Leviticus 24, which immediately follows the description of the holiday calendar in chapter 23, is divisible into three parts: in
verses 1-9, God tells Moses to command the Israelite to prepare olive oil for the tabernacle lamps that must be kept burning;
Aaron is responsible for maintaining the flame. In verses 5-9 the Israelites are assigned to prepare the “Bread of (the) Presence”
(לחם ha-panim) mentioned in Exodus 25:30, 35:13, and 39:36, here termed “loaves” [לחם/hallot], together with
incense for the tabernacle table, to be replaced every Shabbat. The priests may eat the bread that has been replaced as their
sacred portion. Then legislation is interrupted by a brief narrative, one of only two narratives in Leviticus:¹

---

¹ The other is the story of the demise of Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Abihu, in Leviticus 10.
² Jacob Milgrom, Leviticus 23-27, p. 2081.
³ Adapted from Herbert Chanan Brichto, The Problem of “Curse” in the Hebrew Bible, pp. 143-150.
⁴ Viz., the Ineffable Divine Name YHWH, which is an hypostasis of the deity. “Hypostasis” is a term used in philosophy and theology to denote the
essential part of a thing as distinguished from its attributes. The principal biblical hypostases are Name (שם/shem) and Face (פנים/panim).
⁵ Does קלל/qll denote imprecation or derision? Is the object of the half-Israelite’s curse/vilification God or the full-Israelite combatant?

---

The Blasphemer in Leviticus: A Marginal Figure

Alan Cooper, Elaine Ravich Professor of Jewish Studies
now his mother’s name was Shelomith, daughter of Dibri, of the tribe of Dan-

12and he was put in custody, (until) the decision of YHWH should be made clear to them.

13And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying:

14Take the blasphemer outside the camp; and have all who were within hearing lean their hands on his head; then have the whole community stone him.

15And to the Israelites speak thus: Anyone who curses his God shall bear his punishment;

16but if he (also) pronounces the name of YHWH he must be put to death. The whole community shall stone him; alien as well as citizen, if he has (thus) pronounced the Name, he must be put to death....
Moses spoke (thus) to the Israelites. And they took the blasphemer outside the camp and pelted him with stones. The Israelites did as YHWH had commanded Moses.

So Moses addressed the Israelites, whereupon they brought the derider outside the camp and stoned him [as YHWH had commanded Moses.]

How is the narrative related to the preceding laws about the tabernacle lamp and loaves of bread?

Isaac Abarbanel (b. Lisbon, 1407-1508), Commentary on Leviticus

In the previous sections, God commanded and admonished about protection of His Glory, so that they do not disparage it. God commanded about this to the Israelites with laws particular to them, and to priests and Levites with laws particular to them. Also, to Israelites, Levites and priests concerning the festivals [ch. 23], the kindling of the lamp, and the arrangement of the Bread of Presence on the holy table.

6 Milgrom states (p. 2102), “Law is inextricably bound to narrative—that is, the set of circumstances that engender it.” The general laws that emanate from the case of blasphemy “can never be dissociated from the narrative framework in which they are embedded.” That principle applies also to the stipulation regarding “alien and native,” obviously related in Leviticus 24 to the case of the half-Israelite, although the formula turns up often elsewhere.
The Blasphemer in Leviticus: A Marginal Figure

its table. The purpose of all of this was so that they would protect God’s Glory and not profane it. Therefore, scripture provided a practical lesson in law by way of a certain man who abused the Name. God commanded that he be stoned and reproved the Israelites for not killing him at once.

Concerning him it says, “the son of an Israelite woman went out,” meaning that he left protecting the Glory of God and went out to profane the Name: he departed from the Israelite collective and its admonitions…. And why was this section attached to the preceding ones (viz., about the oil and bread)? Our sages said (Leviticus Rabba 32:3) that he took issue with the preceding section. They meant, he mocked the Bread of Presence because the priests would eat it after no less than nine days, unlike the Egyptians, who would eat only warm unleavened cakes every day. That explains the connection.

The continuation of Leviticus Rabba 32:3, cited by Rashi and many other commentators, provides another explanation of the half-Israelite’s “going out”:

7 The lamp and bread in the Tabernacle are holy symbols of divine Presence, standing for divine illumination and sustenance, respectively. The roots קלל/qll and כבד/kbd are antonyms, with base meanings “to be light” and “to be heavy,” respectively.

8 The midrash does not mention Egyptians. Rather, it is the way of the “king” to have “warm” (=fresh) bread every day rather than bread that has gone stale after more than a week on the table.

Alan Cooper, Elaine Ravich Professor of Jewish Studies
Rabbi Ḥiyya taught, he came out [bearing a grudge] related to family affiliation. He had gone to pitch his tent in the camp of the tribe of Dan. They said to him, “By what right do you pitch your tent in Dan?” He told them, “I am from one of the daughters of the tribe of Dan.” They said to him: “It is written ‘each with his standard, under the banners of their father’s house’ (Numbers 2:2)—not their mother’s!” He entered Moses’ judicial court and came out in the wrong. Then he stood up and blasphemed.

Who was the half-Israelite man?

Leviticus Rabba 32:4

Our Rabbis and R. Levi differ on the interpretation. Our Rabbis say, although there were no bastards among them at that time, he was a bastard. R. Levi says he clearly was a bastard. How so? The taskmasters were Egyptians, and the officers were Israelites. One taskmaster oversaw ten officers, and one officer oversaw ten men. Thus, a taskmaster had charge of a hundred men.

On one occasion a taskmaster paid an early visit to an officer and said to him, “Go and assemble your crew for me.” When he entered, the officer’s assistant said to him, “Why do you pay me such respect?” He answered him, “On my father’s command, I made him officer, and my father is dead.”

Alan Cooper, Elaine Ravich Professor of Jewish Studies
wife smiled at him. He thought, “She is mine!” So, he went out and hid behind a ladder. As soon as her husband left, he entered and seduced her. The officer turned around and saw the taskmaster leaving the house. When the taskmaster realized that he had seen him, he went to him and kept beating him all day, saying, “Work hard, work hard!” with the intention of killing him.

Just then the Holy Spirit stirred in Moses, as it says, “he looked this way and that” (Exodus 2:12). What is “this way and that”? That he saw what the taskmaster had done to the officer in the house and in the field. He thought, it’s not enough that he has seduced his wife, but he also seeks to kill him! Immediately, “When he saw that there was no man, [he killed the Egyptian]” (ibid.) .... R. Judah says, no one stood up zealously on behalf of the Name of the Holy One, so he killed him [himself]. Rabbi Nehemiah says, he saw that there was no one to stand up and invoke the Name over him, so he killed him [himself].... Our Rabbis say, he saw that there was no prospect of anything good emanating from him or from his children, or from his children's children to the end of all generations, so he “killed the Egyptian” at once....

Conclusion: the half-Egyptian man in Leviticus 24 was the bastard(?) offspring of an Israelite woman and the Egyptian taskmaster who was killed by Moses. The murder weapon, as it were, was the Ineffable Name.
What was the man’s personal status?

Ramban (Gerona, 1194-1270), *Commentary on the Torah*

“Son of an Israelite mother, and an Israelite man” teaches that when a non-Jew has sex with an Israelite woman, the offspring is not Israelite, even though the *gemara* rules (*Yevamot* 45b) that when a non-Jew has sex with an Israelite woman, the offspring is *kasher* whether the woman was single or married. They said, however, that the offspring is contaminated and disqualified from priesthood. And moreover, he is not an Israelite with respect to lineage and land inheritance. When it says in the *Sifra* (14:1) that “among the Israelites” teaches that he converted, it is not that he required conversion. Rather, they meant to say that he followed the way of his mother and attached himself to Israel. He did not want to follow his father to be an Egyptian.
What about the mother, who, unlike the two anonymous combatants, is named?

Abraham Saba (Castile, 1440-1508), *Tzeror ha-mor*

The sages said (*Leviticus Rabba* 32:5), she was one of a kind and scripture identified her, saying, “the name of his mother was Shelomith bat Dibri of the tribe of Dan,” because already in Egypt, the tribe of Dan had begun to go backwards rather than forward. Thus, it says “they shall march last” (Numbers 2:31), because the idolator goes to the rear and not to the front. Just as in Egypt they began in harlotry, it continued with Samson, who was a Danite, saying to his father, “Get me that one, for she is the one that pleases me” (Judges 14:3) from of old. She is idolatry, as it is written, “[they] espoused daughters of alien gods” (Malachi 2:11). Later, the golden calves, one of them placed in Dan (1 Kings 12:29), and the idol of Micah (Judges 18-19). It all derived from Shelomith bat Dibri of the tribe of Dan. You know that the initial error corrupts subsequent acts and cannot be repaired by deliberations, as it says,9 “If...this is how they have begun to act, then nothing that they may propose to do will be out of their reach” (Genesis 11:6). Therefore, this son was drawn after his Egyptian father.

9 Referring to the builders of the Tower of Babel.
The Blasphemer in Leviticus: A Marginal Figure

What does it mean to נקב/nqb the name?\(^\text{10}\) (Tzeror ha-mor)

When it says, “the son of the Israelite woman נקב the Name,” as the sages said (Sanhedrin 56a), it is like, “And he pierced a hole in its lid (dalto)” (2 Kings 12:10). In this way, he committed heresy, turning the One [זא始め=God] into Other [אחר], as it says, “you must not bow to an Other God” (Exodus 34:14). The meaning of “the son of the woman נקב” is that he pierced a hole in the letter dalet of אהד and made it into אחר.

Why did the half Israelite נקב the Name? (Tzeror ha-mor)

Whence did this come to him? They said in “Secrets of Torah” (Zohar 3:106a) that his father was the Egyptian Moses killed in Egypt, as it says, “he killed the Egyptian” (Exodus 2:12) and “Do you mean to kill me [as you killed the Egyptian?]” (2:14), from which we learn that Moses killed him with the Ineffable Name. This matter was kept secret among the Israelites, as it says, “he hid him in the sand” (2:12). You know that it is characteristic of Israelites that if one knows that his fellow killed someone, should they get into an argument he will reveal what he knows and what he doesn’t.

The base meaning of נקב/nqb is “bore, pierce, perforate,” from which “specify, name, distinguish” are derived. The widespread translation “blaspheme” depends on the assumption that נקב is an alternative for קבב/qbb (e.g., Numbers 23:8, 11), which does mean “curse, blaspheme, execrate.”

Alan Cooper, Elaine Ravich Professor of Jewish Studies
know. When it says here, “they struggled in the camp,” perhaps the [full-Israelite] said to the [half-Israelite], “stop your prattling¹¹ and go after the afflictions and abominations of your Egyptian father, whom Moses killed with the Ineffable Name.” When he heard this, “the son of the Israelite woman pronounced the Name” that had killed his father. For he said, “how can God have left the place of mercy to requite the sin of my father by killing him,” and then “he pronounced the Name.” Why did he continue to vilify? Perhaps when he knew that Moses was the perpetrator, he vilified Moses too. This is hinted at in his saying the Name [השם/ ha-shem] which spells Moses [משה/Mosheh] when the letters are reversed.