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“Esau’s Wives”

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Critics frequently point to what they believe is a contradiction in the Book of Genesis. According to Gen. 26:34 and 28:9, Esau’s wives were as follows:

- Judith, daughter of Beeri the Hittite (Gen. 26:34)
- Bashemath, daughter of Elon the Hittite (Gen. 26:34)
- Mahalath, daughter of Ishmael, sister of Nebajoth (Gen. 28:9)

However, according to Gen. 36:2-3, his wives were:

- Adah, daughter of Elon the Hittite
- Aholibamah, granddaughter of Zibeon the Hivite
- Bashemath, daughter of Ishmael, sister of Nebajoth

The name Bashemath (correctly *Basemath*) probably comes from the Semitic word-stem *b-s-m*, meaning “fragrant” (for example, *besem* means “balsam” in Hebrew). When you add the Hebrew feminine ending *-ath*, you get Basemath, “fragrant woman.” The possibility exists that Mahalath (daughter of Ishmael and sister of Nebajoth) and Adah (daughter of Elon the Hittite) were both given the nickname “fragrant” (Douglas 1982: 124). In other words, the Bashemath, daughter of Elon, in Gen. 26:34 is the same as the Adah, daughter of Elon, in Gen. 36:2, while the Bashemath, daughter of Ishmael, in Gen. 36:3 is the same as Mahalath, daughter of Ishmael, in Gen. 28:9.

After first marrying Judith the daughter of Beeri, Esau may have married Adah the daughter of Elon and nicknamed her “Fragrant.” The possibility exists that Adah died, whereupon he married Mahalath, daughter of Ishmael, and nicknamed her “Fragrant,” in honor of his dead wife. Another possibility is that Esau divorced Adah “the Fragrant” (which was allowed by secular Near Eastern law in the Patriarchal Era), and then married Mahalath, nicknaming her “the Fragrant” to spite Adah. Thus, Esau’s various marriages can be plausibly reconstructed as follows:

- First wife: Judith, daughter of Beeri the Hittite
- Second wife: Adah, “the Fragrant” (*Bashemath*), daughter of Elon the Hittite; deceased or divorced
- Third wife: Mahalath, “the Fragrant” (*Bashemath*), daughter of Ishmael and sister of Nebajoth
- Fourth wife: Aholibamah, granddaughter of Zibeon the Hivite

There are at least two examples of a wife having a nickname different from her real name. The first example comes from the Mari texts, which were contemporary with the Patriarchal Era. Abraham Malamat of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem writes:

“Some years ago I published a study (together with P. Artzi) on the most prominent of the Mari ladies—Shibtu, Zimri-Lim’s queen [Zimri-Lim was king of Mari in the time of the Patriarchs]...Until quite recently it was thought that Shibtu was the daughter of Yarim-Lim, king of Aleppo, and his chief wife, Gashera. In several documents, however, Shibtu’s mother is named as Zizi. Either Shibtu was a princess by a secondary queen at Aleppo, or it might be assumed that Zizi was Gashera’s nickname. Such nicknames were not uncommon in antiquity, and even Zimri-Lim was not immune to this phenomenon, for his family often addressed him as ‘my Star’” (Malamat 1989: 12).

Much later, the wife of Assyrian king Sennacherib (705–681 BC) bore an Aramaic name, Naqia, and an Assyrian name, Zakutu (Boardman 1991: 138; Kuhrt 1995: 527). Thus, it is entirely possible that two of Esau’s wives were known by two different names: their names given to them at birth, Adah and Mahalath, and their identical nicknames, “Fragrant.”

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