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Winslow, Karen Strand

*Early Jewish and Christian Memories of Moses' Wives:
Exogamist Marriage and Ethnic Identity*

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In her introduction to *Early Jewish and Christian Memories of Moses' Wives: Exogamist Marriage and Ethnic Identity*, Karen Strand Winslow writes that her study was inspired by her interest in conflicting Hebrew Bible attitudes toward Israelite men marrying foreign women. She observes, "within the confines of the individual books in each section of the *Tanak*, we find an opposition between a) expressions emphasizing the dangers of intermarriage and b) examples of Israelite/Jewish males marrying and/or producing heirs through outsider women" (3). Winslow's interest in this opposition leads her, in this work, to examine Hebrew Bible texts about Moses' wives as well as later Jewish and Christian interpretations of them. In so doing, she pays particular attention to "the individuality of each interpreter with regard to his endeavor to translate, explain, and/or apply scriptural traditions to present and future generations" (11). She argues that the postbiblical traditions that she examines "are entry points for understanding Jewish and Christian biblical interpretation in the second Temple period and late antiquity" (1).

Winslow devotes roughly the first quarter of *Early Jewish and Christian Memories of Moses' Wives* to traditions about Zipporah in Exodus (ch. 1), Midian as Israel's "friend" and "enemy" in Numbers (ch. 1), and Moses' nameless Cushite wife in Numbers (ch. 2). In these chapters she provides detailed readings of the biblical texts in question and considers exegetical problems such as the following: What does the phrase *hatan-damim* mean (Exod 4:25, 26)? Is the Cushite woman whom Moses is said to have married (Num 12:1) actually Zipporah? What is the connection between Moses' marriage to the Cushite woman and Miriam and Aaron's complaint about prophecy (Num 12:1-2)? Winslow also takes care to place these texts in their larger literary and historical contexts.

In the rest of the book, Winslow discusses traditions about Moses' wives in the LXX (ch. 3); "in the rewritten Bibles of the Jews of the Greek period" (ch. 4); in Philo, Josephus, the rabbinic literature, and the Targums to Exodus (ch. 5); in the Midrash, Talmuds, and Targums that "represent Moses' separation from his wife" (ch. 6); and in early Christian commentaries and treatises about continence (ch. 7) and circumcision (ch. 8) that "appeal to Zipporah's story" (9). After a brief conclusion, Winslow provides ten appendices containing the texts of some of her primary sources.

Throughout the book Winslow traces three "exegetical trajectories" (15) in the Jewish and Christian interpretations of Moses' wives. The first of these trajectories is Moses' exogamy. Winslow suggests that many interpreters were uncomfortable with Moses' exogamous marriage (or marriages). As a result, some minimized Zipporah's foreign status by tracing her lineage through Keturah, whom Abraham married after Sarah's death. Others paid little attention to Zipporah, concentrating instead on her father Jethro, whom they portrayed as a model convert to Judaism. Still others ignored Moses' foreign marriage altogether. In general, the interpreters Winslow whom discusses understood the Cushite woman to be Zipporah herself instead of a separate individual.

Winslow's second trajectory is Zipporah's circumcision of her son (Exod 4:24–26). Although Zipporah is only one of three *mohels* in the whole Hebrew Bible (the others being Abraham and Joshua), Winslow finds that "Jewish and Christian interpreters made little of her unusual role" (15). Some ignored the incident completely. Those interpreters who did remember Zipporah's circumcision either emphasized the power of the circumcision as a ritual act or the power of the blood caused by it rather than the woman who performed it. The act itself was generally understood to be apotropaic, by which an angelic attacker was repelled from Moses. Many interpreters tried to explain the attack on Moses. Some of the reasons they offered were as follows: Jethro would not permit Moses to circumcise his son; Moses had agreed not to circumcise his son in return for permission to marry Zipporah; and Moses intended to circumcise his son but had delayed doing so because he was focused on God's command to return to Egypt to free the Israelite slaves.

The third trajectory is the extrabiblical tradition that Moses renounced sexual intercourse with his wife. In general, according to Winslow, Jewish interpreters viewed celibacy as a requirement for Moses alone. Such interpreters considered Moses' sexual purity as a necessity because of his unique relationship with God; some of them, in fact, believed that God had ordered Moses to withdraw from sexual contact with his wife. By contrast, the Christian interpreters whom Winslow discusses tended to understand celibacy such as they believed Moses practiced to be a requirement for all believers. The Christian interpreters disagreed, however, on the extent of the celibacy that was required (e.g., one

should be married but avoid sexual activity with one's spouse; one should renounce sex after being widowed; one should remain a virgin for one's whole life).

There is much to admire about *Early Jewish and Christian Memories of Moses' Wives*. As Michael A. Williams notes in the book's preface, Winslow is "the first to have attempted a full-scale analysis of these texts [about Zipporah and the Cushite woman] within the larger context of the early history of extra-biblical traditions about Moses' marital partner(s)" (i). Given the great significance of Moses both in the Hebrew Bible and in the Judeo-Christian tradition as a whole, this is an important topic. The analysis that Winslow offers throughout her book is very thorough. She provides close, detailed readings of her primary sources as well as information about the historical context of each of her primary texts and summaries and analyses of leading scholars' positions on the issues that she discusses. Such background and summary information is particularly useful because this book will be of interest to scholars with a wide range of specialties (e.g., Hebrew Bible, rabbinics, patristics, and women's studies in religion).

Despite these considerable strengths, I was frequently overwhelmed by the great mass of details that Winslow presents. The book is quite long, at 415 pages. Based on Winslow's own list, she utilizes at least thirty-three primary texts as well as a number of "supplemental" ones where relevant (14). Ultimately, her frequent summaries—both within and at the end of each chapter—and her conclusion were not sufficient for me to keep track of the details of each primary text, let alone to detect interpretative trends. I would have also preferred more attention to larger exegetical, historical, and cultural patterns as well as the significance of such patterns.

This criticism notwithstanding, however, *Early Jewish and Christian Memories of Moses' Wives* is an impressive book well worth scholars' effort to read.