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Achsah: who ever saw her was angry with his wife.
Achsah in the Bible and Bavli Temurah 16a

In this paper I am going to focus on Bavli Temurah 16a. This is the only place in the whole tractate where a woman is introduced by name. To be more precise two biblical women are mentioned here: Achsah and Azuvah. While Azuvah is only mentioned marginally, Achsah is the topic of a larger discussion. Additionally, bTem 16a is the only place in the Bavli, where Achsah as a person and her deeds according to the bible are discussed. Therefore the focus of this paper lies with Achsah and the question: How does the Bavli picture this biblical figure.

Biblical Evidence

In order to understand the rabbinic interpretation of this biblical episode, let’s first have a look at the biblical evidence. The story of Achsah is told in two almost identical texts in the bible: In Joshua 15:15-19 and Judges 1:11-15. Both books broach the issue of the occupation of the land (by battle) and the settlement of the Israelites in the land. Since the second focus of this paper is the Bavli, I am going to be rather brief in my remarks about the biblical story and its setting within the biblical books, though of course much more could be said about it.

I will quote the text from Joshua, since the two texts are almost identical and it is often argued that the text in Joshua is older than the version in Judges.
From there he marched against the inhabitants of Debir – the name of Debir was formerly Kiriath-Sepher. And Caleb announced: “I will give my daughter Achsah in marriage to the man who attacks and captures Kiriath-Sepher.” And Othniel the son of Kenaz, the brother of Caleb, took it; and Caleb gave him his daughter Achsah in marriage. When she came [to him], she induced him to ask her father for some property. She dismounted from her donkey; and Caleb asked her: “What is the matter?” She replied: “Give me a present; for you have given me away as Negeb [for thou hast given me a south land], so give me springs of water.” And he gave her Upper and Lower Gholloth.
Joshua, however, the initiative is on the part of Achsah: she persuades him. It comes as no surprise that, in the feminist approach, the masoretic text (and the Aramaic targumim) is viewed here as the lectio difficilior and the original version, while the alterations in LXX and Vulgata are held to be ideological changes. Some contemporary scholars argue that the alterations or emendations that shift the initiative towards the male characters of the story are trying to protect the image of the first judge, which might be endangered through his reputed lack of action. Some scholars have additionally suggested that the conversation described in verse 18 takes place between Achsah and Caleb. However, I think Butler and Klein are convincing in arguing, that the conversation is between the newly-weds, even though Othniel is not mentioned by name. The problem that in the following scene the wife confronts her father is to be explained – following again Butler – in the sense that she gained her husband’s agreement before carrying out her plan. Thus, according to the masoretic text Achsah seems to ask her husband for permission, while in the LXX tradition she is persuaded by her husband.

Besides the question of who persuaded whom, the question what Achsah demands exactly and the reason for her request are of interest: The plot seems to be simple: She asks for springs of water and this request is granted, even double fold. She gets the upper and lower springs. But again we encounter a slightly more complex situation. First of all she asks for a blessing, often translated as present. In accordance with the context, modern commentators point to the connection between blessing and pool. Therefore Knauf translates here Segensteich (blessing-pool or pool of blessing) arguing that *brakhah* and *brekhah* are homographic and nearly homonymic. Butler holds that the blessing is to be understood as a wedding present, though the implication of the blessing remains. This assumption leads to the second part of the verse, the reason for Achsah’s request: (ֶנְתַתָּנִי הַנֶּגֶב אֶרֶץ conviction). The verse is interpreted in three different ways, depending basically on the understanding and translation of the form, where Gesenius holds that the suffix must be regarded as a dative:

1.) “for you have given me away as Negeb-land” (JPS 1985).
2.) “because you have put me in dry south-land” (Basic English Version).
3.) “for thou hast given me a south land” (KJV 1985).

These three possibilities imply quite different situations: According to the first reading Achsah is complaining that she was given away as dry land, implying without a dowry: She is the dry land. One could argue that, due to the missing dowry, her pride or her position in the new family might be endangered. Now she is asking for a late dowry. The second translation argues that, through her
marriage, Achsah settled in dry land, implying Othniel possessed only dry land. Thus, Achsah asks her father for help, eventually here, too, for a “late” marriage portion. Following the third translation, Achsah received a dowry but is not satisfied with it: She asks for more. Obviously Caleb sees the request as justified and gives her the upper and lower guloth. Yet regardless of these differences it is noteworthy that she asks or demands the springs of water for herself, not for Othniel. She says “give me”, not give us. The requested goods will belong to her, not to her husband.25

Achsah in the Bavli Temurah 16a

The Bavli places the story of Achsah in a different context from the Bible. I will present the tradition in bTem 16a step by step as I comment on it.

It has been taught:26 A thousand and seven hundred kal wahomer and gezerah shawah and specifications of the Scribes [dikdukei sofrim] were forgotten during the period of mourning for Moses. Said Rabbi Abahu: Nevertheless Othniel the son of Kenaz restored [these forgotten teachings] as a result of his pilpul, as it says: “And Othniel the son of Kenaz, the brother of Caleb, took it; [and he gave him Achsah his daughter to wife]” (Joshua 15:17).

Not the occupation of the land or the settlement is the setting of the story, but the transmission – or endangered transmission – of the oral law. The Bavli states that during the mourning period over Moshe 1700 teachings were forgotten, but Othniel restored them because of his logical acumen. The Rabbis derive this from a biblical verse. As often in rabbinic literature, the most important information necessary for understanding the rabbinic argument is not cited. The cited verse 17 states, that Othniel took it. The previous verse 16 shows that it is Debir that he took, which was formally called Kiriath-Sefer. Because the name Kiriath-Sefer can be understood and translated as “city” or “stronghold of Books”, it alludes to the Halakhah.27 Thus, the physical battle according to Judges and Joshua can be pictured here as a spiritual battle: The
restoration of the forgotten halakhah through Othniel. This aggadah transforms the biblical account into a story of the Rabbis.

At this point, Achsah enters the discussion:

ולמה נקראה שמה עכסה? [א"ר יוחנן:] שבכם הרואה אתו [ו.ו.]: מוכס על

And why was her name called Achsah? [Said R. Yohanan:] Because whosoever saw her was angry with his wife.

The Bavli asks about the meaning of the name Achsah. In studies to the biblical text some attention is paid to the meaning of the name as well: The name is usually explained as being related to anklet or bangle (עכסה). Therefore Lillian Klein argues for example that Achsah is perceived in the biblical text as a decoration or a sexy embellishment given to the bravest man around. But the stamma – in some mss R. Yohanan – states: Every man who saw her became angry with his wife. For the Bavli the name עכסה is obviously related to the root כעס (to be angry, or anger). What the Bavli does not explain is why every man became angry with his wife. Rashi explains this male behaviour as related to Achsah’s (exceptional) beauty. But Tosafot to bTaan 4a explain this as relating to her modesty. In both cases Achsah is pictured as a role model: She is an ideal that the “real” wives cannot reach. Yet, following Tsila Ratner a converse, negative reading of the Bavli is possible: Achsah is feared as a “bad influence”, she jeopardizes the harmony of family life because the first thing she does is complain and meddle.

The Bavli goes on by citing the biblical text:

“ויהי יבשה והAuthService משה אביה שדה ותצנח שדה אביה מאת לשאל ותסיעה בָּבּוֹת ויהי” (יח. מאי "תצנח"? אומר רב א"ר יוחנן: אמרה ל: מה תומר, כו נshore לֶנָּפָל בָּבּוֹת מַיד תִּשְׁעָקָה. מַיד תִּשְׁעָקָה."

“And it came to pass as she came unto him that she moved him to ask of her father a field. And she alighted [watiznah] off her ass” (Joshua 15:18). What does the word wa-tiznah mean? Rava reported in the name of Rabbi Yizhaq: She said to him: Just as an ass when it has no food in its trough immediately cries out, so a woman when she has no wheat in her house cries out immediately.
The question of who seduced or moved whom to make the request is not dealt with in this midrash. But the unclear word ותעצב which in the biblical context is translated as to dismount, sometimes to clap in hands, is explained in the Bavli as being related to צוח (to scream, shout). To emphasize this, the amora Rava states in the name of Rabbi Yizhaq that Achsah likens herself to a donkey: She tells her father that both, animal and woman complain through screaming (צועק/צועקת) when they have no food. Thus, we are to understand that Achsah is discontent with lack of nourishment.

"תאמר תנה על ברכת אرار הנגב נוחני" (יוושע ט טי) ביא שמעון民国.

"ונהנתת על גולה מי" (שם) אדום שאיב בל תורה大理石.

“And she answered, Give me a blessing for thou hast given me a south land” (Joshua 15:19), implying a house dry [devoid] of all goodness [money]; “give me also springs of water” (ibid), meaning a man in whom is nothing except Torah.

The Bavli explicates this by explaining her complaint concerning the Negev or south land as a house that is empty, dry, wiped (מנוגב) from all worldly goods. This implies that, because of her marriage to Othniel, she has no means of living. The second part of this sequence is more striking: The request of the biblical story (give me springs of water) is here to be understood as part of her appeal. The springs of water are explained as alluding to Othniel. This rabbinic argumentation is derived from a play on the word gulloth (springs) and geluyah (revealed). Therefore I suggest translating this part of the sentence in past tense as well: You gave me springs of water, meaning: you married me to Othniel. Thus, one might argue, Achsah does not only criticize her dowry or her economic situation, but the husband, who has no other values than his scholarship and hence is the reason for her grave situation. Spinning this further she questions the rabbinic ideal of Torah scholarship, for she argues that such a man cannot provide a livelihood. She could have said: One cannot live by Torah alone.

"וייתן לך כלב את גולה עליה ואת חותמה לתורה" (יוושע וי ט), אמר להם: מי שדר עליינינו החותמים בכסף ממון? [א] هل לי مليارרי עליינים?

החותמים ישתק ממון מון; [א] לי مليارרי עליינינו החותמים Shelley בכסף

ממון מון; [א] לי مليارרי עליינינו החותמים Shelley בכסף ממון מון.
“And he gave her the upper springs [gulloth] and the nether springs” (Joshua 15:19). He said to her: One to whom all the secrets of the upper and nether worlds are revealed, need one ask food from him?

In the last part of the midrash Caleb – or more to the point the Bavli – restores the “honour” of the Torah scholar: The biblical verse is to be read according to the Bavli as a rejection of Achsah’s complaint: Caleb gave his daughter through marriage everything she needed, and even more than she asked for (the upper and the lower gulloth he gave her), again alluding to a man to whom the Torah is revealed, meaning Othniel. According to the Bavli Caleb holds that a man to whom the Torah is revealed, who can restore the forgotten halakhot, needs no support. Against Achsah he maintains: The Torah itself provides for those who study its laws.42

Conclusion

In both Achsah-traditions water is very important. While water in the biblical tradition is a guaranty and symbol for fertility and having a share in the land, in the Bavli water is clearly a symbol for Torah. This different symbolism is connected to the different settings of the story in the Bavli and the Bible. Both Bible and Bavli portray Achsah as a practical, active woman who tries to secure the worldly needs of life. In the biblical text Achsah is certainly perceived as a positive role model or ideal of womanhood.43 While her request in the biblical story is obviously seen as justified and is granted, her complaint and demand in the Bavli is rejected by her father. Women complaining for not having enough food in the house or trying to provide a livelihood are not necessarily pictured only negatively in the Bavli. Following the interpretation of the Tosafot, that Achsah enabled Othniel to restore the halakhah, one might think of Rabbi Aqiva’s wife, who is a positive example for the rabbis of an active wife that enables her husband to learn Torah.44 In this specific aggadic tradition, however, Achsah’s efforts are not viewed unambiguously positive. Tzila Ratner is certainly right in her argument that the comparison of Achsah to a hungry donkey reduces her request to a dispute over “alimony”,45 but there is more to it: According to the rabbinic discussion, Achsah questions the choice of her fat her and the ideal of pure Torah scholarship by criticizing her husband Othniel. To the Bavli, however, this is not acceptable: First of all, it is an attack on the central rabbinic ideal of devotion to Torah and secondly, it might be seen as posing a threat to social order: a woman should not be seen criticizing her husband. The “rabbinisation” of
the biblical story through the shift of its setting from the occupation of the land to
the transmission of the oral law “automatically” reduces the space for a female
heroine: men study Torah, not women. Thus, the picture drawn in the Bavli is far
less positive and appealing than that in the Bible. I might tentatively formulate it
as follows: The biblical heroine Achsah is reduced in this reading of the Bavli
into a wrongfully complaining, demanding woman.

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1 This paper was originally presented at the SBL International Meeting in London in July 2011. I am thankful to Dr. Ronit Nikolsky and Prof. Sacha Stern for their remarks on this paper.
2 JOST, „Achsas Quellen“, 110.
3 The translation of Torah verses follows the gender-sensitive JPS translation, translation of other biblical texts according to the New JPS Translation (1985), if not otherwise mentioned.
4 Verse 17 according to JPS 1917.
7 KJV 1985.
8 JPS 1985.
9 NOLAN FEWELL, “Deconstructive Criticism,” 126.
10 Notice that this question is dealt with in a Midrash in Genesis Rabbah 60:3 and Leviticus Rabbah 37:4. In two of the four cases where men made improper vows or asked God for something in an improper way, the daughter is given as a reward for a military victory (Caleb, Saul). Although Achsah is mentioned in GenRab 60:3 and LevRab 37:4, she plays no active part in the topic under discussion: Othniel is the appropriate reward provided by God for Caleb, in spite of his inappropriate vow to give his daughter Achsah to “whoever smiteths Kiriath-Sepher” (it even might have been a slave). In the parallel version of the tradition in bTaanit 4a Caleb and Achsah are not mentioned.
Four asked indecently. Three were answered decently and one was answered indecently. And these are Eliezer Abraham’s slave, Caleb, Saul and Jephthah. […] Caleb said: “I will give my daughter Achsah in marriage to the man who attacks and captures Kiriath-Sepher” (Joshua 15:16). And had a slave captured it, would he have given him his daughter? The Holy One blessed be He answered him decently “Othniel the Kennizzite captured it” (Joshua 15:17) (GenR 60:3; translation ILAN Taanit, 78-79.).

11 Judges 1:14 Vulgata: quam pergentem in itinere monuit vir suus ut peteret a patre suo agrum quae cum suspirasset sedens asino dixit ei Chaleb quid habes; LXX: καὶ ἐγένετο ἐν τῷ εἰσπορεύεσθαι αὐτὴν καὶ ἐπέσεισεν αὐτὴν αιτήσαι παρὰ τοῦ πατρός αὐτῆς τὸν ἀγρὸν, καὶ ἐγόγγυεν ἐπάνω τοῦ ὑποζυγίου καὶ ἔκραξεν ἄτο τοῦ ὑποζυγίου Εἰς γῆν νότου ἐκδέδοσαί με. καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῇ Χαλέβ ὁΙ ἐστίν σου; Stuttgarter Erklärungsbibel to Joshua 15:18 and Judges 1:14 translates accordingly: „beredet er sie, zu fordern“.

12 Textus Graecus ex recensione Luciani; Joshua 15:18 καὶ ἐγένετο ἐν τῷ εἰσπορεύεσθαι αὐτὴν καὶ συνεβουλεύσατο αὐτῶν λέγοντας Αἰτήσομαι τὸν πατέρα μου ἀγρόν· καὶ ἔβοησεν ἐκ τοῦ ὑποζυγίου. καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῇ Χαλέβ ὁΙ ἐστίν σου;


14 Butler, Joshua, 180.


16 Knauf, Josua, 141, 143.


18 According to TgJon Achsah asks for an inheritance (אחסשתא). On the question of inheritance law in connection with Achsah see Fleishman, “A daughter’s Demand”.

19 Knauf, Josua, 143.

20 Butler, Joshua, 189, he points to Deuteronomy 28:1-4.

21 Gesenius: Joshua 15:19 “thou gavest me” the suffix must be regarded as a dative, although in such cases it may still be taken as an acc. (“to cause to receive”).

22 JPS 1985 explains: as a dry land, that is, without a dowry.

23 Accordingly: TgJon: יָרָא לָאָרָא דְּרֵמָא רְבֻגַא; LXX καὶ εἴπεν αὐτῷ Δός μοι εὐλογίαν, ὅτι εἰς γῆν Ναγεβ δέδωκας με· δός μοι τὴν Γολαθμαίαν. και ἐδωκεν αὐτῇ Χαλεβ τὴν Γολαθμαιν τὴν ἀνώ καὶ τὴν Γολαθμαιν τὴν κάτω; Vulgata 19 at illa respondit da mihi benedictionem terram austra-
lem et arentem dedisti mihi inuge et inriguam dedit itaque ei Chaleb inriguum superius et inferius; Tur Sinai “In das Trockenland hast Du mich vergeben”.

24 Accordingly: Butler, “because the land of the Negeb you have given me” (Butler, Joshua, 177); Zunz “denn dürres Land hast Du mir gegeben”.

25 Against Hertzberg who holds that the springs will belong to the tribe or clan of Othniel: “Die Wasserstellen werden dem Besitz Othniels zugeschlagen” (Hertzberg, Die Bücher Josua, Richter, Ruth, 98).

26 The translation of the Bavli is based on the Soncino Edition.

27 See explanatory note 32 to bTem 16a in the Schottenstein Edition of Bavli Temurah.

28 Ms Vatikan 119.

29 Mss Vatikan 120 and 119 (119: (לך)): "הלכו ספר קרית ומקי ספר לקרית ת" רש.

30 "משהarily נאמר כלב:_assigned:ת" רש: "ויפתח שאול רעכסה אתו ונתתי ואכה ספר קרית את נכלה אשר שיאמרו יפונה בן כלב חשיב לא מי אמי אל ש黼ט הכל בן פיון שלמה יא אמר כל קרית ספר הלכתי את התענית Tosafot to bTaan 4a: Three asked indecently – Eliezer, Shaul and Yehptah. And if you say: why not count Caleb ben Yephuneh who said: “I will give my daughter Achsah in marriage to the man who attacks and captures Kiriath-Sepher.” (Joshua 15:16) [among them]? Why not refute as here: “It could have been a mamzer or slave”? And to this it should be said: Because Caleb said that [if] the Holy One blessed be He give him someone who could restore the halakhot that had been forgotten during the mourning period over Moshe, than “I will give him my daughter Achsah,” and some interpret that because of this she was called Achsah, because whoever saw her was angry with his wife. And this is certainly because of her extraordinary chastity that they saw in her. And he relied on her merits, while his own merit ensured that she was coupled only according to her deeds, as is found in Sotah: (daf b) that they only couple a woman with a man according to his deeds (bSot 2a).

This commentary actually points to a quite different reading of the text: Achsah helped to make possible the restoration of the law.

35 Gesenius צנח to descend, to let oneself down, Judges 1:14, Joshua 15:18, also used of inanimate things: Judges 4:21 "it went down into the earth" (Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon, 1846).

36 רаш": צנחת לשב צווקת.

37 רashi": מנוב חרב ושב מכם תוב.

38 רashi": גולה מים התורה לכלור אום שהותרה גולה: 

39 Ms Vatican 119.

40 Ms Vatican 120.

41 Emendation follows Shitah Mekubezet § 10, Hagahot HaBach §4, Hagahot Hagra § 3.

42 רashi": בקוש מבו מונות דהיא ודא לא יצפרה דבח ה (משל ל) התהו


44 Bavli Nedarim 50a; Bavli Ketubbot 62b.

45 RATNER, “Playing Fathers’ Games,” 164.

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