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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE MEANINGS OF KARPAS:  
MULTI-COLORED,  
COTTON, AND CELERY

**Thomas F. McDaniel, Ph.D.**

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### XIII

## THE MEANINGS OF *KARPAS*: MULTI-COLORED, COTTON, AND CELERY<sup>1</sup>

### ETYMOLOGIES

In Esther 1:6 the MT קַרְפָּס וְקָרְפָּס, used with reference to the decor of the Shushan palace, is translated in the Septuagint as βυσσίνους καὶ καρπασίνους “linen and made-of-cotton.” Hebrew קַרְפָּס and Greek καρπάσινος are loanwords taken from Persian کرباس / کرباس (kirbâs / kirpâs) and Sanskrit/ Indo-Aryan कर्पास (*karpāsa*) “cotton.”<sup>2</sup> This loanword appears in Arabic as كرفس / كرسف (*kurfus / kursuf*) and as کرباس (*kirbâs* and *karbâs*).<sup>3</sup> The interchange of *f* and *b* (i.e., Hebrew כּ and בּ) is evident in Greek κάρπασος “cotton,” but Latin *carbasus* “cotton” (= κάρβασος “fine linen, flax”) and Syriac ܟܪܒܫܐ (*karbasâ*) “cambric, muslin, lawn.” (The Greek also registers κάλπασος as well as κάρπασος and κάρβασος, with the interchange of the liquids λ and ρ.)

This quadrilateral (consonantal) कर्पास (*karpāsa*) (where the *s* is a part of the stem) is unrelated to the Greek trilateral (consonantal) stem καρπός “fruit” (which is used in the Septuagint for nine different Hebrew words) or καρπός “wrist” (use in the Septuagint for וָר and כַּרְפֵּי).<sup>4</sup> The *ς* of καρπός (with either meaning) is a case ending, analogous to the final *s* of Sanskrit *karpāsas* as cited in Liddell and Scott.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, this quadrilateral (consonantal) कर्पास (*karpāsa*) “cotton” is unrelated to the Persian کرفس (*karfas*) and the Aramaic-Hebrew קַרְפָּס “celery, parsley,” which appears in

Syriac as ܟܪܦܣܐ *kērapsā* and in Arabic as كرفس (*karafs*)—with no interchange in the Persian, Arabic, Aramaic, Hebrew, and Syriac of the פ and כ, as with כַּרְפָּס = κάρπασος, κάρβασος, and the Latin *carbasus* “cotton, linen, flax” (Castell 1669: [*Persico-Latinum*] 444, 449; BDB 502; Jastrow 673).

### JOSEPH'S TUNIC

In 2 Samuel 13:18–19 the MT פְּטִיָּה כְּתֹנֶת, used with reference to Tamar’s royal robe,<sup>6</sup> was translated χιτῶν καρπωτός “a tunic (reaching) the wrist.” If the καρπωτός were uncritically associated with κάρπασ(ος)—instead of καρπός “wrist”—and, secondarily, κάρπασ(ος) was taken to be a variant of *karbu* (कबु) “variegated-color,” it would be easy to account for Joseph’s פְּטִיָּה כְּתֹנֶת in Genesis 37:3 becoming in the Septuagint χιτῶνα ποικίλον “tunic of variegated-color.”<sup>7</sup>

In an unidentified tradition καρπωτός—or just καρπωτ—was equated with the Persian, Sanskrit, and Indo-Aryan *karbis* (as כַּת מִצְוָה became *bas miṣvah*, with the ת becoming a sibilant). It could also account for how, in popular etymology and folk usage (in contrast to a historical etymology), כַּרְפָּס “celery, parsley” became symbolically associated with Joseph’s פְּטִיָּה כְּתֹנֶת, since the tunic became ποικίλον “multicolor” in the Septuagint, with ποικίλον equaling *karbu* (कबु) which, with a case ending became *karbus* = καρβός = καρπός.

Rashi did not associate the פְּטִיָּה in Gen 37:3 with *karpāsa* “cotton” or καρπός “fruit” or כַּרְפָּס “celery, parsley.” He identified the פְּטִיָּה as מְלִיֵּית “fine wool” rather than, for example, with צֶמֶר גֶּפֶן “wool of the vine” (= “cotton,” similar to Greek καρπός εὐανθῆς μήλων “downy fruit of sheep” = “wool”). Rashi’s comparison with the פְּטִיָּה כְּתֹנֶת in II Sam

13:18 and the כַּרְפָּס in Est 1:6 probably referred to the appearance (color or shape) of Joseph's tunic rather than the fabric of the tunic—be it wool, flax, or cotton.

### CONCLUSION

The use of celery or parsley in the Seder as a symbolic reminder of Joseph's tunic would be a good example of the logic that things equal to the same thing are equal to each other. Since כַּרְפָּס—on the analogy of Est 1:6 and II Sam 13:18—equals כַּרְפָּס/κάρπας or כַּרְפָּס/κάρβας, and since כַּרְפָּס equals celery/parsley, then celery/parsley could have something to do with כַּרְפָּס, or vice versa. The analogy and equation provided an excellent base for didactic and haggadic expansion.

The various meanings of כַּרְפָּס in Semitic need not be limited to “cotton, flax, linen” or to “celery and parsley” or to “variegated color.” In Syriac, in addition to ܟܪܒܫܐ (*karbasâ*) “cotton,” there is also Syriac ܟܪܒܫܐ (*krbs*) meaning *res qua ligatur* and *clavus* [“things which are joined together”<sup>8</sup> and “nail”]<sup>9</sup> and *proxeneta* [“broker, negotiator”], as well as Syriac ܟܪܦܫܐ (*karpasâ*) “celery.” There is no basis for assuming that these varied meanings of כַּרְפָּס/ܟܪܒܫܐ/ܟܪܦܫܐ in Semitic come from a single Persian or Sanskrit loanword.

### NOTES

1. This short study is an extended footnote to the article by G. J. Gevaryahu and M. L. Wise (1999) entitled, “Why Does the Seder Begin with Karpas,” in which it was stated that Hebrew *karpas* was borrowed from the Persian *kirpas* “linen” and *karafs* “parsley” and the Greek *karpos* “fruit.” It is intended to provide a more detailed etymological analysis in light of comparative lexicography than that which was given by the authors.

2. Steingass 1892: 1021–1023; Monier, Monier-Willaims 1899: 275–276; Macdonell 1924: 64; and Turner, 1971: 146, 156. Note also the **פִּטָּה** “topaz” in Exo 28:17, 39:10; Ezek 28:13, 17; and Job 28:19, which is the Sanskrit loanword **पीत** (*pīta*) “yellow” (Macdonnell 1924: 163).
3. Lane 1885: 2603c, 2607c; Hava 1915: 649, 651; and Wehr 1979: 959, 961.
4. Hatch and Redpath 1954: 723–724.
5. Liddell and Scott 1940: 879–880.
6. McCarter 1984: 325–326.
7. Note that Aquila rendered **פִּטָּה** as **στραγαλων** “knotted, ornamented,” whereas Symmachus has **χειριδον η καρπωτον** “sleeved [to the] the wrist.” See Brooke and McLean 1906: 105. The Arabic **بنش** (*bannaš*) “a cloth upper-garment with very full sleeves,” cited by Hava (1915: 47) as a Turkish loanword used in Syria is of interest, given the interchange of **ב / פ** and **ש / שׁ** and the frequent assimilation of the **נ** in Hebrew. A masculine plural **בנשים** (> **בשים** > **פשים**) could easily become **פטים**. But the provenance of **بنش** (*bannaš*) needs further study. Speiser (1964: 290) suggested that **פטים** was an adaptation of Akkadian *pišannu* which “was a ceremonial robe which could be draped about statues of goddesses, and had various gold ornaments sewed onto it.”
8. Aquila’s **στραγαλων** appears as **στραγαλίδων** “chains” in the Septuagint of Jud 8:26.
9. While *clavus* may mean “a purple stripe on the *tunica* worn by knights (narrow) or senators and their sons (broad) . . . as one of the insignia of senatorial rank,” which could support the translation of **כברס** as being “striped,” the context of the citation requires *clavus* to mean the nail or rivet which holds things together.