Prof. Sidnie White Crawford

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Prof. Sidnie White Crawford is Willa Cather Professor (*emerita*) of Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Judaism at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and a Visiting Scholar in the Dept. of Bible at Princeton Theological Seminary. She received her Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1988, where she was a student of Frank Moore Cross. Crawford was a member of the international team responsible for the *editio princeps* of the Qumran Dead Sea Scrolls manuscripts, with special responsibility for the manuscripts of Deuteronomy (see *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert*XIII and XIV). In her most recent publication, *Scribes and Scrolls at Qumran*(Eerdmans, 2019), a synthetic treatment of the texts and archaeology of Qumran, she argues that Qumran was founded in the early first century B.C.E. as a scribal center and library for the wider Essene movement in Second Temple Judaism. Crawford serves on the Council of the Society of Biblical Literature, and is Board Chair *Emerita* of the W. F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research in Jerusalem.

Moses’ Black-Skinned Wife: What Does the Torah Think of Her?

Miriam and Aaron speak negatively about Moses for marrying a Kushite woman. Does their issue have to do with her skin color? Miriam’s punishment may hold the key.

[Prof. Sidnie White Crawford](https://www.thetorah.com/author/sidnie-white-crawford)



A Nubian woman, between 1800 and 1899, (cropped) Photograph by Jean Pascal Sébah. Wellcomecollection.org

Miriam’s critique of Moses’ wife (Num 12:1) has been used to argue for the Bible’s “color-consciousness,”[1] that is, an awareness of physiological differences, including skin color, between ethnic groups.[2] The story begins:

במדבר יב:א וַתְּדַבֵּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמֹשֶׁה עַל אֹדוֹת הָאִשָּׁה הַכֻּשִׁית אֲשֶׁר לָקָח כִּי אִשָּׁה כֻשִׁית לָקָח.

Num 12:1 Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Kushite woman he had married: “He married a Kushite woman!”[3]

What does this passage tell us about racial attitudes among the ancient Israelites? To answer this question properly, we must begin by determining what the gentilic כֻּשִׁית, “Kushite” (or “Cushite”) meant in the context of ancient Israel.

The Geographical Meaning of Kush

The geographical term כּוּשׁ “Kush” in the Bible refers broadly to Africa and Africans and more narrowly to the land south of Egypt,[4] as do the cognate terms in Egyptian (*kush*) and Assyrian (*kusu*).

In the Table of Nations in Genesis 10, Kush is the eldest son of Ham (10:6) and the older brother of Mitzraim (Egypt), thus placing Kush in Africa in the vicinity of Egypt. In the book of Esther, Kush (Ethiopia) is at the southern extreme of the Persian Empire:

אסתר א:א וַיְהִי בִּימֵי אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ הוּא אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ הַמֹּלֵךְ מֵהֹדּוּ וְעַד כּוּשׁ שֶׁבַע וְעֶשְׂרִים וּמֵאָה מְדִינָה.

Esth 1:1 It happened in the days of Ahasuerus—that Ahasuerus who reigned over a hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Kush.

In the Septuagint, Kush is regularly translated as Αιθιοπία, Ethiopia, the kingdom south of Egypt (modern day Sudan).

The Identity of the Kushite Woman

Taking Numbers 12:1 at face value, Moses has a wife who comes from African Kush. Who is this mysterious wife?

Midianite Zipporah

In Exodus 2:21, Moses marries Zipporah, the daughter of Reuel,[[5]](https://www.thetorah.com/article/moses-black-skinned-wife-what-does-the-torah-think-of-her" \l "_ftn5) the Midianite priest. Some ancient (and modern) interpreters equate the two, presumably because there is no explicit biblical record of Moses’ marrying a second wife.[6]

For example, the Hellenistic Jewish author, Ezekiel the Tragedian (3rd cent. B.C.E.), retells the story of Moses meeting Jethro’s daughters at the well, but sets the story in Africa. Speaking in Moses’ voice, he says:

But, lo! These seven maidens I espy!  
In response to his question as to who they might be,  
Sepphora (=Zipporah) replies:  
This land, O stranger, all bears Libya’s name,  
but tribes of sundry races dwell throughout;  
**the dark-skinned Aethiops**. Yet there is one  
who ruler, prince, and sole commander, he  
rules all this state and judges mortal men,  
a priest, the father of myself and these.[7]

Ezekiel the Tragedian equates equates Zipporah with Moses’ Kushite wife, and Midian with Libya and “the dark-skinned Aethiops.”

Demetrius the Chronographer (3rd cent. B.C.E.), in a more prosaic manner, simply equates Midian in the east with Ethiopia. After calculating the descent of Moses and Zipporah, to show that it makes sense that they were contemporaries, he writes:

And they lived in the city of Midian, which was named from one of the sons of Abraham. For it says that Abraham sent his sons to the East (Gen 25:6) to settle there. And for this reason also, Aaron and Miriam said at Hazeroth (Num 12:1) that Moses had married an Ethiopian woman.[8]

This, however, is not accurate geographically. Midian, מדין, is located to the east of the present-day Gulf of Aqaba, in the northern Hejaz, many hundreds of miles from Kush. The two peoples, Kushites and Midianites, appear to be completely separate ethnic groups.[9] Thus, equating Moses’ Kushite wife with his Midianite wife Zipporah seems unlikely.

A Kushanite Woman

Some commentators, however, such as twentieth century German Biblical scholar Martin Noth, argue that the mention of Kush in this passage does not refer to African Cush, but to the geographical location Kushan mentioned in Habakkuk, a land of tent-dwelling nomads parallel to Midian:

חבקוק ג:ז תַּחַת אָוֶן רָאִיתִי אָהֳלֵי**כוּשָׁן** יִרְגְּזוּן יְרִיעוֹת **אֶרֶץ מִדְיָן**.

Hab 3:7 As a scene of havoc I behold the tents of Cushan; shaken are the pavilions of the land of Midian!”

Noth states:

The “Cush” from which the wife mentioned here [in Num 12:1] came, can hardly mean, as it mostly otherwise does in the Old Testament, the country on the southern border of Egypt, a country far removed from Moses’ sphere of activity… but is probably to be identified with the “Cushan” of Hab 3:7.[10]

While Noth’s objection that in the Torah Moses is not associated with southern Egypt, but with the Delta region, carries some weight, the reading he proposes is actually more difficult grammatically than the plain sense meaning: The gentilic for a woman from “Kushan” would be כֻּשָׁנִית, “Kushanite woman,” not כֻּשִׁית, “Kushite woman.”

A Nubian Princess

Some ancient traditions outside of the Torah have Moses marrying this woman while he was young and a part of Pharaoh’s household, and place Moses in southern Egypt, in the area of Kush. According to Josephus (*Ant*. 2.252-253; based on Alexander Polyhistor), Moses as a young adult leads a campaign against Ethiopia on behalf of Egypt. On the campaign he encounters Tharbis, the daughter of the Ethiopian king, and marries her after his victory. The Greek-Jewish author Artapanus of Alexandria (2nd cent. B.C.E.) also recounts this same tale concerning Moses.

According to this understanding, Moses has a Kushite wife in addition to his Midianite wife Zipporah.

Not an Ethnicity but a Compliment

Some rabbinic interpreters read the word “kushite” not as a gentilic but as an adjective, emphasizing a feature of Moses’ wife Zipporah.

In the Aramaic translation of Targum Onkelos (mid-first millennium C.E.), the word הַכֻּשִׁית is translated as שפירתא, “beautiful.” According to this reading, Kushites must have been considered a beautiful people. The verse is saying that Moses’ wife, while not ethnically a Kushite, was looked on as beautiful like a Kushite. This is a positive assessment of Kushites, as well as the acknowledgment of physiological differences, that is, a color consciousness.

Similarly, Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer, a midrashic work composed during the latter half of the 1st millennium C.E., 53:5, claims that the Kushite woman is Zipporah, but that “Kushite” doesn’t mean from the territory of Kush. Instead, it is a complimentary adjective:

וְכִי כֻּשִׁית הָיְתָה, אֶלָּא מָה הַכֻּשִׁי הַזֶּה מְשֻׁנֶּה בְעוֹרוֹ, כָּךְ הָיְתָה צִפּוֹרָה מְשֻׁנָּה בְּמַעֲשֶׂיהָ הַטּוֹבִים, [לְפִיכָךְ נִקְרֵאת כּוּשִׁית שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר כִּי אִשָׁה כּוּשִׁית לָקָח].

Was she then a Kushite woman? Was she not Zipporah? But just as this Kushite is different as regards his body from all other people, so was Zipporah different from all other women by her words and by her good deeds; [therefore, she was called a Kushite, as it is said, “For he had married a Kushite woman.”][11]

Here, blackness is not described as beautiful per se, but clearly the text believes that calling someone a Kushite would be understood as a compliment. Moreover this text also displays color consciousness, as it highlights that black skin is “different” that what the authors are used to.

While both of these interpretations are positive and creative, these homiletical readings do not reflect the simple meaning of the text; Kushite is clearly a gentilic.

Why Do Miriam and Aaron Object?

If we accept the plain sense of the text and the statement that Moses married (as a second wife) an unnamed Kushite woman, why do Aaron and Miriam speak against her? Most scholars maintain that it is because she is foreign, since she is described with a foreign gentilic.[12] That seems an obvious explanation, but if so, why is this objection never made against Zipporah in the text as we have received it?[13] Does it have something to do with the unnamed wife’s identity as a Kushite?[14]

The Kushites in the Bible

Kush (also translated as Ethiopia or Nubia) and the Kushites are generally portrayed as warriors and wealthy people, with either positive or neutral associations.[15]

* Kush is the father of Nimrod, a “mighty warrior” (Gen 10:8; 1 Chron 1:10).[16]
* A Kushite is among David’s trusted warriors and brings him the news of Absalom’s death (2 Sam 18:21–32).
* The Kushite king Tirhakah (=Taharka, a 25th dynasty Pharaoh), ostensibly in league with King Hezekiah of Judah, marches against the Assyrians (2 Kgs 19:9//Isa 37:9).
* They are warriors with chariots and shields (Jer 46:9).
* Kush is equated with wealth (Isa 43:3, 45:14; Job 28:19).
* Ebed-Melech, the eunuch who saves Jeremiah from death in the cistern, is identified as a Kushite (Jer 38:6–14).

None of these passages reflects a negative view of Kush and the Kushites. Moreover, none of them exhibit a color-consciousness. The Kushites appear to be just another nation among the many that appear in the Bible.

Color Consciousness

The only passage in the Hebrew Bible that reflects any kind of explicit color-consciousness concerning Kushites is the proverbial saying found in Jeremiah:

ירמיה יג:כג הֲיַהֲפֹךְ כּוּשִׁי עוֹרוֹ וְנָמֵר חֲבַרְבֻּרֹתָיו גַּם אַתֶּם תּוּכְלוּ לְהֵיטִיב לִמֻּדֵי הָרֵעַ.

Jer 13:23 Can the Kushite change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Just as much can you do good, who are practiced in doing evil!

Here the Kushite’s skin is singled out as something unique to that people, like the leopard’s spots: both the skin color and the spots are depicted as an innate part of their being that cannot be changed. But the Kushite’s dark skin is not portrayed negatively, any more than the leopard’s spots are negative.

Punished with White Skin-Disease for an Insult to a Dark-Skinned Woman

As a consequence of speaking disparagingly about Moses’ wife, Miriam is punished:

במדבר יב:י וְהֶעָנָן סָר מֵעַל הָאֹהֶל וְהִנֵּה מִרְיָם מְצֹרַעַת **כַּשָּׁלֶג** וַיִּפֶן אַהֲרֹן אֶל מִרְיָם וְהִנֵּה מְצֹרָעַת.

Num 12:10 As the cloud withdrew from the Tent, there was Miriam stricken with **snow-white** *tzaraʿat*! When Aaron turned toward Miriam, he saw that she was stricken with *tzaraʿat*.[17]

Note the emphasis on the whiteness of her now diseased skin. A contrast may be intended here with the Kushite wife’s dark skin, although it is not made explicit.[18] If this is the case, Miriam’s critique has some connection to the woman's color, and her punishment reads against the historic racial categories of the western world: Miriam’s punishment makes her a sickly white, in contrast to the blackness of Moses’ wife. This would fit, to some extent, with the Onkelos’ translation of Kushite as “beautiful” noted above.

This reading, which accepts the reading “Kushite” as referring to the Kush found in Africa, thus assumes Moses had a second wife[19] and that she was a dark-skinned African.

Contemporary Relevance

In reading a passage like this, we need to avoid importing our own “race-consciousness” into the biblical world, to avoid distorting the biblical narrative with concerns and prejudices that are not native to it.[20] Nevertheless, one point with some contemporary relevance is worth highlighting.

For much of American history, the Bible has been mined in support of racial theories that would put black people on a lower plain than white people.[21] Recognizing that not only does the Bible claim that Moses had an African wife, but that God even defended this choice by punishing Miriam for disparaging her, and that God did so by turning her a sickly white, is taking a step towards rectifying this use of the Bible and opening vistas of alternative and more inclusive understandings of the text.

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/moses-black-skinned-wife-what-does-the-torah-think-of-her)

1. The phrase is that of Cain Hope Felder, “Race, Racism and the Biblical Narratives,” in Cain Hope Felder, ed., *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 127–145 [p. 127].
2. Moses’ Cushite wife sits “at one of the primary intersections of gender and ethnicity in the book of Numbers”; Ron M. Serino, “A Sign in the Dark: Moses’ Cushite Wife and Boundary Setting in the Book of Numbers,” *Biblical Interpretation* 24 (2016): 153–177 [p. 154].
3. All translations follow NJPS with some adjustments.
4. For a geographical discussion see David T. Adamo, [“A Silent Unheard Voice in the Old Testament: The Cushite Woman whom Moses Marries in Numbers 12:1-10,”](http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/lds.v52i.2370) *In die Skriflig* 52 (2018). Accessed May 9, 2021.
5. Other texts have him as Jethro or Hobab. Editor’s note: For a discussion of the biblical confusion surrounding Moses’ father-in-law, see Zev Farber, [“Moses’ Father-in-Law: Kenite or Midianite?”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/moses-father-in-law-kenite-or-midianite) *TheTorah* (2015).
6. Editor’s note: See discussion in Elad Filler, [“Moses and the Kushite Woman: Classic Interpretations and Philo’s Allegory,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/moses-and-the-kushite-woman-classic-interpretations-and-philos-allegory) *TheTorah* (2018).
7. R. G. Robertson, “Ezekiel the Tragedian,” in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 2.810–11.
8. J. Hanson “Demetrius the Chronographer,” in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 2.853.
9. The Midianites are associated with the Ishmaelites in Genesis 37:25-28 and Judges 8:24.
10. Martin Noth, *Numbers* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 94.
11. The earliest version of this midrash can be found in the 3rd cent. C.E. Sifrei Numbers §99. See also Rashi on Num 12:1, as well as David Qimhi.
12. See, for example, Noth, *Numbers*, 94; and Dennis T. Olson, “Numbers,” in *The Harper’s Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2000), 174.
13. The very mention of Moses’ Kushite wife in this verse may be the remnant of a different source, not related to the source tradition concerning Zipporah at all.
14. It should be noted that Num 12:2–9 abandons the whole question of the Kushite wife and gives jealousy as the motivation for Aaron’s and Miriam’s challenge to Moses’ authority.  It is only in 12:9 that the question of the Kushite wife may return.  It seems clear that we are dealing with two different strands of tradition.  See Noth, *Numbers*, 93.
15. Randall Bailey suggests dividing the biblical references to Cush into three tropes: 1. As a symbol for great military power (2 Chron 12:3, 14:9); 2.  As a norm for valuation (Amos 9:7, Isa 43:3); and 3.  As a symbol of wealth (Isa 45:14, Job 28:19, Ps 68:28-35, Dan 11:43).  “Beyond Identification: The Use of Africans in Old Testament Poetry and Narratives,” in Felder, *Stony the Road*, 172-74.
16. Editor’s note: For the possibility that the editor of this chapter was mixing African Kush (Ethiopia/Nubia) and Mesopotamian Kish or Kashu, see Yigal Levin, [“Nimrod, Mighty Hunter and King—Who Was He?”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/nimrod-mighty-hunter-and-king-who-was-he) *TheTorah* (2020); David Ben-Gad HaCohen, [“Decoding the Table of Nations: Reading It As a Map,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/decoding-the-table-of-nations-reading-it-as-a-map) *TheTorah* (2015), fn. 11.
17. Even though both Aaron and Miriam speak against Moses, only Miriam is punished.  This raises the question: Why is only Miriam, and not Aaron, punished?  Is it because she, like Moses’ wife, is a woman, and so they are parallel, the insulted woman and the punished woman?  Is it related to Aaron’s status as high priest and questions of priestly purity and impurity?  The text itself does not tell us, and it does not seem to be concerned with our contemporary questions of fairness or unfairness.  See Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, “Numbers,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed., eds., Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 83-84.
18. Felder, “Race, Racism,” 135: “It is not accidental that Miriam becomes ‘white as snow’.”
19. See the early twentieth century comment of George Buchanan Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers* (New York: Scribner, 1920), 221, “the clause itself…reasonably implies that the marriage was recent, and consequently that the wife mentioned is not Sipporah.”
20. Editor’s note: For a discussion of color-consciousness and even racism in Jewish text and tradition in the post-biblical era, see Meylekh Viswanath, [“Black People in Jewish Tradition: Eliminating Racism Requires Honesty,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/black-people-in-jewish-tradition-eliminating-racism-requires-honesty) *TheTorah* (2020).
21. See, e.g., Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah’s Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery*, Religion in America (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).