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Solving Riddles
and
Untying Knots

Biblical, Epigraphic, and Semitic Studies
in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield

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The statement in Deut 34:7 that when Moses died at the age of 120, מִשְׁמַת מִגָּו has been given a variety of interpretations, most commonly that Moses’ ‘moment’ in the sense of ‘natural force’ or ‘vigor’ had not left him. However, there is no evidence that מִשְׁמַת מִגָּו, and in any case, according to Deut 31:2, Moses had lost his vigor.

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In this article, I argue that in Deut 34:7 מִשְׁמַת מִגָּו, ‘moment’ refers to luster in the sense of smoothness and smoothness of the skin, despite his extreme old age, Moses’ skin had not become wrinkled. This interpretation, first proposed by Ibn Ezra, is supported by the semantic parallel of Northwest Semitic מַעֲשֹׂר, which, as Jonas Greenfield showed, connotes lustrousness, particularly smooth lustrousness, and is used in the ‘almid as to refer to “the lustrous quality of the skin due to its being moist and freshened,” that is, unadorned. On the basis of this interpretation, it is likely that the verb מַעֲשֹׂר does not mean ‘departed’ but, as suggested by Yehoshua and R. Joseph Kohn, ‘drived up’, cognate to Arabic مَعْسِرُ (murs) ‘to dry up’, wood of bread.

According to Deut 34:7, when Moses died at the age of 120 ‘his eyes were undimmed’ and, the text adds, מִשְׁמַת מִגָּו. The latter phrase has been given a variety of interpretations. Several ancient translations—perhaps influenced by the parallel fire eye, referring to a facial feature—assumed that מִשְׁמַת was derived from מִשְׁמַנ ‘cheek, jaw’ and took the phrase to mean that Moses’ cheeks did not become sunken or that he did not lose the teeth of

Author’s note: Jonas Greenfield’s article “A Touch of Iron” which inspired the present article, provides an apt metaphor for Jonas Greenfield himself as a scholar and as a colleague. For students of every branch of Semitic studies, Jonas Greenfield’s publications have been extraordinarily suggestive, filled as they are with מִשְׁמַת מִגָּו and, especially, מַעֲשֹׂר. As a colleague, his implicit motto has been מַעֲשֹׂר מִשְׁמַת מִגָּו. No scholar surpasses him in the unstinting generosity of his assistance and advice. It is a pleasure to take part in this volume to a seminal scholar and a dear friend.
his jaws.' However, as R. Joseph Qimhi observed, this is morphologically excluded, sinceיהלנ in Josh 40:26 (cf.יהלן in Lam 1:2). By far the best known interpretation, preferred by the medieval grammarians and found in most English translations is that Moses' 'natural force' or 'vigor' did not leave him. This interpretation is based on the derivation ofיהלנ fromיהל 'yesh, mouth,' and ד fromיהל 'be', hence 'depart'. This derivation ofיהל is unproblematic, but there are two difficulties with taking 'mouth' to mean 'vigor':
(a) There is no evidence for the use ofיהל to mean 'vigor'. That it had such a meaning might be argued on the basis of the cognateיהלק in Rabbinic literature. A number of passages in rabbinic literature useיהלק to describe people who have not lost their youthful vigor. For example, R. Elazar explains that יבק did not follow Abadam because הנקיר ידיו ליהלק הריבר יב.rand David was still in possession of his vigor' (b. Sanh. 93a). However, the spellingיהלק is not certain. In the other three passages where this usage is found, all in Midrash Guzron Yabud, the London manuscript that served as the basis for the Theodore-Callow edition readsיהלק instead ofיהלק. For example, in Gen, Rabb. 48:16, R. Ammi explains the difference between two verses saying that Abraham was old:יהלקibaHan בא יאמירת יאל ילקת, יהלקibaHan הב שימ ילקת אמן. The problem here is to find the old age where there is still vigor;

1. LXX, Alexey 'Jew,' tr. (H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, eds., A Greek-English Lexicon [rev. H. S. Jones, O. Arnold, 1963] 1997, col. 8, s.v. Alexey), יב ('the teeth of his jaws'), יב ('mouth', 'mouth'; Polotsky, יב 'dental plate'). Also, şekנאה had not become common, or derived. Cf. Meshil Tamim, p. 227 note (םיקרל יבמ הלש יב רכינא). Meshil Hasdai has a similar sense. Rabbi Mordecai Zevulun, חישול ויסוק יב שֶׁשׁי יב. Some of the targumim interpret in a more general way that it was simply Moses' facial appearance that had not changed. Thus the Pagnini Targum renders יב ('the teeth of his jaws'), יב ('mouth', 'mouth'; Pagnini Smith, יב ('the teeth'), יב ('mouth'), יב ('the teeth') (tarnished), the Pagnini Targum and Opulus trv. express the same terms for the skin of Moses' face in Exod 34:29–35, and Neofiti says יב ('mouth') of Opulus here. This view is found in Meshil Leba (rev. יב ('the teeth') יב ('mouth') אֲנֵה, יב ('mouth'), יב ('the teeth') יב ('the teeth') יב ('the teeth'), and Rashbi (ועיבר יב ר' מנחם). 2. יב יב. H. J. Mathews, ed., Targum HaCochab (Berlin, 1867) 82 (rev. courtesy of Uri Melamed), See also his 506; Gen 41:14; Josh 1:6; 10:16; and Deut 29:4.

3. See the dictionary of Ben Judah and Qimhi (s.v.יהלנ ויהלנ), the translation of סנדה (Hebrew), and the Semitisms תוגננה (Hebrew).

4. The kethib, Lemberg, and the modern 'natural force'; Moffatt, יב, Yon, and the Jerusalem Bible have 'vigor'; the qere has 'strength'.

5. Cf. readings of this phrase as יבך (I magazzu: 'freshen'; Field, Handbook over [proverbs]); Yehoshua: יבך; Kahl-Delitzsch.

later [in 24:1] it refers to old age where there is no vigor. The term 'moistness' and 'vigor' may be two separate words, not necessarily related to each other, despite the fact that they share the meaning 'moistness.' Hence, if the original form of the one used for 'vigor' was indeed spelled with kaph, it may not be related to biblical הָדַל. This would explain why none of the targums or commentaries of the talmudic period rendered, or glossed, הָדַל with the rabbinic word; had it been spelled הָדַל at the time, it would have been natural for them to do so.

(b) If the rabbinic term is unrelated to biblical הָדַל, it is nevertheless semantically parallel to the alleged meaning of הָדַל in Deut 34:7. However, an equally serious objection to the הָדַל meaning 'vigor' is that, according to Deut 31:2, Moses had in fact lost its vigor. Some scholars have inferred from the putative inconsistency that 34:7/b is not Deuteronomistic, thus circumventing the problem. However, there are no other grounds for separating v. 7b from its context and assigning it to a different source. As G. A. Smith observed, "the phrase cannot be assigned to one source more than another." Even if the phrase were demonstrably non-Deuteronomistic, it would not necessarily follow that its source disagreed with Deuteronomy's very plausible assertion that Moses had been weakened by extreme old age. Hence it would be best to find a suitable connotation of 'moistness' that does not entail an inconsistency with Deut 31:2.

In fact, 'natural force' or 'vigor' is not the only possible connotation of moisture. R. Eliezer b. Hanin in the Siph to the phrase to mean that Moses' body did not dry up, but this is based on his view that the passage refers to the preservation of Moses' body after death. Albright took moisture as referring to sexual power, which Moses allegedly had not lost at the age of 120. However, this hardly suits the context.
never hear that Moses fathered children after leaving Midian, let alone in old age), and Albright later abandoned the suggestion. No better ideas are suggested by the closest parallels to Deut 34:7, namely, the descriptions of Adad-guppi, mother of Nabonidus, who lived to the age of 184, and Si'gabbar, priest of Nebra. Adad-guppi's inscription states that to the end of her life, "my eyesight was good, my hearing excellent, my hands and feet were sound, my words well chosen, food and drink agreed with me, and my mind happy." Si'gabbar's inscription states that until the day of his death, "[his] mouth was not seized, preventing speech" and that he was able to see his descendants with his own eyes. Both of these descriptions refer to the retention of eyesight, as does Deut 34:7 but none of the other faculties described could be described as a retention of 'moistness'. In his study of the Northwest Semitic root *šîš* on the basis of the bilingual Akkadian-Aramaic inscription from Tall Fakherrey in Syria, Jonas Greenfield provides an important clue to the meaning of 'moistness' in Deut 34:7. He shows that *šîš* connotes luxuriant-i.e., particularly liquid luxuriance, and that it was used to refer to freshness and smoothness of the skin. This is indeed an appropriate connotation of moistness in the context of aging. According to The Wilberforce Encyclopedia of the University of California, Berkeley:

With age, the skin gradually loses its elasticity and becomes thinner and drier. Because of the effect of gravity, skin may begin to sag...these developments affect facial skin, causing wrinkles and bags under the eyes...a moisturizer can help make the skin feel smooth, temporarily prevent moisture loss from the cells, and decrease the fine lines caused by dryness..."

13. See the translations in AMT (A.L. Oppenheim [trans.], "Babylonian and Assyrian Historical Texts," 561); and J. Rosenthal [trans.], "Canaanite and Aramaic Inscriptions," 601); and the study by H. Taesch, "Some Literary Elements in the Opening Sections of the Hadîd, Zakî, and Sûrat II Inscriptions in the Light of East and West Semitic Royal Inscriptions," JJS 45 (1994) 40-60. Other descriptions of old age cited by Taesch are no more suggestive, nor is 2 Sam 19:36. Another characteristic of Moses paralleled in royal inscriptions is his *šîš* (Num 12:3) "hale"; see the comments of J. Milgrom, Numbers (JPY Torah Commentary [Philadelphia, 1995] ed. loc.), and then the remarks of Taesch, "Some Literary Elements," 51-55.
15. The Wilberforce Encyclopedia, Stray the Editors of the University of California, Berkeley, Wilberforce Nolani (Boston, 1991) 297.
Greenfield notes that (1) in Uguritic, the verb 'dan is used for providing luxurious rainfall; (2) in Rabbinic Hebrew it is used for freshening the skin and body by lubricating them with oil and for rain freshening soil and grass; (3) in Sarah's comment in Gen 18:42, הָעָרַע הִשְׂנַח לָךְ יִרְחָא, the noun הָעָרַע is used in contrast to יִשְׂנַח 'I am withered' and refers to "the lubricious quality of the skin due to its being moist and freshened"; and (4) this was understood in the Talmud, which describes the fulfillment of Sarah's words thus: "After the skin had withered (יִשְׂנַח) and wrinkles multiplied, the skin was freshened (יִשְׂנַח) and the wrinkles became smooth, and beauty returned" (b. B. Bat. 120a). In sum, the restoration of moistness to Sarah's skin led to the disappearance of her wrinkles. This suggests that Moses' moistness, יָלָד, may also refer to unwrinkled skin.

In fact, this is how Ibn Ezra interprets יָלָד. He comments that יָלָד is derived from יַלְדָא 'moistness' and explains, 'for dryness overcomes the aged; and יָלָד means the opposite of stretch (tight)'. Although his comment is characteristically terse, it is convincingly explained in the supercommentaries. According to Solomon Zalman Netter, Ibn Ezra understands יָלָד here not as 'tight' but as shringling and dryness, the opposite of tightness and smoothness, meaning that Moses' moistness did not shringle and dry up but remained as it was, for when the face is full of moistness the skin is stretched out, but the reverse is true when the moistness of the face departs; it shrinks. Another supercommentator, Judah Leib Krisniki, held that Ibn Ezra did understand יָלָד as 'departed', but otherwise he agreed with Netter: a young person's skin is full of moistness and is therefore stretched over his flesh, but in old age the moistness departs and his skin becomes wrinkled. Krisniki even cited Rabba's comment on Sarah's statement in Gen 18:12, a comment that is strictly a verbatim quotation from h. B. Bat. 87a, cited above. In sum, Krisniki concluded, Ibn Ezra means that Moses never showed visible signs of old age, since his moistness never departed and his skin remained as smooth as in his youth.17

Ibn Ezra's explanation, I believe, is the correct one. It is consistent with Deut 31:2 and now has the support of an apt semantic parallel in the use of יָלָד.

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17. מזרחי, על שם יָלָד (1907–20).
Netter's and Kinsky's disagreement over the meaning of מְדַנְדָּה is back to one further contribution of the medieval grammarians to the understanding of מְדַנְדָּה. A verb meaning 'flee' is far from being a natural predicate for 'moistness'. According to Ibn Janah and R. Joseph Qushji, מְדַנְדָּה in Gen 41:7 is not from מְדַנְדָּה 'flee' but from a different verb, cognate to Arabic مَذَابِل (m.3.t-3) 'dry up', used of bread.\(^{18}\) The same explanation is proposed by Ehrlich, who notes that it requires vocalizing the nun with a אֲדַנְדָּה instead of מְדַנְדָּה.\(^{19}\)

All of the above considerations indicate that מְדַנְדָּה מַלֶּה means that the moistness of Moses's skin had not dried up, that he had not become wrinkled in his old age but retained the smoothness of his skin to the end of his life.

18. Sepher Haqinah, 8, cited by R. David Qushji, ספרו שלח נבון, 4.213 ss. מ. For the Arabic verb, see Freytag 4:270. Ibn Janah says the same, though he conceives that derivation from מְדַנְדָּה (meaning מְדַנְדָּה) is tolerable.