanus omits the crucial story of Moses' marriage with the Ethiopian princess.
3. Josephus modeled the story on one or more popular stories drawn from mythology or legend.
4. Josephus invented it himself.

Another version is given in a later midrash, *Yalkut Shimoni*, where there are major differences with the versions of Artapanus and Josephus.

War was waging between Cush and Bnei Kedem. Kukanus, King of Cush, went to war with Aram and Bnai Kedem, and he left Balaam and his sons to guard the city . . . Balaam advised the people remaining in the city to rebel against the King . . . When the King returned he saw that Balaam and his sons had made the city impregnable . . . At the time of this siege, Moses had run away from Egypt {to Ethiopia} and met the soldiers of King Kukanus who were unable to enter their city. The King and all the officers and soldiers were enamored with Moses because he looked as strong as a lion and his face shone like the sun, and they made him an advisor to them. After 9 years {remaining on the outskirts of the city} the King became ill and died . . . The officers and soldiers asked Moses to lead them. And he was made King and was to be given the Lady Cushite, the wife of the late King Kukanus, as his wife. Moses was 27 years old when he became King of Cush...and sat upon the throne, put on the crown and took the lady Cushite as his wife. But Moses was fearful of the God of his forefathers, and he did not consummate the marriage with the lady Cushite. Moses remembered the oath that Abraham made his servant Eliezer take when he told him not to take a wife for his son from the daughters of Canaan. And Isaac did the same thing when Jacob ran away from Esau, and he told him not to marry from the children of Ham...and Moses was afraid from his God and acted in truth with all his heart and did not stray from the path that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob followed. And Moses ruled the people of Cush for forty years. And he was successful because the God of his fathers was with him. In the fortieth year of his reign, one day he was sitting on the throne next to Lady Cushite, and she mentioned

the following to the Ministers and to the Nation: ‘Forty years this King is ruling Cush, and he has not been intimate with me, and has never worshipped our Cush gods.’ She asked the Ministers to appoint her son Munhas to be King, rather than the foreigner Moses. And that’s what happened. Moses was 67 years old when he left Cush. He couldn’t return to Egypt, from where he had run away. He ran off to Midian, to Re’uel . . . and he received Zipporah the Midianite as his wife...²¹

Yalkut Shimoni explains that Moses married Cushite royalty, a queen, before his marriage to Zipporah, an idea similar to the story in Josephus, where Moses marries a Cushite princess. But significantly, in the *Yalkut Shimoni* version, there is emphasis on the fact that Moses did not consummate the marriage. In this manner, the midrash gets all the benefits of the Moses in Cush narrative, such as filling in a long gap in the timeline of the life of Moses, portraying Moses as someone with great leadership skills, and explaining that the Cushite woman in Numbers 12:1 was in fact Cushite, without any negative associations of having relations with an alien woman. This is the version of the story referenced by the rabbinic commentators Rashbam and Hizkuni, who explicitly note that Moses never slept with her.

In this manner a legendary story of Moses ruling Cush and marrying Cushite royalty was incorporated into the midrashic corpus and became the basis for the interpretation of the *pashtanim*, those exegetes who endeavor to stick to the simple meaning of the text.

NOTES

1. Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* (Bridgeport: M. Sherman Publisher, 1828), Book II, chapters 9-11, pp.154-164.
2. Artapanus wrote *Concerning the Jews*. Many of his writings have not survived, and parts are preserved in the works of Eusebius of Caesarea (a Roman historian of the 2nd century, C.E.), specifically in: *Preparatio Evangelica* {Preparations for the Gospels}, Book 9, chapters 27-29. Louis Ginzberg (*Jewish Encyclopedia*, (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1906), *viz.* Artapanus, wrote: “Artapanus evidently belonged to that narrow-minded circle of Hellenizing Jews that were unable to grasp what was truly great in Judaism, and, therefore, in their mistaken apologetic zeal...set about glorifying Judaism to the outer world by inventing all manner of fables concerning the Jews” (p.145).
3. Lucius Cornelius Alexander Polyhistor wrote *Upon the Jews*.
4. Probably a tenth century composition attributed to Avraham Azulai, *Divrei HaYamim shel Moshe* (Cracow: Verlag von Lazar Schenkel Tarnow, 1897). See also: Avigdor Shinan, “Moses

and the Ethiopian Woman: Sources of a Story in *The Chronicles of Moses*," *Hierosolymitana*, 27 (1968), pp. 66-78.

5. *Sefer HaYashar* is a 'midrash' that covers biblical history from the creation of the world until the Israelite conquest of Canaan. There are many who questioned its veracity. Joseph Dan published an edited edition of the 1625 text and dates the book to the early 16th century (Joseph Dan, ed., *Sefer HaYashar* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1986).

6. *Yalkut Shimoni* is a later Midrash of the 13th century. The probable author is Rabbi Simeon of Frankfurt.

7. Jacob Kuli, *Yalkut MeAm Loetz* (Jerusalem: Wagshall Publishers, 1967), Exodus, vol. I (on verse Ex. 2:15), pp. 30-32. Kuli wrote his original work in Ladino (which was later translated into Hebrew) in the early 18th century; Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1968), 5:407-410, fn. 80.

8. Henry Barclay Swete, *An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek* (New York: Ktav Publishing, 1894/1968).

9. Swete, p.370.

10. George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), vol. I, pp. 64-6.

11. John J. Collins, "Artapanus," in J.H.Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishing, 2011), vol. II, p.894.

12. Jacob Freudenthal, *Hellenistische Studien* (Charleston, South Carolina: Nabu Press, 1875/2011), pp. 153-154.

13. See Gregory E. Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition: Josephos, Luke-Acts and Apologetic Historiography* (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1992), p.180.

14. When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek (Septuagint), the Hebrew term: 'Cush' became 'Aethiopia' in Greek and 'Ethiopian' in the English King James Version.

15. Artapanus quoted in Eusebius of Caesarea, *Preparatio Evangelica*, Book 9, chapters 27-28.

16. Josephus, *Antiquities*, Book II, chapt. 10, pp.160-163. Moses gained from both sides: On the Egyptian side he won the war and on the Ethiopian side he gained a wife. Confusion regarding the allegiance of Moses is also reflected in the controversial book by Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (London: Hogarth Press, 1939). An abbreviated version of the Josephus story is found in the commentary of the Ludwig Philippson Bible (Leipzig: Baumgartner's Buchhandlung, 1858), *Numeri* {Numbers}, 12:1 (p.737, fn). This is the Bible that Freud owned.

17. Tessa Rajak, "Moses in Ethiopia: Legend and Literature," *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 29 (1978), p.120.

18. Avigdor Shinan, *op. cit.*, p.70.

19. Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, *op. cit.*, 6:68, fn. 353.

20. Louis Feldman, *Josephus's Interpretation of the Bible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 402-404, fn. 60. According to Feldman: "Josephus also attempts to make his narrative more appealing to his Greek readers by introducing romantic motifs...Of course, the most striking instance of the introduction of a romantic motif is the scene in which the Ethiopian princess Tharbis falls madly in love with the brave enemy general Moses, who is besieging the capital city of the Ethiopians." ("Josephus' Portrait of Moses," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 82 (1992), p.325).

21. *Yalkut Shimoni*, Exodus 2, Section 168-169.