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Edited by

Ziony Zevit
Seymour Gitin
Michael Sokoloff

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לא נס לחה 'He Had Not Become Wrinkled' (Deuteronomy 34:7)

JEFFREY H. TIGAY

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

In this article I argue that in Deut 34:7 לח 'moisture' refers to lubricity in the sense of freshness 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 ערן, which, as Jonas Greenfield showed, connotes luxuriance, particularly liquid luxuriance, and is used in the Talmud to refer to "the lubricious quality of the skin due to its being moist and freshened," that is, unwrinkled. On the basis of this interpretation, it is likely that the verb נס does not mean 'departed' but, as suggested by Ibn Janah and R. Joseph Qimhi, 'dried up', cognate to Arabic nassa (n-s-s) 'to dry up', used of bread.

According to Deut 34:7, when Moses died at the age of 120 "his eyes were undimmed" and, the text adds, לא נס לחה. The latter phrase has been given a variety of interpretations. Several ancient translations—perhaps influenced by the parallel term *eyes*, referring to a facial feature—assumed that לחה was derived from לחי '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 Eden," 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 נחמד למראה and, especially, נחמד להשכיל. As a colleague, his implicit motto has been מכל עץ הגן אכול תאכל. No scholar surpasses him in the unstinting generosity of his assistance and advice. It is a pleasure to take part in this tribute to a seminal scholar and a dear friend.

his jaws.¹ However, as R. Joseph Qimḥi observed, this is morphologically excluded, since לחה lacks the final *yod*, which is preserved in the suffixed forms of לחי, as in לחיו in Job 40:26 (cf. לחיה in Lam 1:2).²

By far the best known interpretation, proffered by the medieval grammarians³ and found in most English translations⁴ is that Moses' 'natural force' or 'vigor' did not leave him. This interpretation is based on the derivation of לחה from לח 'fresh, moist',⁵ and נס from נוס 'flee', hence 'depart'. This derivation of לחה is unproblematic, but there are two difficulties with taking 'moisture' to mean 'vigor':

(a) There is no evidence for the use of לח to mean 'vigor'. That it had such a meaning might be argued on the basis of the cognate לחלוחית 'moistness' in Rabbinic Hebrew.⁶ A number of passages in rabbinic literature use לחלוחית to describe people who have not lost their youthful vigor. For example, R. Eleazar explains that Joab did not follow Absalom because עדיין היה לחלוחית של דוד קיימת 'David was still in possession of his vigor' (*b. Sanh.* 49a). However, the spelling לחלוחית is not certain. In the other three passages where this usage is found, all in *Midraš Genesis Rabbah*, the London manuscript that served as the basis for the Theodor-Albeck edition reads לכל(ו)כית instead of לחלוחית. For example, in *Gen. Rab.* 48:16, R. Ammi explains the difference between two verses saying that Abraham was old: כאן זקנה שיש בה לכלכית, להלן זקנה שאין בה לכלכית 'Here [in Gen 18:11] it refers to old age where there is still vigor;

1. LXX, *Χελυτια* 'jaw, lip' (H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon* [rev. H. S. Jones; Oxford, 1985] 1987, col. ii, s.v. *Χελυτια*); *Targum Jonathan* 'גיבי ליסתיה, *Teeth of his jaws*'; Vulgate, *dentēs* 'teeth'; Peshitta, לא אתקמטו פכודי, 'his cheeks had not become sunken, or shriveled'. Cf. *Midraš Tannaim*, p. 227 top (הא בלחיו שלמתים נפסק); *Midraš Hagadol* has a variant (נפרק); Rabbenu Meyuḥas, המתים להשמט לחיהם. Some of the targums interpret in a more general way that it was simply Moses' facial appearance that had not changed. Thus the *Fragment Targum* renders לא אשתנו זיווהון דאפרי; *Targum Neofiti*, לא אשתנו זיווהון דאפרי; and *Onqelos*, לא אשתנו זיווהון דאפרי; לא שנה זיו יקרא דאפיה (interestingly, the *Fragment Targum* and *Onqelos* use exactly the same terms for the skin of Moses's face in Exod 34:29–35, and Neofiti uses זיו איקרהון, as does *Onqelos* here). This view is found in *Midraš Lekah Tov* (היה מדמות פניו מדמות שהיה) (מחר סיני) and Rashi (ולא נהפך תאר פניו) (מחר סיני).

2. *Sepher Ha-galuj* (Berlin, 1887) 8 (ref. courtesy of Uri Melammed). See also Isa 50:6; Hos 11:4; Job 16:10; Cant 1:10, 5:13; and Ezek 29:4.

3. See the dictionaries of Ibn Janah and Qimḥi (s.v. לח and נוס), the translation of Saadia (רטובה), and the *Samaritan Targum* (רטובה).

4. The *kjv*, Leeser, and the *rsv* have 'natural force'; Moffatt, *NEB*, *NAB*, and the *Jerusalem Bible* have 'vigor'; the *NIV* has 'strength'.

5. Cf. renditions of this phrase as 'freshness' (Luzzatto: 'freschezza'; Field, *Hexapla: vivor* ['greenness']; Yehoash: פרישקייט; Keil-Delitzsch).

6. See A. van Selms, "A Forgotten God: Lah," in *Studia Biblica et Semitica: Theodoro Christiano Vriezen . . . Dedicata* (Wageningen, 1966) 318–26 (ref. courtesy of Uri Melammed). Rashi implicitly compares לחה with לחלוחית in its literal sense of 'moistness'; see below, n. 10.

later [in 24:1] it refers to old age where there is no vigor'.⁷ לחלוחית and לכלוכית 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 *kap*, it may not be related to biblical לח. This would explain why none of the targums or commentaries of the talmudic period rendered, or glossed, לחה with the rabbinic word; had it been spelled לחלוחית at the time, it would have been natural for them to do so.

(b) If the rabbinic term is unrelated to biblical לח, it is nevertheless semantically parallel to the alleged meaning of לח in Deut 34:7. However, an equally serious objection to לחה meaning 'vigor' is that, according to Deut 31:2, Moses had in fact lost his vigor. Some scholars have inferred from the putative inconsistency that 34:7b is not Deuteronomistic,⁸ 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."⁹ 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 moistness. R. Eliezer b. Yaakov in the *Sipre* took 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's body after death.¹⁰ Albright took 'moistness' as referring to sexual power, which Moses allegedly had not lost at the age of 120.¹¹ However, this hardly suits the context (we

7. Ed. Theodor-Albeck, 493. See also *Gen. Rab.* 61:2 and 79:1 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, 658 and 938). MS Vat. 30 reads לכל(ה) בית in the first two passages; in the third it reads לחלוחית (presumably either the scribe or the author of the midraš chose a spelling that matched כלח in Job 5:26, which the midraš is interpreting). For the verb לכלך see M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Palestinian Jewish Aramaic* (Ramat-Gan, 1990) 283; H. Yalon, *פרקי לישון* (Jerusalem, 1971) 412–13. Similar variant readings are found in the Ibn Tibbon translation of Maimonides' *Guide*, III:46: the main text reads ומלכלכים, and a variant reads ומלחלחים (New York, 1946) 58a.

8. See, for example, the commentaries of Dillmann (KeH, 2d ed., 1886), Bertholet (KHC, 1899) and Steuernagel (HKAT, 2d ed., 1923).

9. Cambridge Bible (1918).

10. *Sipre Deuteronomy* (ed. L. Finkelstein) 429. He is followed by Rashi, who paraphrases לחלוחית שבו, שלא שלט בו רקבו (decomposition).

11. W. F. Albright ("The 'Natural Force' of Moses in the Light of Ugaritic," *BASOR* 94 [1944] 32–35), perhaps inspired by 'virility' in *The Bible: An American Translation* (repr. Chicago, 1975).

never hear that Moses fathered children after leaving Midian, let alone in old age), and Albright later abandoned the suggestion.¹²

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 104, and Si'-gabbar, priest of Nerab. 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'.¹³

In his study of the Northwest Semitic root ʔלע on the basis of the bilingual Akkadian-Aramaic inscription from Tell Fakherye in Syria, Jonas Greenfield provides an important clue to the meaning of 'moistness' in Deut 34:7. He shows that ʔלע connotes luxuriance, particularly liquid luxuriance, and that it was used to refer to freshness and smoothness of the skin.¹⁴ This is indeed an appropriate connotation of moistness in the context of aging. According to *The Wellness 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 . . .¹⁵

12. According to Marvin H. Pope in RSP III, 369.

13. See the translations in *ANET* (A. L. Oppenheim [trans.], "Babylonian and Assyrian Historical Texts," 561c; and F. Rosenthal [trans.], "Canaanite and Aramaic Inscriptions," 661d); and the study by H. Tawil, "Some Literary Elements in the Opening Sections of the Hadad, Zakir, and Nerab II Inscriptions in the Light of East and West Semitic Royal Inscriptions," *Or* 43 (1974) 60–63. Other descriptions of old age cited by Tawil are no more suggestive, nor is 2 Sam 19:36. Another characteristic of Moses paralleled in royal inscriptions is his ענדה (Num 12:3) 'piety'; see the comment of J. Milgrom, *Numbers (JPS Torah Commentary)* (Philadelphia, 1990) ad loc.), and then the remarks of Tawil, "Some Literary Elements," 51–55.

14. J. C. Greenfield, "A Touch of Eden," in *Orientalia J. Duchesne-Guillemin Emerito Oblata* (Leiden, 1984) 223–24.

15. *The Wellness Encyclopedia*, from the Editors of the University of California, Berkeley, *Wellness Newsletter* (Boston, 1991) 287.

Greenfield notes that (1) in Ugaritic, the verb *ʿdn* is used for providing luxuriant 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 18:12, אַחֲרַי בְּלוֹתִי הִיְתָה לִי עֲדָנָה, the noun עֲדָנָה is used in contrast to בְּלוֹתִי '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 (נִתְבַּלָּה) and wrinkles multiplied, the skin was freshened (נִתְעַדָּן) and the wrinkles became smooth, and beauty returned" (*b. B. Meṣ.* 87a; נִתְעַדָּן is used the same way in the identical description of Jochebed's rejuvenation in *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, לחה, may also refer to unwrinkled skin.

In fact, this is how Ibn Ezra interprets לחה נס לחה. He comments that לחה is derived from לח 'moistness' and explains, 'for dryness overcomes the aged; and נס means the opposite of stretch (tight)' (כִּי הַיְבֻשׁוֹת תִּתְגַּבֵּר) (עַל הַזִּקְן, וְטַעַם "נִס" הַפֶּךָ מֵתַח). Although his comment is characteristically terse, it is convincingly explained in the supercommentaries. According to Solomon Zalman Netter, Ibn Ezra understands נס here not as 'flight' but as shriveling and dryness, the opposite of tightness and smoothness, meaning that Moses' moistness did not shrivel 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 shrivels.¹⁶ Another supercommentator, Judah Leib Krinski, held that Ibn Ezra did understand נס 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. Krinski even cited Rashbam's comment on Sarah's statement in Gen 18:12, a comment that is simply a verbatim quotation from *b. B. Meṣ.* 87a, cited above. In sum, Krinski 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 עֲדָן.

16. Netter's supercommentary was first published in 1859. I am citing it from the Horeb edition of *Miqra'ot Gedolot* (London and New York, 1948).

17. חומש מחוקקי יהודה (1907-28).

Netter's and Krinski's disagreement over the meaning of נט leads us back to one further contribution of the medieval grammarians to the understanding of לא נט לחה. A verb meaning 'flee' is far from being a natural predicate for 'moistness'. According to Ibn Janah and R. Joseph Qimhi, נט in Deut 34:7 is not from נוט 'flee' but from a different verb, cognate to Arabic *nassa* (*n-s-s*) 'dry up', used of bread.¹⁸ The same explanation is proposed by Ehrlich, who notes that it requires vocalizing the *nun* with a *pataḥ* instead of a *qames*.¹⁹

All of the above considerations indicate that לא נט לחה 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 Ha-galuj*, 8, cited by R. David Qimhi, ספר השרשים, 423 s.v. נוט. For the Arabic verb, see Freytag 4:270. Ibn Janah says the same, though he concedes that derivation from נוט (meaning העברה) is tolerable.

19. A. B. Ehrlich, *Randglossen zur hebräischen Bibel* (repr. Hildesheim, 1968) 392. See GKC §67a, b, and bb.