

Bible Study Note

The Importance of Human Diversity Series

Was the Cushite Woman a Midianites?

**By C. M. White
Version 1.1**



Was the Cushite Woman a Midianitess?

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Introductory Comments

A debate has continued for some time as to the identity of the Cushite woman that Moses married.

Here is what is recorded in Numbers:

“And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had taken. For he had taken a Cushite woman.

And they said, Has Jehovah indeed spoken only by Moses? Has He not also spoken by us? And Jehovah heard.” (Num 12:1-2)

The three main positions taken by Bible students are:

1. She was a black Cushite, descendant of Ham (these people today reside in East Africa). If tradition can be believed, Moses, prior to conversion, was a general in the Egyptian army and whilst campaigning in the south, married a Cushite or part-Cushite woman. Later, he divorced her and married Zipporah, a Midianitess (the descendants of Midian are today around the Baltic region). The Cushite woman was still in the camp and Miriam and Aaron used this as a means to attack Moses. The accusation in Numbers 12 was raised, it seems, about a previous matter that Moses got himself involved in some time previously - because he was, at that time married to Zipporah.

2. The Cushite woman was never divorced and stayed as his wife, drawing the ire of Miriam and Aaron.

3. Another position is that she was the same as Zipporah and therefore racially not a Cushite, but may have been nationally a Cushite if some trading Midianites found their way into Cushite territory. Therefore she was White. The accusation in Num 12 then is brought up about a current matter that Moses got himself involved in - because he was, at that time married to Zipporah. Or that she was from the territory of Cushan as will be explained below.

By way of illustration, you can be born in a foreign country but be a different race to the locals. An example would be the famous singer, Cliff Richard, who was a White Englishman, but born in India. Nationally he was an Indian, but racially and Englishman.

A Biblical example of this is discussed by Nicholas P. Luinn in *The Gospels Through Old Testament Eyes*:

“David’s first aborted attempt to bring the ark up to Jerusalem meant that the ark was brought into the home of Obed-Edom, a Levite (cf. 1 Chr. 5:17-18, 21, 24).” (p. 19)

Footnote 11 to this sentence reads:

“Although Obed-Edom is also called a ‘Gittite’, his Levitical role

precludes him from being a native-born Philistine from Gath [because only those of the blood-line of Levi could serve in such a capacity]. Perhaps he is so described because it was his clan name, or perhaps he or his forebears once resided in that place before the Philistines took it over.”

In IIChron 21:16 there is mention of Cushites in the area not far from Israel. These seem to be different to those in East Africa:

“And the LORD stirred up against Jehoram the anger of the Philistines and of the Arabians who are near the Ethiopians.”

This is true also of the Hittites.

In my book *In Search of ... the Origin of Nations* I wrote the following:

“In the Middle East, three or even four racial groups may be identified as Hittites.(1) Many historians still do not yet understand this:

"Biblical references to Hittites in southern Palestine - Esau marries two Hittite women, for example - remain a puzzle to scholars."(2)

The Hittites that are referred to in the previous section are the invaders of Asia Minor, not the original group whom I wish now to discuss briefly.

Some confuse the Hittites with the Khittites, another group who inhabited Asia Minor. The original Hittites were a dark-skinned people(3) who had a yellow/brown skin.(4) They were related to the Minoans (5), probably through intermarriage.”

The references contained in this quote are:

(1) Wiseman, D.J. (1973). *Peoples Of Old Testament Times*. Oxford University Publishers, p. 197.

(2) N.N. (1998). "Expeditions", *Biblical Archaeological Review*, 1998, March-April, p. 77.

(3) Koestler, A. (1976). *The Thirteenth Tribe*. Picador, London, p. 164.

(4) Sayce, A.H. (1928). *Races Of The Old Testament*. Lutterworth Press, Surrey, p.42.

(5) McEvedy, C. (1967). *The Penguin Atlas Of Ancient History*. Penguin Books, Middlesex, p. 28.

Either way, regardless of what Moses may or may not have done, we are not to do the wrong thing. Similarly other Patriarchs and righteous men sinned, but that is no reason for us to.

A Cushite or Midianitess?

Around 1973 or 1974 when I was exploring these sorts of topics, I purchased *The New Bible Commentary* and noticed the following concerning this event:

“1, 2 Ostensibly Miriam and Aaron complained that Moses had married a

Cushite woman. The verb, however, is third person feminine singular, suggesting that originally it was Miriam alone who spoke. Later, Miriam alone was punished (v. 10). The ostensible ground of the complaint appears to be that Moses married a foreign woman: the reference may even be to Zipporah, who was, of course, a Midianitess (Ex 2:15), for Midian and Cushan are linked, e.g. in Hab 3:7. But the real challenge was, *Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?*” (p. 182)

The word is also used in Judges 3:8, 10.

Strong's Dictionary of Hebrew Words provides some information about the region of Cushan:

“Number: 3572
Transliteration: Kuwshan
Phonic: koo-shawn'
Meaning: perhaps from 3568; Cushan, a region of Arabia
KJV Usage: Cushan”

And

“ETHIOPIAN WOMAN. Married by Moses, whom Aaron and Miriam then criticized (Nu. 12: 1). As the last mention of Zipporah is just after the defeat of Amalek (Ex. 17) when Jethro returned her to Moses (Ex. 18), it is possible that she subsequently died, Moses then taking this 'Cushite woman' as his second wife, unless Moses then had two wives. 'Cushite' is usually taken as 'Ethiopian' (cf CUSH, ETHIOPIA); if so, she probably left Egypt among the Israelites and their sympathizers. **It is also, perhaps, possible to derive 'Cushite' from Kushu and Heb. Cushan, associated with Midian (Hab. 3:7); if so, this woman might be of allied stock to Jethro and Zipporah.**” (*New Bible Dictionary*, p. 346) [emphasis mine]

So, Miriam and Aaron used the Cushite woman as an excuse to have a go at Moses. They used a problem with Moses as a means to undermine his authority.

Another view that has been postulated that is that the Cushite woman was his second wife:

“A third rebellion followed at Hazeroth, the next camp site. Moses had married a Cushite wife, probably Ethiopian (in Gn. 10:6 Cush means Ethiopia), **and this was probably his second wife (his first wife was Zipporah, a Midianite; Ex. 2:16—21)**. Making this an excuse, Miriam and Aaron spoke against him. They desired equality with him as leaders of Israel. Miriam seems to have been the main culprit and she bore the punishment. It may seem strange that she, being a woman, should have challenged the authority of her brother. However, she was a prophetess and leader of the Israelite women (Ex. 15:20-21).” (ibid, p. 182) [emphasis mine]

This means that his first wife would have died. There is no record of Zipporah dying or having been divorced. So how could this be a second wife?¹

Wikipedia has an interesting comment in this regard:

“The Samaritan Pentateuch text refers to Moses' wife Zipporah as "Kaashet" (which translates to "the beautiful woman"), rather than "Cushit" ("black woman" or "Cushite woman").

"Cushite woman" becomes *Aethiopissa* in the Latin Vulgate Bible version (4th century). Alonso de Sandoval, 17th century Jesuit, reasoned that Zipporah and the Cushite woman was the same person, and that she was black. He puts her in a group of what he calls "notable and sainted Ethiopians". (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zipporah>) [emphasis mine]

Now notice that Numbers 25 presents a distinctly unfavorable perspective on the Midianites and the unions formed between them and the Israelites.

Who were the original Midianites? They were anciently resident in the Middle East, descendants of Abraham (see Gen 23:2; 25:1, 6; IChron 1:32) and today reside around the Belorussian area (ie they are known as the ‘White Russians’). Read the article *Who are the Peoples of Rosh?* for proof.

Also, identifying the Cushite woman as an individual from Africa is difficult, given that Egypt is geographically distant from the areas where Moses operated.

In this context, Phinehas, grandson of Aaron, receives divine commendation for the act of killing an Israelite alongside his Midianite spouse.

Disturbed by the moral corruption that the Moabites and Midianites had instigated among the Israelites, as described in Numbers 25:1–9, took decisive action against an Israelite man and a Midianite woman who were engaged in an illicit relationship within the confines of the man's tent. He executed them by thrusting a javelin through the man and the woman, thereby halting the plague that Yahweh had inflicted upon the Israelites as a consequence of their sexual relations with the Midianites.

This portrayal raises questions, particularly when considering that Zipporah, the wife of Moses, was also a Midianite and the daughter of a priest. What could account for this apparent inconsistency? The biblical text does not offer a moral judgment regarding Moses' marriage to Zipporah. But given that Moses resided among her people and received the blessing of her father, Jethro, it is understandable that he would choose to marry her.

¹ “In these cases biblical Kush is not taken literally but metaphorically, as that which is different in a positive way. In addition, rabbinic sources preserve another explanation of the Kushite in Num 12:1: that it means “beautiful.” Thus we see that the rabbinic interpretation of Kushite in Numbers 12:1, **whether as a metaphor for distinctiveness or beauty, implicitly understood that Moses' wife was Zipporah the Midianite.**” (David Goldenberg, *Moses' Kushite Wife Was Zipporah the Midianite*, TheTorah.com) [emphasis mine]

What Commentaries and Researchers Reveal

Several researchers similarly believe that it does not fit Biblically that she could have been a Cushite. Here are several:

- Gunther Plaut, *Numbers, The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, Vol. 4, pp. 116-17.
- Karen Winslow, *Proceedings*, pp. 61-73.
- Leonard Elliott-Binns, *The book of Numbers*, pp. 75-76.
- Martin Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary*, p. 94.

While George Gray in *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Numbers*, pp. 121-22 does not make any effort to recognize the Cushite woman, as he believes that the verse is a later editorial addition.

Below are some useful extracts from commentaries regarding the Cushan connection:

<https://biblehub.com/commentaries/habakkuk/3-7.htm>

Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges online

7. tents of Cushan] Cushan here cannot be Cush or Ethiopia in Africa. In Numbers 12:1 it is said that Moses had married a Cushite wife, though she was a Midianite; and in the next clause here Midian is parallel to Cushan (cf. the name Lotan for Lot, Genesis 36:29). Cushan and Midian consequently are either names for the same people or for branches of it. This people dwelt in the neighbourhood of Sinai. Mention of the ancient Cushan and Midian suggests that it is the Theophany of the Exodus that the poet is describing, though perhaps the inference is not conclusive, as he might suppose the ancient conditions still existing in his day, or even of purpose use archaic names. Present tenses are preferable.

Ellicott's Commentary for English Readers online

(7) “**I saw.**”—Better, I see. **Did tremble.**—Better, *are trembling*. Probably the imagery is still borrowed from the Exodus story, the nations instanced being the borderers on the Red Sea—viz., Cushan (Cush, or Ethiopia) on the west, and Midian on the east side. A plausible theory, however, as old as the Targum, connects this verse with later episodes in Israel’s history. “Cushan” is identified with that Mesopotamian oppressor, “Cushan-rishathaim,” whom the judge Othniel overcame. (Judges 3:8-10). And “Midian” is interpreted by Judges 6, which records how Gideon delivered Israel from Midianite oppression. Both names thus become typical instances of tyranny subdued by Jehovah’s intervention. We prefer the other interpretation, because the prophet’s eye is still fixed apparently on the earlier history (see Habakkuk 3:8, et seq.), and a reference here to the time of the Judges would mar the climactic symmetry of the composition. “Cushan,” however, is never used elsewhere for “Cush,” though the LXX. understood it in this meaning. “Curtains” in the second hemistich is merely a variation on “tents” in the first. (Comp. Song of Solomon 1:5.)

Benson Commentary online

Habakkuk 3:7. *I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction* — Since Moses’s wife, who was a Midianite, is called (Numbers 12:1) a *Cushite*, Cushan may be here another name for Midian, and then the two members of this period will be equivalent; but if they be different, then the Cushites must have been an Arabian nation who dwelt in tents near the Midianites, and were seized with the same consternation, at the approach of Jehovah and his people Israel,

as the latter were. The total overthrow which the Israelites gave the Midianites and their allies, as recorded Numbers 31:7-12, is probably here referred to.” — Green and Houbigant.

<https://www.biblicalencyclopedia.com/C/cushan.html>

McClintock and Strong Biblical Encyclopedia

Cushan

There is, however, good reason for the supposition that Cushan here stands for an Asiatic Cush (see *Meth. Quar. Rev.* Jan. 1861, p. 81), as it is named in connection with Midian (q.v.). Delitzsch (*Der Prophet Habakuk*, Leips. 1843, p. 159), who admits only the African Cush, holds that its mention along with Midian is intended to show how places so far removed from each other were equally affected by the theophany; but this is exceedingly strained, and at variance with the parallelism of the passage.

<https://www.biblicalencyclopedia.com/C/chushan-rishathaim.html>

McClintock and Strong Biblical Encyclopedia

Chushan-rishathaim

Chu'shan-Rishatha'im (Heb. *Kushan' Rishaatha'yim*, כּוּשָׁן רִשְׁאָתַיִם, Sept. Χουσανρρσαθαίμ, Vulg. *Chusan-Rasathaim*), the king of Mesopotamia who oppressed Israel during eight years (B.C. 1575-1567) in the generation immediately following Joshua (Jg 3:8). The name, if Hebrew, would signify *Cush* (comp. CUSHAN, Hab 3:7) of the *two wickednesses*; but First (*Heb. Handwörterb.* s.v.) compares the Arabic signification, *chief of two governments* (see Abulf. *Ann.* 2, p. 100), with reference to the two-fold form of Aram-Naharaim (q.v.). Josephus (*Ant.* 5, 3, 2) calls him.

<https://www.internationalstandardbible.com/C/cushan-rishathaim.html>

International Standard Bible Encyclopedia Online

Cushan-rishathaim

ku'-shan-rish-a-tha'-im (kushan rish`athayim, translated, or rather interpreted, as "man from Cush, he of the twofold crime"; Septuagint Chousarsathaim, the King James Version Chushan-rishathaim): Mentioned in Jg 3:8-10 as a king of Mesopotamia who was chosen by God as his tool to chastise the Israelites for their idolatry. After Joshua's death the children of Israel soon began to affiliate themselves with the heathen peoples among whom they dwelt. This was the fertile source of all their troubles. God delivered ("sold") them into the hands of the heathen. C.-r. is the first whose name is given in this connection. Barring this short passage in Jdg nothing is known of the man. Eight years the Israelites were under his dominion, when the Lord raised up a deliverer to them, Othniel, the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother--the first of the judges. - William Baur

www.biblicaltraining.org/library/cushan

Cushan

CUSHAN koo' shän (כּוּשָׁן, LXX Αἰθίοπων). A name which occurs only once in a description of Yahweh coming from the area of Sinai (Hab 3:7). The LXX understood the passage to refer to Ethiopia. The parallelism with "the curtains of the land of Midian" may indicate that the region near Midian is meant, and Cushan may be an old name for that area. Perhaps the CUSHITE designation for the wife of Moses (Num 12:1) means she was a Midianitess. International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (1915) kushan: In the psalm of Habakkuk (Hab 3:7) "the tents of Cushan" are mentioned in an individualizing description

of the effects of a theophany. Parallel is the phrase "the curtains of the land of Midian." Septuagint renders Cushan, kushan, by Aithiopon, reading perhaps kushim, or kushin (kushin). The context indicates that the same land or people is intended as the [Old Testament] elsewhere calls Cush, yet vaguely and not in any strict geographical usage that would limit it to Africa.

Final Comments

Given all of the above, when one views the Scriptures in its historical context, it is difficult to draw the conclusion that the Cushite Woman was an ethnic person from East Africa. But rather, was Zipporah herself from the area of Cushan, to the east of the Holy Land.

There are just too many reasons that point in that direction. I know this will disappoint some, but the Bible speaks for itself.



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