

Lev. 18:9/11: Distinguishing Halfsisters and Stepsisters

Peter Schmidt, 2021

This write-up is meant to help make sense of two difficult verses in the Law.

Taking NIV11R as an example, Lev. 18:9/11 reads as follows:

⁹ Do not have sexual relations with your sister, either your father's daughter or your mother's daughter, whether she was born in the same home or elsewhere.

¹¹ Do not have sexual relations with the daughter of your father's wife, born to your father; she is your sister.

In that form, the text raises some questions:

- How do these two verses differ? Why is the “daughter of your father’s wife” mentioned again in v. 11? This case was already covered by the phrase “your father’s daughter or your mother’s daughter” in v. 9.
- Is “born to your father” in v. 11 not redundant, after the identification as “daughter of your father’s wife”?

The essentials on these verses are explained succinctly by Sklar (TOTC₂, 2013):

V. 9. This law forbids a man from having sexual relations with his blood *sister*, whether his *father's daughter* or his *mothers daughter*, whether she was born in the same home (and therefore obviously closely related) or lived elsewhere (such as a half-sister, whom the mother bore in the previous marriage but who stayed with her father’s household when her parents divorced; Wenham, 1979: 256). ...

V. 11. This law forbids a man from having *sexual relations with his stepsister* (the daughter of his father’s wife). The phrase *born to your father* (NIV) is better translated ‘brought up in your father’s family’ (ESV), which helps to distinguish this law from that of verse 9.

The table on p. 2 divides up the different cases that are addressed, and should help to keep them apart.

Comments

There are at least two questions to be answered before one can translate verse 9:

(1) What is the meaning of the word מוֹלֶדֶת *môledet* in verses 9 and 11?

(2) Does the phrase מוֹלֶדֶת בַּיִת אוֹ מוֹלֶדֶת חוּץ *môledet bayit ô môledet hûš* refer only to the phrase “your mother’s daughter”, or to the combined phrases “your father’s daughter or your mother’s daughter”?

Re: Question (1)

The meaning of the word מוֹלֶדֶת *môledet* in verses 9 and 11 is crucial to the understanding of these verses. ***môledet* means ‘kindred / relative’, i.e. being a clan member.** The ties are usually established through birth, but the present text can probably only be understood fully if we assume an extended meaning, namely **ties established through a second marriage**, when children move in to the same household.

Obviously, מוֹלֶדֶת *môledet* derives from the root ילד *yld* ‘bear’ etc. But this does not mean that “born” is the only possible meaning. The dictionaries seem to allow for the wider meaning ‘kindred / relative / clan’ that is adopted here, although they do not make a strong point on it. TWOT glosses ‘kindred, relatives’, and remarks: “Sometimes wrongly translated as “nativity” or “birth” [without further special comment in the article]. HALOT, while keeping the gloss ‘born’ for 18:9, does say ‘those who are related to the father’ for 18:11. NIDOTTE (# 3528, vol. 2, p. 459) does not discuss our question explicitly, but when talking about “native land” does mention the possibility of translating “kinfolk” in some places.

V. 9 – Halfsister	“daughter of your father” (from a different mother, i.e. second wife [whether or not the first has died] / concubine)		related by <i>consanguinity</i> (through blood ties); not eligible for marriage
	“daughter of your mother” (from a different father [previous marriage])	“kindred* of the home” (= belonging to the same household)	
		“kindred* of outside” (= belonging to another household, i.e. girl growing up with her own mother’s clan)	
V. 11 – Stepsister	“daughter of the wife of your father” (= stepmother’s daughter from previous marriage)	“kindred* of your father” (= belonging to the same household)	related by <i>affinity</i> (through marriage); not eligible for marriage
(Not mentioned:)		kindred of outside (= a stepsister who is brought up in her mother’s clan)	unrelated; therefore eligible for marriage[?]

* kindred = מוֹלֶדֶת *môledet*.

Wenham (NICOT, 1979) translates:

⁹ Do not have intercourse with your sister, your father’s daughter or your mother’s daughter, whether she belongs to local kindred or distant kindred.

¹¹ Do not have intercourse with your step-sister, if she belongs to your father’s kindred; she is your sister.

He explains:

“Your father’s daughter or your mother’s daughter.” A half-sister through a man’s mother presupposes an earlier marriage by his mother. In her first marriage the woman had a daughter. When she remarried her daughter could be brought up in her mother’s new home (“local kindred”) or left behind with her parents or brothers (“distant kindred”). No matter where her first daughter was brought up, any son by her second marriage could not marry her daughter. In other words “whether she belongs to local kindred or distant kindred” refers only to “your mother’s daughter.” “Your father’s daughter” would automatically be classed as local kindred, since she would grow up in her father’s home. ...

[on v. 11:] ... *if she belongs to your father’s kindred.* It is this last clause that leads most commentators and translators to suppose that a man’s half-sister as opposed to his step-sister is meant, for they take *kindred* (*môledet*) to mean “offspring, family, or birth.” But in Genesis *môledet* clearly defines a wider grouping than the nuclear family, including cousins. Perhaps “patrilineage” or “extended family” might be a suitable translation.

Hartley (WBC, 1992) sticks to the translation “born” and translates:

⁹ You shall not have sexual relations with your sister, either your father’s daughter or your mother’s daughter, whether she was born at home or elsewhere. ... ¹¹ You shall not have sexual relations with the daughter of your father’s wife, born of your father; she is your sister.

However, he goes with Wenham on v. 9. He comments:

The sister is further identified as born at home or abroad, either to his father or to his mother. The precise meaning of רחוק, “abroad, elsewhere,” is debated. Hoffmann (2:14), in accord with Jewish tradition (*b. Yebam. 23a*), takes this phrase to mean a blood sister born out of wedlock [i.e. of parents not legally married. PS], while Neufeld (*Ancient Hebrew Marriage Laws*, 197) understands that the law is identifying a stepdaughter who is brought up outside this family as a half sister, i.e., she is raised by her mother’s household. The dominant interpretation is that this is a daughter born to one’s mother in a previous marriage (cf. Porter, *The Extended Family*, 3). If this is the case, some posit that the father is living with this wife’s family, while others hold that the father took his new wife’s children into his household, and they became a part of his family unit. Bigger (*JBL* 98 [1979] 190), however, doubts that a family would let any daughters leave with their widowed mother because of their economic value. Though such an occurrence might have been rare, it is conceivable given the complexity of some family situations. Ruth, a Moabitess, accompanied Naomi, her mother-in-law, back to Israel (Ruth 1:16–22). Another position, advocated by Wenham (256) and Porter (*Leviticus*, 146), understands “abroad” to include a half sister who is brought up outside the home. This last position is the most favorable, for it interprets each phrase as having legal application. This law thus applies to both full sisters and half sisters. ...

11 There have been many attempts to discover how this law identifies a different relationship from those included by the law in v 9. Porter (*The Extended Family*, 16) observes that this law is straightforward and specific, while that in v 9 is composed to cover a wide range of circumstances. The dominant interpretation of this law is that a son may not have sexual relations with a girl born to his father by a woman other than his mother, including a concubine or a maid (e.g., Rashi, 82b; Keil and Delitzsch, 414–15; Hoffmann, 2:16; Porter, *Leviticus*, 146; Snaith, 86). The critical issue

for interpreting this law is a determination of the precise meaning of the phrase מולדת אביך, “one begotten of your father.” Does it identify only a consanguineous relationship (Bigger, *JBL* 98 [1979] 197), or is it used legally to identify a daughter born to one’s father’s wife in a former marriage and adopted by one’s father (Dillmann, 596; Neufeld, *Ancient Hebrew Marriage Laws*, 199; Kornfeld, 119)? The circuitous phrase בת־אשת אביך “daughter of your father’s wife,” in contrast to the direct phrase בת אביך, “your father’s daughter,” in the law in v 9, suggests that there is a significant difference in the sisters being identified. This phraseology favors the second alternative of the above question. If this interpretation is correct, the phrase מולדת אביך, “one begotten of your father,” plus the declaratory formula אהוּתך הוּא, “she is your sister,” means that a daughter born to a father’s wife in a previous marriage who accompanies her mother to one’s father’s house is both legally and socially one’s sister and must be treated as a full or a half sister.

Re: Question (2)

In translation, one can keep the ambiguity and so the answer is not as essential as for question (1). Nevertheless, one view makes more sense than the other.

V. 9 could be read in two ways:

Option 1

- (a) ... either your father’s daughter or your mother’s daughter,
- (b) whether of at home or of outside

Option 2

- (a) ... either your father’s daughter
- (b) or your mother’s daughter,
 - (α) whether of at home
 - (β) or of outside

In option 1, (a) would include half-sisters, and (b) stepsisters. But stepsisters are talked about in v. 11. It is unlikely that the same case is dealt with twice. Therefore, option 2 is more likely: v. 9 speaks of half-sisters then. The assumption is that if the father is the same, they live together (although this could be questioned), but if the mother is the same, there could be two scenarios: (α) the mother might have brought her earlier children with herself into the new home, or (β) those children are raised with the mother’s clan.

Translation

KJV, NASB, NET, NIV, NJPS, NLT, NRSV all speak of “born”. They cannot be recommended. The commentaries argue against them.¹ REB (“whether brought up in the family or in another home”) is quite nice, and GNT also has “brought up”, but both REB and GNT do not carry that over into v. 11. Furthermore, GNT has “stepsister” in v. 9, and “half sister” in v. 11, which is the other way round from the view presented here. (Arguably, it is more logical to deal with half sisters first, then with stepsisters. But this is not the main argument.)

Notably, ESV has it right. I see no other English version like it:

⁹ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your sister, your father’s daughter or your mother’s daughter, whether brought up in the family or in another home. ¹¹ You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father’s wife’s daughter, brought up in your father’s family, since she is your sister.

¹ Milgrom (*Leviticus 17–22*, AB, 2000) has not been quoted in detail here, but he translates *mōledet* with ‘clan’, and by and large argues similarly as the others above. He also points out that אֵשֶׁת אָבִיךָ (v. 11) means ‘stepmother’. Consequently, the following phrase מוֹלֶדֶת אָבִיךָ cannot mean “born of your father”.

FC97 is also a good model:

⁹ Vous ne devez pas avoir de relations avec votre demi-sœur, fille de votre père ou de votre mère, même si elle n'a pas été élevée dans le même foyer que vous.

English: You [plur.] must not have [sexual] relations with your halfsister, daughter of your father or of your mother, even if she was not raised in the same home as you.

¹¹ Vous ne devez pas avoir de relations avec la fille d'une femme de votre père; elle est apparentée à votre père, elle est donc votre sœur.

English: You [plur.] must not have [sexual] relations with the daughter of a wife of your father; she is related [by marriage / married-in] to your father, thus she is your sister.

FC97 is superior to ESV in regard to naturalness.

Note, however, that ESV and FC97 differ in that in v. 11, the questionable phrase מוֹלֶדֶת אֲבִיכָא *mōledet ābikā* is taken as part of the *definition of the case* (the protasis as it were) by ESV, but as part of the *consequence* (the apodosis as it were) by FC97. The latter probably misses the point: **it is the very purpose of this verse to make this distinction, namely to state that if the stepsister is raised in that man's father's home, she counts as his sister;** if she is *not* raised together with him, she counts as unrelated.²

I suggest this as a model:

⁹ You must not have intercourse with your halfsister, neither with a daughter of your father, nor with a daughter of your mother – whether she grew up in the same home as you or not.

¹¹ You must not have intercourse with your stepmother's daughter, if she was raised in your father's home [with you]; then she counts as your sister.

These two verses, then, are an example for how the commentators' wisdom has hardly been exploited for creating clear translations. Observing the above insights turns a confusing text into logical and straight instructions.

² Cf. the discussion of this issue in Milgrom, p. 1542.