Ethnicity, Exogamy, and Zipporah

Karen Strand Winslow
Haggard Graduate School of Theology
Azusa Pacific University, Azusa, California

Abstract

[1] In contrast to the book of Ezra, whose protagonists demand that Jews expel “foreign” wives, the story of the Midianite Zipporah, Moses’ wife, affirms that foreign women are beneficial to Israel. Zipporah’s circumcision of her son in Exodus 4 is the climax of a pattern in which females thwart attacks on endangered males. Later, Zipporah’s father confessed faith in Moses’ God and ate a meal with Israel in the presence of God. Zipporah and her father represent a household that originated outside of Israel’s ideological boundaries, but became positively allied to Israel through marriage, circumcision, confession, and sacrifice. This and similar stories suggest that, among those who selected and shaped the narratives of the Tanakh, there was considerable and persuasive dissent from what has often been assumed to be the dominant position in Second Temple Judaism.

[2] Recently several scholars have applied modern theories of ethnicity to post-exilic Jewish history, connecting the formation of the Jewish Scriptures to the identity crises brought by exile and resettlement in the Babylonian and Persian periods. Some emphasize the concern exhibited in these texts with Israel’s religious identity and the distinctions between Israel and other peoples. Others seek to link certain biblical narratives to the economic and property issues resulting from exile resettlement and Persian policies and politics. I am interested in the relevance of wife-taking traditions throughout the Hebrew Bible to the social tensions over identity formation and ethnicity construction among the Jews who processed these traditions and produced a set of scriptures. I maintain that diverse wife-taking stories found across the range of Torah, Prophets, and Writings are best explained, not by positing stages in the development of marriage customs over the range of Israel’s history, but rather as representative of distinct perspectives on exogamy among the scribes who redacted them. I am arguing that narratives and law codes in the Pentateuch reflect contrasting perspectives on exogamy that may be explained, at least in part, by the conflicts over suitable marriage alliances among the inhabitants of Persian Yehud.

[3] Some Torah narratives imply that to marry within certain defined groups is to preserve the community’s religious vitality and ethnic identity—defined as mutually informing. Other texts, in contrast, demonstrate that sentiments and prohibitions against “foreigners” must be set aside because the new Israel is a religious community. These texts affirm that outsiders contributed to the establishment of Israel. The conspicuous presence of tensions concerning the provenance and ethnicity of wives for Israelite men in the Bible and subsequent Jewish
literature signifies the continuing importance of this issue for the authors and their communities.⁵

[4] The Exodus account of Moses’ Midianite wife illustrates how this and similar traditions about outsider wives were useful against those who claimed that only golah (exiled) Jews—male and female—and their offspring were Israel, the holy seed. The protagonists in the book of Ezra (Shecaniah and Ezra) contended that unions of male golah Jews with women originating inside the land produced mixed, polluted offspring who must be expelled from the golah congregation, sent outside of the boundaries the authors of Ezra constructed around Israel. However, the stories of Zipporah—and other outsider wives or mothers such as Tamar, Asenath, the Cushite, and Ruth—indicate otherwise. These narratives show that foreign wives were essential to the formation, preservation, and deliverance of the people, Israel. I will begin by outlining briefly some of the most apparent tensions in the Torah narratives, then move to the story of Moses’ wife, Zipporah.

The Tensions

[5] According to the narratives of Genesis, Abraham was both endogamous and exogamous. At the outset of his story, he is married to Sarah, whom he called a half-sister.⁶ At Sarah’s urging, he agreed to take Hagar—an Egyptian slave—as a second wife to bear his first son (Ishmael). Significantly, Abraham does not oppose Sarah’s proposal to take a “foreign” slave as a second wife (Genesis 16:3), and this position is not criticized by the narrator. After Sarah died, he also fathered sons through Keturah—whose origin is not mentioned in the biblical text.⁷ There is no explicit indication that Sarah’s kinship with Abraham as a Terahide is the reason the covenant son must be born by her, nor is there any suggestion that Ishmael and the sons of Keturah were expelled because of their “outsider” status through their mothers.⁸ Nevertheless, all of these other sons were sent away (shalah) from Isaac, the son of Sarah, Abraham’s first wife. Ishmael became the father of a nation of twelve princes (Genesis 21:13, 18; 25:16) and buried his father together with Isaac; the sons of Keturah were sent eastward.

[6] Isaac and Jacob were compelled by their parents to avoid the neighbor girls and marry endogamously—within the Haran/Aram clan. Nevertheless, no narrative in Genesis recounts Jacob’s interest in finding wives among the kin for his sons.⁹ Several (at the least) married or produced children with outsiders. Genesis 34 describes the capture of the Hivite women and children by the sons of Jacob as booty after Simeon and Levi had circumcised and killed all the men to avenge Shechem’s rape of Dinah (Genesis 34:29). Any censure of Simeon, Levi, and the pillaging brothers was directed toward their violence and potential incitement of the many against the few (Genesis 34:30; 49:5-7), not against taking the Hivite women as captives or having intercourse and progeny with them.¹⁰

[7] Both Joseph and Judah found wives in the lands of their exile after Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt. Judah married a Canaanite, and Genesis 38 tells in some ironic detail how he happened to impregnate Tamar. Tamar is clearly not a relative of Judah or his family; therefore, she is most likely construed as a Canaanite of the land within the world of the story,
although early interpreters chose to construct her as more of an insider. Tamar’s son Perez led the lineage of Judah.¹¹

[8] Joseph married Asenath, the daughter of an Egyptian priest. Their union produced Ephraim and Manasseh who were adopted as sons by Israel and fathered the Joseph tribes (Genesis 41:50-52; 48:8-22). These cases of exogamy and exogamous progeny are not marginal, since the later tribes and kingdoms of Judah and Israel are both at stake.¹²

[9] Notice that insider women, the sister/cousin-wives, were always barren until the LORD opened their wombs. This includes Leah—the LORD intervened on her behalf, when he saw that “she was unloved” (Genesis 29:21-27). Barrenness was never a problem for the outsiders: Hagar, Tamar, Asenath, and Zipporah. Although the barren insider/fertile outsider motif is intriguing and would be fruitful to explore in more depth, I will turn instead to the brief accounts in Exodus about Moses’ Midianite wife and father-in-law and the implications of this story for the Jews of the post-exilic period.

[10] The correlations and divergences between the journeys of Moses and Jacob are instructive in this regard. I claim that the writers of Exodus used traditional motifs to link Moses’ exogamous relations to Jacob’s endogamous alliances, but purposely highlighted the extraordinary hospitality, wits, and courage of the outsiders. This stands in contrast to the subterfuge of Laban, Jacob’s in-clan father-in-law and even that of his wife, Rachel. I maintain that the redactor of Exodus purposely paralleled Moses’ journeys with Jacob’s to emphasize that Moses’ alliances with Midianites, unlike Jacob’s endogamous relations to Laban, did not hinder his vocation and maturation, but helped him fulfill it.

Moses and Jacob

[11] A series of parallels, both similarities and differences make the comparison compelling. Jacob’s exile and insider marriages were the result of his flight from the rage of his brother Esau; Moses’ exile and outsider marriage occurred when he fled his Egyptian household. As with Rebekah and Rachel—the kin wives of Isaac and Jacob—the Midianite Zipporah is first introduced to the reader at a well (Exodus 2:15-17).¹³ As the respective stories continue to follow a generally parallel plot line, the differences between Jacob and Moses’ relationships with their fathers-in-law are drawn ever more vividly—the insider relationship degenerates while the outsider marriage alliance results in affirmation of Israel’s God and benefits Israel.

[12] Whereas Jacob was deceived into serving his uncle Laban for fourteen years after first choosing Rachel as a wife, Zipporah’s father gave her to Moses at once, with no strings attached. Both Jacob and Moses pastured the flocks of their fathers-in-law and had children who became part of Laban and Jethro’s respective households. Both eventually were ordered by the LORD to return to the land of their origin. Jacob abandoned his uncle and father-in-law surreptitiously (Genesis 31:20), but Moses simply requested leave and Jethro said, “go in peace” (Exodus 4:18). Both Jacob and Moses later encountered their fathers-in-law in scenes depicting social and religious transformations. Besides these reunions, which will be discussed below, the wilderness journey of each hero who separated from his father-in-law to
found his own household included a mysterious and dangerous encounter prior to its expected conclusion.14

[13] For example, “a man” struggled with Jacob all night while he was alone (Genesis 32:24), and the LORD attacked Moses during the night while he was with his wife and sons (Exodus 4:18-26). Perhaps the wrestler of Genesis 32 was seeking to take Jacob’s life as well, but Jacob was too strong and demanding. In any case, Jacob had already sent his family on; he had no one to help him as Moses did. Although bloodletting circumcision was not the crux of the struggle for Jacob in Genesis 32 as it was for Moses in Exodus 4, the divine wrestler touched (naga’) Jacob’s groin in an attempt to escape Jacob’s grasp before the morning light.

[14] Similarly, in Exodus 4:18-26, we learn that Moses took his wife, sons, and the rod of God when he returned to Egypt to speak to Pharaoh about releasing the Israelites. On the way, the LORD sought to kill “him”—either Moses or his son, but Zipporah circumcised her son and the LORD withdrew from “him.” Not only does Exodus 4 parallel Jacob’s journey home told in Genesis 32, it links Zipporah to other preserving, delivering women in the lives of the ancestors. She is a link in the chain of other women—both insider and outsider—who saved males and preserved Israel.15

[15] Ilana Pardes points out that the blurred demarcation between Moses and his son is resonant with the Egyptian savior goddess Isis’ dual protection of her husband and child—the father-son pair, Osiris and Horus. Isis brings the dismembered Osiris back to life by collecting his body parts and hovering over him with her wings. She is impregnated by him with Horus whom she births in a papyrus thicket and hides from Seth. Pardes sees Isis ‘wrenched apart’ in the Exodus narrative as her role in protecting husband and son is divided among midwife/mother/sister/wife there. ‘Zipporah’ means bird and she “erupts in Exodus 4 with the power of an Isis” to save her husband/son. She is ‘demythologized’ to be sure, presented as a human historical figure, but traces of the goddess remain.16

Exodus 4:24-26

[16] Irrespective of the many textual theories about the identification of the victim in Exodus 4:24-26, the action of Zipporah is represented as salvific.17 Zipporah’s circumcision of her son in Exodus 4 is the climax of a pattern in which the un-endangered females in Moses’ story-world thwart deadly attacks on endangered males by Pharaoh and the LORD. Zipporah joins the midwives, Moses’ mother and sister, and Pharaoh’s daughter (another foreign mother) as an accomplice with the LORD in protecting the one who was to draw out the LORD’s people from Egyptian slavery. Just as Moses escaped death as a child because of the shrewdness and compassion of Hebrew and Egyptian women, Zipporah’s timely move saved Moses and allowed him to deliver Israel from the land of bondage. Circumcision, like sacrifice, represents bloodletting and both are symbols of—and antidotes to—the powers of birth. Both circumcision and sacrifice are boundary-crossing rituals that teem with gender implications, which Nancy Jay has found to be shared worldwide.18

[17] Whereas, Zipporah is depicted as birth giver in Exodus 2:21-22 and as an aggressive, blood-shedding savior in Exodus 4, her actions and words in Exodus 4:24-6 transmit the blood
to Moses and consequently the role of savior to him.  

19 She smeared the bloody foreskin of her first born son on “his” feet, legs or genitals, and then said: “. . . you are indeed a hatan of blood to me!” After Zipporah’s cut, her application of the foreskin to “his” feet, and her vocal appraisal of this incident, she fell silent. In this manner, Zipporah prepares the reader, not only for the Passover blood smearing, which repelled the Death Angel from Israel’s first born sons, and the tenth plague, but also for her silent role in Exodus 18.  

20 From Exodus 4:27 onward, Moses began to speak before Aaron, Israel, and Pharaoh and to perform the functions to which the LORD called him at the mountain of God.

[18] Like the other women in the previous movements of the birth story of Israel, Zipporah appeared in her story as an agent to solve an immediate problem, then disappeared into silence as the reader continues to follow the activities of the “male-endangered” but “female-rescued” male hero. Throughout Exodus 18, her next appearance in the story, Zipporah remains silent; the focus shifts to the words of her father. Whereas Zipporah is a type of the valuable foreign woman who enters Israel through marriage, her father represents outsider men who become allied to Israel through recognizing the LORD’s power and partaking of Israelite sacrifices.

**Exodus 18**

[19] Exodus 18:1-4 portrays Jethro bringing Zipporah and her sons back to Moses in the wilderness at the mountain of God. Verse two reads: “And Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, had accepted (yaqah stem laqah) Zipporah the wife of Moses after her sending away (shiluheah) (Exodus 18:2). This redactional gloss is the means by which the redactor was able to include the tradition about Zipporah and her sons journeying with Moses to Egypt and the tradition about Jethro’s response to the mighty works of God.  

23 It is clear from the phrase “after her sending away” that the author found both the “Circumcision by Zipporah” tradition of Exodus 4 and the Exodus 18 account of Jethro’s confession, sacrifice and communal meal, and advice to Moses crucial to Israel’s founding story. Circumcision, sacrifice, and confession are rituals implemented throughout the Hebrew Bible to mark and/or establish one’s entrance into the community of Israel. Here, their Midianite performers are showcased. Zipporah had to go with Moses to perform the salvific circumcision; and she had to have been sent away at some point in order to be returned by her father to Moses. No explanation is given for this sending away; the author is concerned here to provide a platform for Jethro’s confession and shared meal with the Israelite elders. After Moses told Jethro of the LORD’s work against the Egyptians on Israel’s behalf, Jethro said: “Now I know that the LORD is greater than all the gods . . . (Exodus 18:11). Jethro’s response illustrates the often-repeated purpose of the signs, wonders, and smitings against Egypt: that Israel, Pharaoh, Egypt, and the whole earth should know that the earth is the LORD’s (Exodus 7:5, 17; 9:16, 29).

[20] Some scholars suggest that this implies that the Midianite was already a worshipper of the LORD, and that some ancient historical cult of YHWH existed in Midian. This is possible but not demonstrable here, and in any case is not relevant to the primary point of the passage.  

I claim rather that this passage indicates that the mighty works of God convinced Jethro of the LORD’s predominance over other gods, just as they were intended to do. Jethro’s Exodus 18 confession is reminiscent of Rahav’s, a Canaanite whose entire family entered the congregation.
of Israel because of her confession of fear in the LORD and her negotiations with the spies (Joshua 2 and 6:22-25). Jethro’s affirmations also remind us of Ruth’s loyalty oath demonstrating that a Moabite was a woman to be welcomed and emulated, not cast out.

While the Midianite priest’s role is similar to that of Rahav and Ruth, the communal sacrifice and meal of Jethro and the elders in Exodus 18:10-12 contrasts to the similar event described between father-in-law/son-in-law in Genesis 31, Laban and Jacob. Again, I will point out the antagonism between the kin pair and the conviviality between Moses and Jethro who were connected through an exogamous marriage—a marriage that is evidence of the hospitality of the Midianite.

The sacrificial meal of Jacob and Laban in Genesis 31 signifies the hostility of their separation. After pursuing and claiming his daughters and their children are his own, Laban finally relinquished them to Jacob and initiated a covenant, witnessed by a heap of stones which served as a boundary between the two households. Laban is no longer Jacob’s mother’s brother and the head of the household to which Jacob belongs; instead Laban becomes one of Jacob’s brothers (Genesis 31:54). This is one point among many in the transformation of Jacob from a son and dependent to a father and patriarch.

Conversely, the sacrificial meal between Jethro and Israel in the presence of God—at the mountain of God—signifies their communion and union. He peacefully brought daughter and grandsons to Moses and accepted (yaqah stem laqah) sacrificial portions. This scene is a fitting seal to the mutuality and rapport between Moses and Jethro, which explicitly includes theological consensus. Even though Jethro, like Laban, returns to his own home, Moses’ encounter with Jethro is marked by rejoicing, affection, and (shalom).

In Exodus 18, Moses returned the hospitality Jethro had shown him when he was a refugee and alien. The reunification of Moses and Zipporah is the occasion for the confession of Jethro and his acts of communion with Israel, representing the way outsiders may be included in Israel. Jethro’s appearance in Exodus 18 serves as a model of knowing the LORD through his works and contrasts to Pharaoh’s “I do not know the LORD and I will not release Israel” (Exodus 5:2), and to Laban’s reluctance to release the embryonic Israel in the shape of Jacob, his wives, and their children (recall Pharaoh). Unlike the final meeting between Laban and Jacob (Genesis 31), who were kin through their mothers and their fathers (Genesis 22:20-24; 24:24, 29) and whose entire relationship is marked by deception and hostility, the Midianite traditions of Exodus 2, 4, and 18 emphasize the respect and affection Moses and his Midianite father-in-law held for each other.

We may assume that the scribal redactors of these texts recognized and used this pattern of endogamy/exogamy purposefully. By means of the allusions to Jacob and Laban throughout the story of Moses’ Midianite alliances, we hear the contention that: 1) kin of blood were not necessarily kin in spirit; 2) those seen as “outsiders” could be allied peacefully to Israel through marriage; and 3) such families are to be emulated for rejoicing over the LORD’s deliverance, restoration, and establishment of his people. Whether these stories were first produced during the Persian period or before, the inclusion of this material as foundational and educational.
curriculum—as Scripture—during the Second Temple period suggests that here a position was established to counter the position expressed in Ezra and Nehemiah. This stance affirmed that the settled natives of Persian Yehud and other “foreigners”—whom some considered strange and dangerous—were an asset to Israel and could be a source of sustenance and salvation. In addition, within the Zipporah-Jethro story, we find procedures by which those otherwise defined as “outsider” might enter Israel.

[26] For those familiar with conflicts over intermarriage, such as those expressed in the book of Ezra, this story conveyed a clear message. Ezra and Shecaniah attempted to expel “foreign wives” from the congregation of the exiles (the holy seed); the Zipporah/Jethro story in Exodus provided support for those who opposed such procedures. It supplied a Mosaic precedent for keeping “outsider” wives who were in danger of being expelled from the post-exilic community of Israel because their families had not experienced exile to Babylon and consequently their ethnic status was mixed or indemonstrable.27

[27] Numbers 12 suggests further evidence for this argument. This narrative implies Moses’ prophetic prowess was questioned by Miriam and Aaron—the leadership of the wilderness community—because of his choice of a Cushite wife. The LORD objected to their complaint. As a result, insider Miriam, not Moses’ outsider wife, was shut outside the camp, separated from the community, and bore the shame of suggesting Moses’ Cushite wife compromised his position between God and the community. Some of the targums and Sifre to Numbers claim that this wife was Zipporah, and that the siblings’ complaint arose against Moses’ celibate marriage with her. However, I suggest that for earlier sages, this text offered a polemic against those priestly leaders who attacked mixed marriages.

Conclusion

[28] In his story about Zipporah and Jethro, the redactor of Exodus recalled Jacob’s travails with Laban to emphasize that Moses’ foreign wife and father-in-law, unlike Jacob’s kin father-in-law, did not obstruct his vocation, but prepared him for it. Just as Tamar donned garments of prostitution to preserve Judah’s line (Genesis 38), Zipporah did not hesitate to wield the flint for circumcision (Exodus 4:24-6).28 This act saved Moses or his first-born son from death at the LORD’s hands. Rather than violating Israel, as other traditions about Midianite women claim (Numbers 25 and 31), this story affirms that foreign wives knew just how to save the males of Israel.

[29] In contrast to the book of Ezra, whose protagonists demanded that immigrants from Babylon to Yehud expel indigenous wives ideologically construed as “foreign,” the story of Moses’ marriage to Zipporah affirmed that foreign women were beneficial to Israel. Zipporah and her father represent a household that originated outside of ideological boundaries, but became positively allied to Israel through marriage, participation in circumcision, confession in the LORD’s predominance, sacrifice, and a communal meal. All of these practices can be performed within social communities that have ideological bases for permitting them to outsiders, such as that provided by the Torah’s account of Moses’ Midianite marriage alliance.
Endnotes:

3 This is in contrast to the diachronic view of social exogamy maintained by earlier commentators. In Marriage Laws in the Bible and Talmud (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942), Louis Epstein explains the mix of endogamy/exogamy in the Torah as indicative of the “endogamy of the patriarchal age” which was an easily breached social custom (Epstein, 150). Much later, Epstein writes, in the time of the “restoration reformation,” Ezra instituted a religiously racialized endogamy, which prohibited mixing even with “followers of the Jehovah worship” (163). Mullen also accepts the view that with Ezra and Nehemiah, “endogamy became the officially accepted marriage relationship” (Mullen 1997, 145, n. 65; 1993, 66, n. 30; see also Hamilton, “marriage,” ABD IV 564-5). Positive stories about exogamy that remain in the text are viewed by these scholars as evidence of much earlier perspectives and practices, rather than as evidence of opposing perspectives on intermarriage in post-exilic Yehud. In other words, they assume that Ezra and Nehemiah’s anti-exogamy ideology became policy.
4 Mark Brett’s reading strategy, like mine, is to read these stories against the background of the Persian period (“Politics of Identity: Reading Genesis in the Persian Period,” in Australian Biblical Review [47, 1999], 1-15). I agree that the resistance to the Ezra-Nehemiah polemic against “foreign” wives (as seen by the good-foreign-wife stories), may have been intended to be subtle, as Brett suggests, but we cannot assume it was “a minority view” (2). The position that all exogamy was dangerous to Israel’s survival was sufficiently authoritative to produce Ezra-Nehemiah and their position in the Jewish scriptures, but it may not have been the “dominant ideology of the fifth century BCE” (2).
5 Christine Hayes has recently examined the views on intermarriage found in the Bible and rabbinic literature (“Interruption and Impurity in Ancient Jewish Sources,” Harvard Theological Review 92/1 [January 1999]: 3-34). Hayes probes the bases for rabbinic proscriptions against Jews marrying Gentiles, focusing on “holy seed,” purity/impurity, holy/profane terminology in Second Temple texts and how this informs rabbinic prohibitions against intermarriage with Gentiles. Cf. Shaye J. D. Cohen, “Interruption in the Bible and the Talmud,” in The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). Examining Pentateuchal laws against exogamy, Cohen shows that Josephus and Philo based their proscriptions against intermarriage on Deuteronomy 7:3-4 and Leviticus 18 as Ezra and cohorts had (Ezra 9:1-2; 242-245). But Hasmonean Jews did not. This grounds his discussion of the rabbinic debate about the bases for proscriptions against intermarriage (245-262). For the author of Jubilees, intermarriage resulted in defilement, impurity, and must be absolutely banned. A man who gave his daughter to a Gentile was to be executed (Jubilees 30:11-16). Cana Werman notes that the composers of Jubilees, The Temple Scroll, “The Eighteen Measures,” and the Mishnah (m. Megillah 4.9 and its discussion of the forbidden targum) concur in their blanket prohibition of intermarriage, dissenting from the mitigated view of the sages in this regard. The sages banned marriage with anyone who had not abandoned idolatry (Midrash Tannaim Deuteronomy 21:13, Sifre Deuteronomy, 213-14), while other Jewish writers, whom Werman cites, placed no impediment on intermarriage (“Jubilees 30: Building a Paradigm for the Ban on Intermarriage,” HTR 90/1 [1997]: 1-22).
6 Nathaniel Wander, in “Structure, Contradiction, and “Resolution” in Mythology: Father’s Brother’s Daughter Marriage and the Treatment of Women in Genesis 11-50” (JANES 13 [1981] 13: 75-99) shows that the

According to Jubilees 19:11, Keturah was Abraham’s third wife taken from the daughters of his household servants. Abraham married her “because Hagar died before Sarah.” Pirqe R. El. claims that Keturah was Hagar (trans. by G. Friedlander from Vienna text of A. Epstein, NY: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1971, xxviii and 219).

Ismael was circumcised within the context of Abraham’s own covenant marking circumcision. When Hagar and Ishmael are sent away, Sarah denigrates Hagar’s slave status, even though Sarah conceived of the idea of having a son through Hagar in the first place.


In the list of the family who descended into Egypt, one of the sons of Simeon, Saul, is also described as the son of a Canaanite woman (Genesis 46:10). Genesis 34 emphasizes a reversal through cunning. Whereas, on Hamor’s terms, Jacob’s family would have been absorbed into the Hivites of Shechem, on Simeon and Levi’s (deceptive) terms, the women and children of Shechem are absorbed into Israel. The Hivites are listed among the list of seven nations Israel is ordered to utterly destroy and avoid marrying (Deuteronomy 7:2-3). Nevertheless, Shechem appears in Deuteronomy and Joshua as a site of intermingling through covenant.

In Jubilees, Tamar is an Aramean (Charlesworth, ed. OTP II, 130). In L.A.B. (Pseudo-Philo’s Biblical Antiquities), Amram, Moses’ father, calls Tamar, “our mother,” and Pseudo-Philo implies that she was not a gentle when his Tamar says, “It is better for me to die than to have intercourse with gentiles” (Charlesworth, ed. OTP II, 315).

Tensions are also apparent within Deuteronomy, which prohibits Israelite marriage alliances with seven peoples of Canaan (Deuteronomy 7:3, cf. Exodus 34:11-16), but allows Israelite men to marry captive women (Deuteronomy 20:14; 21:10-14, cf. Numbers 31:18).


Moses’ marriage to the daughter of a priest in the land of his exile, which is a result of finding favor with his patron, recalls Joseph’s marriage to Asenath, the daughter of the priest of On (Genesis 41:50; Exodus 2:21-2). Bernard Robinson notes the scholars who have discussed the similarities between the “Circumcision by Zipporah” story and the account of Jacob’s wrestling match in “Zipporah to the Rescue,” VT 36:4 (October 1986): 447-461; see 451.

For example, without Tamar’s desperate ingenuity as depicted in Genesis 38, Judah would have been without progeny. His two older sons dead at the hands of the LORD and Shelah set aside for, but not given to, Tamar. Tamar’s intercourse with Judah, which she contrived by pretending to be a prostitute, ensured the preservation of the line of Judah through her twin sons, but primarily through Perez (see Genesis 46:12 and Joshua 7, where the descendents of Zerah, Achan, and his line is destroyed).


The text ascribes the attack to the LORD and is set in the context of Moses’ return to Egypt—even if at an earlier point in the story’s history it was attached to Exodus 2:22 as is argued by H.F. Richter. See “Gab es einen ‘Blutbräutigam’? Erwägungen zu Ex 4, 24-26,” in Studies in the Book of Exodus: Redaction-Reception-Interpretation, edited by Marc Vervenne (Leuven: University Press, 1996), 433-442. The theories that old legends about a wilderness night demon or even the placation of a Midianite deity lie under this pericope are not relevant for my analysis. The local demon theory is found in Noth, Exodus (trans. J.S. Bowden; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 49; H. Gressman, Mose und seine Zeit (1913), 51-56; and E. Meyer, Die Israelisiten und ihre Nachbarstämme (Halle, 1906), 59. That Zipporah frightened off the god of the Midianites is argued by Hans Kosmala in “That Bloody Husband”, VT 12 (1962): 14-28, Morgenstern (“The Bloody Husband”[?] [Exodus

18 Nancy Jay analyzes blood sacrifice worldwide as a social action that establishes relations between men and men in the same and in subsequent generations. Blood sacrifice is an integral part of systems that make father-son relation the basis of social order and patrilineal descent. In linking males, Jay has found, sacrifice expiates descent from women. Descent from women must not be given social recognition lest patriarchy have no boundaries or continuity—to recognize a woman’s line of descent is to bring disorder, to disestablish patriliney and patriarchy. Thus sacrifice is doubly a remedy for being born of a woman. 1. It constitutes descent and enables patriarchal descent groups to transcend mortality. 2. It transcends birth by placing males in an eternal kin group. See “Sacrifice as Remedy for Having Been Born of Woman,” in *The Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality*, ed. Clarissa Atkinson, et al., Harvard Studies in Religion Series (Boston: Beacon, 1985), 300; idem, *Throughout your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion and Paternity*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 105-6. The blood-letting of circumcision, of course, is also a sacrifice and another way to socially construct those who may sacrifice and be bonded with one another, men, as different from those who may not, women.


22 Just as Jethro accepted sacrifices (Exodus 18:12), he accepted his daughter after she had been sent away (Exodus 18:2; *BDB*, 542). See Aelred Cody, “Exodus 18, 12: Jethro Accepts a Covenant with the Israelites,” *Biblica* 49 (1968): 153-166. Cody shows that wayyiqqah Yitro of Exodus 18:12 means that Jethro accepted the portions of a sacrificial meal that were offered him by the Israelites and thus is party to a covenant between himself and Israel. This point is missed in many recent translations, including *JNPS*, *NRSV*, and *NIV*. The *LXX* agrees with the MT.


26 For further explication of this move, see Jay, *Throughout*, 108. She writes regarding Genesis 31:54: “Jacob had sacrificially reconstituted (had at-oned) their descent relations: they had become agnates sacrificing together” (108).

27 In Ezra and Nehemiah, indigenous women of the land were the source of conflict. Zipporah, although not depicted as indigenous to the land Israel was to enter, is nevertheless an outsider to Israel. She and Jethro represent “mixed” seed and are foils to the “holy seed,” concepts innovatively applied to people in Ezra 9:2 (cf. Leviticus 19:19 and Hayes, “Intermarriage and Impurity in Ancient Jewish Sources,” n. 5 above).

28 Note that Tamar and Zipporah engage the penis to resolve the textual conflicts (no husband for Tamar, no progeny for Judah’s son; the attack by the LORD on Zipporah’s family) and as a means to enter the community. The same engagement in Ezra, however, leads to the proposed expulsion of the foreign women, because their
sexual intercourse—the same sort of engagement—with the emerging golah males is viewed as defiling the community.

References


Jay, Nancy. “Sacrifice as Remedy for Having Been Born of Woman.” In *The Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality*. Edited by Clarissa


Glossary

ABD       ANCHOR BIBLE DICTIONARY
BDB       BROWN, DRIVER, BRIGGS HEBREW LEXICON
HTR       HARVARD THEOLOGICAL REVIEW
JANES     JOURNAL OF ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN STUDIES
Pirqe R. El PIRQE DE RABBI ELIEZER
OTP       OLD TESTAMENT PSEUDEPIGRAPHA
VT        VETUS TESTAMENTUM
JSOT      JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT
HUC       HEBREW UNION COLLEGE ANNUAL
LXX       Septuagint
MT        Masoretic Text

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