

Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews 2:10 (from <http://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/josephus/ant-2.htm>)

Tharbis was the daughter of the king of the Ethiopians: she happened to see Moses as he led the army near the walls, and fought with great courage; and admiring the subtility of his undertakings, and believing him to be the author of the Egyptians' success, when they had before despaired of recovering their liberty, and to be the occasion of the great danger the Ethiopians were in, when they had before boasted of their great achievements, she fell deeply in love with him; and upon the prevalency of that passion, sent to him the most faithful of all her servants to discourse with him about 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 when he had once taken possession of the city, he would not break his oath to her. No sooner was the agreement made, but it took effect immediately; and 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.

במדבר פרק יב:א-ג

ותדבר מרים ואהרן במשה
על אדות האשה הכשית אשר לקח
כי אשה כשית לקח:

ויאמרו: "הרק אך במשה דבר ה'?" הלא גם בנו דבר!
וישמע ה':

והאיש משה ענו עניו מאד מכל האדם אשר על פני האדמה: ו

Miryam and Aharon spoke against Mosheh,
with regard to the Cushite woman whom he had taken to wife,
for he had taken a Cushite woman to wife.

אונקלוס

על עסק אתתא שפירתא די נסיב
ארי אתתא שפירתא דנסיב רחיק

with regard to the beautiful woman whom he had married,
for he had distanced the beautiful woman whom he had married.

תרגום "יונתן"

על עסק אתתא כושיתא דאסבוהי כושאי למשה במיערקיה מן קדם פרעה וריחקה
ארום לאיתא אסבוהי ית מלכתא דכוש ורחיק מינה

With regard to the Ethiopian woman whom the Ethiopians had married to Moshe when he fled
from Par'oh, whom he had then distanced
For he had married the queen of the Ethiopians and distanced himself from her

רש"י במדבר פרק יב פסוק א

"האשה הכשית" - מגיד שהכל מודים ביפיה, כשם שהכל מודים בשחרותו של כושי:
כושית - בגימטריא יפת מראה:

על אדות האשה - על אודות גירושיה:

כי אשה כשית לקח - מה תלמוד לומר? אלא יש לך אשה נאה ביפיה ואינה נאה במעשיה, במעשיה ולא ביפיה, אבל
זאת נאה בכל:

האשה הכשית - על שם נזיה נקראת כושית, כאדם הקורא את בנו נאה כושי, כדי שלא תשלוט בו עין רעה:
כי אשה כשית לקח - ועתה גרשה:

"The Cushite woman" – this tells that everyone conceded her beauty, as they concede the
blackness of Ethiopians

"Cushite" – in gematria "beautiful of appearance"

"With regard to the woman" – with regard to her divorce

"For he had married a Cushite woman" – what does this teach? There are woman attractive in
beauty but not in deeds, or in deeds and not in beauty, but she was attractive in all.

"the Cushite woman" – she was called Cushit because of her attractiveness, as when a man calls
his attractive son Cushi, to avoid the evil eye

"for he had married a Cushite woman" – and not divorced her

רשב"ם במדבר פרק יב פסוק א

"כי אשה כושית לקח" - כדכת' בדברי הימים דמשה רבנו, שמלך בארץ כוש ארבעים שנה ולקח מלכה אחת ולא שכב עמה, כמו שכתוב שם, והם לא ידעו כשדיברו בו שלא נזקק לה. זהו עיקר פשוטו . . .

"for he had married a Cushite woman" – as is written in The Chronicle of Mosheh Rabbeinu, that he reigned in Ethiopia for forty years, and married a queen but did not lie with her, but Miriam and Aharon did not know when they spoke against him and he has not coupled with her.

בכור שור

"והאיש משה ענו מאד" –

מגיד לך הכתוב שמשה לא היה בעל גאווה, ולא נתכוון לשום גאווה, אלא הכי היתה סיבה ומזל שלקח אשה כושית,

כמו שכתוב גבי שמשון, גבי אביו ואמו שהיו מוכיחין אותו על שלא היה נושא מבנות ישראל, וכתוב "ואביו ואמו לא ידעו כי מה' היא",

ואעפ"י שלא נודע למה היתה סבה זאת של משה, אין גלויין לנו כל הסודות,

ובדברי הימים של משה מספר מן הכושית, כי היתה מלכת הכושים והיה משה מלך בכוש ארבעים שנה, ואף בזאת היה ענו . . .

"The man Mosheh was very *anav*" –

Scripture tells you that Mosheh was not a man of arrogance, and intended no arrogance, but rather it was destiny and fate that he married an Ethiopian woman, as Scripture writes regarding Shimshon, that his father and mother were rebuking him for not marrying from among the daughters of Israel, but Scripture writes (Shoftim 14:4) "But his father and mother did not know that the matter was from Hashem", and even though the reason for this destiny of Mosheh is not known, not all secrets are known to us,

and in the Chronicle of Mosheh it tells of the Ethiopian woman that she was queen of the Ethiopian and that Mosheh was king there for forty years, but even about this Mosheh was *anav* . . .

The standard Orthodox presentation of Written and Oral Torah approximates the following: At Sinai, G-d gave the Jews a section of His Wisdom in writing. A different section, for reasons unknown, He whispered into Mosheh's ears.

There is a subsequent dispute as to the extent of the whispered section, with some describing it as an utterly comprehensive commentary, and others limiting it to the bare minimum principles necessary to develop an authentic Torah commentary, plus some halakhic details, e.g. the blackness of tefillin. All authentic Torah commentary developed later then becomes part of Oral Torah. But all positions have in common the identification of the original Oral Torah with a special revelation to Mosheh.

I want to suggest a different perspective, one I believe fits better with Maimonides' understanding of halakhah leMosheh miSinai. Hashem gave us the Torah in Hebrew. Understanding the Torah therefore requires knowledge of the vocabulary and grammar of Biblical Hebrew. Nonetheless, the Torah does not include a dictionary or a grammar textbook. Rather, G-d gave the Torah to the Jews in Hebrew *because they already knew Hebrew*.

In other words, the Written Torah is not a self-sufficient document – it is intelligible only on the basis of information it does not provide. That information must be taught to us, but the original readers' simply knew it. So part of the Oral Torah is the linguistic context of the Written Torah as it was known before Revelation by the Jewish people and subsequently passed down to us.

It seems to me reasonable to suggest that this applies to cultural and historical as well as linguistic knowledge. The Torah was not given to a tabula rasa population with no knowledge or awareness of Jewish and general history. The historical and cultural information in Torah, therefore, is often selected from, and given in the context of, a much larger set of cultural and historical information that the Jews' already possessed, and often can only be fully understood in light of that context, although it will still be worth asking why the Torah tells us this detail and not that, especially if that is really necessary to understand this.

In Bamidbar 12:1 we read that Mosheh had married a Cushite woman. Rashi understands Cushite as meaning beautiful, and offers an array of apparently farfetched explanations, including gematria and euphemism, for why Cushit means that here. He accordingly believes that the reference is to Tziporah, and that Mosheh had only one wife. Rashbam and Bekhor Shor, however, believe that the reference is to a second wife, and back up their interpretation by citing a historical work unknown to me in which Mosheh is said to have married an Ethiopian princess, and himself ruled in Ethiopia for forty years.

Now Rashbam and Bekhor Shor do not cite Targum "Yonatan", which also brings this story, or Josephus, and Rashi does not cite Targum Onkelos, which translates Cushite as beautiful. But we have access to both, and so we note that they are choosing among two streams of interpretation that were already ancient in their day.

How do we evaluate these interpretations? We might seek to list the exegetic challenges inherent in these verses, including but not limited to:

- 1) What did Aharon and Miryam object to about the relationship?
- 2) How does their objection relate to the question of whether Mosheh's relationship with Hashem was unique?
- 3) Why are we told that Mosheh had married a Cushite woman after, and only after, we hear that Aharon and Miriam had objected to something about the marriage?
- 4) How is Moshe's *anivut* related to this episode?
- 5) Why does Hashem object to Aharon and Miryam voicing their opinions?
- 6) Why does Hashem punish Miryam more than Aharon?

and then decide which interpretation meets them better. Alternatively, we might focus on whether it seems more implausible to believe that Cushite means beautiful here, or rather that the Torah mentions a marriage by Mosheh only in passing.

I suggest that such an approach may be fundamentally flawed. The story of Mosheh and the Ethiopian princess may not derive from the text, either from specific textual phenomena or from the flow of the narrative generally; rather, it may simply have been a biographical fact about Mosheh that all original readers could have been expected to know. It was Oral Torah.

Now just as with halakhah, grammar, and lexicography, some parts of the narrative masoret are lost over time. Rashbam and Bekhor Shor, for instance, may not have known a

Masoretic source for the story, or even a Jewish source, depending on what their Divrei haYamim shel Mosheh was. I confess that I first read this story several weeks ago in a book by the Mormon writer Orson Scott Card, and was unsure before reading Bekhor Shor this week whether it had any Jewish basis. But it clearly existed, and was seen as Masoretic, at least before the Destruction of the Temple.

If this thesis is correct, then we need, as Professor James Kugel has noted, to recognize that at least some Midrashic narratives are neither exegesis nor eisegesis, but simply recordings of cultural context, and therefore cannot be evaluated exegetically.

Once we make the fundamental decision as to whether to accept this narrative tradition *as tradition*, we nonetheless may choose among alternate versions of the story on exegetical grounds - for example, whether we think Mosheh married her before or after he killed the Egyptian, or whether he ever lay with her. But that will have to wait for another time.

Shabbat shalom!

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