

XIII

THE MEANINGS OF *KARPAS*: MULTI-COLORED, COTTON, AND CELERY¹

ETYMOLOGIES

In Esther 1:6 the MT כְּרִימָהּ כְּרִימָהּ, used with reference to the decor of the Shushan palace, is translated in the Septuagint as βυσσίνοις καὶ καρπασίνοις “linen and made-of-cotton.” Hebrew כְּרִימָהּ and Greek καρπάσινος are loanwords taken from Persian کریاس / کریاس (*kirbâs / kirpâs*) and Sanskrit/Indo-Aryan कर्पास (*karpâsa*) “cotton.”² This loanword appears in Arabic as كرفس / كرسف (*kurfus / kursuf*) and as کریاس (*kirbâs* and *karbâs*).³ The interchange of *f* and *b* (i.e., Hebrew כ and ב) 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 quadriliteral (consonantal) कर्पास (*karpâsa*) (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 כַּף and כַּרְפֵּי).⁴ The ς of καρπός (with either meaning) is a case ending, analogous to the final *s* of Sanskrit *karpâsas* as cited in Liddell and Scott.⁵

Moreover, this quadriliteral (consonantal) कर्पास (*karpâsa*) “cotton” is unrelated to the Persian کرفس (*karfâs*) and the Aramaic-Hebrew כְּרִימָהּ “celery, parsley,” which appears in

Syriac as ܟܪܦܣܐ *kērapsā*² and in Arabic as كرفس (*karafs*)—with no interchange in the Persian, Arabic, Aramaic, Hebrew, and Syriac of the פ and ב, as with ספֿרֿ = 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 סִטְפֿתֿ בְּתִנָּה, used with reference to Tamar’s royal robe,⁶ 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 סִטְפֿתֿ בְּתִנָּה in Genesis 37:3 becoming in the Septuagint χιτῶνα ποικίλον “tunic of variegated-color.”⁷

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

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

13:18 and the כַּרְפֵּס 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 כַּרְפֵּס—on the analogy of Est 1:6 and II Sam 13:18—equals כַּרְפֵּס/κάρπας or כַּרְבֵּס/κάρβας, and since כַּרְפֵּס equals celery/parsley, then celery/parsley could have something to do with כַּרְפֵּס, or vice versa. The analogy and equation provided an excellent base for didactic and haggadic expansion.

The various meanings of כַּרְפֵּס 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”⁸ and “nail”]⁹ and *proxeneta* [“broker, negotiator”], as well as Syriac ܟܪܦܫܐ (*karpasâ*) “celery.” There is no basis for assuming that these varied meanings of כַּרְבֵּס/כַּרְפֵּס 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-Williams 1899: 275–276; Macdonell 1924: 64; and Turner, 1971: 146, 156. Note also the פִּטְוֵהָה “topaz” in Exo 28:17, 39:10; Ezek 28:13, 17; and Job 28:19, which is the Sanskrit loanword पीत (*pîta*) “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 פִּטְוֵהָה 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 כ/פ and ש/ש and the frequent assimilation of the נ in Hebrew. A masculine plural בנשים (> פנשים) could easily become פטיים. But the provenance of بنش (*bannaš*) needs further study. Speiser (1964: 290) suggested that פטיים 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 στραγγαλίδων “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 כבֶּרֶס as being “striped,” the context of the citation requires *clavus* to mean the nail or rivet which holds things together.