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THE MIDIANITE CONNECTION: AN EXPLORATION OF SUGGESTIVE HINTS

Albrecht Nyce, OSB

*“Don’t throw anything away because it may contain some truth.” -
Irene Nowell, O.S.B.¹*

Who is the god of Moses? Is this god the god (or one of the gods) of the Midianites? And does this god become *the* God of Israel? The biblical scholar Mark S. Smith notes that “Exodus not only tells the story of Israel’s identity; it also explains who God is.”² However, it seems to do so in a convoluted fashion that betrays the nature of how it was composed over many years by many hands drawing from many sources. Yet, in spite of this, a most remarkable feature of Exodus is the pivotal roles played by a Midianite priest named Jethro who becomes Moses’ father-in-law.³ In this essay, I will argue that the scattered Midianite narratives in Exodus, along with other clues found elsewhere (biblical and extra-biblical) support the notion of cross-fertilization and of a significant Midianite role in the development of Yahweh (YHWH) as Israel’s national god.

Some preliminary remarks are in order. Carol Meyers writes of a spectrum of biblical scholarship ranging between poles of *minimalism* on the left (nothing happened the way it is described) to *maximalism* (everything happened the way it is described), and describes herself as a “centrist.”⁴ I will adopt a somewhat left of center position on her minimalist-maximalist spectrum and propose,

as she does, that there are some kernels of historicity present in canonical Exodus that have survived the centuries of composition and redaction from multiple sources and authors, even if at the same time I discount the reality of the miraculous (as violations of the laws of physics) and the fantastical (the late Carl Sagan popularized the statement, “Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence”). Thus, I will treat Moses, Aaron, and others, as well as the events (flight from Egypt) as having *enough* of an historical core to enable one to have confidence in the historical core of the Midianite passages that are interwoven around the story of Moses and the exodus.⁵ In light of this, I argue the above thesis largely in a *synchronic* manner, though historical references, biblical and extra-biblical, will be brought to bear to solidify the case.

At the core of the thesis of this essay is a theory (or theories as there are many variations on the same theme) about the origins of the cult of YHWH variously known as the Kenite, or Midianite-Kenite, or just Midianite Hypothesis, which had its origins in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁶ The Kenites are purportedly a sub-klan of the Midianites (see Judges 1:6) and this is the clan to which Jethro belonged. The essential feature of this hypothesis is that Yahweh (YHWH) was *already* worshipped by tribes south of Canaan before Moses had his burning bush encounter. The worship of YHWH by these tribes would have been passed down from ancestors going back to Abraham and, according to the J source, potentially dates back to antiquity (Genesis 4:26).⁷ This notion has garnered support *and* opposition among prominent Biblical scholars ever since.⁸ Many current scholars, however, see an increase in its viability, that is, its explanatory power. Carol Meyers describes the hypothesis as “compelling.”⁹ She further states, “...[Moses’] intimate relationship with a priestly Midianite family, and the first revelation of Yahweh’s name at a mountain in Midian are collective memories supported by the documented information about a people in this area [south of Canaan] with *a deity whose name becomes the name of Israel’s*

deity.”¹⁰ (Emphasis mine.)

Since Exodus is arguably about migration, it is useful to consider some geography. Where is Midian? Biblical Midian (by far most information about Midian comes from the Bible, with the exception of archeological evidence)¹¹ lies south of Canaan, occupying land presently situated in the northwest corner of Saudi Arabia and the southwest corner of Jordan, to the east of the Gulf of Aqaba. The territorial boundaries were quite fluid as the Midianites were a nomadic tribe of shepherds and traders.¹² Their territory seems to have also overlapped with Edom and perhaps extended into regions on the Sinai Peninsula (across the Gulf of Aqaba) such as Seir, Teman, and Paran.¹³ Migratory patterns showing their reach into southern Palestine and the Transjordan can be seen in multiple biblical references.¹⁴ The location of the sacred “mountain of God,” critical at several junctures for Moses and the migrating people of Israel (and alternately called Horeb or Sinai), is unknown, with some scholars locating in the southern Sinai Peninsula and others across the Gulf of Aqaba in more traditional Midianite territory.¹⁵

Midianite territory looms large in the first passage (Exodus 2:15b-22) to be considered:

But Moses fled from Pharaoh. He settled in the land of Midian, and sat down by a well. 16 The priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father’s flock. 17 But some shepherds came and drove them away. Moses got up and came to their defense and watered their flock. 18 When they returned to their father Reuel, he said, “How is it that you have come back so soon today?” 19 They said, “An Egyptian helped us against the shepherds; he even drew water for us and watered the flock.” 20 He said to his daughters, “Where is he? Why did you leave the man? Invite him to break bread.” 21 Moses agreed to stay with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah in marriage. 22 She bore a son, and he named him Gershom; for he said, “I have been an alien residing in a foreign land.”

In this passage we find the first mention of a Midianite connection to Moses in the description of the flight of Moses from

Egypt to Midian, after he killed an Egyptian. Why Midian? Why did Moses flee to Midian? It can be reasonably be concluded that he needed to find a place he considered safe and not within the grasp of the Egyptian authorities. Traditional scholarship places the events of Exodus in the 13th century BCE and Egypt's militaristic control over the Canaan during this time would seem to preclude moving back to where his ancestors (by tradition the sons of Jacob/Israel, including his own Levitical roots) may have migrated from a few hundred years prior.¹⁶ Also, Biblical tradition in the form of genealogical linkages to antiquity (and perhaps religious links to an "original" god (or gods) worshipped) can be found in Genesis 25 – Midian, the eponymous founder of the Midianite tribe and territory, was a son of the patriarch Abraham with his wife Keturah. They were sent "eastward to the east country," which would roughly correspond to Transjordan and beyond, if Abraham was in Hebron. Of course, Moses can also be traced through Biblical genealogies back to Abraham and Sarah, but alas, these remote linkages would not, it seems to me, be sufficient to enkindle any sense of kin in Moses. Indeed, Moses goes back to Egypt to rescue *his kin* (Exodus 4:18). So, perhaps the only reasonable hypothesis is that, as an Egyptian official dealing with resources that involve trade, Moses would have been aware of the tribes occupying neighboring lands throughout the region and that, in all likelihood, would have known of the long standing good relations between the Israelites (his kin) and the Midianites. This relationship sours later on (See Judges 6 and 7).

Also in this section of Exodus chapter two, we find out that Moses "settled" in the land of Midian, met and wed a daughter (Zipporah) of "the" (a?) priest of Midian, here named Reuel (later named as Jethro). He settles down to a family life and eventually has two sons. The eldest is named Gershom and only his birth is reported in this pericope. How long did he stay in Midian? The tradition here

speaks to the probable extent of the Midianite influence on Moses. Moses ostensibly lives to be 120 years old (Deuteronomy 34:7) and his life is, by later tradition neatly (and symbolically) broken down into three “very long time” periods, that is, three 40-year periods. Thus, in Acts 7:23, we find that it was at age 40 that he killed the Egyptian and fled to Midian. Coupled with Exodus 7:7 (Moses is 80 at the time he returns to Egypt) we can infer he spent 40 years in Midian raising his family, working as a shepherd for his father-in-law Jethro (Exodus 3:1) and, presumably and probably, worshipping the god (or gods) of Jethro the Midianite priest and his daughter Zipporah. It seems reasonable to propose the sons of Moses and Zipporah were also raised in the same faith.

It is at this point (at the end of this forty year period in Midian) Moses has the burning bush theophany and the revelation of the name (YHWH) of the god who is identified as (the primary?) god of his genetic ancestors. This god self-identifies as “...I am the God of *your* father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”(Exodus 3:6)¹⁷ It can be reasonably argued that this god of the burning bush was already present in the pantheon worshipped by Jethro, and thus also Moses. The timeline of 40 years (again, a very long time) spent in Midian would support this assertion. Is this theophany a “connect the dots” realization by Moses as he senses a need to connect to, and respond to the needs of, his genetic familial and tribal heritage that he shamefully abandoned some forty years earlier? Presumably Jethro had been given the details of Moses’ burning bush experience – it seems natural to discuss such a fantastic mystical experience that occurred at the mountain of (a Midianite) God (here Horeb), in the land of Midian, with your father-in-law, the priest of Midian.

So, Moses then seeks and is given permission to return to Egypt and he takes Zipporah and the two sons with him (at least part of the way). This leads to a strange episode. Carol Meyers

describes the bizarre episode of Exodus 4:24-26 as “among the most enigmatic and troubling passages in the Hebrew Bible.”¹⁸ Yet, despite its inexplicability, it does portray a circumcision ritual performed expertly by Zipporah. Perhaps this is evidence she was a priestess of Midian (following in her father’s line of work), thus strengthening the argument for an ancient Israelite-Midianite Yahwist connection.¹⁹ As will become clear later on, Zipporah and her sons went back to live with Jethro instead of going to Egypt with Moses and Aaron. We now jump ahead several chapters. Exodus 18:1-12 states:

1 Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses’ father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moses and for his people Israel, how the LORD had brought Israel out of Egypt. 2 After Moses had sent away his wife Zipporah, his father-in-law Jethro took her back, 3 along with her two sons. The name of the one was Gershom (for he said, “I have been an alien in a foreign land”), 4 and the name of the other, Eliezer (for he said, “The God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh”). 5 Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, came into the wilderness where Moses was encamped at the mountain of God, bringing Moses’ sons and wife to him. 6 He sent word to Moses, “I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you, with your wife and her two sons.” 7 Moses went out to meet his father-in-law; he bowed down and kissed him; each asked after the other’s welfare, and they went into the tent. 8 Then Moses told his father-in-law all that the LORD had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel’s sake, all the hardship that had beset them on the way, and how the LORD had delivered them. 9 Jethro rejoiced for all the good that the LORD had done to Israel, in delivering them from the Egyptians. 10 Jethro said, “Blessed be the LORD, who has delivered you from the Egyptians and from Pharaoh. 11 Now I know that the LORD is greater than all gods, because he delivered the people from the Egyptians, when they dealt arrogantly with them.” 12 And Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices to God; and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses’ father-in-law in the presence of God.

After Moses and the Israelites escape from Egypt, and after the battle with the Amalekites near Rephidim (which is apparently near Horeb, the mountain of God,) they camp near Horeb, and Jethro comes out to visit. He has heard, and Moses confirms once they

meet, how the god YHWH (LORD) used Moses to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. Note Jethro's statement in verses 10-11. Based on the witness of Moses, he credits the LORD (YHWH) with the deliverance of Moses and the Israelites, praising the LORD (YHWH), the same god whom Moses encounters in the burning bush episode a year (or so) earlier at this same mountain of God. The success of Moses prompts his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian to acknowledge that YHWH should be considered the greatest of *all gods* (verse 11). It is reasonable to assume that Jethro means, at least, *all gods* within the Midianite pantheon. In verse 12 we see Jethro assume his priestly role in providing "a burnt-offering and sacrifices to God" and then organize a common meal with Moses (implied) to which he invites Aaron and all the elders of Israel and this is done "in the presence of God." It is interesting to note that LORD (YHWH) is not used here when the LORD was just acknowledged to be superior to all gods in the prior verse. What is remarkable here is that the Midianite priest is the officiant of the sacrifice ritual to "God" and of the common meal or feast afterward, and not Moses or Aaron.

Further evidence of the importance of the Midianite connection is found in Exodus 18:13-27. Here Jethro provides Moses with sage administrative advice to help alleviate the burden of adjudicating disputes between fellow Israelites as well as teaching them about God. Verse 24 notes, "So Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said." This is also a remarkable claim that the architect of the Israelite system of justice is a Midianite.

Although this essay concentrates primarily on the Midianite connections that can be seen in Exodus, there are some rather interesting textual hints that suggest a southern (Midianite region) origin of the YHWH cult. This is especially pronounced in early Hebrew poetry such as can be found in Judges 5:4-5 (the 12th century Song of Deborah), and Deuteronomy 33:2 (the archaic blessing of Moses), and Habakkuk 3:3-7. Biblical scholar Lawrence Stager

writes, “The setting for these encounters on or near the ‘mountain of God’ is connected with Edom, Seir, Paran, Teman, Cusan, and Midian. There, in the Arabian, not the Sinai, Peninsula, Yahweh is first revealed to Moses, and it is from there that the deity marches forth to lead the nascent Israelites into battle, according to the earliest Hebrew poetry.”²⁰

Furthermore, additional evidence for a strong Midianite Yahwist connection can be found in several extra-biblical sources, namely lists inscribed in Egyptian temples during the reign of Amenhotep III (he reigned during the first half of the 14th century), referring alternately to beduin lands and tribes southeast of Canaan, known as “the Shasu land of Yahu” or “the Shasu land of Yhw,” both Yahu and Yhw identified as variants of Yahweh.²¹

Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude by virtue of a coherence that emerges from a synchronic reading of the text that the Midianite threads embedded within the patchwork of sources that were woven into the canonical Exodus fabric reveal a historical core of ancient connections and influence on the evolution of YHWH as the national god of the Israelites.

I can imagine the process involved by the Priestly group of editors who have before them many inherited textual threads and patches and, like the quotation from Irene Nowell at the top of this essay, are trying to make sense of disparate pieces and not “throw anything away” as it may contain truth. I can imagine this happening over a long period of time involving many hands. To me it is significant that the Midianite fabric has survived, as a clearly identifiable and coherent theme, the process of producing a canonical Exodus garment, and this lends support to the notion of a Midianite connection to the evolution of YHWH as the God of Israel.

Notes

- 1 Irene Nowell, *Numbers* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011), 48.
- 2 Mark S. Smith, “The Book of Exodus,” in *New Collegeville Bible Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. Daniel Durkin (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2015), 133.
- 3 There is textual confusion in the Bible over the names of Moses’ father-in-law. He is variously Jethro or Reuel or Habab. This confusion need not concern us since what is relevant is that Moses married into a Midianite family.
- 4 Carol Meyers, *Exodus* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2-4.
- 5 Ibid, 13. Carol views Moses in “super-human” terms. “Moses is a larger-than-life figure, if not a demi-god.”
- 6 Joseph Blenkinsopp, “The Midianite-Kenite Hypothesis Revisited and the Origins of Judah,” *Journal of the Study of the Old Testament*, Vol 33.2 (2008): 131-153. See also Meyers, 12-15 and Lawrence E. Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 142-149.
- 7 G. H. Parke-Taylor, 21.
- 8 Ibid., 22-31. Parke-Taylor provides an extensive discussion.
- 9 Meyers, 45.
- 10 Ibid., 13.
- 11 Stager, 144-8.
- 12 Wayne T. Pitard, “Midian,” in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, eds. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 518-519.
- 13 Smith, 147.
- 14 Pitard, 518.
- 15 Hershel Shanks, ed., *Frank Moore Cross: Conversations with a Bible Scholar* (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1994), 12-15. The present day consensus points to the Arabian side.
- 16 Ibid., 36-44.
- 17 Terrence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991),

57. The "father" here is Amram (Exodus 5:20) See also Exodus 15:2.
18 Meyer, 63.
19 Ibid., 63-64.
20 Stager, 144.
21 Blenkinsopp, 139, See also Stager, 145.