

*Bible in  
History*

*John T. Willis*

*Yahweh and Moses in Conflict*

*The Role of Exodus 4:24–26 in the Book of Exodus*

*Peter Lang*

## *Yahweh and Moses in Conflict*

# *Bible in History*

*Bible in History* focuses on biblical interpretation in different ages and countries and is a series dedicated to studies of biblical exegesis as well as to research about principles of interpretation relevant to interpreters of the Bible. The series is open to studies focusing on philological and theological aspects of particular Bible passages but it also welcomes publications in the field of history of biblical interpretation that study the development of new ideas and their impact on the interpretation of the text. Editions of textual variants as well as of influential old and modern commentaries are also within the scope of this series.

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## Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ABC	The Abingdon Bible Commentary
ABD	D. N. Freedman et al. (eds.), Anchor Bible Dictionary
ACEBT	Amsterdamse Cahiers voor Exegese en Bijbelse Theologie
AfP	Archiv für Papyrusforschung
ANF	The Ante-Nicene Fathers
Anth	Anthropos
BBB	Bonner Biblische Beiträge
BCBC	Believers Church Bible Commentary
BETL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium
Bib	Biblica
BIS	Biblical Interpretation Series
BK	Bibel und Kirche
BKAT	Biblischer Kommentar, Altes Testament
BN	Biblische Notizen
BOT	De Boeken van het Oude Testament
BPl	Bibliothèque de la Pléiade
BRev	Bible Review
BSac	Bibliotheca Sacra
BSC	Bible Student's Commentary
BWANT	Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CAT	Commentaire de l'Ancien Testament
CB	The Century Bible
CBC	Cambridge Bible Commentary
CBiPa	Cahiers de Biblia Patristica
Cent	Centaurus
col(s).	column(s)



ConsJ	Conservative Judaism
CrCur	Cross Currents
CV	Communio Viatorum
DB	Dictionnaire de la Bible
DBAT	Dielheimer Blätter zum Alten Testament
diss.	dissertation
DSD	Dead Sea Discoveries
EBC	The Eerdmans Bible Commentary
EC	Epworth Commentaries
EI	Eretz Israel
Enc	Encounter
ERE	The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics
EsBib	Essais Bibliques
ETL	Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses
ETR	Études théologiques et religieuses
EvT	Evangelische Theologie
Exod. Rab.	Exodus Rabbah
ExpTim	Expository Times
Frg. Tg.	Fragmentary Targum
FOTL	Forms of the Old Testament Literature
FRLANT	Forschung zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
GBSOT	Guides to Biblical Scholarship, Old Testament
GDBL	Gads Danske Bibel Leksikon
HAR	Hebrew Annual Review
HAT	Handbuch zum Alten Testament
HCOT	Historical Commentary on the Old Testament
HKAT	Handkommentar zum Alten Testament
HS	Hebrew Studies
HSAT	Die Heilige Schrift des Alten Testamentes
HUCA	Hebrew Union College Annual
IB	Interpreter's Bible
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
IDB	Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible
Imm	Immanuel
ISBEFR	International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Fully Revised

ITC	International Theological Commentary
JAB	Journal of the Aramaic Bible
JBC	The Jerome Biblical Commentary
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
JBQ	The Jewish Bible Quarterly
JE	The Jewish Encyclopedia
JNES	Journal of Near Eastern Studies
JNSL	Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages
JPSTC	The Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series
JSOT	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series
Jub.	Jubilees
Jud	Judaica
KEHAT	Kurzgefasstes exegetisches Handbuch zum Alten Testament
KHCAT	Kurzer Hand-commentar zum Alten Testament
LBBC	The Layman's Bible Book Commentary
LBC	The Layman's Bible Commentary
LTJ	Lutheran Theological Journal
Mekh.	Mekhilta
NAC	The New American Commentary
NBC	The New Bible Commentary
NCamBC	New Cambridge Bible Commentary
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
Ned.	Nedarim
NIB	The New Interpreter's Bible
NIBC	New International Biblical Commentary
NIDB	The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible
NIVAC	The NIV Application Commentary
NJBC	The New Jerome Biblical Commentary
NPNF	The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers
NTS	New Testament Studies
OBO	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis
OTE	Old Testament Essays
OTL	The Old Testament Library

OTS	Oudtestamentische Studien
OTSSA	Old Testament Society of South Africa
POT	De Prediking van het Oude Testament
PSS	Psychoanalytical Study of Society
R.	Rabbi
RB	Revue Biblique
REES	Revue des Études Ethnographiques et Sociologiques
RevistB	Revista Biblica
RGG	Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart
SBLSS	Society of Biblical Literature Semeia Studies
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
SBU2	Svenskt Bibliskt Uppslagsverk, 2 <sup>nd</sup> ed., I. Engnell (ed.)
SC	Sources Chrétiennes
SEAJT	South East Asia Journal of Theology
SIJD	Schriften des Institutum Judaicum Delitzschianum
SP-B	Studia Post-Biblica
StB	La Sainte Bible
TANZ	Texte und Arbeiten zum neutestamentlichen Zeitalter
TBT	The Bible Today
TDOT	Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament
TeU	Tekst en Uitleg
Tg. Neof.	Targum Neofiti I
Tg. Onq.	Targum Onqelos
Tg. Ps.-J.	Targum Pseudo-Jonathan
ThB	Theologische Bücherei
TLZ	Theologische Literaturzeitung
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
TRE	Theologische Realenzyklopädie
TZ	Theologische Zeitschrift
UBSMS	United Bible Societies Monograph Series
VB	Verklaring van een Bijbelgedeelte
VT	Vetus Testamentum
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WC	Westminster Commentaries
WestBC	Westminster Bible Companion
ZÄS	Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde
ZAW	Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
ZRGG	Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte

# Introduction

## Purposes of This Study

Exod 4:24-26 is a tiny pericope tucked away in a narrative which begins by describing the migration of Jacob and his descendants from Canaan to Egypt (Exod 1:1-7) and concludes by relating Yahweh's liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian oppression and the songs of Moses and the Israelites and of Miriam and the women of Israel praising Yahweh for this deliverance (Exod 14:21-15:21). This three-verse pericope relates an incident involving Moses and his family at a lodging place in the wilderness as they traveled from Midian to Egypt in order for Moses to carry out Yahweh's commission to lead the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery. For two thousand years or more, Jewish and Christian thinkers and scholars have attempted to explain the meaning and significance of this small passage. The present work represents an attempt to accomplish several goals relevant to biblical scholarship, especially scholarship of the Hebrew Bible.

First, this study seeks to categorize the different uses and interpretations of Exod 4:24-26. The advantage of this endeavor is to identify the thinkers who espouse each view, and thus indicate how long a certain use or understanding of this text has existed as well as how earlier scholars have influenced the views of later scholars.

Second, this study strives to present in as much detail as necessary the 'sequence of argumentation' employed by each scholar as that scholar presents it in his/her work. This enterprise attempts to avoid certain pitfalls: (a) as much as possible, it endeavors to let each scholar speak for himself/herself rather than providing a summary which reflects more the impression of the one reading and interpreting any given position rather than the lines of thought of the scholar being investigated; (b) it demonstrates that while scholars agree and overlap on one detail or another, their overall understandings of a text or context or word or phrase or concept diverge significantly, making it very difficult to reduce

any scholar to a 'stereotyped' position reflected by a 'cluster' of scholars.

Third, this study endeavors to demonstrate that the use and/or interpretation of a biblical text is inseparably connected to the culture, social and/or religious setting, and historical time period in which it was proposed, as well as the background, agenda, and politico-religious pressures or influences impacting the scholar under consideration.

Fourth, this study tries to show that a scholar's interpretation of a biblical text (in this case, Exod 4:24-26) depends on the approach or approaches which that scholar is using in dealing with that text. One's presuppositions (whether he/she is conscious of these or not) have a direct bearing on how he/she interprets a certain biblical text. For example, if one interprets Exod 4:24-26 as a very ancient (non-Israelite? Midianite?) story or legend which a later writer or editor incorporated into his work, which ultimately the redactor(s) of the Pentateuch included in the present book of Exodus, he/she will probably interpret the text in one way. However, if one interprets Exod 4:24-26 as a part of the narrative in Exod 1:1-15:21 as the text now stands, he/she will probably interpret the text in an entirely different way.

Fifth, this study advocates that diversity in interpreting scripture, in presuppositions held by biblical exegetes, in approaches used to determine the meaning of scripture, and in ways of understanding and applying biblical texts is inevitable and desirable. Indeed, it functions positively to help defenders of each view comprehend the strengths and weaknesses of their own positions and the positions of others.

Finally, in view of these considerations, the present writer proposes a particular understanding of Exod 4:24-26. This pericope is part of a much larger narrative context in its present final form. Hence, the first responsibility is to attempt to determine the role and function in this passage in that context. The final section of this book offers an explanation of this text and how it fits in its larger narrative.

In the course of arriving at this conclusion, this book organizes various views of Exod 4:24-26 throughout the centuries. After presenting the text of this passage in the MT and relevant ancient versions, this work first discusses early rabbinic treatments of this pericope. Sequentially, it will deal with usages and interpretations of Exod 4:24-26 by the early Church Fathers, medieval thinkers, and pre-critical scholars and expositors. Modern critical interpreters, beginning approximately with

J. Wellhausen, have proposed a wide variety of understandings of this passage. For the sake of organization, this study categorizes these views according to critical methods or approaches. Tracing these methods or approaches historically, this investigation discusses textual criticism [including lexicography, syntax], source criticism, form and tradition-historical criticism, historical criticism, redaction criticism, rhetorical criticism, intertextuality, social-scientific criticism, structural criticism, psychological criticism, ideological criticism, narrative criticism, discourse analysis, literary criticism, canonical criticism, theological criticism, reader [reader response] criticism and feminist criticism. Each section describes each criticism and discusses the ways various scholars have applied that criticism to Exod 4:24-26. In several cases, more than one method or approach comes into play, as the discussion makes clear.

As the various interpretations of Exod 4:24-26 make clear, some of these approaches or methods deal with this text in isolation from its surrounding context, while others attempt to understand this pericope in the broader context of its meaning and function in the larger narrative. The reader must know that the present writer favors the current movement toward appreciating and interpreting biblical texts as smaller portions of their larger contexts, sections, books, and canon. Accordingly, my bias inclines toward redaction criticism, rhetorical criticism, narrative criticism, literary criticism, theological criticism, and canonical criticism. While taking this stance, I hold diverse views in the highest regard, and desire to appreciate and extol other views.

## Textual Critical Issues

Textual criticism is fundamental to all biblical interpretation. All scholars are compelled to use textual criticism in some way or other, because only copies or copies of copies of biblical texts are available, since no alleged autographs existed. Ancient manuscripts contain problems in the text which thoughtful researchers must examine and strive to resolve. Even the ancient Masoretes adopted their own textual readings when faced with difficult problems. Its purpose is to attempt to recover the original text of each biblical passage. In order to attempt to determine

the meaning of a text, philology, syntax, and intertextual text [ancient Near Eastern and biblical] are essential. Accordingly, textual critical issues have a direct bearing on the meaning of Exod 4:24-26 irrespective of a view under consideration.<sup>1</sup>

The Masoretic Text (MT) and major ancient versions of Exod 4:24-26 read as follows in English translation.

MT [BHS]:

24 וַיְהִי בַדֶּרֶךְ בַּמֶּלֶךְ וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ יְהוָה וַיִּבְקֹשׁ הַמִּיתוֹ  
 25 וַתִּקַּח צִפּוֹרָה צֹר וַתִּכְרֹת אֶת־עֶרְלַת בְּנָהּ וַתַּנֵּעַ לְרַגְלָיו וַתֹּאמֶר  
 כִּי חֲתָן־דָּמִים אָתָּה לִי  
 26 וַיֵּרָק מִמֶּנּוּ אִזּוֹ אָמְרָה חֲתָן דָּמִים לְמוֹלֵת

English Translation:

24. And it came to pass on the way at the lodging place that Yahweh met him and sought to put him to death.
25. And Zipporah took a flint and cut off the foreskin of her son and touched his feet, and she said: 'Truly a bridegroom of blood are you to me.'
26. And he left him alone. Then she said, 'A bridegroom of blood for the circumcisions.'

Septuagint (LXX):

- 24 Ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ ἐν τῷ καταλύματι συνήνητησεν αὐτῷ ἄγγελος κυρίου καὶ ἐζήτει αὐτὸν ἀποκτείνειν
- 25 καὶ λαβούσα Σεπφώρα ψῆφον περιέτεμεν τὴν ἄκροβυστίαν τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτῆς καὶ προσέπεσεν πρὸς τοὺς πόδας καὶ εἶπεν Ἔσθι τὸ αἷμα τῆς περιτομῆς τοῦ παιδίου μου
- 26 καὶ ἀπῆλθεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ, διότι εἶπεν Ἔσθι τὸ αἷμα τῆς περιτομῆς τοῦ παιδίου μου

1 E. Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Biblical Hebraica* (trans. E. F. Rhodes; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979); J. Weingreen, *Introduction to the Critical Study of the Text of the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1982); P. K. McCarter, Jr., *Textual Criticism: Recovering the Text of the Hebrew Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); E. Tov, 'Textual Criticism (OT),' *ABD* 6 (1992) 393-412.

English translation:

24. And it came to pass on the way in the lodging, an angel of the Lord met him and sought to kill him.
25. And Zipporah, having taken a pebble [stone], circumcised the foreskin of her son and fell at the [his] feet and said, ‘The blood of the circumcision of my child has stood firm [stopped?].’
26. And he departed from him, because she said, ‘The blood of the circumcision of my child has stood firm [stopped?].’

### Syriac Peshitta:

[illegible]

English Translation:

24. And it came to pass that Moses was on the journey at the caravansary (lodging for the night), and the Lord attacked him and sought to kill him, namely, Moses.
25. And Zipporah took a stone and cut off the foreskin of her son, and she laid hold of his feet and she said: 'A bridegroom [relative by marriage] of blood are you to me.'
26. And he left him at the time she said: 'A bridegroom [relative by marriage] of blood' concerning the circumcision.

Vulgate:

24. Cumque esset in itinere, in deversorio, occurrit ei Dominus et volebat occidere eum.
25. Tulit ilico Sephora acutissimam petram, et circumcidit praeputium filii sui tetigitque pedes eius et ait: Sponsus sanguinum tu mihi es.
26. Et dimisit eum postquam dixerat: sponsus sanguinum ob circumcisionem.



## English Translation:

24. Whenever he was on the way, in a lodging, the Lord attacked him and wanted to kill him.
25. Immediately Zipporah brought forth a sharpened stone, and circumcised the foreskin of her son and she touched his feet and said: A bridegroom of bloods are you to me.
26. And he let him go when she said: A bridegroom of bloods because of the circumcision.

## Tg. Onq:

- 24 וְהוּהוּ בְּאוֹרְחָא בְּבֵית מִבְתָּא וְאָרַע בֵּיה מִלְאכָא דִּי וּבִעָא  
לְמִקְטִילָהּ
- 25 וְנִסִּיבַת צִפּוֹרָה טִינְרָא וְגִזְרַת יֵת עוֹרֶלֶת בְּרָה וּקְרִיבַת  
לְקַדְמוּחֵי וְאָמַרְתָּ בְּדַמָּא דְּמַהוּלְתָּא הָדִין אֲתִיבָה חֲתָנָא לְנָא
- 26<sup>2</sup> וְנַח מִינִיהּ בְּכֵן אָמַרְתָּ אֵילּוּלֵי דְּמָא דְּמַהוּלְתָּא הָדִין  
אֲתִיבָה חֲתָנָא קְטוּל

## English Translation:

24. And it came to pass on the way at the lodging place that the angel of the Lord met him and sought to kill him.
25. And Zipporah took a stone and cut off the foreskin of her son, and she drew near to him and said: 'By the blood of this circumcision may my husband be restored to us.'
26. And he left him alone because she said: 'Had it not been for the blood of this circumcision, my husband would have incurred death (merited execution).'

## Tg. Ps.-J.:

- 24 וְהוּהוּ בְּאוֹרְחָא בְּבֵית אֲבִתּוּתָא וְאָרַע בֵּיה מִלְאכָא דִּי וּבִעָא  
לְמִיקְטִילָהּ מִן בְּגִלְל גְּרִשׁוּם בְּרִיה דְּלָא הוּה גַּחִיר עַל עֵיסַק  
יִתְרוֹ חֲמוּי דְּלָא שְׁבָקִיה לְמַגְזִרְיָה בְּדָם אֲלִיעֶזֶר הוּה גִּזְר  
בְּתַנְאָה דְּאֲתַנְיִי תְרוּוִיָּהוּן

2 מקראות גדולות (New York: Pardes, 1951), 20-21; A. Sperber, *The Bible in Aramaic. I. The Pentateuch according to Targum Onkelos* (Leiden: Brill, 1959) 94-95.

25 ונסִיבת צפורה טִינרא וגזרת ית ערלת גרשום ברה ואקריבת  
 ית גזירת מהולתה לריגוי דמלאך חבלא ואמרת חתנא  
 בעא למזגור וחמוי עכיב עלוי וכדון אדם גוזרתא  
 הדין יכפר על חתנא דילי  
 26<sup>3</sup> ופסק מלאך חבלא מיניה בכך שבחת צפורה ואמרת מה  
 חביב הוא אדם גוזרתא הדין דשויב ית חתנא מן ידוי  
 דמלאך חבלא

English Translation:

24. At a lodging place on the way the angel of the Lord met him and sought to kill him because of Gershom, his son, who had not been circumcised on account of Jethro, his father-in-law, who had not allowed him to circumcise him. But Eliezer had been circumcised according to an agreement which they had made between them.
25. Then Zipporah took a flint-stone and cut the foreskin of Gershom, her son, and brought the circumcised foreskin to the feet of the Destroying Angel and said: 'The bridegroom wanted to circumcise, but the father-in-law prevented him. And now may the blood of this circumcision atone for my husband.'
26. And the Destroying Angel left him alone. Then Zipporah praised (God) and said: 'How precious is the blood of this circumcision that saved the bridegroom from the hands of the Destroying Angel.'<sup>4</sup>

Tg. Neof.:

24 והוה באורחא בבית אבתותא וארע יתיה מלאכא מן  
 קדם ייי ובעה למקטל יתיה  
 25 ונסרת צפורה טנרא וגזרת ית עורלתא דברא וקרבת  
 לרגלוי דמחבלה ואמרת ארום חתנא בעא למגזור

3 E. G. Clarke, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of the Pentateuch: Text and Concordance* (Hoboken: KTAV, 1984).

4 M. Maher, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Exodus*. Vol. 2 of The Aramaic Bible (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1994) 172-73.

וחמוי לא שבק יתיה וכפר כען אדם גזירתה הדא  
 על חובוי דחתניה הדין  
 26<sup>5</sup> וארפי מיניה מלאכא בכדן שבחת צפורה ואמרתה מה  
 חביב דם [גזירת] הדא דשיזב לחתניה הדין מידא  
 דמלאך מותא

English Translation:

24. And it happened on the way, in the resting-house, that an angel from before the Lord overtook him and sought to kill him.
25. And Zipporah took a flint and circumcised the foreskin of her son, and brought it near the feet of the destroyer and said: 'In truth the bridegroom sought to circumcise, but his father-in-law did not permit him. And now may the blood of this circumcision atone for the sins of this bridegroom.'
26. And the angel let him go from him. And Zipporah gave praise and said: 'How beloved is this blood which has delivered this bridegroom from the hand of the angel of death.'<sup>6</sup>

Frg. Tg.:

25. ותקח ונסיבת צפורה טינרא ונורת ית עורלתא דברה  
 ואקריבת יתיה קדם ריגלוי דמחבלא ואמר <ת> חתנא  
 בעא למימר וחמוי לא שבק יתיה וכדון יכפר אדם  
 גזירה הדא די ישיחב לחתנא מן ידוי דמלאך מותא  
 26. וירף וכד ארפי מ ל חבלא מיניה בכדן שבחת צפורה  
 ואמרת מא תקוף הוא אדם גזורתא הדא די שיזיב  
 לחתנא הדין מן ידוי דמלאך מותא

English Translation:

24. [Not preserved].
25. And she took: And Zipporah took a flint-stone and cut off the foreskin of her son, and brought it near the feet of the de-

5 A. D. Macho, *Neophyti: I: Targum Palestinense ms de la Biblioteca Vaticana: Exodo* (2 vols; Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Cientificas, 1968-79).

6 R. Hayward, *Targum Neofiti 1: Exodus*. Vol 2 of The Aramaic Bible (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1994) 24-25.

stroyer, and <she> said: 'The bridegroom [Moses] wanted to circumcise, but his father-in-law [Jethro] did not allow him to; and now may the blood of this circumcision atone, so that it might rescue the bridegroom from the hands of the Angel-of-Death.'

26. And he let up: And when the destroyer let him go, Zipporah then sang praise, and said: 'How strong is this circumcisional blood, that it rescued this bridegroom from the hands of the Angel-of-Death.'<sup>7</sup>

The MT of Exod 4:24-26 presents several problems.

1. Whom did Yahweh meet [attack] and seek to kill? Exod 4:24 does not identify the direct object of the verbs 'met' and 'kill.' Is it Moses, his older son Gershom, his younger son Eliezer, or someone else?
2. Why did Yahweh apprehend this individual and wish to kill him? If this individual was Moses, as the flow of the narrative in the book of Exodus seems to suggest, why did Yahweh commission Moses to return to Egypt to carry out the mission Yahweh had given him to lead the Israelites out of bondage (Exod 3:1-4:17), and assure him that those who were seeking his life for killing the Egyptian (Exod 2:11-15) were dead (Exod 4:19); then, while Moses was on his way back to Egypt, attack him and seek to kill him (Exod 4:24)? Or, if the individual Yahweh sought to kill was one of Moses' sons, what was wrong with that child, or what had Moses or Zipporah done to arouse Yahweh's anger and motivate him to want to kill the child?
3. How did Zipporah know what to do to keep Yahweh from killing her husband or one of her sons?
4. Whose 'feet' (legs, genitals) did Zipporah touch with the bloody foreskin she had just cut off (Moses'? one of Moses' son's? Yahweh's?), and what was the significance of this act?
5. What does Zipporah's statement at the end of vv 25 and 26 mean? How is one to translate her statement? How is this statement connected to her acts of circumcising her son and touching (someone's) 'feet' (legs, genitals) with his bloody foreskin?

7 The Hebrew text, respectively, is from M. L. Klein, *The Fragment-Targums of the Pentateuch According to their Extant Sources. Volume I. Texts, Indices and Introductory Essays* (AnBibl 76; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1980) 36.

6. How is the hearer or reader to understand and evaluate Exod 4:24-26 in the flow of the narrative in the book of Exodus (in the Pentateuch)?

The various translations and interpretations of the ancient versions complicates the meaning of this text. Basic to interpretation are textual critical considerations: philology, etymology, morphology, grammar, semantics, and syntax. Every explanation of Exod 4:24-26 has some bearing or other on these aspects of this method.

From the third century B.C.E. (the translation of the LXX) to the present time, Jewish and Christian thinkers have proposed several answers to these questions. In these proposals, at least two important particulars become clear. On the one hand, those who struggle to understand this text attach two or more meanings to it. The combination of understandings of this passage varies from thinker to thinker and from scholar to scholar, and the sequence of thought of each thinker and scholar differs. Rather than attempt to reduce the various proposals to neatly arranged categories, it seems only fair to present each thinker's or scholar's viewpoint as closely to that thinker's or scholar's sequence of thought as possible. Thus, this study inevitably reports the same or similar positions which appear several times in the historical survey of viewpoints on Exod 4:24-26, and seeks to follow the sequence of thought of each thinker and scholar as closely as possible. One result of this study has discovered that diligent scholarly pursuit of difficult problems in this passage often eludes significant issues.

The purpose of the present work is to offer a history of the treatments and interpretations of Exod 4:24-26, beginning with the early Jewish rabbis, then discussing relevant works of the early Church Fathers and medieval thinkers, and, in modern times, describe and evaluate critical methods and approaches applied to scholarly research in the past 150 years. Finally, the writer proposes his own interpretation of this difficult text.

## Noncommittal Commentators and Contributors

Before launching into a study of the history and interpretation of Exod 4:24-26, at some point, the reader will come to realize that some scholars choose to refuse to take a position on the meaning of this text, or allude to this text in dealing with a certain subject pertaining to an idea in this passage. Thus, before attempting to categorize the various interpretations of this text, this section describes relevant scholars who have dealt with Exod 4:24-26 in noncommittal ways.

Exod 4:24-26 bristles with difficulties. This is without doubt the most obscure passage in the book of Exodus. A. Bertholet, R. E. Murphy, T. C. Mitchell, J. P. Hyatt, E. Isaac, W. Dumbrell, O. Betz, N. A. van Uchelen, M. Görg, T. Pippin and G. Aichele, and A. Herbst do not attempt to explain its meaning or its function in the narrative.<sup>8</sup>

A. Bertholet [very similarly O. Betz] does not offer an interpretation of Exod 4:24-26. He remarks that the use of stone instruments to perform circumcision (Exod 4:25; Josh 5:2) suggests circumcision goes back to the Stone Age. He asserts that in early human history, people circumcised boys at puberty, so circumcision was a puberty rite. Originally it was connected with marriage, as Exod 4:25 and Gen 34:14ff, and the word *ḥātān*, meaning 'bridegroom,' show. Some trace circumcision back to Joshua's act to roll away the contempt of the circumcised Egyptians from the Israelites (Josh 5:2ff), while others trace it back to Abraham (Gen 17:10ff). The full meaning of circumcision as a 'sign of the

8 T. C. Mitchell, 'The Meaning of the Noun *ḥtn* in the Old Testament,' *VT* 19 (1969) 93-112; J. P. Hyatt, 'Circumcision,' *IDB* 1 (1962) 629-31; *Commentary on Exodus* (NCBC; London: Oliphants, 1971) 86-88; N. A. van Uchelen, *Exodus Hoofdstuk 1-20* (VB; Kampen: J. H. Kok, n. d. [1985?]) 21. M. Görg ('Der "schlagende" Gott in der "älteren" Bibel,' *BK* 51 [1996] 94-100) cites Exod 4:24-26 and several other passages, e.g., Gen 32:22-32; Exod 12:13, 23a, 29; 2 Sam. 5:8, to show that the Hebrew Bible describes Yahweh as a 'smiting' God, i.e., God of violence, but the only observation he makes pertinent to the interpretation of Exod 4:24-26 is that what Zipporah accomplished by circumcising her son and daubing some of the blood of his foreskin on Moses' genitals was to protect Moses from Yahweh's smiting him.

covenant' arose during the have exile when other cultic practices became impossible.<sup>9</sup>

R. E. Murphy says almost nothing about Exod 4:24-26. He says the meaning of this passage escapes us today, but it seems at least to witness to the scruples of the traditionalists to correlate the practice of circumcision with Moses.<sup>10</sup>

T. C. Mitchell does not take a position on the meaning of *htn* in Exod 4:24-26. He says that if 'you' whom Zipporah addresses in 4:25b is Moses, *htn* means 'bridegroom' or 'husband,' since Moses was Zipporah's husband. It is also possible that *htn* here means 'circumciser' (although this meaning does not appear anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible) on the basis of the Arabic *ḥatanu*, 'to circumcise.' So *ḥātān dāmīm*, spoken in the heat of the moment, would mean 'circumciser of blood' or 'bloody circumciser.' But the meaning of Exod 4:24-26 is uncertain. Mitchell thinks the noun *htn* in the Hebrew Bible and in some related languages is a classificatory term meaning something like 'relation by marriage.'<sup>11</sup>

E. Isaac mentions Exod 4:24-26 briefly, but his concern is the meaning of circumcision in the Hebrew Bible, and he is convinced that Exod 4:24-26 contributes nothing to that issue. He thinks Genesis 15 and especially Genesis 17 are the main texts of the Hebrew Bible which deal

- 9 A. Bertholet, 'Beschneidung,' *RGZ* 1 (1927) cols. 946-47. O. Betz ('Beschneidung. II. Altes Testament, Frühjudentum und Neues Testament,' *TRE* 5 [1980] 716-19) essentially makes the same observations as Bertholet, in addition asserts that circumcision was probably originally considered to be an apotropaic act performed at the beginning of puberty (cf. Gen 17:25) or at the wedding (Exod 4:24-26); God did not tolerate Moses delaying obedience to God (Exod 4:24-26; bNed 31b); the 'blood of circumcision' has soteriological effect (Exod 4:25 LXX; 4:26 Tg. Onq, Tg. Ps.-J.).
- 10 R. E. Murphy, O. Carm., *The Book of Exodus. Part 1 with a Commentary* (New York: Paulist Press, 1960) 13.
- 11 Mitchell, 98-99, 111. A. Guenther ('A Typology of Israelite Marriage: Kinship, Socio-Economic, and Religious Factors,' *JSOT* 29 [2005] 390-98 [entire article 387-407]) argues that the verb *htn* indicates a request or offer to contract a marriage with outsiders whether people outside the tribe or cultural group, or people outside one's social or economic stratum, as royalty marrying commoner or rich marrying poor. The essence of the newly formed relationship is to create a unified community of peace and religious tolerance which in cases of interfaith marriage involves respect for the spouse's deity(ies), religious beliefs and traditions, and worship. Guenther does not discuss the meaning of Exod 4:24-26.

with this matter. He says circumcision is a special case of general cutting or dismembering rites to establish covenants or treaties. Cutting or dismemberment connected with covenants occurs in Genesis 15; Jer 34:10-19; Deut 21:1-9; and a Hittite rite. E. Isaac agrees with M. Noth that *likrôt b'ērīt* means 'to cut between.' Several African parallels show that by dividing an animal, a person took a conditional self-curser: may I suffer the fate of the divided victim if I fail to live up to this agreement. The parallel of circumcision with initiation rites is obvious. The Hebrew words for bridegroom, son-in-law, father-in-law, all derived from the root *ḥātān*, which in Arabic means 'to circumcise.' Fertility is the central theme in Genesis 17. As a descendant of Adam and Noah, God promises Abraham many offspring. The covenant in Genesis 17 is similar to the ancient Near Eastern accession or enthronement ritual of sacral kings. The candidate for the throne, often after a symbolic death, was reborn king and given a new name – God changed Abram's name to Abraham. The covenant established Abraham's status as vassal to his liege lord. For the author of Genesis 17, the rite of circumcision was a particular application of an ancient custom associated with treaty and covenant obligations.<sup>12</sup>

The purpose of T. Pippin and G. Aichele's essay is not to offer an interpretation of Exod 4:24-26, but to suggest that this text influenced later works of Paul and F. Kafka. F. Kafka's story, 'In the Penal Colony' (1948), describes a writing machine which inscribes the death penalty on an unsuspecting inmate. The condemned man can read his own death sentence only by *becoming* the text; writing is the circumcision of the body. Kafka's story has roots in Paul's affirmation that circumcision binds one to the Law (Gal 5:2-4), and that material writing is opposed to the spirit who writes on human hearts (2 Cor 3:1-6), so that the spirit who writes on the hearts is the true circumcision (Rom 2:26-27). In turn, Kafka and Paul have roots in the strange story in Exod 4:24-26. This story is filled with ambiguities, and mixes the roles of demons and gods. Here the foreskin is both more and less than a metaphor; it is narrative

12 E. Isaac, 'Circumcision as a Covenant Rite,' *Anth* 59 (1965) 444-56.



incarnate. It is the simple flesh of story, which we discard once we have understood the meaning, and Zipporah is the scribe.<sup>13</sup>

The purpose of A. Herbst's article on Exod 4:24-26 is not to take and defend a particular interpretation of Exod 4:24-26, but to show that Jewish Rabbis contemporary with Paul argued that circumcision was a sacrifice like the Paschal lamb in the Passover Festival, and that Paul applied this concept to his teaching about Christian baptism as the means of entering into the New Covenant through the sacrifice of Christ. Herbst traces the history of the Jewish understanding of Exod 4:24-26, strikingly close to the studies of G. Vermes and K. S. Winslow. Herbst begins by affirming that Paul's view of Christian baptism had Jewish origins. The most convincing Jewish parallel to the true significance of baptism is circumcision (Col 2:11-12). Through circumcision, the newborn joined the covenant and was transformed into a child of the covenant; and through baptism, the newborn Christian entered into the church, the community of the new covenant. Circumcision and baptism are the external signs of belonging to the covenant. The ancient Jewish exegesis of Exod 4:24-26 provides important insights into the Jewish understanding of the relationship between circumcision and sacrifice.<sup>14</sup>

13 T. Pippin and G. Aichele, 'The Cut that Confuses, or, In the Penile Colony,' in *Culture, Entertainment and the Bible* (ed. George Aichele; JSOTSup 309; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) 106-23.

14 A. Herbst, 'Bautismo y Circuncisión Judía. Nueva luz desde un análisis de Éxodo 4,24-26,' *RevistB* 66 (2004) 157-59, 171-72.

## Chapter I

### Early Jewish Explanations

The Aramaic Targums of the Pentateuch may have begun as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E., but they passed through a long period of revision, re-editing, and recension into the 9<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Tg. Onq. originated in Palestine in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E., was redacted in the 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E., and finally experienced a recension in Palestine in the 9<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Tg. Ps.-J., the most expansive of the Pentateuchal Targumim, roughly twice the length of the original Hebrew text, was redacted in the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries C. E. The final form of Tg. Neof. dates from the 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E. Even though this targum is not as expansive as Tg. Ps.-J., it is still expansive. It uses certain standard exegetical procedures and equivalents for the original Hebrew, but it has been glossed and re-worked over a long period of time. Frg. Tg. is an incomplete Palestinian Targum in western Aramaic. It represents a broadly uniform tradition of Bible exegesis, and apparently dates between Tg. Neof. and Tg. Ps.-J. Most likely, Frg. Tg. came into being when Tg. Onq. became the 'official' Targum in the West and displaced the indigenous Palestinian Targumim. Incomplete Targums preserved worthy elements of the complete text, one of which is Frg. Tg. Three traits distinguish rabbinic literature: law and exegesis of the Hebrew Scriptures, exclusion of all prior tradition except for Scripture, and appealing to named sages called rabbis. The oral part of the commentary on the Torah is the Mishnah, a philosophical law code that reached closure at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E., while the written part of this commentary comprises the Pentateuch and other books of ancient Israelite Scripture. In the scholarly hierarchy, the Babylonian Talmud had pride of place, followed by other legal literature, then the Midrashim. If rabbinic scholars had time left over after studying these texts, they turned to the Targumim. Hence, the Targumim use the process of midrash, which paraphrases the original Hebrew and adds

fresh materials that seek to clarify the meaning of the text for the audience.<sup>1</sup>

Early Jewish thinkers of Exod 4:24-26 focused on four concerns. First, the Targumim stressed the importance of the blood of the circumcision to ward off the attack against the victim. The power or importance or necessity of circumcision was primary. Second, several rabbis opposed the idea that Yahweh sought to kill Moses, and thus replaced the assailant as the angel of the Lord, the Destroyer, Prince Mastema (Satan). Third, some rabbis attempted to excuse Moses of blame for failing to circumcise his son by explaining that Jethro or even Zipporah made an agreement or warning connected with Moses' marriage or family situation in Midian. Fourth, some rabbis interpreted the expression 'touching the feet [genitals]' in v 25 in various ways, and understood the victim as Moses' older son Gershom or younger son Eliezer rather than Moses. Often, comparatively modern critical scholars support or share one of more of these early Jewish proposals, and thus it seems preferable to wait to discuss some of these views until a later point in this investigation. It seems appropriate at this point to discuss two views: circumcision blood has atoning power, and Moses and Jethro made an agreement. For convenience, I will number these views consecutively throughout this work, moving from one broad approach to another, beginning with these two early Jewish explanations.

## 1. Circumcision Blood's Atoning Power

Ancient Jewish explanations of Exod 4:24-26 introduce different details into the story, but the main emphasis in these works is the power or importance or necessity of circumcision. The LXX reads 'the angel of the Lord' in place of 'the Lord' in 4:24 as Moses' assailant, because the translators assumed that the Lord himself would not seek to kill any human being, especially the one he had commissioned to lead his people out of Egyptian bondage. According to Vermes, in the LXX of 4:25,

1 P. S. Alexander, 'Targum, Targumim,' *ABD* 6 (1992) 320-24; J. Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1994) 8-9, 611-16.

Zipporah ‘falls at (before)’ the angel’s feet as a gesture of supplication, and Zipporah says: ‘The blood of the circumcision of my son is stanchied (is stopped, has ceased to flow),’ which has a sacrificial tone. The meaning of Zipporah’s statement is clearer in the Armenian and Ethiopic versions, which are dependent mainly on the LXX. The Armenian version reads: ‘Behold the blood of the circumcision of my son;’ and the Ethiopic version reads: ‘May the blood of the circumcision of my son be in his [Moses’] place.’ The idea is that the blood shed by Zipporah when circumcising her son saved Moses’ life. The LXX (διότι) and the Vulgate (postquam) introduce a causal relationship between the words of Zipporah and the departure of the angel (or the Lord, respectively) in 4:26: ‘And he departed from him *because* she said [...]’ The LXX does not translate the last word in the Hebrew text of 4:26. If Zipporah had addressed the words, ‘A bridegroom of blood are you to me,’ to her husband, they would mean Moses had not died, but remained her husband because of the blood shed at the circumcision of the son, since this blood had expiatory virtue.<sup>2</sup>

K. S. Winslow has a slightly different understanding of the meaning of the LXX. She points out that Ambrosianus and Coislinianus read simply ‘an angel’ in 4:24, disconnecting Yahweh completely from the attack on Moses.<sup>3</sup> Although the LXX does not make clear whether this angel attacked Moses or his son, apparently the translator understood ‘him’ in 4:24 as Moses. In the MT of 4:25, Zipporah circumcises her son and touches Moses’ genitals with the bloody foreskin, and says: ‘You are my relative of blood,’ indicating that by circumcising her son, Moses had entered into a binding relationship with her. By being involved in this rite of circumcision, Zipporah became a member of the people of

2 See G. Vermes, ‘Circumcision and Exodus IV 24-26. Prelude to the Theology of Baptism,’ *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism: Haggadic Studies* (ed. P. A. H. de Boer; SP-B IV; Leiden: Brill, 1961 [Revised form of ‘Baptism and Jewish Exegesis: New Light from Ancient Sources,’ *NTS* 4 (1958) 308-19, especially 309-11]) 178-92, especially 179-81. See also A. Le Boulluec, ‘Moïse menacé de mort. L’énigme d’Exode 4, 24-26 d’après la Septante et selon les Perès,’ in *Lectures anciennes de la Bible* (CBiPa 1; Strasbourg: Centre d’Analyse et de Documentation Patristiques, 1987) 75-77; and Herbst, ‘Bautismo y Circuncisión Judía,’ 159-61.

3 See K. S. Winslow, ‘Framing Zipporah: Early Jewish and Christian Memories of Moses’ Wife’ (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington; Ann Arbor, Mich.: ProQuest Information and Learning Company, 2003) 122-23.

Israel; however, in the LXX much of this changes. Here there is no 'relation of blood' to Zipporah. The angel does not depart because of the circumcision or because of touching or smearing blood on someone's feet/legs/genitals, but because Zipporah said: 'The blood of the circumcision of my child stands.' The atoning quality of the blood of the circumcision is barely implicit in the LXX. Vermes' view that the LXX translator thought the blood of the son's circumcision had a sacrificial atoning effect reads back into the LXX a later development of the expiatory motif from the Ethiopian and Armenian versions and certain Targumim. All the LXX says is that the angel departed because of the mere existence of the blood of the circumcision.<sup>4</sup>

The Targumim go beyond the explanation of the LXX. Tg. Onq. agrees with the LXX that the angel of the Lord sought to kill Moses (4:24). The sacrificial character of the circumcision is more explicit in Tg. Onq. than in the LXX of 4:25, and Tg. Onq. avoids any mention of the angel's feet to avoid anthropomorphism. In 4:26 in Tg. Onq., Zipporah says her husband would have deserved death if it had not been for the blood of this circumcision. In 4:25, Tg. Onq. repeats the LXX by making Zipporah's statement a supplication, but in 4:26 directly affirms the redemptive virtue of the blood of the circumcision. The LXX and Tg. Onq. follow the interpretative tradition of Palestinian origin. In the Frg. Tg., 4:25 identifies the angel with 'the Destroyer,' and Zipporah proves she has obeyed the command to circumcise by presenting the angel with the newly severed foreskin. In 4:25, Zipporah says Moses' father-in-law did not permit Moses to circumcise, and prays that the blood of this circumcision atone for the guilt of Moses. 4:26 says: 'When the Destroyer departed from him, Zipporah gave thanks, and said: How beloved is the blood of circumcision which has saved my husband from the hand of the Angel of Death.' So the Palestinian tradition says 4:26 is a prayer of thanksgiving. Moses is a 'bridegroom of blood' because he has been redeemed by the blood of the circumcision. Tg. Ps.-J. has the singular 'her son' in 4:25 because only one of Zipporah's two sons, the younger son Eliezer, had been circumcised. Further, Tg. Ps.-J. explains Jethro's opposition to circumcising Gershom the firstborn as the result of an agreement between Jethro and Moses.

4 Winslow, 'Framing Zipporah,' 124-37.

The main elements of the earliest pre-Christian tradition on which the LXX and Targumim agree are: (1) Moses was the object of the threatened attack; (2) the assailant was an angel of God – the Destroyer, the angel of death, but not Satan; (3) Zipporah addressed her words in 4:25 to the angel; and (4) Moses' life was saved, not by the late performance of his religious duty, but by the sacrificial blood of the circumcision.

The Book of Jubilees (composed between 220 and 160 B.C.E.) provides a *terminus ante quem* for dating the principal elements of the Targumic interpretation. This work stresses circumcision, claiming it is an eternal institution written on the heavenly tablets, causing the children of Abraham to resemble the angels who are themselves created circumcised (Jubilees 15). The effort of the author of Jubilees to alter Exod 4:24-26 proves that the Targumic tradition, ascribing to Moses the responsibility for the uncircumcision of his son, could not have originated during the Hellenistic crisis, especially not after the persecution of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. So the date of the origin of the Targum tradition is 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.E.<sup>5</sup>

While the Aramaic Targumim and the Greek Targum of the LXX had to translate and interpret the Hebrew text of the Pentateuch as closely to the original as possible, the authors of the Rewritten Bible had more freedom. Artapanus (late 3<sup>rd</sup> through early 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries B.C.E.; known through Eusebius [early 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E.] quoting from Alexander Polyhistor [1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.E.]<sup>6</sup>), Pseudo-Philo, Josephus, and Philo ignored Exod 4:24-26 because it disturbed them. Yet Artapanus and Pseudo-Philo must have had Exod 4:24-26 in mind when they assured their readers that Moses was circumcised. Artapanus says in Fragment Three that Moses was an Egyptian dedicated to the well being of Egypt. He went to Arabia and married the daughter of Raguel, the ruler of Arabia, a tradition which Josephus also relates.<sup>7</sup> While in Arabia, Moses heard a divine voice ordering him to fight against Egypt. Moses must have been circumcised because he taught the Ethiopians and the priests circumcision. Pseudo-Philo is the earliest witness we know that claimed Moses was born circumcised. Eventually this became the common Pales-

5 Vermes, 181-84.

6 Winslow, 'Framing Zipporah,' 158.

7 Winslow, 'Framing Zipporah,' 163-64, 168.

tinian tradition (see Exod. Rab. i. 24). Jubilees is the only document to record events that occurred during Moses' journey to Egypt. It does not mention Moses' marriage to Zipporah, because it forbade marriage between Jews and outsiders. The author of Jubilees could not accept that God tried to kill Moses, or that Moses neglected to circumcise his son on the eighth day after his birth. The only biblical element he retains is that Moses was in danger of death. His assailant was Prince Mastema = Satan. The cause of the threat was no sin of Moses, who was blameless, but Mastema's desire to protect the idolatrous Egyptians from him (Jub 48:3). The Angel of the Presence, not Zipporah, thwarted Mastema's attempt to kill Moses.<sup>8</sup>

A fragment titled Mas 1 j: 1276-1786, discovered in the 1963 to 1965 excavations at Masada, is from a copy of Pseudo-Jubilees. The mention of Midian in Col. II, l. 4 and of the Prince of Mastema in Col. I, l. 5 indicates the scene described on this fragment is that of Exod 4:24-26, based on Jub 48:2-3. Pseudo-Jubilees says the Prince of Mastema tried to kill Moses as Moses and his family were traveling from Midian to Egypt. Moses was 78 years of age at this time. The mention of the covenant in Col. II, ll. 5-6 seems to be connected with the circumcision which takes place during the same event (Exod 4:24-26). For the translator of the LXX and for most Jewish traditions, it was inconceivable that Yahweh in person would threaten the life of any man, especially Moses. Thus in most Jewish traditions, the assailant of Moses was an angel. The author of the Book of Jubilees identifies the assailant as the Prince of Mastema. The Masada fragment apparently says the reason Mastema attacked Moses was the circumcision, which is different from the reason given by the author of Jubilees.<sup>9</sup>

A few modern scholars imply or state explicitly that the purpose of Exod 4:24-26 is to show that circumcision is important or necessary. E. Dhorme reasons that Zipporah's use of a flint knife to circumcise her son indicates circumcision was a primitive rite. In primitive times, circumcision was an initiation into marriage, and was practiced at the time of betrothal. Zipporah circumcises her son and touches her husband's geni-

8 Vermes, 184-85; Winslow, 'Framing Zipporah,' 187-88, 193; and A. Herbst, 'Bautismo y Circuncisión Judía,' 165-67.

9 E. Eshel, 'Mastema's Attempt on Moses' Life in the "Pseudo-Jubilees" Text from Masada,' *DSD*, 10 (2003) 359-64.

tals with the bloody prepucce. The purpose of the scene described in Exod 4:24-26 is to emphasize the necessity of circumcision, the official institution of which Genesis 17 recounts.<sup>10</sup> L. Kruse-Blinkenberg argues that one important point in Exod 4:24-26 is that Zipporah saved Moses' life by circumcising their son,<sup>11</sup> which implies that circumcision is important.

R. A. Cole connects Exod 4:24-26 to Gen 17:1-14, and argues that both passages emphasize the necessity of circumcision. The problem in Exod 4:24-26 is that Moses' son was uncircumcised, probably because he was born in Midian and Midianite culture discouraged Moses and Zipporah from circumcising their son. Circumcision is a symbol of removing all that is displeasing to God and of dedication to God to prepare one to carry out God's mission. But circumcision is a human response to God's prior grace (Gen 17:10), and true circumcision is inward, not outward (Jer 9:26; Rom 2:29). Since Moses was in a Hebrew home in the first months of his life and since the Egyptians practiced circumcision, it is likely that Moses was circumcised. God sought to kill Moses because Moses had not circumcised his son.<sup>12</sup>

N. D. Osborn contends that one must interpret Exod 4:24-26 in its present position in its narrative context in the book of Exodus. Osborn thinks Moses may have been circumcised as a child in the house of Pharaoh's daughter partially by Egyptian circumcision, but not completely by Israelite circumcision. *ḥātān dāmīm* means 'blood-circumcised one,' one who becomes related to another family by marriage, and refers to Moses' younger son Eliezer in 4:25-26. 'His feet' in 4:25 are the son's feet. 4:25 describes the ancient ritual connected with circumcision. In an early period, Hebrews performed circumcision at the onset of puberty or at marriage, but P prescribed that the Israelites circumcise a male infant as a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham (Gen 17:12; Lev 12:3). Exod 4:21-26 belong together: just as Yahweh instructs Moses to tell Pharaoh that Yahweh will kill Pharaoh's firstborn son if Pharaoh does not liberate Yahweh's firstborn son Israel in 4:21-23, so Yahweh threatens to kill Moses' son in 4:24. 'Him' in

10 E. Dhorme, *La Bible I. L'Ancien Testament*, Premier Volume (BPI; Paris: Gallimard, 1956) 186.

11 L. Kruse-Blinkenberg, 'Omskaerelse,' *GDBL*, L-A (1966), col. 384.

12 R. A. Cole, *Exodus. An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC; London: Tyndale, 1973; Third American Printing, Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1979) 78-80.



4:24 is Moses. Yahweh was angry with Moses because Moses had not circumcised his younger son Eliezer. The editor of the Exodus narrative preserved the story in 4:24-26a and inserted 4:26b to emphasize the importance of circumcision even for Moses and his sons.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. The Moses-Jethro Agreement

In Early Rabbinic Literature, one tendency is to amplify a traditional interpretation recorded in the Targumim by involving Jethro and by putting a particular interpretation on Zipporah's gesture after the circumcision. In the Palestinian Targumim (Tg. Neof. and Frg. Tg.), Jethro prevents his son-in-law Moses from circumcising his son, and Tg. Ps.-J. says Moses and Jethro agreed to this.<sup>14</sup>

Tg. Neof., Frg. Tg., and R. Eleazar of Modi'im (2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E.) say Jethro agreed for his daughter Zipporah to marry Moses if Moses swore to him that the first son born to this marriage would be dedicated to idolatry, then all subsequent sons would be dedicated to God. Moses agreed, so the angel of the Lord sought to kill him.<sup>15</sup> Mekilta-Amalek, a 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century C.E. midrash, says:

At the time when Moses said to Jethro, 'Give me your daughter Zipporah to wife,' Jethro said to him, 'Accept one condition which I will lay down and I will give her to you for a wife.' 'What is it?' asked Moses. He said, 'The first son that you will

13 N. D. Osborn, 'Circumspection about Circumcision in Exodus 4:24-26,' *Issues in Bible Translation* (UBSMS 3; ed. P. C. Stine; London: United Bible Societies, 1988) 257-260. [On certain particulars, it is difficult – if not impossible – to determine whether Osborn is reporting an interpretation of another scholar or stating his own view. E.g., on p. 256, Osborn seems to argue that the antecedent of 'him' and 'his' in 4:24-26 is Moses; but on p. 258, Osborn appears to state that 'him' in 4:24 is Moses while 'his feet' in 4:25 are the son's feet. In view of Osborn's whole article, I am following the second option].

14 Winslow, 'Framing Zipporah,' 237.

15 B. Ned. 32a. Winslow, 'Framing Zipporah,' 223, 239.

have shall belong to idolatry, and the rest may belong to [your] God.' Moses accepted. Jethro then said, 'Swear to me.' And Moses swore.<sup>16</sup>

The Targumic tradition said Zipporah circumcised her son, then either approached the feet of the angel or brought the severed foreskin of her son to the feet of the angel. R. Judah b. Il'ai said Zipporah approached the feet of Moses, saying, 'Your guilt is cut off.' But the general Rabbinic opinion is that Zipporah touched the feet of the child.

The Christian Syrian hermit, Ephrem of Nisibe, basically agrees with the LXX and Palestinian Targumim that the Angel of the Lord threatened Moses with death because Moses and Zipporah had not circumcised their infant son. Zipporah understands this immediately, and saves Moses' life by circumcising their son, grabbing the angel's feet, and begging the angel to withdraw from killing Moses, claiming circumcision of her son should be sufficient reason for him to release Moses. Ephrem claims that Moses sent Zipporah back to her father because her son was sore from his circumcision, so she and her sons would not come to Egypt from which all Israel would be leaving.<sup>17</sup> While the Palestinian Targumim say Moses had not circumcised his infant son because his father-in-law Jethro would not permit it, Ephrem says Moses did not circumcise him because Zipporah opposed it; so, when Moses' life is threatened, she atones for her own fault by circumcising the infant. Zipporah agreed to have one son circumcised to continue the circumcision of Abraham, but refused circumcision to the other son in order to transmit the uncircumcision of her father's house by him. Zipporah was motivated by fidelity to her father and to the religion of her ancestors. Ephrem also says Zipporah complained during the night they had stopped on the journey that Moses had not had sexual relations with her since God spoke to him. This is not in the Palestinian Targumim, but is a rumor of the Jewish tradition which Ephrem (363-373 C.E.) is passing on.

Ephrem's claim that Zipporah herself opposed the circumcision of one child is another Jewish tradition Ephrem received and is passing on, which the allusion of Aphrahat (336-337 C.E.) to an echo of this same tradition proves. Aphrahat passes on a tradition which calls Zipporah 'adviser of sin' because she kept Moses from circumcising their infant

16 See A. S. Maller, 'The Bridegroom of Blood,' *JBQ* 21 (1993) 94. On the Rabbinic literature, see A. Herbst, 'Bautismo y Circuncisión Judía,' 168-71.

17 See Winslow, 'Framing Zipporah,' 315-16.

son. Apparently Ephrem and Aphrahat received the same tradition and passed it on. This tradition is very similar to that of the Palestinian Targumim: Moses had not circumcised one of his sons, because Zipporah's father and Zipporah herself opposed Moses performing this; this is why the Angel of the Lord attacked Moses.<sup>18</sup> Aphrahat says Zipporah was the cause of Yahweh's attack on Moses in Exod 4:24. Moses was forced to send Zipporah away because Yahweh was threatening to kill him, because Zipporah led Moses to shameful acts (which Aphrahat never explains).<sup>19</sup>

18 A. Guillaumont, 'Un midrash d'Exode 4,24-26 chez Aphraate et Ephrem de Nisibe,' *A Tribute to Arthur Vööbus. Studies in Early Christian Literature and Its Environment, Primarily in the Syrian East* (ed. R. H. Fischer; Chicago: The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 1977) 89-94.

19 See Winslow, 'Framing Zipporah,' 293-94.

## Chapter II

### Early Christian Views

From the general perspective of attempting to interpret a biblical text, the normal early Christian treatment of biblical passages is strange and unconvincing. Various early Church Fathers differ significantly between their own positions. Contributors range from Asia, Egypt, North Africa, and Europe from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E. The exegesis of the Antiochian School is grammatical and historical, but does disregard the spiritual sense and the divine element in Scripture. Contrariwise, Origen and his associates of the Alexandrian School advanced a threefold understanding of Scripture: (a) a somatic, literal, or historical sense; (b) a psychic or moral sense; and (c) a pneumatic or mystic and ideal sense. W. Walker's comment: 'This allegorical system enabled Origen to read practically what he wished into the Scriptures,'<sup>1</sup> represents a widespread assessment of most early Christian writers. Extant applications or usages of Exod 4:24-26 demonstrate the diverse treatment of this passage among these thinkers.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Circumcision for Jews Only

The Epistle of Barnabas (90-100 C. E.) 9:4 says that in Exod 4:24-26, the angel attacked Moses, and this led to the circumcision of Moses' son. Barnabas propagates a circumcision-free Jewish Christianity. Barnabas 9 opposes false Jewish trust in circumcision. Barn 9:4 argues that since idolatrous non-Jews are circumcised (cf. Jer 9:24-25), physical circumci-

1 W. Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Scribner's, 1952) 81.

2 P. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Volume 2: Ante-Nicene Christianity; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952) 521; J. P. Trigg, 'Origen,' *ABD* 5 (1992) 46; J. Hayes, 'Biblical Interpretation, History of,' *NIDB* 1 (2006) 456.

sion cannot make a person a member of God's people. Barn 9:7-9 reasons that the equivalent of the Greek letters to make 318 for the males Abraham circumcised in Gen 14:14 are symbols of Jesus and his cross, so that Abraham in his circumcision saw in advance Jesus and his cross.<sup>3</sup>

Tertullian, in his work *Against the Jews* (197-223 C.E.),<sup>4</sup> uses Exod 4:24-26 to claim that if circumcision brought salvation, Moses would not have neglected circumcising his son. That Zipporah circumcised her son shows only that the angel endangered her uncircumcised son for a specific purpose related to the imminent command that all Jews be circumcised. Thus, other people groups are susceptible to neither the danger nor the salvation from such danger through circumcision. Circumcision was not a universal law for all people; neither can it bring salvation to them. Rather, circumcision was given to the Jews as a sign in their flesh so they could be physically distinguished from others who were allowed to enter Jerusalem during the period Jews were restricted from the city.<sup>5</sup>

In Origen's work *Contra Celsum* (in Caesarea ca. 248 C.E.), Book V, Origen argues against Celsus that nations other than the Hebrews originated the practice of circumcision, and thus the Israelites cannot claim they are holier than other peoples. Yet, circumcision is unique for the Israelites because they perform it on the eighth day. Origen proposes that circumcision might have an apotropaic function for Jews, explaining:

Perhaps the command was given because of some angel hostile to the Jewish nation who had power to injure those of them who were not circumcised, but who was powerless against those circumcised. One might say that this is indicated by what is written in Exodus, where the angel had power to act against Moses before the circumcision of Eliazar, but after he was circumcised he could effect nothing. It is because she had learnt this that 'Zipporah took a pebble and circumcised' her child, and according to the usual manuscripts she is recorded to have said, 'the blood of my child's circumcision is checked'; but according to the Hebrew text: 'A bridegroom of blood art thou to me.' For she knew the truth about this angel who had power before the blood was shed and was checked by the blood of the circumcision. That is why she said to him: 'A bridegroom of bloodshed art thou to me.'

3 See Blaschke, *Beschneidung*, 430, 476-482, 490.

4 Tertullian, 'Of Circumcision and the Supersession of the Old Law,' in *ANF* 3, ch. 3.

5 See Le Boulluec, 'Moïse menacé de mort,' 83-84; Winslow, 'Framing Zipporah,' 355-59.

Origen emphasizes the command to circumcise and the efficacious action of the blood, but renounces the idea that this blood has a sacrificial or atoning function. Instead, circumcision's blood makes the angel powerless and thwarts the attack. Jesus' coming circumcision destroyed the angel's power for all time, which circumcision's blood only temporarily checked the angel's power. So, it is no longer necessary for Christians to be circumcised. Origen writes:

The angel... had power against those of the people who were not circumcised, and in general against all who worship only the Creator; and he had this power so long as Jesus had not assumed a body. But when he did that, and his body was circumcised, all his power against those who are uncircumcised and who follow this religion was taken away. For Jesus destroyed him by an indescribable divine power. This is why his disciples are forbidden to be circumcised, and why they are told: 'If you are circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing.'

According to Origen, the command of circumcision is no longer necessary, because Christ's circumcision fulfilled the function of the original command and permanently disabled the capacity of the angel to harm those who are uncircumcised. One who submits to circumcision does not share fully of the benefit of Christ. Thus, Christ's disciples are not to be circumcised.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4. Circumcision a Model for Infant Baptism

Augustine (354-430 C.E.) emphasizes the importance of Zipporah circumcising her son for a different reason. In his work *De baptismo contra Donatistas* (400 C.E.),<sup>7</sup> he advocates infant baptism, claiming that infant circumcision was instituted in Genesis 17 and Exod 4:24-26. Infant baptism, like circumcision, is a seal of faith that leads to salvation based on the individual's mature volition and belief. Zipporah circumcising her

6 Origen, *Contra Celsum* 5:48. See H. Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953); Winslow, 'Framing Zipporah,' 360-64; A. E. O. Gorospe, *Narrative and Identity. An Ethical Reading of Exodus 4* (BIS 86; Leiden: Brill, 1907) 256-59.

7 Augustine, *De baptismo contra Donatistas* 4.24-32, in *NPNF* 4:461.

son is a model for Christian parents and guardians baptizing their infant children. The circumcision of Zipporah's infant son proves that adults who act on their children's bodies lead them to faith and salvation. Augustine writes:

If anyone seek for divine authority in this matter [infant baptism], though what is held by the whole Church, and that not as instituted by Councils, but as a matter of invariable custom, is rightly held to have been handed down by apostolic authority, still we can form a true conjecture of the value of the sacrament of baptism in the case of infants, from the parallel of circumcision, which was received by God's earlier people, and before receiving which Abraham was justified, as Cornelius also was enriched with the gift of the Holy Spirit before he was baptized. Yet the apostle says of Abraham himself, that 'he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith,' having already believed in his heart, so that 'it was counted unto him for righteousness.' Why, therefore, was it commanded him that he should circumcise every male child in order on the eighth day, though it could not yet believe with the heart, that is should be counted unto it for righteousness, because the sacrament in itself was of great avail? And this was made manifest by the message of an angel in the case of Moses' son; for when he was carried by his mother, being yet uncircumcised, it was required, by manifest present peril, that he should be circumcised, and when this was done, the danger of death was removed. As therefore in Abraham the justification of faith came first, and circumcision was added afterwards as the seal of faith; so in Cornelius the spiritual sanctification came first in the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the sacrament of regeneration was added afterwards in the layer of baptism. And, as in Isaac, who was circumcised on the eighth day after his birth, the seal of this righteousness of faith was given first, and afterwards, as he imitated the faith of his father, the righteousness itself followed as he grew up, of which the seal had been given before when he was an infant, so in infants, who are baptized, the sacrament of regeneration is given first, and if they maintain a Christian piety, conversion also in the heart will follow, of which the mysterious sign had gone before in the outward body.

Exod 4:24-26 indicates the angel's message made it apparent by the manifest peril that the child should be circumcised. Augustine does not say whose life was in peril, but that the danger of death to someone was removed when the child was circumcised. Augustine contended that an angel, not the Lord, threatened Moses' family as they journeyed toward Egypt. Zipporah, not Moses, performed circumcision and thus marked her child for righteousness and salvation. Augustine emphasized the impact of circumcision without honoring the circumciser, since he use the passive. Jewish circumcision on the eighth day demonstrates that infant baptism is a necessary and effective component of salvation.

Zipporah's son, Abraham and his household, especially Isaac, who was circumcised as an infant, show that circumcision is a sign leading to salvation, even though it is not the same as belief. Augustine did not argue that circumcision was replaced by baptism, but he may have assumed this as understood.

In Augustine's *Letter 23*, he declares that circumcision's power has been rendered void by the coming of Jesus and the cross. Augustine refers to the threat afforded by the angel and the power of circumcision to avert it, then clarifies that the danger is directed against Moses' son and Zipporah. He refers directly to the child's mother, but without name. Augustine writes:

If I had been a Jew in the times of the ancient people, when there was nothing better to be, I would surely have accepted circumcision. That 'seal of the justice of faith' (Rom 4:11) had so much power at that time, before it was rendered void by the coming of the Lord, that the angel would have strangled the infant son of Moses if his mother had not taken up a stone and circumcised the child and thus by this sacrament warded off his imminent destruction. This sacrament even tamed the river Jordan and reduced it to a brook (Josh 5:3-5). The Lord himself received this sacrament after birth, although on the cross he made it void.

Here Augustine clearly gives Zipporah credit for warding off her son's imminent destruction by circumcising him. As a Christian, Augustine considers circumcision obsolete, and yet recognizes that Jesus himself was circumcised and calls it a sacrament.<sup>8</sup>

## 5. Circumcision Symbolizes Celibacy

Jerome sternly contends that the clergy must abstain from all contact with women. In his *Letter 52 to Nepotian* (394 C.E.), he extols the life-long monogamy of Moses and Zipporah as evidence that David did not

8 Augustine, *The Letters of St. Augustine* 23.4, in *NPNF* 1:243. See Winslow, 'Framing Zipporah,' 378-81; Gorospe, *Narrative and Identity*, 259-62. In Augustine, *Reply to Faustus the Manichean* 19.9, in *NPNF* 4:242-43, he argues that circumcision is a prefiguration of a new life, since it denotes separation from one's fleshly nature.



need a young girl [Abishag] in his old age to warm him; Abishag is an allegory for Wisdom. Moses did not say Moses and Zipporah were continent or that Moses sent Zipporah away and avoided sex from the time Yahweh began to speak with him, but insisted Moses and Zipporah were satisfied with each other.<sup>9</sup> In his work *Against Jovinian* (393 C.E.),<sup>10</sup> Jerome argues that Moses' shoes and the foreskin of Zipporah's son symbolize marriage. Moses' act of putting off his shoes and Zipporah's act of circumcising her son symbolize that Christians must sever marriage ties and avoid marital relationships in order to enter God's presence.<sup>11</sup>

## 6. Purging Classical Learning Produces Christian Perfection

Gregory of Nyssa (b. 335 C.E.) interprets Exod 4:24-26 figuratively. He says circumcision means casting off the dead skins human beings put on when they are stripped of the supernatural life after the transgression. Zipporah was Moses' foreign wife, who represents classical learning. She 'appeased' the angel by the blood of the circumcision. Zipporah's accompaniment of Moses on his return to Egypt is like a profane education in producing virtue. The angel came to bring the fear of death because of the impure defilement, symbolized by the foreskin, found in the offspring of the man and his pagan companion. So the angel prompted the foreign wife's circumcision of her son, which represents the removal of foreign impurities. The flawed aspects of pagan learning can be fully removed or purged so as to make a contribution to progress in Christian perfection. Once learning that comes from outside the Scriptures and Christian traditions (Zipporah's son) has been shorn of defective ideas about the soul, the Creator, etc. (its fleshly and alien foreskin), the angel of destruction that once came to endanger the pilgrim/student is transformed into an angel of mercy that rejoices in the good that remains in pagan doctrines to enlighten those who have excised the defiling per-

9 Jerome, *Letter 52 to Nepotian*, in *NPNF* 6.

10 Jerome, *Against Jovinian*, in *NPNF* 6:361.

11 See Winslow, 'Framing Zipporah,' 329-44, 349-50.

spectives. The body of the circumcised son of Zipporah symbolizes that which edifies and nurtures one's ascent to perfection.<sup>12</sup>

## 7. Spiritual Struggle

Some Church Fathers interpreted Exod 4:24-26 typologically or spiritually. Cyril of Alexandria, in his *Glaphyres* on Exod 11:6, says Moses did not circumcise his older son, Gershom; but his primary emphasis is on a typological interpretation of Exod 4:24-26. Here circumcision is not fleshly, but spiritual. Zipporah is the church. Jesus circumcised the people of Israel with stone knives (Josh 5:2), symbolizing the spiritual circumcision which Paul describes in Col 2:11.<sup>13</sup>

In the *Questions on Thalassios* 17 (630-634 C. E.), Maximus the Confessor spiritualizes Exod 4:24-26. The desert is the worldly human nature and the state of absence of passions. Moses is the intellect, which receives from God the hidden mission to bring out of Egypt the flesh and feeling, represented by the Israelites. Zipporah is cognitive wisdom, which helps the intellect like a wife helps her husband. The attack of the angel is the interruption or cessation of the virtue, the evil passion, which attacks the intellect as the intellect moves toward its goal. The angel's attack is the condemnatory word which threatens death in the conscience. The interruption of the virtue produces the foreskin of the feeling; wisdom, the wife of intellect, sharply rebukes (circumcises) the feeling with the stone of the word of faith, causing every notion of the sensual life to wither. This is the story of the journey of every person of faith.<sup>14</sup>

12 Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, I, 18-22; II, 37-42, 45-53. See Le Boulluec, 'Moïse menacé de mort,' 94; Winslow, 'Framing Zipporah,' 368-76.

13 See Le Boulluec, 'Moïse menacé de mort,' 92-94.

14 See Le Boulluec, 'Moïse menacé de mort,' 94-98.



## Chapter III

# Ideological and Psychological Criticisms

Several explanations of Exod 4:24-26 belong in general terms in the discipline of ideological criticism or psychological criticism. It is very difficult to define these terms. In the volume, *To Each Its Own Meaning*, D. N. Fewell identifies Feminist Criticism with ideology, and F. F. Segovia identifies Socioeconomic Criticism with ideology, dealing largely with Liberation Hermeneutics.<sup>1</sup> G. L. Byron describes Ideological Criticism in very broad terms: '[...] Ideological criticism intersects with different forms of biblical criticism such as postcolonial, literary, rhetorical, reader response, and a host of hermeneutical stances such as feminist and womanist, disabilities, history of sexuality, and cultural engagements of the Bible by historically underrepresented interpreters [...] to expose racialized discourses, marginalized perspectives, and hidden hegemonic social and cultural assumptions. Moreover, ideological criticism exposes the political stakes of biblical texts and the political uses to which the Bible has been put in contemporary and historical settings. This rich interpretive framework is a valuable tool for dealing with the inherent struggles, dilemmas, and tensions that are operative in biblical texts and contexts, traditions of interpretation, and the interpreters themselves.'<sup>2</sup>

Some psychologists and medical scholars have offered views for understanding Exod 4:24-26. Psychology is the study of human behavior, and this certainly lends itself to attempting to interpret various biblical texts. D. A. Kille's observations about Psychological Criticism are quite appropriate for understanding certain views concerning Exod 4:24-26: 'Psychological biblical criticism [...] is a way of reading the biblical

1 D. N. Fewell, 'Reading the Bible Ideologically: Feminist Criticism,' 268-82; F. F. Segovia, 'Reading the Bible Ideologically: Socioeconomic Criticism,' 283-306, in *To Each Its Own Meaning* (eds. S. L. McKenzie and S. R. Haynes; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999).

2 G. L. Byron, 'Ideological Criticism,' *NIDB* 3 (2008) 7.

text that is sensitive to psychological factors that may be at play. Psychological criticism draws on a wide array of psychological theories, including behaviorism, depth psychology, object relations, cognitive and learning theory, family relations theory, and many more. It also examines different dimensions of the biblical text: the personalities, descriptions, myths and symbols, and psychological dynamics expressed in the text; and interaction between the text and readers or communities of interpretation.<sup>3</sup> Several views or proposals or suggestions for understanding Exod 4:24-26 belong to the realms of Ideological Criticism and Psychological Criticism.

## 8. Moses' Depression

J. Derby argues that the third person singular ('him,' 'his feet') in Exod 4:24-26 and the second person singular ('you') in Zipporah's statement in 4:25 refer to Moses. The story in 4:24-26 is a vital part of the entire drama of the exodus in the preceding and following chapters in the book of Exodus. Moses was very reluctant to accept Yahweh's command that he return to Egypt and lead the Israelites out of bondage because of his speech impediment and his natural humility. His self-confidence must have been very low, and Yahweh told him beforehand that Pharaoh would not listen. He must have thought Pharaoh would kill him for telling him his firstborn son would die if he did not let the Israelites go. As Moses and his family traveled from Midian to Egypt, Moses must have discussed his feelings with his wife, Zipporah. Moses brooded over his own future and over the fate of the Israelites. The disastrous results of his first encounter with Pharaoh surely deepened his doubts and apprehensions, so Moses complained to Yahweh: 'Why did you worsen the people's plight? To what end did you send me?' (Exod 5:22). While Moses' family rested at night at a camping place on the way, Moses became gravely ill because he was beside himself. Zipporah was distraught, and felt she must do something to bolster her husband's morale and to strengthen his trust in Yahweh. She decided that only a meaning-

3 D. A. Kille, 'Psychology and Biblical Studies,' *NIDB* 684.

ful, powerful act would impress Moses, so she performed the act of the covenant itself – she circumcised her son, then took the child's foreskin and touched Moses' male organ with it to bring the full significance of her act to bear on Moses. Her scheme worked. Moses came out of his state of depression and proceeded with his mission, although not yet completely convinced that it would succeed. Zipporah's statement to Moses in Exod 4:25: 'You are a blood bridegroom to me,' was Zipporah's oral explanation to Moses of the meaning of what she had done, a further source of encouragement to him. The repetition of this statement in 4:26 is a statement commonly applied to a circumcised child. This story is a vital link between Moses the reluctant emissary and Moses the courageous one who appears before Pharaoh.<sup>4</sup>

P. T. Reis contends that the expression 'Yahweh sought to kill Moses' in Exod 4:24-26 is an idiom meaning Yahweh caused Moses to be depressed and contemplate suicide. The statement 'God left Moses alone' in Exod 4:26a means God lifted Moses' despair. Moses was raised in a high class Egyptian home, and married the daughter of a priest of Midian, which put him in the upper social stratum of society. At the inn on the road from Midian to Egypt, Moses became sick unto death because Yahweh had sent him to deliver an oppressed lower class. On the journey, Zipporah was undoubtedly looking forward to meeting her refined in-laws. But at the inn, Moses fell into a deep depression, and Zipporah urged him to tell her why. Moses told her he was an Israelite and was going to Egypt to deliver his fellow Israelites from slavery. Zipporah was enraged because Moses had deceived her father, and expected her and their children to live among slaves. Knowing that circumcision was an absolute necessity to the Israelites, in anger Zipporah circumcised their son, which said symbolically to Moses: 'If you are a Hebrew, we will just perform this disgusting and barbarous rite of circumcision which is characteristic of the Hebrews!' Moses was not circumcised as an infant (cf. Josh 5:2, 5). The shame or reproach God rolled off from the Israelites in Josh. 5:9 is the shame and reproach of their failure to circumcise their male children in infancy. Zipporah touched Moses' genitals to make a sign in blood *on* the flesh where there should have been a sign *in* the flesh. If Moses had such a sign, Jethro would have known he was a Hebrew, and Zipporah would not now be

4 J. Derby, 'Why Did God Want to Kill Moses?' *JBQ* 18 (1989-90) 222-29.

bound to a fugitive of slave descent, nor be on her way with her sons to possible suppression. Touching blood made one ritually impure. By calling Moses *ḥātān dāmīm*, Zipporah used the strongest, most insulting language she could. *ḥātān* means bridegroom and son-in-law. Zipporah called Moses son-in-law in Exod 4:24-26: 'I have you, a son-in-law of blood!' In contrast to her sisters who married well, Zipporah was angry because she married a son-in-law of blood. Here Zipporah is using her father as a referent. It is bad enough that she married a man of blood, but even worse that a son-in-law of blood disgraces her father, a priest of Midian. Lest a hearer or reader suppose Zipporah called Moses 'man of blood' because he had killed a man, Exod 4:26b repeats and clarifies this phrase: 'A son-in-law of blood in regard to the circumcision.' After the circumcision scene, Moses sent Zipporah and their sons away (Exod 18:2) in anger because he and Zipporah were having marital strife. Zipporah's angry words and actions were shock therapy to Moses. He came out of his depression a changed man. Now he knew who he was and that his identity was bound up with the Israelites; in Exod 32:32, Moses offered his life for the Israelites. Moses married a more congenial wife, a Cushite woman (Num 12:1). The lesson in Exod 4:24-26 is not the supremacy of the covenant of circumcision. Rather, the moral is implied in the name God discloses to Moses at the burning bush: 'I Am That I Am' (Exod 3:14). God's use of this particular name at this particular time teaches Moses and all men that ultimately you are who you are.<sup>5</sup>

## 9. Anti-Moses Tradition

T. C. Butler argues that Exod 2:11b-14, 16-22; 4:24-26; 18:5-7, 14b-23 are five narratives which are part of an anti-Moses tradition, polemicizing against him for assuming authority presumptuously, killing others to protect himself, living with and marrying the enemies of Israel, being saved from divine anger by his foreign wife, paying allegiance to the

5 P. T. Reis, 'The Bridegroom of Blood: A New Reading,' in *Reading the Lines. A Fresh Approach to the Hebrew Bible* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002) 93-103, especially 95-103.

priest of Midian instead of being the leader of his own family, and following the advice of his Midianite father-in-law in setting up the administrative system over Israel. Moses was a bloody bridegroom in that he cost Zipporah the blood of her own son when she circumcised her son to save Moses from death at the hands of Yahweh. This tradition originated in [priestly?] circles and their sympathizers who were trying to convince Israel that Moses was not suited for any of Israel's positions of leadership. They failed, and the pro-Mosaic forces subtly adopted and adapted their traditions to build up an even more heroic picture of Moses.<sup>6</sup>

## 10. Retribution for Moses' Murder

P. Middlekoop argues that Yahweh attacked Moses as he journeyed back to Egypt to kill him as retribution for having killed the Egyptian (Exod 2:11-15). Moses had not told anyone about this, not even Zipporah, but Exod 4:19 indicates it still troubled him. When Yahweh attacked Moses, somehow Zipporah learned that Moses was burdened with bloodguilt, so she, the clan mother, circumcised their son as the representative and personification of her whole clan to pledge her whole clan to Yahweh and thus to conciliate him. She circumcised the child, then touched the child's legs with the bloody severed foreskin, which apparently had a symbolic meaning similar to placing hands on the head of an animal to be sacrificed, identifying the one performing the action with the creature he/she touched. At the same time, Zipporah uttered an exclamation of horror at what she had learned about her husband's bloodguilt: *hātān dāmîm*, 'bridegroom of bloodshed' (Exod 4:25). In so doing, Zipporah coined a designation which since was customarily applied to boys who have just been circumcised. Verse 26b is a gloss from a later redactor referring to Moses and stressing the significance of circumcision as a covenant ritual for the Israelites. For Moses, Yahweh's attack was a revelation that he must be redeemed from his bloodguilt by sharing in the circumcision of their son as a symbolic sacrifice implying confession of sin and conversion, changing him into a reborn man. By association

6 T. C. Butler, 'An Anti-Moses Tradition,' *JSOT* 12 (1979) 9-15.



with his son's circumcision, Moses became a 'cut one' or 'marked one' like Cain in Gen 4:15. Moses had to be reconciled to Yahweh in order to fulfill his function as God's chosen leader of His people. This enabled him to be the intermediary for the law: 'You shall not kill.' Moses returned to Egypt as a 'marked one,' protected by Yahweh from danger, because his bloodguilt had been redeemed.<sup>7</sup>

## 11. A Nightmare

D. Gelernter argues that 'concealment' is central to the story of Moses in the Hebrew Bible. Moses tried to 'conceal' the Egyptian he killed for beating a Hebrew by hiding him in the sand (Exod 2:12). In Midian, Moses 'concealed' his true identity as an Israelite from Jethro and his family and the Midianites. Yahweh attacked Moses as he and his family journeyed from Midian to Egypt because Moses had not circumcised his son. Ibn Ezra compares Yahweh withdrawing from Moses when Zipporah touched Moses' feet with her son's bloody foreskin with the Destroyer passing over the houses where the blood was on the lintel in the Passover (Exod 12:23). Exod 4:22-23 states that on the Passover night, the firstborn of Pharaoh will die. In Exod 12:23, the role of the lamb's blood was to separate God's firstborn from Pharaoh's. The Israelite firstborns were forfeit to the Lord (Exod 13:2) on the eighth day after birth (Exod 22:28-29). Exod 13:15 ties this to the night of Passover. Gelernter hypothesizes that circumcision on the eighth day after birth was a symbolic forfeit to the Lord, which enrolled the circumcised as the Lord's firstborn. It is significant that Exod 4:21-23 comes immediately before 4:24-26. In 4:21-23, Yahweh told Moses that Yahweh's firstborn Israel will live; Pharaoh's firstborn will die; circumcision marks the dividing-line. This means Moses' firstborn will die, because he has not been circumcised. Gelernter argues that Exod 4:24-26 relates a 'nightmare' of Moses. Zipporah thought Moses was an Egyptian – and he was not; Yahweh thought Moses was an Israelite – and he was not. Moses'

7 P. Middlekoop, 'The Significance of the Story of the "Bloody Husband" (Ex. 4:24-26),' *SEAJT* 8 (1966/1967) 34-38.

special terror was: Lord, I am not who you think I am. On the journey back to Egypt from Midian, Moses was beset by inner demons. The incident described in Exod 4:24-26 happened at night in a lodging, where travelers slept and dreamed. In real life, Pharaoh tried to kill Moses; now, in a nightmare, Moses sees Yahweh trying to kill him. Moses knew why Yahweh wanted to kill him, and in his nightmare Zipporah also knew why. Zipporah discovered to her horror that Moses was not her bridegroom but her *blood* groom, an Israelite, colored with circumcision, so she cried out in her nightmare shriek: 'You are my bloody bridegroom!' Moses escaped with his life, but the sound of his wife's scream echoed. Exod 4:24-26 describes Moses' nightmare not as a dream, but as a reality. The story of Jacob's encounter with the man (God) at the Jab-bok (Gen 32:22-32) is similar to Exod 4:24-26. Horizontal logic helps the hearer/reader see these events as dreams.<sup>8</sup>

## 12. An Allegory

F. Blumenthal proposes that Exod 4:24-26 is an allegory. Three significant influences affected Moses' life during the first eighty years of his life. (1) Moses was born into a Hebrew family while living in Egypt. In that culture, Moses learned the ancestral traditions and stories of the Hebrew Patriarchs. At the burning bush in Midian, Moses experienced and accepted the message of the God of his ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. (2) Moses was raised in the royal palace of the Egyptian dynasty, where Egyptian religion and culture strongly shaped his understanding of Egyptian thought and practices during the first forty years of his life. (3) When Moses encountered conflict with the Egyptians, he fled to Midian, where Moses met Jethro, the priest of Midian, and married Jethro's daughter Zipporah. The Midianite culture and polytheistic religion became the major source of influence on Moses between the next forty years of his life. When Yahweh commanded Moses to return to Egypt and deliver the Israelites from bondage, Moses may have

8 D. Gelernter, 'Tsipporah's Bloodgroom: A Biblical Breaking Point,' *Orim* 3 (1988) 46-57 [especially 48-55].

thought he would go back home to Midian after he carried out this mission in Egypt. Exod 4:20 says Moses took his wife and sons to make their journey back to Egypt, taking the rod of God in his hand. Allegorically, Moses' wife, the daughter of Jethro, the priest of Midian, and his uncircumcised son, become the symbol of Moses' attachment to Midian. But the rod of God is the symbol of Moses' commitment to the Hebrew God of his Fathers. The inn, halfway between Midian and the present abode of the Hebrews in Egypt related in Exod 4:24-26, is an allegorical repetition of the dichotomy which plagues Moses at the early stage of his mission. Here the Lord encounters Moses and seeks to 'kill' him, which may mean the end of the prophetic status of Moses. God's threat to kill Moses is God's demand that Moses dedicate himself totally to the people Moses is soon to lead. Unless Moses cuts off every remaining adherence to the cultures of his educational past, Moses cannot become the liberator and teacher of God's people. Zipporah, Moses' wife, the symbol for Moses' link to Midian, terminates every connection Moses may still keep in his heart. The allegorical story of Zipporah's circumcision terminates her and her sons' symbolic status as a connecting link to Midian. When Zipporah performs the only ritual which at the time connects the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to their God, Zipporah expunges all loyalty Moses may have had in the past. The severed foreskin of Zipporah's son declares that there is no return; Moses no longer can go back to Midian. Moses' meeting with his brother Aaron follows this event immediately to demonstrate that Moses no longer had any commitment to his past. Aaron now is Moses' brother and confidante, and thus the Israelite slaves have become Moses' brethren. The circumcision and the ritual connected with it completed Yahweh's commandment to Moses, whether Zipporah circumcised Gershom or Eliezer. Exod 4:24-26 relates the transformation of Zipporah from a symbol of Midianite religion to a companion with Moses on their way ahead. Moses becomes Sapporo's 'bridegroom,' her newly acquired husband, because they both were culturally new persons. *hātān dāmīm*, 'bridegroom of blood,' refers to the blood of circumcision which removes all preceding affiliation and allegorically seals Yahweh's appointment of Moses to lead his people Israel from Egyptian bondage.<sup>9</sup>

9 F. Blumenthal, 'The Circumcision Performed by Zipporah,' *JBQ* 35 (2007) 255-59.

### 13. Moses' True Identity

B. Scolnic agrees with D. Gelernter that 'concealment' is a major theme in the story of Moses (Scolnic does not mention Gelernter's idea that Exod 4:24-26 relates a nightmare of Moses). Scolnic says Moses did not circumcise his son to hide Moses' true identity as an Israelite from Jethro and his family and the Midianites. Circumcision made a person one of God's firstborn sons. Moses heard the words of God, but had not circumcised his son. God expressed his anger; Zipporah showed her resourcefulness and her shock at being married to an Israelite, who was commanded to practice infant circumcision. Scolnic goes a step beyond Gelernter and suggests, with the Zohar, that the blood of infant circumcision and concealment are intimately connected, for circumcision is a ceremony of opening or disclosing. Exod 4:24-26 seems to say: Do not conceal your identity; do not remain closed to your true self; do not conceal what should be revealed. If Moses is to be the leader of Israel, God's firstborn son, he must move beyond concealment. To wear the covenant on your body is to identify yourself with the destiny of your people. Exod 4:24-26 emphasizes the importance of circumcision. Failure to circumcise, no matter the circumstances, is a mortal sin. Exod 4:24-26 explains circumcision as apotropaic, as warding off evil and sickness.<sup>10</sup>

### 14. The Oedipus Conflict

A. Peto proposes a psychoanalytical history of the development of Israelite ethical monotheism, in which he assumes the standard Documentary Hypothesis. He argues that the unconscious fantasies of the nomadic Bedouins, who gradually united to become the people of Israel, became the decisive factor in the growth of the monotheism of the Hebrew Bible. The psychological history of this monotheistic attitude falls into three

10 B. Scolnic, 'From Bloody Bridegroom to Covenant Rite: *Brit Milah* – The Perspective of Modern Biblical Scholarship,' *CJ* 42 (1990) 17-18.

phases of thought development, which are not sharply divided but merge into each other. The first period is life in the desert; the second is life in Canaan; and the third is the prophetic period. The story in *Exod 4:24-26* belongs to the first period. A prominent part of the religion of the Semites is the idea that evil beings prowled by night lurking in dark places for victims. Later editors of the Hebrew Bible ascribed qualities and actions of various demons to Yahweh. Perhaps the most threatening quality of the demon was his desire to castrate his victims. The blessing (*Gen 32:24-29*) was designed to ward off the demon-father's castrative desires against his son-people. The demon thirsted for the blood of the firstborn, his purpose being to take away from the people-son the most valuable signs of its potency, viz., its offspring. Later the demon allowed himself to be appeased by animal sacrifice and ransom, paid in substitution for offering sons. Circumcision was a magic protection against evil. In the desert, the Israelites rebelled against Yahweh and Moses, who essentially are one. Moses took over the role of the father in his people's Oedipus conflict. The Yahweh groups tried to force their demon Yahweh on all the tribes, which led to revolts, the function of which was to ward off anxiety. Yahweh as oppressive father demanded the exclusive loyalty of his son Israel. The son felt that the only way to escape his father's wrath was to abandon his male role entirely, so he took on a feminine identification and became Yahweh's love partner, eliminating the mother from the religion.

The oldest source, J, presents the first circumcision as performed by a mother (*Exod 4:24-26*). Here the mother supports the father's aggression by castrating the son. The two purposes of this castration are to appease the attacking Yahweh-father and to preserve the Moses-father. When Zipporah completes this act, the father and mother are united. Among the Bedouins from the south, the destroying, castrating, malignant mother prevailed over all other mother fantasies, and the released castration anxiety could be overcome only by the complete repression of the mother. In the struggle of Jacob with Yahweh (*Gen 32:27-30*), which is the myth of the Northern Israelite tribes, there is a normal Oedipus fantasy: the son struggles with the father who tried to castrate him, the father loses and must pass his strength on to the son. However, in the struggle of Moses with Yahweh (*Exod 4:24-26*), which is the myth of the Southern Israelite tribes, the mother cooperates with the father and castrates the son, and the son receives no blessing. In the south, the son,

Israel, took over the role of the mother, producing a homosexual relationship between Yahweh and Israel. The Israelites ward off the castration anxiety by claiming they were Yahweh's 'chosen one.' The humiliated son changed himself into the favorite son. Exod 4:24-26 is the unsuccessful condensation of the process from the bloodthirsty demon-god and goddess to circumcision as a symbol of blessing. Exod 4:24-26 indicates that the earliest (J) recorded meaning of circumcision was the sacrifice of the son by the mother for the father's sake. E (Gen 17:1-14; 22:1-19; etc.) converted circumcision into the father's blessing. These solutions of the usual Oedipus conflict secured the son's potency so he could continue to fight against the father. After the elimination of the mother, the evil, castrating father changes, by blessing, into the good father promoting virility. The magic symbol of the son's annihilation, circumcision, becomes a symbol of manhood and protection. But this reacquired manliness arouses guilt in the son. Therefore, Yahweh's terrible demands prevail: denial of manhood (Israel is his bride), absolute devotion of the subdued son, and abandonment of the mother.<sup>11</sup>

## 15. Freudian Slip

R. Kessler argues that psychoanalysis indicates Exod 4:24-26 is a Freudian slip, i.e., the unintentional expressing of a hidden truth, usually followed by an attempt to cover up that truth. The Freudian slip in Exod 4:24-26 is not the work of the author, but the result of the long history of handing down this story by the tradents or the community. There are several dimensions of this Freudian slip. (1) Yahweh is out of character in Exod 4:24-26, because here he is not on Israel's side. Like the Israelite children on the Passover night (Exod 12:13, 23), Moses must be protected from Yahweh by a blood rite. (2) Moses' statement that he is of uncircumcised lips (Exod 6:12, 30) connects Exodus 6 with 4:24-26 [the 'him' Yahweh attacks in v. 24 must be Moses], and indicates Moses was not circumcised. The narrative in Exodus 3-4 makes it clear that Moses is not enthusiastic about Yahweh's appointing him to lead Israel out of

11 A. Peto, M. D., 'The Development of Ethical Monotheism,' *PSS* 1 (1960) 311-31.

Egypt. The Freudian slip in Exod 4:24-26 shows that Israel's savior and hero (Moses) not only vacillates in the beginning, but in at least one life-threatening situation also falls prey to a passivity bordering on paralysis. (3) The real hero in Exod 4:24-26 is Zipporah, who saves Israel's savior from death. A hidden truth that comes to light in the Exodus narrative is that as a child Moses depended on midwives, his mother, his sister, and Pharaoh's daughter for survival, and as an adult he became indebted to his wife for saving his life. Zipporah is Moses' guardian goddess in his struggle against Yahweh as a male deity. (4) Since the circumcision by Zipporah and touching 'his feet' causes the deity to abandon his attack, the blood of circumcision has an apotropaic effect; yet in most of the Hebrew Bible circumcision is connected with covenantal relationship. Since Zipporah circumcised her son, until then he must have been uncircumcised. Yet the expression 'bridegroom of blood' connects circumcision with initiations at the time of puberty and/or a wedding or marriage, even though usually in the Hebrew Bible circumcision is an asexual covenantal sign. According to Exod 4:24-26, circumcision first makes one a man or a woman. The verb 'cut off' in 4:25 connects circumcision and castration. The primal father inflicted on his sons circumcision as a symbolic substitute for castration to assert his absolute power over them, and whoever accepted this symbol showed by doing so that he would submit to his father's will. Since Yahweh is male, the appropriate objects of his desire should be women. Men could become objects of God's desire only by their unmaning. So in Exod 4:24-26, Yahweh's attack on Moses is on his masculinity. This is why circumcision pleases God. The blood of circumcision is a symbolic acknowledgment that a man's masculinity belongs to God. Circumcision is a symbol of male submission to God. But male dominance over women must not be jeopardized, so circumcision is given a second, positive meaning that the male organ is an instrument of reproduction. The circumcision of a male is prerequisite for a couple's fertility.<sup>12</sup>

12 R. Kessler, 'Psychoanalytische Lektüre biblischer Texte – das Beispiel von Ex 4,24-26,' *EvT* 61 (2001) 204-21 = 'Psychoanalysis as a Hermeneutical Tool: the Example of Ex 4:24-26,' in R. Kessler and P. Vandermeersch, eds., *God, Biblical Stories and Psychoanalytical Understanding* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2001) 29-53, especially 31-49.

## 16. Inversion

S. D. Kunin argues that the difficulties in Exod 4:24-26 can be resolved by correctly analyzing the structure of 4:20-26 as inversion, by understanding it in the context of the Moses saga as a whole, and by interpreting it in light of broader Hebrew structural patterns. This text consists of several mythemes.

- (1) One mytheme is the journey to Egypt, which includes the ass. The ass suggests related texts, especially the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22, indicating Genesis 22 and Exod 4:24-26 both deal with symbolic death and rebirth. The sacrificial element in Exod 4:24-26, viz., circumcision, is tied to a vertical transformation of the unnamed son, a transformation between generations, e.g., father-son. Murder is tied to transformation on a horizontal level, a transformation within a single generation, e.g., brother-brother. Since it was customary for the younger son to be transformed in opposition to his brothers, structural inversion here suggests this was Moses' older son Gershom. But ambiguity in texts clouds this aspect of inversion, and allows either son to be transformed. This mytheme also contains a directional focus southward from Midian to Egypt, which is associated with transformation of the wife. But the transformational mechanism of inversion suggests that here the husband Moses is transformed into a proper husband and thus is the 'bridegroom of blood' to Zipporah.
- (2) A second mytheme is God's attempt to kill Moses or his son. The unnamed lodging place on the journey, which is the location for this attempt, can be regarded as a liminal space. This is in the wilderness, which functions as a location for transformation. In Exod 4:24-26, murder [usually associated with pits] occurs in respect to God's attempt to kill Moses on a horizontal level with a generation, and sacrifice [usually associated with mountains] occurs in the act of circumcision on a vertical level between generations. Since this text works on two levels simultaneously, it cannot occur at the typical location of either.



- (3) A third mytheme is the act of circumcision. The transformation of roles by Zipporah performing the circumcision instead of Moses is a key to understanding Exod 4:24-26 as a whole.
- (4) A fourth mytheme is Zipporah's statement: 'You are a bridegroom of blood to me.' 'You' is ambiguous, because it may refer to Moses or their son. This ambiguity indicates this text can refer to two generations and that the text can work on a horizontal and vertical level at the same time. Here either Moses or their son is transformed into a bridegroom of blood. This mytheme denies human birth and sexuality in favor of divine birth. Circumcision here is symbolic castration, the most extreme denial of male sexuality. In previous events involving Moses, Jochebed and Miriam assume inverted roles because they do what males usually do. Since Moses married a Midianite, Zipporah, instead of an Israelite, this put Zipporah in the position of transformation. Zipporah performed the male role of circumcising their son. Moses' inactivity and symbolic death (God's attempt to kill him) in Exod 4:24-26 mirrors both halves of the female role in the sacrifice-rebirth mytheme. Zipporah takes Moses as a husband rather than the normal practice of Moses taking Zipporah as a wife. The entire Moses narrative is an inversion of the Joseph story.<sup>13</sup>

The above-mentioned uses – or proposals or understandings – of Exod 4:24-26 reveal a great amount of creative thinking by their various exponents. Some of these insights are interesting and thought provoking. However, for a wide range of reasons, they have not enjoyed general acceptance by most scholars of the Hebrew Bible – Jewish or Christian. A major explanation for this may be that all these understandings bring extraneous approaches or predetermined agendas to this text, then attempt to use them to support a certain approach or agenda. Accordingly, scholars naturally seek for other approaches or methods to interpret biblical texts, including Exod 4:24-26, more adequately.

13 S. D. Kunin, 'The Bridegroom of Blood: A Structuralist Analysis,' *JSOT* 70 (1996) 3-16 = '4. The Bridegroom of Blood,' in Claudia V. Camp and Andrew Mein, eds., *We Think What We Eat. Non-structuralist Analysis of Israelite Food Rules and Other Cultural and Textual Practices* (JSOTSup 412; London/New York: T&T Clark, 2004) 147-67.

## Chapter IV

# Literary Critical [Source] Criticism, Form Criticism, Traditio-Historical Criticism, and Social Scientific Criticism

There are ways in which literary historical [source] criticism, form criticism, traditio-historical criticism, and social scientific criticism [including sociology, anthropology, ethnology, structuralism, intertextuality, and related disciplines] are distinct. But in some ways, they are inseparable from one another in attempting to deal with biblical texts and ideas. Several scholars apply these approaches to the interpretation of Exod 4:24-26. Briefly, this study sketches the fundamental aspects of each of these methods and their application to this text.

Source criticism assumes that biblical works are the end result of earlier written sources. Following W. M. L. de Wette and K.-H. Graf, J. Wellhausen championed the view that a careful scholar can isolate four sources from the Pentateuch: J, E, D, and P based on differences of inconsistencies, repetitions and doublets, vocabulary variants or emphases, stylistic differences, and theological distinctions.<sup>1</sup> Major scholars of this discipline identify Exod 4:24-26 as an earlier pericope of non-Israelite as well as Israelite origin.

H. Gunkel and his followers generally assumed and accepted the approach and conclusions of Source Criticism, but insisted that additional concerns of biblical study are also necessary, often dealing with a pre-literary level originally transmitted orally, which soon led to what scholars now call Form Criticism and Traditio-Historical Criticism. Form Criticism essentially attempts to address four aspects of a biblical text: (1) the extent of the pericope [beginning and conclusion], its struc-

1 See N. Habel, *Literary Criticism of the Old Testament* (OTGBS; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971); J. Barton, 'Source Criticism (OT),' *ABD* 6 (1992) 162-65; P. A. Viviano, 'Source Criticism,' in *To Each Its Own Meaning* (eds. S. L. McKenzie and S. R. Haynes; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999) 35-57.

ture and scope; (2) the genre; (3) the *Sitz im Leben* [setting or situation in life]; and (4) the intention, purpose, or function of the text.<sup>2</sup> Traditio-Historical Criticism is rooted in Form Criticism, but adds two important aspects beyond what many scholars consider Form Criticism. For one thing, traditio-historical critics attempt to trace the history of an oral [or, sometimes, written] tradition through several stages of transmission until it reaches its present, final form in the biblical text, much like archaeologists dig slowly from the ground deeper and deeper through the strata in the soil until they reach down to bedrock. H. Gunkel's basic concept was that 'the composition of the book of Genesis came about in a number of complex stages. The book, as we now have it, represents only the last step in the long process of its formation. Behind this final stage one can discern an earlier time during which a number of independent sagas have come to be amalgamated. Usually these sagas have already been reworked into prose versions by the time they have been incorporated into a larger narrative. But at a still earlier period individual sagas [...] were transmitted in poetic form and by means of oral tradition [...] This early stage of oral transmission had a creative impact on the formation of the tradition which was passed on.' For another thing, traditio-historical experts contend that traditions rearranged, eliminated, added, modified, and reapplied the earlier traditions they inherited to reinterpret them for the needs, problems, and crises of their own audiences for that new culture and time.<sup>3</sup>

Coupled with textual criticism [syntax, etymology], Form Critics and Traditio-Historical Critics have proposed several ways of understanding Exod 4:24-26. Some contend that this pericope was originally a Kenite or a Midianite or another type of ancient Near Eastern tale not connected with Moses, and then later Israelites adopted and adapted this text in new contexts related to Moses or the Exodus tradition. Some in-

2 See G. M. Tucker, *Form Criticism of the Old Testament* (GBSOT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971); J. Hayes, ed., *Old Testament Form Criticism* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1974); J. Barton, 'Form Criticism (OT),' *ABD* 2 (1992) 838-41; M. A. Sweeney, 'Form Criticism,' in *To Each Its Own Meaning* (eds. S. L. McKenzie and S. R. Haynes; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999) 58-89; M. J. Buss, 'Form Criticism, OT,' *NIDB* 2 (2007) 486-87.

3 W. E. Rast, *Tradition History and the Old Testament* (GBSOT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) [quote from p. 4]; D. A. Knight, 'Tradition History,' *ABD* 6 (1992) 633-38.

sist that Exod 4:24-26 belongs to a larger pericope, perhaps 4:21-26 or 4:18-31. The extent of each possible passage may indicate a different meaning. Various scholars defend the view that Exod 4:24-26 is a legend or a saga or an etiology or a tale. Depending on each thinker, the interpretation of this passage differs. The meaning of key terms and phrases in this pericope is crucial, especially: 'the Lord [...] tried to kill him;,' 'Zipporah touched his feet [genitals?];' 'bridegroom of blood;' and 'circumcision[s].' One may understand Redaction Criticism as the final stage of the Traditio-Historical Criticism, but it seems more suitable to discuss Redaction Criticism at a different point in the discussion of Exod 4:24-26.

Sociology or Social-Scientific Criticism [including Anthropology, Ethnology, economic and political concerns, various family customs, socio-religious systems, war and peace practices, and the like] is inseparably connected with all aspects of human life. N. K. Gottwald asserts that 'sociology of ancient Israel ... is an imprecise covering term for the following: (1) the practice of social scientific criticism of the Bible, which employs methods, data, and theories from the social sciences (anthropology, economics, political science, and sociology), in order to clarify the relationship between biblical literature and ancient society; (2) the study of the social organization of ancient Israel, in its larger or smaller units, either at a given moment in cross-section (synchronics) or over a course of time, which may expand into a full-scale social history (diachronics); and (3) the identification of patterns of social life within the Bible claimed to be prescriptive or exemplary in some way for contemporary religious or secular life.'<sup>4</sup> Concerns of this nature are clearly intimately related to an understanding of Exod 4:24-26, especially the dynamics of a marriage between a Hebrew [Moses] and a Midianite [Zipporah] and their resulting sons, family customs such as birth, circumcision [rites of passage], religious beliefs, social or cultural backgrounds, and the like.

4 See R. R. Wilson, *Sociological Approaches to the Old Testament* (GBSOT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); N. K. Gottwald, 'Sociology (Ancient Israel),' *ABD* 6 (1992) 79-89 [quote from p. 79]; P. J. King and L. E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (LAI; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001 [see especially pp. 36-49]; L. J. Lawrence and M. I. Aguilar, eds., *Anthropology & Biblical Studies: Avenues of Approach* (Leiden: Deo, 2004).

Concerns and viewpoints and understandings pertaining to Source Criticism, Form Criticism, Tradition-Historical Criticism, and Social Scientific Criticism underlie various scholarly interpretations of Exod 4:24-26. This study represents an attempt to describe and evaluate the next several views.

## 17. Egyptian Myth of Osiris and Isis

C. Fontaine proposes a parallel between Yahweh inexplicably seeking Moses' life in Exod 4:24-26 until Zipporah stops Yahweh by the sacramental action of shedding ritual blood and Hathor (or Anat) aimlessly seeking to destroy defenseless victims until Hathor glimpsed the sight of blood. Zipporah's action may be an example of making the hero acceptable to the submerged goddess through induction of symbolic menstruation in the male hero.<sup>5</sup>

I. Pardes suggests that Exod 4:24-26 reflects a conflict between polytheistic and monotheistic traditions. Zipporah's opponent is Yahweh himself. By warding off Yahweh, Zipporah endangers monotheistic and patriarchal concepts. The portrayal of Zipporah in this text appears much like portrayals of goddesses in polytheistic texts who protect young male heroes often by struggling against male deities. One facet of the rise of monotheism was transferring the role of goddesses to human women. In Zipporah's struggle against Yahweh and designating Moses as her bridegroom, she seems to play the role of a goddess. Zipporah addresses Moses when she says: 'Surely a *ḥātān dāmīm*, blood-bridegroom are you to me,' i.e., I am delivering you from death and restoring you to life by our son's blood, and your return to life makes you my bridegroom a second time, this time a bridegroom procured through blood, a blood-bridegroom (following U. Cassuto on this point). The story in Exod 4:24-26 is a modified version of the myth of Isis, the Egyptian savior goddess, and her husband-brother Osiris. Because of jealousy, Osiris'

5 C. Fontaine, 'The Deceptive Goddess in Ancient Near Eastern Myth: Inanna and Inaras,' *Reasoning with the Foxes: Female Wit in a World of Male Power* (eds. J. C. Exum and J. W. H. Bos; Sem 42; Atlanta: Scholars, 1988) 86.

brother Seth locked Osiris in a coffin and cast it into the Nile. Some say Seth dismembered Osiris' body, but Isis collected the members of Osiris' body and brought him back to life by magical formulas and waving her wings. This revived Osiris' phallus and he impregnated Isis. Parallel to this myth, Exod 4:24-26 describes a violent assailant [Yahweh], a wife saving her husband, action on a male sex organ [*krt*, 'cut,' may echo Osiris' dismemberment], magical formulas, and wings. Zipporah, a Hebrew word for 'bird,' may reflect influence by the winged Isis. Isis' drawing Osiris out of a coffin in the Nile calls to mind Pharaoh's daughter drawing Moses out of an ark in the Nile. The relationship of Osiris to his son Horus is similar to that of Moses and his son whom Zipporah circumcised. The transition from polytheism to monotheism called for a shift from one patriarchal view of females to another, from celestial goddesses to terrestrial women. Exod 18:2-5 refers to Moses sending Zipporah home without stating the reason. Since Moses does not greet Zipporah when Jethro brings her with him to Moses (Moses speaks only with Jethro), it seems that Moses' relationship to Zipporah has little meaning to him. Now it is as if he were married to God.<sup>6</sup>

## 18. Kenite Clan Deity

J. Morgenstern contends that Exod 4:24-26a belonged originally to the Kenite (K) Code, the oldest document of the Hexateuch (899 B.C.E.). He insists explicitly that '[...] it has no immediate narrative or literary connection whatever with either the passages which immediately precede or which follow in the biblical text.'<sup>7</sup> Morgenstern argues that Moses' marriage to Zipporah was a *beena* marriage, in which a man abandons his own clan and joins himself to the clan of his wife. Children born to such a marriage had to be circumcised by the *ḥōtēn*, 'the circumciser,' the oldest brother of the wife, which released them from the taboo of the

6 I. Pades, *Countertraditions in the Bible. A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) 79-97.

7 J. Morgenstern, 'The "Bloody Husband" (?) (Exod. 4:24-26) Once Again,' *HUCA* 34 (1963) 38.

clan god and initiated them into the clan. The son of Moses and Zipporah was born shortly before they departed on their journey and he had not been circumcised, or he was born on the journey. The clan deity attacked Zipporah's son because he had not been circumcised and Zipporah was about to leave the territory he controlled, and thus was about to deprive him of what belonged to him. Zipporah assumed the role of her oldest brother in his absence, circumcised her son to satisfy the claims of the deity, and saved her son's life. Her words in v. 25b mean: 'Verily one related by blood (of circumcision) art thou [my son] to me,' i.e., you are a full member of my clan. V. 26b is an editorial gloss, which says: 'On that occasion she (Zipporah) said *ḥātān dāmîm* at the circumcision.' The redactor means that Zipporah was the very first person to use this formula, so she initiated the custom of mothers calling their son's *ḥātān* or *ḥātān dāmîm* at circumcision. *mālôn* in v. 24 is from *mûl*, 'to circumcise,' so one should translate Exod 4:24-26: 'Now upon the journey, at the circumcision Yahweh attacked him (the child) and sought to kill him. But Zipporah took a flint-stone and cut off the foreskin of her son and touched (with it) his (the child's) legs and said, 'Surely one related by blood (of circumcision) art thou to me.' So He (Yahweh) withdrew from him (the child). On that occasion she (the mother) said (for the first time) 'one related by blood (*ḥātān dāmîm*) at circumcision.'<sup>8</sup>

## 19. Midianite Deity or Demon

A. Allwohn assumes Exod 4:24-26 has no connection with its present context in the book of Exodus, but an anonymous scribe inserted in its present position for some unknown reason. He asserts that circumcision is a religious symbol, and therefore has mythical elements. One can never fully express the real content of symbol rationally. The meaning of symbol becomes clear only when one enters existentially into the experience of the Holy. Regard for the numinous is the most important concern when one applies the meaning of symbol to circumcision. Circumcision is a numinous experience in fertility cults. The deity demands human

8 Morgenstern, 'The "Bloody Husband" (?)', 35-70, especially 66-70.

sacrifices from the initiate. Through history, this has evolved from sacrifice of the firstborn, then of slaves and captives, to sacrifice of parts of the body as hair, blood, the phallus or individual members in self-mutilation, to redemption by animal sacrifices to spiritual sacrifices of the heart. Sacrifice of the phallus appears in the cults of Great Mother deities, in which priests offered their sexual organ in self-castration. The Great Mother demands the sexual power of the initiate in the puberty ceremony. In Exod 4:24-26, behind Yahweh is the demon of the desert, the infertile desert itself, which longs to be fertilized by the procreative male. Zipporah, representing the Great Mother, cuts off the foreskin of her oldest son Gershom and throws it at his feet, saying: 'You are a blood bridegroom to me.' The Mother Goddess desires the full sexual power of her son as the regenerated representative of the father. Zipporah and Gershom are related like Anat and Baal. The son of the Mother Goddess Earth, viz., vegetation, injects the semen into the Mother like seed falling into the ground. In circumcision, the son becomes the blood bridegroom of the Mother. Circumcision puts the circumcised in covenant with the deity.<sup>9</sup>

H. Kosmala insists that one must interpret Exod 4:24-26 as an isolated pericope separate from its present position in the Exodus narrative. It belongs after Exod 2:15-22, which says Moses fled to Midian where he married Zipporah. Zipporah's father, Jethro, identified his god with the God of Moses, but Jethro and Zipporah retained some older beliefs of their Midianite ancestry. Originally, Exod 4:24-26 told how a Midianite deity sought to kill Zipporah's son. Zipporah circumcised her son immediately, and smeared some of the blood on the upper part of his legs as a visible sign on the child which the deity would see and not kill him. Her actions are very similar to those of the Israelites at the Passover when they kill a lamb and smear the blood on the doorpost and lintel so that Yahweh will pass by or over their houses as he goes through the land of Egypt to kill the firstborn of the Egyptians (Exod 12:7, 13). Then Zipporah made an audible sign to assure the deity would let the child go unharmed. Zipporah addresses her words: 'A blood-circumcised one art thou with regard to me,' to the child in the hearing of the deity. They are a ritual formula which must accompany a ritual act. After the deity hears

9 A. Allwohn, 'Die Interpretation der religiösen Symbole, erläutert an der Beschneidung,' *ZRGG* 8 (1956) 32-40, especially 38-39.



this declaration, he releases the son. 4:26b: ‘at that time she, i.e., Zipporah, used the expression *ḥātān dāmîm* with regard to the circumcised,’ is the key to understanding 4:24-26. This was a Midianite expression, not Israelite. Since Midianites are Arabs, one must turn to the Arabic language for enlightenment. The Arabic *ḥatana* means ‘circumcise.’ The LXX confirms the MT by reading: ‘she fell at his feet’ [a symbol of imploring (the angel of) God to have mercy on her son], ‘and she said, “The blood of the circumcision of my son was (is) there [the result of the circumcision being still visible].”’<sup>10</sup>

H. Schmid argues that Exod 4:24-26 was originally a Midianite tradition which was incorporated into the N (nomadic) source (following G. Fohrer). Zipporah was originally a part of this tradition. A wilderness demon whom Yahweh replaced, or Yahweh himself, was also part of the original tradition. It is possible that Yahweh was a part of the original story because the Midianites worshiped Yahweh. Yahweh attacked Moses because Moses was not qualified to participate in the Midianite feast described in Exod 18:9-12. Even if Moses had been circumcised in Egypt, he still had to be circumcised (at least fictively or symbolically) into the Midianite cult community in order to participate in this feast. In the original story, Yahweh threatened to kill Moses on his wedding night; so Zipporah circumcised Moses (actually or fictively) and said to him: ‘A bloody bridegroom are you to me.’ Since marriage for the Midianites was a cultic partnership, Moses’ circumcision brought the couple much closer together and qualified Moses to share in the cultic banquet of the Midianites. The author of N modified the story to make Zipporah circumcise their son and touch Moses’ genitals with the severed bloody foreskin. The blood on Moses ward off Yahweh’s attack just as the blood of the Paschal lambs ward off Yahweh’s attack on the firstborn sons in the last plague (Exod 12:21-23, 27b – N). In the final form of the book of Exodus, Moses considered Yahweh to be the God of the Fathers, who promised the Israelites the land of Canaan. Moses held a feast of Yahweh in the wilderness with the Israelites. Moses told Jethro what Yahweh did for Israel in Egypt, and called on Jethro to confess Yahweh as the greatest of the gods. Jethro did not submit to Moses. Moses sent Jethro back to his land, and may have taken Jethro’s place in

10 H. Kosmala, ‘The “Bloody Husband”,’ *VT* 12 (1962) 14-28.

the cult.<sup>11</sup> Schmid's reasoning is difficult to follow, because he moves back and forth from the original tradition to its place and function in the N source to its place and function in the final form of the book of Exodus.

S. L. Shearman and J. B. Curtis suggest that the stories of Jacob in Gen 32:22-32 and Moses in Exod 4:24-26 are related because they are both stories about divine-human conflict. They find a fertility myth two stages behind the present book of Ruth, and contend that this myth provides a probable explanation of the original meaning of the Jacob and Moses stories. In this fertility myth, the land of Moab is the netherworld. Like Tammuz, Elimelech goes into the netherworld, but does not return. Naomi = Inanna returns with Ruth, a devotee of the Mother-Goddess, the sacred prostitute who devotes herself to the service of her deity and performs sacred marriage at the threshing floor as homoeopathic magic to insure productivity of the land. Similarly, when Jacob crosses over the Jabbok River, he enters the land of Ammon, the netherworld, encounters a netherworld demon, and fights with him all night. The foreskin of Zipporah's son which she cuts off is a blood sacrifice of a part to redeem the whole. The original story behind Exod 4:24-26 has nothing to do with Moses. At a lodging place, a demon encounters an unnamed person and seeks to kill him. A bird, Zipporah, a tribal totem animal and a winged night demoness, cuts off the foreskin of her son and touches the demon's feet with it, saying, 'Surely you are a relation of blood to me,' and the demon lets him alone. So this story originally concerned a confrontation of two demons. When Jacob entered the land of the dead, he had not made a proper sacrifice, i.e., giving part of the body to redeem the whole, so the demon El-Malakh attacks him and tries to circumcise him, thus taking the sacrifice which had been denied him, but demon Bethel blesses Jacob (Hos 12:3-4), i.e., allows Jacob to leave Moab-Ammon, the netherworld.<sup>12</sup>

J. Gray suggests Exod 4:24-26 is the J version of an older Kenite tradition. The expression 'bridegroom of blood' reflects a society which practiced circumcision as preparation for marriage, which was probably a Midianite custom. In the original story, the incident described in

11 H. Schmid, 'Mose, der Blutbräutigam: Erwägungen zu Ex 4,24-26,' *Jud* 22 (1966) 113-18.

12 S. L. Shearman and J. B. Curtis, 'Divine-Human Conflicts in the Old Testament,' *JNES* 28 (1969) 231-42.

Exod 4:24-26 occurred at an unknown place in the desert and a demonic power attacked an unnamed person. J, in keeping with his Yahwistic orthodoxy, identifies this demonic power with Yahweh. This story does not fit well in the context of Exodus 4. It fits somewhat better if one assumes that originally 4:19-20a, 24-26 followed 2:23a, then Yahweh's commission to Moses at the burning bush in 3:1-4:17 followed immediately. Undoubtedly Moses was circumcised in infancy as a Hebrew or as an adoptive Egyptian. But Exod 4:24-26 says Moses undergoes circumcision vicariously at the circumcision of his son when Zipporah puts the blood of the severed foreskin on Moses' 'feet,' a euphemism for genitals.<sup>13</sup>

E. Kutsch argues that in ancient Near Eastern languages, the root *htn* has to do with relationship by marriage (affinity) in contrast to blood relationship (consanguinity). Nouns corresponding to biblical Hebrew *hātān* mean primarily 'son-in-law.' It is inappropriate to ask why Yahweh was angry with Moses in Exod 4:24-26, just as it is inappropriate to ask why Yahweh was angry with Jacob in Gen 32:24, with Judah in Gen 38:7, and with David in 2 Sam 24:1. It is clear that the object of Yahweh's attack was not the child but Moses, because there is no mention of the son until Exod 4:25aa, and because the original connection of 4:24 with 4:20a indicates that 4:20a spoke only of one son of Moses and Zipporah (cf. 2:22), not two sons (as in the MT of 4:20a, following 18:3). Zipporah does not touch the 'feet' (genitals) of her son but of Moses with the foreskin of her son. That Yahweh leaves Moses alone (4:26a) – not because of the circumcision but because the blood was applied to Moses – shows that this blood ritual (like that practiced in the Passover [Exod 12:22-23]) was considered apotropaic. That the blood for this ritual was obtained through circumcision indicates the purpose of 4:24-26, viz., to explain the expression *hātān dāmīm*, as 4:26 emphasizes. The expression *hātān dāmīm* originated in another linguistic background (Midianite Bedouin? – cf. Gen 25:2), and so must be explained to Israelites. If one assumes a semantic connection with Arabic *ḥatana*, 'circumcise,' *hātān dāmīm* can be interpreted as 'blood-circumcised (person),' at least in 4:26. However, 'to me' in 4:25 suggests a reinterpretation for Israelites: 'You are a blood-relative (by marriage) to me.' The translation

13 J. Gray, 'Exodus,' *IOVC* (ed. C. M. Laymon; London: William Collins Sons, 1972) 40.

‘bridegroom of blood’ is inappropriate for Moses, who has already been married a long time.<sup>14</sup>

H.-C. Gossmann argues that *ḥātān dāmīm* means ‘blood circumciser’ (following the Arabic) rather than ‘bridegroom of blood.’ The blood here is that which flowed at the circumcision. Gossmann stresses that the name ‘Moses’ appears nowhere in this passage, and concludes that therefore Moses was not an original character in this story. He affirms that originally the assailant was not Yahweh, but a desert demon. Later, this and other demon narratives in the Hebrew Bible were Yahwicized. Blood in Exod 4:24-26 and Exodus 12 is an apotropaic medium against the spirit(s) of the dead.<sup>15</sup>

## 20. Night Demon

A. Jeremias states that Moses’ struggle with God in Exod 4:24-26 is similar to the struggle over the Urim and the Thummim in Deut 33:8-9 and Jacob’s struggle with God in Gen 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33]. Like Jacob, Moses wins: ‘God let him alone’ (Exod 4:26a). The legend of Moses’ struggle with God in Exod 4:24-26 is connected with a saga about Moses’ nocturnal struggle with a demon who wanted to kill him. Zipporah appeases the demon by circumcising her son with a stone knife, touching the ‘feet’ (genitals) of Moses with the foreskin, and calling Moses ‘bloody bridegroom.’ Behind this story is an archaic explanation of the ‘cultic institution of circumcision.’ The main particular in Exod 4:24-26 is the blood of the circumcision, which wards off and appeases a demon interfering with marriage. The rite Zipporah performed

14 E. Kutsch, ‘*ḥtn; ḥātān; ḥōtēn,*’ *TDOT* V (1986) 270-77, especially 276-77.

15 H.-C. Gossmann, ‘Metamorphosen eines Dämons. Ein Beitrag zur Rezeptionsgeschichte von Ex 4,24-26,’ in D.-A. Koch and H. Lichtenberger, eds., *Begegnungen zwischen Christentum und Judentum in Antike und Mittelalter: Festschrift für Heinz Schreckenburg* (SIJD 1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993) 126-29.

suggests a Minaic (German – minaische) [Midianite?] origin and a magical spell for warding off demons.<sup>16</sup>

A. Jirku says Exod 4:24 means Yahweh attacked Moses without warning. But the original story must have said that it was a night demon who attacked Moses, because it is not possible that the early account of the incident related in Exod 4:24-26 said that Yahweh attacked the first man to make Yahweh the God of his people and who interacted with Yahweh daily in order to kill that man. Further, some ancient versions say ‘the messenger of Yahweh’ attacked Moses, and Zipporah’s action of circumcising her son and touching the night demon’s genitals with the blood of her son’s foreskin goes back to the custom of warding off demons by blood, which is similar to the Israelites putting blood of slain animals on the doorposts and lintels of their houses to ward off the angel of death (Exod 12:22, 29), who is not Yahweh or a divine being, but a night demon. According to the Hebrew Bible, night demons assume their true identity at night, attack human beings, and seek to kill them. Human beings alone can ward off a night demon by learning his name, by blood, and by uttering certain formulas to cause the demon to flee. Blood plays a prominent role in warding off night demons. The night demon must be the ‘blood-bridegroom’ of Exod 4:25-26. The blood-bridegroom cannot be Moses, because by the time of the event reported in Exod 4:24-26, Moses had already been Zipporah’s husband for several years, and they already had a son. If the individual intended in Exod 4:25-26 were Moses, one would expect him to be called ‘blood-husband.’ There must have been a blood rite no longer clear to us in Zipporah’s action of circumcising her son and touching the night demon’s genitals with the bloody foreskin.<sup>17</sup>

16 A. Jeremias, *Das Alte Testament im Lichte des Alten Orients* (Dritte [Deutsche] Völlig Neu Bearbeitete Auflage; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs’sche Buchhandlung, 1916) 359 (=Vierte Auflage, 1930) 407.

17 A. Jirku, *Die Dämonen und ihre Abwehr im Alten Testament* (Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1912) 31-32, 59-60.

21. Deity Demanding *ius primae noctis*

E. Meyer, R. Weill, A. Loisy, A. J. Reinach, H. Gressmann, S. Mowinckel, G. Beer, J. C. Rylaarsdam and J. E. Park, M. Auerbach, T. Lescow, M. Noth, S. L. Shearman and J. B. Curtis, H.-C. Gossman, and W. Hüllstrung propose that the story in Exod 4:24-26 originally concerned a demon or a deity, possibly a Midianite god, or Yahweh as understood in a very primitive Semitic society, who demanded the *ius primae noctis*, 'the right of the first night,' i.e., the privilege of being the first to have sexual relations with the new bride.

E. Meyer affirms that Yahweh's attack on Moses in Exod 4:24-26 is similar to Yahweh's attack on Jacob in Gen 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33]. In the original myth, Jacob struck Yahweh on the hip. J has Jacob asking Yahweh his name, while E has Yahweh asking Jacob his name in order to introduce the name Israel. In the present text of Gen 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33], the demon who attacks Jacob is Yahweh, who has demonic characteristics, for he roams about at night and fears daylight. In Exod 4:24-26, Zipporah touches Yahweh's genitals with the bloody foreskin and calls Yahweh her *ḥātān dāmīm*, blood bridegroom, which can only mean that Yahweh brought Zipporah home as his bride and as a result Yahweh is bloody. The purpose of Exod 4:24-26 is to explain the origin of circumcision among the Israelites: circumcision is a magic charm (incantation) that dispels Yahweh's wrath.<sup>18</sup>

R. Weill argues that there are strong parallels between the encounters of Jacob (Gen 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33]) and of Moses (Exod 4:24-26) with a genie or a deity. The genie or Yahweh attacks both of them at night, and both win the victory in the battle against him. Zipporah throws the bloody foreskin on Yahweh's sexual organs while proclaiming the magical formula: 'A bloody bridegroom are you [Yahweh] to me [Zipporah].' The god had taken away Zipporah's virginity from her; then the genie releases Moses. This incident is very important, because Moses was the founder of the Israelite religion and the ancestor of the priestly caste. In a lost form of the narrative, Moses, like Jacob, demanded and obtained God's name, which is preserved in the E tradition

18 E. Meyer, *Die Israeliten und ihre Nachbarstämme* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1906) 56-59.

in Exod 3:13-14. In that narrative, 4:26a was connected to 3:2: when Moses forced Yahweh to tell him his name, Yahweh received Moses at the Bush. Yahweh's nocturnal attack on Jacob and Moses was the necessary preparation for the peaceful manifestation of the god who comes afterwards, which indicates the significance of this strange divine combat in the mythology of the pre-J era. By mastering Yahweh's name and secrets, Jacob and Moses became the first worshippers of Yahweh. The god in this primitive pre-J myth is a jealous and hostile spirit, established in a fixed place, from which he attacks anyone who sets foot inadvertently on his domain. Then it is necessary that this god's secrets be obtained from him by force. Jacob and Moses do this, and obtain the secrets of this god's religion, which then become the religion of the descendants of Jacob and Moses.<sup>19</sup>

A. Loisy says E. Meyer may be correct that according to Exod 4:24-26, Zipporah touched Yahweh with the bloody foreskin of her son and claimed Yahweh as her husband. Yahweh here does not behave like God, but like a ferocious being appeasable by blood. Exod 4:24-26 suggests circumcision was a sort of homage to the spirits to prevent or avert their anger and vengeance. J borrowed this earlier story to show that in Israel the circumcision of infants replaced circumcision at puberty. P presents circumcision as the indispensable condition of legal purity, and the sign of the covenant between God and Abraham's descendants.<sup>20</sup>

A. J. Reinach argues that the accounts of Yahweh's struggle with Jacob in Gen 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33] and Moses' struggle with Yahweh in Exod 4:24-26 are very similar. P tries to explain the earlier account in Exod 4:24-26 by inserting the phrase 'bridegroom of blood,' which means Moses received this designation because he was circumcised in preparation for his marriage to Zipporah, daughter of the priest of Midian. The most informed view is that Yahweh attacked Moses because he had not been circumcised. In order to appease Yahweh's wrath, Zipporah quickly circumcises Gershom and rubs some of the blood of the severed foreskin on Moses' genitals to redeem his life, as Yahweh commanded Abraham to be circumcised as a redemption of the sacrifice of his firstborn. Reinach follows E. Meyer in arguing that 'his' and 'you'

19 R. Weill, *Le séjour des Israelites au desert et le Sinai* (1909) 66-67.

20 A. Loisy, *The Religion of Israel* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1910 [originally published in French in 1901]) 64-70.

in Exod 4:25 refer to Yahweh, and that the 'feet' of Yahweh at which Zipporah threw the bloody foreskin of her son is a euphemism to denote Yahweh's genitals. Circumcision is a magical means of averting the wrath of the God of Israel, and a sign of the covenant. Yahweh leaves Moses alone when Zipporah cuts off the foreskin of her son with a flint, throws the foreskin at the genitals of Yahweh, and cries out to Yahweh: 'You are a bridegroom of blood to me.' By this act, Yahweh becomes her *ḥātān dāmīm*, 'bloody fiance,' i.e., the one who has shed the virginal blood. So the purpose of Zipporah's act is to give Yahweh the appearance of being the man who took away her virginity. In this way, Yahweh becomes her most intimate kindred by blood, and thus can do nothing against her or her relatives, but must give them help and protection. In ancient times, a passer-by, having thus entered into the covenant of the clan and its god, would establish himself under their protection, and thus Moses comes under Jethro's protection. That the son-in-law is married to the family of the wife is the very essence of the covenant. Young girls and boys of marriageable age had to participate in the covenant of blood to be admitted into the clan, and both married the tutelary god and generator of the clan. Exod 4:24-26 describes a double rite reflecting originally distinct accounts: Zipporah married Yahweh by the act which constitutes Yahweh bridegroom of blood; and Gershom, Moses' firstborn, is married to the god by the blood of circumcision. A redactor added 'because of the circumcision' to indicate that 'bridegroom of blood' was a formula pronounced at the time of the circumcision. Circumcision, which after Gershom must have become the sign of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel, already had the same value for the Cainites from which it issued: circumcision may have been the sign of Cain in Gen 4:15. Yahweh, in seeking to kill Moses, is acting like every local god in the ancient world is supposed to act. Every stranger who ventures into his territory is an enemy whom the god seeks to destroy as long as the stranger has not performed the rites of alliance to install him into the new world over which the god presides; as soon as these rites are performed, the god is bound to protect the stranger just as he protects his faithful ones.<sup>21</sup>

21 A. J. Reinach, 'La lutte de Jahvé avec Jacob et avec Moïse et l'origine de la circoncision,' *REES* (1908) 338-62, esp. 348-62.



H. Gressmann emends the text in Exod 4:25 from בִּנְיָן, 'her son,' to חֻשָּׁן, 'her husband,' so 'Zipporah [...] circumcised the foreskin of *her husband*,' and in 4:26 from לְמוֹלֵת, 'the circumcisions,' to לְמוֹלֵי, 'the circumcised ones,' so 'One called those who were circumcised [...]' Exod 4:24-26 is a very ancient legend about a nocturnal event. Primitive man believed that the *ius primae noctis*, 'the right of the first night,' of a newly married couple was the prerogative of the gods. A deity sought to kill the groom who tried to deny him that right. Zipporah circumcises Moses ('her husband') and touches Yahweh's genitals with the bloody foreskin, making herself the spouse of the deity, Yahweh, as indicated by her words to Yahweh: 'You are my bloody bridegroom!' This legend indicates that the Israelites practiced circumcision on young men before marriage to ward off attacks of demonic creatures on the wedding night. This demon is more like the water god of the Jabbok in Gen 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33] than Yahweh. This was originally a Midianite legend, and reflects the customs of women circumcising young men, and touching the holy stone or seat of Yahweh with the severed foreskin. Later, circumcision of young men was replaced by circumcising male infants at eight days of age.<sup>22</sup> At certain points, Gressmann does not make clear whether he thinks the creature who attacked Moses was a demon or Yahweh behaving like a demon in other ancient Near Eastern legends.

S. Mowinckel argues that in its original form, Exod 4:24-26 certainly had nothing to do with Yahweh, but with some local Elohim or other, a 'god' or a 'demon,' and probably had nothing to do with Moses and Zipporah. Rather, it had to do with the necessity of circumcision and how it began. In 4:25, one must read *'ishshah*, 'her husband,' instead of *bēnāh*, 'her son.' In the oldest source of 4:24-26, circumcision occurred at the age of puberty or preparation for marriage (Josh 5:2ff; Genesis 34). The story assumes a demon lying in wait for a newly married wife, who wants to kill the husband to get the wife for himself (cf. Tob 6:15ff). 'Zipporah' performed the circumcision and smeared the blood from the foreskin on the demon's 'feet' (=genitals) to trick the demon into believing he had already had sexual relations with her, so it was not necessary to kill her husband – viz., demons are stupid; since that time,

22 H. Gressmann, *Mose und seine Zeit. Ein Kommentar zu den Mose-Sagen* (FRLANT 1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913) 56-61.

one is accustomed to circumcising men so they become 'blood bridegrooms.' J interpreted this story as an enforcement of the practice of circumcision: Yahweh wants to kill all Israelites who do not have this covenant mark; and since Moses, all men are accustomed to be circumcised. 4:25 modified the story to advocate circumcision at eight days of age. J thinks Zipporah smeared the blood on Moses' feet.<sup>23</sup>

G. Beer calls Exod 4:24-26 a shocking text, because in 4:19-20a, Yahweh had told Moses to return to Egypt to lead the Israelites out of bondage, but now in 4:24-26 Yahweh seeks to kill Moses as he is in the process of obeying Yahweh's command. Beer follows E. Meyer, R. Weill, and H. Gressmann in arguing that this is an 'explorer text.' Here, circumcision in Israel is traced back to the Midianite woman Zipporah. The text describes an event which occurred on Moses and Zipporah's wedding night. The demon, Yahweh, attacks Moses for the *ius primae noctis*, 'the right of the first night,' but Zipporah saves Moses by circumcising him. Zipporah then touches the genitals of the demon with the bloody foreskin of Moses and speaks the magical formula: 'You are my bloody bridegroom,' thereby becoming the bride of the demon. This satisfies the demon, and he releases Moses. Circumcision came from the Egyptians through the Midianites to the Israelites. The present text of Exod 4:24-26 does not make sense, because a married man with children cannot be called 'bridegroom,' as Moses is here. The stone knife shows this is an ancient story. The early meaning of circumcision is that it is a bloody sacrifice of redemption (Exod 12:7, 22) from the jurisdiction of powers and spirits which rule weddings and marriage. It is a consecration at the age of puberty or adolescence, declaring young men marriageable and sexually suitable, creating conditions for a happy, fruitful marriage (Genesis 17). Exod 4:24-26 is an etiological legend whose purpose is to explain when and how circumcision arose as a demand of the national god Yahweh. In time, the circumcision of male infants replaced the circumcision of young men; in both cases, it symbolizes acceptance into the religious community. In the context of the entire story of Moses, Exod 4:24-26 signifies a consecration of Moses for his office.<sup>24</sup>

23 S. Mowinckel, *Det Gamle Testamente. Loven eller De Fem Mosebøker* (oversatt av S. Michelet, S. Mowinckel, og N. Messel [Mowinckel translated and commented on Exodus 1-24]; Oslo: Aschehoug, 1929) 112-13.

24 G. Beer, *Exodus* (HAT I/3; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1939) 37-39.

J. C. Rylaarsdam (with J. E. Park) reasons that as Exod 4:24-26 stands, it is an etiological story which gives a different account of the origin of circumcision than Genesis 17 (P). This passage indicates infant circumcision, but originally circumcision was performed at puberty or just before marriage. Rylaarsdam (with Park) follows the interpretation of Gressmann and Beer. Zipporah the Midianite performed circumcision, indicating it came to Israel from the Midianites. In an earlier version of the story, Zipporah circumcised Moses, not her son, on their bridal night to save Moses from destruction by a demon who denied Moses intercourse with his bride. Zipporah touches the demon with the foreskin and says to him, 'Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!' Thus, the demon is appeased. The second use of this phrase in v. 26b perhaps is addressed to Moses, and hints at the ancient practice of adult circumcision. Those who reworked this story into its present form replaced the demon with Yahweh.<sup>25</sup>

M. Auerbach reasons that unlike Jacob in Gen 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33], Moses is not important in the story related in Exod 4:24-26. The idea behind Exod 4:24-26 is a deity strolling about at night in his domain to inspect it and to encounter any intruder who decides to spend the night in his lodging place. The original story was mythological, and concerned a dreadful demon. A newlywed husband and wife (Moses and Zipporah) stopped to spend the night at a lodging place in the demon's domain. The demon attacked Moses because he was sexually jealous of Moses and came to claim the right of the first night of sexual intercourse with Zipporah. The expression 'bridegroom of blood' indicates that during sexual intercourse on the first night after the wedding, the groom gets the blood of his virginal wife on his genitals. Zipporah realized what the demon had in mind, so she circumcised her son and brought the severed foreskin to touch the genitals of the demon to deceive him into thinking that he had had intercourse with her and thus had become her 'blood-bridegroom.' Thus, the demon left Moses alone. The purpose of Exod 4:24-26 is to narrate the origin of circumcision and to explain its meaning. The explanation is that by the symbolic operation, which originally was performed on grown young men but later on small infants, the jealousy of the demonic deity on the wedding night is appeased. Orig-

25 J. C. Rylaarsdam, 'The Book of Exodus: Introduction and Exegesis,' and J. E. Park, 'The Book of Exodus: Exposition,' *IB* 1:882-83.

nally, Exod 4:24-26 was located right before Yahweh's revelation to Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3:1-4:17). In the darkness of night, a demonic Yahweh of primitive times attacked Moses; the next day, in broad sunlight, the God of the burning bush revealed himself as deliverer of the people, Lord of all human beings, and just and compassionate judge of destiny.<sup>26</sup>

T. Lescow holds a view similar to this, but with a different emphasis. He says the structure of Exod 4:24-26 is the 'gradation schema': A1A2BC1C2. B is the core of the narrative. It narrates in four stages how Zipporah removed the foreskin of her son, touched 'his' (her son's) feet with it, and declared: 'Bloody bridegroom are you (my son) to me!' At this time, her son must have been at the age of puberty, and his circumcision by Zipporah is an apotropaic rite to ward off incestuous relationships between mother and son. Zipporah is adapting an ancient action to a new situation. In the ancient rite, the 'bloody bridegroom' must be Yahweh, whose privy parts Zipporah touches with the severed foreskin of her son to ward off the surprise attack on 'him' (her son, 4:24). Just as touching the hip in Gen 32:26a [Hebrew 32:27a] indicates a transfer of power, thus blessing, so touching the penis in Exod 4:25 indicates a transfer of power. Circumcision and the declaration that Yahweh is Zipporah's bloody bridegroom are a warding off rite, and the creation of a new relationship which excludes future danger to Moses' family by Yahweh. Just as the circumcision blood protects Zipporah's son from Yahweh's surprise attack in Exod 4:24-26, so the blood of the paschal lamb protects the Israelite firstborn from Yahweh's surprise attack on Passover night (Exod 12:13, 23). This indicates that circumcision is a 'redemption sacrifice' (cf. Josh 5:2-9). 'Covenant' is a partnership relationship between the people of Israel and the God of Israel, represented in the rite of circumcision.<sup>27</sup>

Some responses to this explanation are worth mentioning. J. Hehn and H. Junker state that this view is 'grotesque' and completely incom-

26 M. Auerbach, *Moses* (Amsterdam: G. J. A. Ruys, 1953) 54-56.

27 T. Lescow, 'Ex 4,24-26: Ein archaischer Bundesschlussritus,' *ZAW* 105 (1993) 19-26.

patible with the Hebrew Bible's entire way of thinking.<sup>28</sup> H. Kosmala writes:

This interpretation of the story is so phantastic, not to say ridiculous, if one tries to picture to oneself the actual circumstances demanded by this interpretation, that it can be dismissed at once. He must be a very silly god who can be cheated so easily. He must also have seen that Zipporah had had a son already before this pretended first night. Some logicity must be ascribed even to demons. Besides, the interpretation is completely divorced from the text and it does not explain why the story should have been inserted just here.<sup>29</sup>

J. Morgenstern says the interpretations of E. Meyer and A. J. Reinach are 'far-fetched and groundless;' and then responds to H. Gressmann's view by saying: 'This hypothesis is so arbitrary and without proof that it would hardly merit presentation here, were it not put forth by a scholar of high repute.'<sup>30</sup>

Several scholars using source criticism, form criticism, tradition-historical criticism, and social scientific criticism in dealing with Exod 4:24-26 connect circumcision with God's relationship to his people, the covenant. From this perspective, in some way or other, Zipporah's circumcision of her son plays a significant role in God's covenant with his people, and is related to Moses' role in circumcision and that impact on future generations of the Israelites, especially related to the Passover. Exod 12:43-39 states explicitly that no one can participate in the Passover without first being circumcised, whether one is an Israelite or an alien. Therefore, the next couple of interpretations of Exod 4:24-26 connect circumcision with the concept of covenant.

28 J. Hehn, 'Der "Blutsbrautigam" Ex 4 24-26,' *ZAW* 50 (1932): 1; H. Junker, 'Der Blutbräutigam: Eine textkritische und exegetische Studie zu Ex 4 24-26,' *Alttestamentliche Studien. Friedrich Nötscher zum 60. Geburtstag gewidmet* (BBB 1; Bonn: Hanstein, 1950) 120-21.

29 Kosmala, 'The "Bloody Husband",' 16-17.

30 Morgenstern, 'The "Bloody Husband" (?)', 44-45 n. 27.

## 22. Zipporah and Moses' Assailant

T. H. Gaster argues that Exod 4:24-26 contains an ancient tale which one must interpret on the basis of the primitive meaning of *ḥātān*, which is cognate to the Arabic *ḥatana*, 'to circumcise.' A *ḥātān* is 'one related by ties of tribal circumstances.' Zipporah circumcised her son and smeared the blood of the severed foreskin on Moses' genitals as a kind of ritual to forge a bond of kinship with the mysterious assailant who attacked him, as a result of which Moses became exempt from his attack. Gaster asserts that the Australian aborigines and the Urabuna of central Australia engage in practices similar to that of Zipporah.<sup>31</sup>

## 23. Circumcision Blood as Sacrificial Blood

According to G. Vermes, in NT times, circumcision was the rite whereby an Israelite entered the covenant, the external sign of his membership. Circumcision of the flesh was regarded as the symbol of the circumcised heart. Philo says it is a symbol of the renunciation of all material pleasure. Targumic exegesis of Exod 4:24-26 emphasizes the importance of the blood shed in circumcision; it is 'the blood of the covenant.' The blood shed at circumcision was considered equivalent to the sacrificial blood of every covenant. The Targum of Ezek 16:6 (Mekh. I, 33-34) and Midrash Rabba on Lev 17:11 connect the blood of circumcision with the blood of the Passover lamb. Exod. Rab. xix. 7 says the first Passover after the exodus from Egypt was celebrated by mingling the blood of circumcision and the blood of the Passover lamb. Mekh. I, 33-34 reinterprets this in the sense of an atoning observance of the commandments of circumcision and Passover. The ancient theology of circumcision, especially its connection with sacrifice, is latent in the Pauline doctrine of baptism. For Paul, baptism is not only a sacramental entry into the new covenant and a rite of inner purification; it is above all a participation in

31 T. H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) 234.

the sacrificial death and resurrection of Christ, the source of salvation. It is a union with the 'circumcision of Christ.' Paul's association of baptism with sacrifice springs directly from the contemporary Jewish doctrine of circumcision which he adopted and adapted (Rom 6:3-4; Col 3:11-12).<sup>32</sup>

B. D. Napier argues that Exod 4:24-26 in its present form dates to a time close to the Mosaic era. It recounts Moses' brush with death – by illness or accident. It affirms that Moses' affliction was the occasion for the performance of circumcision as the outward sign of commitment to the Lord's promise and purpose, so that commitment was sealed in blood. This illustrates the whole concept of covenant, combining divine word with human response: disclosure of divine nature and intent by the word, and human acceptance by faith (here testified in circumcision) of that word. Moses' son is circumcised but vicariously Moses is circumcised. This act of covenant making effects the cure of Moses' sickness-unto-death.<sup>33</sup>

A. Blaschke affirms that Vermes is incorrect when he tries to derive baptism and the self-sacrifice of Christ in Romans 6 and Colossians 2 from the Jewish exegesis of Exod 4:24-26, which held that circumcision is a sacrifice and atonement. There is no trace of Exod 4:24-26 in the entire NT. The NT contrasts circumcision and baptism.<sup>34</sup>

M. L. Soards says that according to Exod 4:24-26, Zipporah seems to redeem Moses from the destructive powers of God by circumcising their son and touching the foreskin to Moses' feet, i.e., genitals. This portrays circumcision as derived from either magical or primitive religious rites where it functioned either as a sacrifice of redemption or as a tribal or covenantal sign. In the OT, the dominant understanding of circumcision is the covenantal aspect. Gen 17:9-14 says that among the Hebrews circumcision began with Abraham as a covenantal rite with God.<sup>35</sup>

32 See Vermes, 'Circumcision and Exodus IV 24-26,' 190-91.

33 B. D. Napier, *The Book of Exodus* (LBC 3; Atlanta: John Knox, 1963) 36-37.

34 Blaschke, *Beschneidung*, 433-34.

35 M. L. Soards, 'Circumcision,' *NIDB* 1 (2006) 668.

## Chapter V

# Contextual, Etymological, and Sociological Explanations

An important aspect of source criticism, form criticism, tradition-historical criticism, and social scientific criticism is the way(s) a context affects a biblical text, the meaning of the words and phrases in the text, and sociological customs or practices related to the text. These concerns have played an important role in interpreting Exod 4:24-26. Various scholars have suggested the meaning of this little pericope in the scope of these considerations.

## 24. Yahweh and Pharaoh's Son

J. Coppens says that the most widespread interpretation of Exod 4:24-26 is that Yahweh wished to kill Moses because Moses had not circumcised his son. According to this interpretation, circumcision is a sacramental act in which the blood of child redeems the father. Coppens contends that this interpretation does not make sense, because (1) Moses had two sons; why would he have circumcised only one of them? (2) This son would be approximately forty years of age at this time, but the text presents him as an infant. (3) Why would Yahweh want to kill Moses, whom he chose and sent to deliver his people? Others understand this passage to mean that according to Midianite custom, Moses should have been circumcised just before his marriage; Yahweh wishes to kill him because he neglected this custom; Zipporah saves Moses by substituting the circumcision of their son for the father. According to this interpretation, the intention of Exod 4:24-26 seems to be to explain the introduction of the Arab (ancient Egyptian) custom of circumcision in Israel and the establishment of circumcision of infants. The rationalistic interpreta-



tion is that Zipporah circumcised Moses and applied the blood of the circumcision to Yahweh's genitals, thus making him the bridegroom of the first night; in this way, she satisfied Yahweh's anger.

Coppens argues that 'him' in Exod 4:24 cannot refer to Moses, since he was mentioned by name last in 4:21. Rather, it refers naturally to the firstborn son of Pharaoh whom 4:23 mentions just before this. Coppens translates Exod 4:23-24: 'And I [Yahweh] say to you [Pharaoh]: "Send away my son in order that he may serve me. If you persist in not sending him away, I will kill your son, your firstborn"; while he [Pharaoh's firstborn] is en route, when he is at the house, Yahweh will go to meet him and seek to kill him.' Exod 4:24, then, explains how Yahweh will without fail achieve his goal to kill Pharaoh's firstborn: his hand will reach Pharaoh's firstborn wherever he may be, so that Pharaoh's son cannot escape Yahweh's avenging hand, not even by fleeing from his house. The change from first person in 4:23 to third person in 4:24 is common in the OT. The *wayyiqtol* form in 4:24 can refer to future time. Exod 12:30, 33; 14:30 use *mut* for the death of the firstborn of the Egyptians, so it is suitable in 4:24. Exod 4:24-26 is out of tune with the surrounding context whether one understands 4:24 to refer to Moses or not. According to the primitive tradition related in Exod 4:25-26, Zipporah was terrified by Yahweh's threat to kill the firstborn sons of the Egyptians, so she resorted to circumcision, a rite of blood suitable for saving her and her son from Yahweh's avenging arm. It is also to a rite of blood that other Israelite families had recourse to shelter themselves from Yahweh's vengeance in the night Yahweh killed the firstborn sons of the Egyptians.<sup>1</sup>

## 25. Egyptian Circumcision

B. J. Diebner contends that Exod 4:24-26 is a later addition to Exodus 1-4, the purpose of which was to emphasize the ritual blamelessness of Moses as mediator of the covenant. Exod 2:1-2 does not make clear

1 J. Coppens, 'La prétendue agression nocturne de Jahvé contre Moïse, Sephorah et leur fils (Exod., IV, 24-26),' *ETL* 18 (1941) 68-73.

whether Moses was circumcised in the Jewish manner. When Yahweh called Moses at the burning bush, Moses had been circumcised in the Egyptian manner, but not in the Jewish manner. The symbolic act of circumcision in Exod 4:24-26 removes this deficiency. Such a concern belongs to the cultural conflicts between Mesopotamian Jewish exiles and Egyptian Jewish exiles living mainly in Hellenized Lower Egypt in the 3<sup>rd</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> centuries B.C.E., probably after the Hasmonean consolidation of 164 B.C.E. The most likely setting for the origin of Exod 4:24-26 is the period of affliction in which Jewish 'heroic mothers' circumcised their children and as a result became martyrs (1 Macc 1:60; 2 Macc 6:10). Mesopotamian Jewish exiles refused to fellowship Egyptian Jewish exiles because they had been circumcised in the Egyptian way as adolescent boys. The Mesopotamian Jews insisted that the Egyptian Jews be circumcised symbolically by having their penis touched by a bloody foreskin of one who was circumcised in the 'Israelite' way. A modern example of this is that orthodox Judaism required Ethiopian Jews (Falashas) who fled catastrophe in Ethiopia and settled in Israel to be 'circumcised again symbolically' by touching a drop of (circumcision-)blood to the penis, which they based on Exod 4:24-26. A redactor placed Exod 4:24-26 immediately after 4:21-23 because these two pericopes are connected by the key words 'firstborn' and 'sought to kill.' Egyptian circumcision offered no protection to the firstborn in Egypt or to Moses. 'Met' connects 4:24 with 4:27. Zipporah touched Moses' feet (a euphemism for genitals), since Moses is the last person named in 4:21. Yahweh attacked Moses in 4:24. By touching Moses' feet with the severed foreskin of their firstborn son, Zipporah 'transferred' the circumcision of their firstborn to Moses. Exod 4:24-26 indicates that Moses had not been circumcised by Jewish ritual as Yahweh commanded. Yahweh wants to kill Moses because Moses had not been circumcised properly. Exod 4:24-26 makes sense when read in connection with Gen 17:14, which states that if a Hebrew is not circumcised in the Jewish way, he must be cut off from the people of Israel. Zipporah circumcised Gershom, and touched Moses' genitals with the bloody foreskin. Zipporah presumably is the true assembly of the foreskin, i.e., the Mesopotamian exile, and Moses is the archetypical Egyptian exile. Israel's God, Yahweh, and Moses' legitimacy to mediate Yahweh's covenant with Israel came from Midian through Jethro and Zipporah. Exod 4:24-26 has twenty-nine words in Hebrew, the central one of which is, עָרַבָה, 'and

she touched.' Here Zipporah is performing the 'act' of 'symbolische Nachbeschneidung' (symbolic second circumcision), which consists of touching the penis of one who has been circumcised in an invalid way with a drop of covenant-blood of a ritually valid *new* circumcision.<sup>2</sup>

H. F. Richter insists that the literary critical approach alone can solve the difficulties in Exod 4:24-26. This pericope does not make sense in its present position. '*Dem ursprünglichen Kontext von Ex 4,24-26 kann unmöglich die Berufungsgeschichte vorausgegangen sein.*'<sup>3</sup> Thus, Richter proposes that behind Exodus 1-4 are two sources: the 'Jethro source': 1:7-2:10; 2:23-25; 3:1-4:23; 4:27ff; and the 'Reuel source': 2:11-22a; 4:24-26. According to the 'Reuel source,' an otherwise unknown man named Moses kills an Egyptian for mistreating a Hebrew, which someone witnesses; to escape punishment, Moses flees to Midian, encounters a priestly family (the family of Reuel), and marries the priest's daughter. Later, when he and his wife leave Reuel, Yahweh is displeased with Moses and seeks to kill him. His wife, Zipporah, averts Yahweh's attack by performing the cultic rite of symbolic circumcision. By placing 4:24-26 after 4:23, the final redactor of the Pentateuch supposed Yahweh sought to kill Moses' child, not Moses; and understood *ḥātān dāmîm* simply as an ancient expression for circumcision. For him, the intention of this text was to emphasize that circumcision is the distinguishing mark of a male Israelite. Since Moses married into a Midianite priestly family, several scholars have proposed that one origin of the Yahweh religion is from the Kenites or Midianites. Richter abandons his earlier view that Yahweh sought to kill Moses because his child had not been circumcised. He states that the translation of *ḥātān dāmîm* by 'bloody bridegroom' is nonsensical. This long-standing interpretation is connected with the view that circumcision immediately preceded a wedding. But circumcision just before marriage would render sexual inter-

2 B. J. Diebner, 'Ein Blutverwandter der Beschneidung. Überlegungen zu Ex 4,24-26,' *DBAT* 18 (1984) 119-26; "'Symbolische Nachbeschneidung.'" Ein Nachtrag zu *DBAT* 18 (1984), S.119-126: Ex 4,24-26,' *DBAT* 18 (1984) 186-88; 'De Besnijdenis van Mozes in het Boek Exodus: Een geval dat om verklaring vraagt,' *ACEBT* 10 (1989) 21-36; "... und sie berührte..." Zur "Mitte" von Ex 4,24-26,' *DBAT* 29 (1998) 96-98.

3 H. F. Richter, 'Gab es einen "Blutbräutigam"? Erwägungen zu Exodus 4,24-26,' in *Studies in the Book of Exodus: Redaction-Reception-Interpretation* (ed. Marc Verenne; BETL 126; Leuven: University Press, 1996) 434.

course on the wedding night impossible, so this interpretation is very doubtful. Arabic and Hebrew show that a *hātān* was a relative by marriage, not only a bridegroom, and thus the translation 'blood-bridegroom' would not fit Moses, since he had been married for a long time when this incident occurred. Hence, Richter suggests that *hātān dāmīm* should be translated: 'You have been accepted [by this] bloody [intrusion] into my family,' i.e., the priestly family of Reuel. Read in the flow of the 'Reuel source,' 4:24-26 would suggest that Yahweh wanted to kill Moses because he had committed murder or had touched a dead body. That a ritual act by Zipporah sufficed to avert Yahweh's killing Moses indicates Moses' offense to Yahweh must have been impurity or uncleanness. Since the Egyptians practiced circumcision, it is unlikely that Moses had not been circumcised before the event described in 4:24-26. But Egyptian circumcision did not qualify Moses to carry out Yahweh's mission. So Zipporah circumcises their son, touches Moses' genitals with the bloody foreskin, and utters the traditional formula of acceptance into a household. Now Moses was culturally legitimized as a member of the priestly family of Reuel. 4:24-26 may have an etiological intention. In an etiology, first an existing custom is established, because from it the legal statute is derived. As the priest's daughter, Zipporah has equal status with Moses. She is legitimized to carry out the circumcision, and thus to create valid law and to avert threatening disaster. If she had not done this, Moses would never have become the one to lead the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage.<sup>4</sup>

Several studies of Egyptian circumcision support the view that Egyptian circumcision was incomplete. F. Jonckheere wrote a seminal article in 1951, which several scholars have followed because of its convincing arguments. Jonckheere bases his conclusions on Egyptian texts, plastic representations, and mummies. There are only six texts dealing with circumcision in all ancient Egyptian literature. One cannot draw certain conclusions from these texts as to how the Egyptians practiced circumcision. Plastic representations show that the ancient Egyptians practiced circumcision, but do not show clearly how they did this. Evidence from ancient Egyptian mummies is a little more helpful. Apparently the ancient Egyptians circumcised males at the age of puberty. A relief from the Old Empire in the tomb of Ankh-ma-Hor at Saqqarah

4 Richter, 'Gab es einen "Blutbräutigam"?', 434-41.

indicates the Egyptians practiced circumcision. Since depictions of foreskins exist on ancient Egyptian reliefs and statues, the Egyptians did not practice complete circumcision, for in that case there would be no foreskins. The Egyptians circumcised by making a linear dorsal incision on the foreskin at the age of puberty, while the Jews made an annular amputation of the foreskin eight days after birth.<sup>5</sup> C. de Wit follows Jonckheere very closely. De Wit makes several points relevant to the present discussion. The evidence shows that in Egypt males in general were circumcised, not only priests. The Egyptians believed circumcision made its recipient pure. Some depictions on Egyptian statues seem to indicate an incision on the glans penis, not complete circumcision. A general named Amenemheb, who lived during the reign of Thutmose III, seems to have undergone a complete circumcision like the Jews and Arabs. [This statement implies that usually the Egyptians practiced a partial circumcision – JTW].<sup>6</sup>

R. C. Steiner argues that according to Jer 9:25 (Hebrew 24) the Egyptians, Edomites, etc., were circumcised, but according to v. 26 (Hebrew 25) they were not. Steiner traces the interpretation of these two verses from Rashi (11<sup>th</sup> century C.E.) to J. D. Michaelis (18<sup>th</sup> century C.E.) to A. B. Ehrlich (19<sup>th</sup> century C.E.), and concludes that they are not contradictory. Rashi translates v. 25b (Hebrew 24b): ‘with every circumcised person with a foreskin,’ and says this refers to Jews who were circumcised physically but not spiritually. J. D. Michaelis revises this view slightly by arguing that the other peoples named in Jer 9:25-26 (Hebrew 24-25) were circumcised, so the prophet means that both the Jews and the other peoples mentioned here were circumcised physically but not spiritually. A. B. Ehrlich modifies this interpretation somewhat by translating *mûl b<sup>e</sup> ‘orlâh*, ‘one that is circumcised and even so has a foreskin.’ He suggests that the nations mentioned in this passage were only semi-circumcised; their circumcision was incomplete; the same was true of the Jews because of the foreskin of their hearts. The physical foreskin of the Egyptians, etc., is not completely removed, and the spiritual foreskin of the Jews is not completely removed. F. Jonckheere has confirmed A. B. Ehrlich’s theory by showing that Egyptian circumcision was very different from that of the Jews. The Egyptian in Jeremiah’s time was

5 F. Jonckheere, ‘La circoncision des ancient Egyptiens,’ *Cent* 1 (1951) 212-34.

6 C. de Wit, ‘La circoncision chez les Egyptiens,’ *ZAS* 99 (1972) 41-48.

literally ‘a circumcised person who had a foreskin.’ A new reading of Josephus, *Antiq.*, 13.9.1, paragraphs 257-58 indicates the Idumeans (descendants of the Edomites) were circumcised differently from the Jews. Jer 9:25-26 (Hebrew 24-25) is saying that the circumcision of the Egyptians, Edomites, etc., is incomplete physically, and the circumcision of the Jews is incomplete spiritually.<sup>7</sup>

## 26. Etiology

M. Noth argues that in Exod 4:24-26, Yahweh displays a ‘demonic’ character when he fiercely attacks Moses at a solitary, mysterious place in the wilderness. Perhaps in the course of the transference of all supernatural activities to the one God in the Hebrew Bible, Yahweh replaced the local demon who attacked Moses in the original story. The wilderness locality with its demon only forms the background for a brief etiological narrative. Exodus 4:26b gives the reason for the expression ‘bridegroom of blood,’ an expression it was customary to use ‘because of the circumcision,’ i.e., in the case of those who were or had been circumcised. The wording of 4:26b suggests that for the narrator this expression was ancient, no longer current in his time, but still known from an earlier period. The expression ‘bridegroom of blood’ indicates a connection between circumcision and marriage, and the story which explains the expression understands circumcision as an apotropaic act which fends off a nocturnal threat – originally this may have been on the wedding night. This text does not give any reason why Zipporah resorted to the act of circumcision when she realized the threat to Moses; the etiological aim of the narrative requires Zipporah’s spontaneous action. The reason for the appearance of the son in the story is completely obscure. One is tempted to assume that the part played by the son is an addition to the tradition which was occasioned by the later custom of infant circumcision, where the original material still dealt with older adult circumcision, and that by ‘touching the feet’ (genitals) the act of

7 R. C. Steiner, ‘Incomplete Circumcision in Egypt and Edom: Jeremiah (9:24-25) in the Light of Josephus and Jonckheere,’ *JBL* 118/3 (1999) 497-505.

circumcision would appear to have been effected symbolically on Moses.<sup>8</sup>

B. S. Childs, in his earlier work on Exod 4:24-26, understands this passage as an etiology explaining the expression 'bridegroom of blood.' He says 'az, 'then,' in 4:26 shows this is an etiology. Exod 4:24-26 seeks to explain the relationship between 'bridegroom of blood' and infant circumcision. Zipporah circumcised her son *instead of* her husband, and touched her husband's genitals with the severed bloody foreskin, thus transferring the benefits to him. *ḥātān* means 'son-in-law' or 'bridegroom,' and is closely related to the Arabic *ḥatana*, which means both 'to marry' and 'to circumcise.' This shows circumcision was originally a puberty rite; the *ḥātān* is the circumcised one who is entering into a new family relationship by marriage. When Zipporah touched Moses' genitals, she made him a bridegroom, i.e., a circumcised one, symbolically, thus delivering him from God's attack which was provoked by the fact that Moses had never been circumcised. The etiology seeks to explain why infant circumcision replaced adult circumcision as a puberty rite in Israel. Exod 4:24-26 has no connection with its surrounding context. Its picture of God is foreign to Israel's faith, because it presents God as a sinister demon of the night who ambushes men. The story is about a magical act. Originally the deity was a local night demon who by chance inhabited the place chosen by a traveling couple to spend the night. He attacked the man because he was not circumcised, but was appeased by the quick wit of the wife who performed a vicarious operation on her son. The biblical writers transformed this myth into a saga and made it part of Israel's salvation history. This sage affirms that a rite as important for Israel as circumcision had its roots in God's action in Israel's history. Yahweh takes on the characteristics of the demon, which causes friction with the main Hebrew tradition into which it is placed.<sup>9</sup>

O. Böcher does not label Exod 4:24-26 an 'etiological legend,' but he clearly follows M. Noth in his discussion of this text and refers to his work on this passage. Böcher reasons that Gen 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33] and Exod 4:24-26 portray Yahweh as having demonic characteris-

8 M. Noth, *Exodus. A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962 [first published in German in 1959]) 49-50.

9 B. S. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* (SBT 27; Naperville: Allenson, 1960) 58-63.

tics. Yahweh is the potential murderer in Exod 4:24-26. The 'feet' in Exod 4:25 and Isa 7:20 are genitals. Israelite popular belief said that demons endangered the first sexual intercourse between newlyweds. According to Exod 4:24-26, circumcision averted a nocturnal threat to Moses and Zipporah on their wedding night by a murderous demon. Here circumcision is an apotropaic blood rite against sexual demons (following M. Noth). Since Zipporah circumcised her son, the Hebrew Bible does not exclude women from the cult. Exod 4:25; Gen 34:14-24; and Josh 5:2-3 depict circumcision of young men; Genesis 17 promotes the circumcision of male babies.<sup>10</sup>

D. Michel reasons that Exod 4:24-26 is an etiology of circumcision which was attributed to Yahweh or a pre-Yahwistic deity. 'Bloody bridegroom' can refer only to an adult. The circumcision of the infant is a secondary expansion, which presumably brought about the later custom of infant circumcision.<sup>11</sup>

G. W. Coats essentially follows Noth's understanding of Exod 4:24-26. Coats argues that 4:24-26 has no integral connection with its context. The event recorded there did not occur on the wedding night. Still, the position of 4:24-26 in the redaction of the Exodus text is appropriate. The event it records occurred while Moses and his family were on a journey and stopped overnight. 4:24-26 has been inserted at an obvious break in the redactional structure of the Exodus narrative. Since 4:24-26 fits into a redactional seam and seems foreign in worldview to tradition normally in J, apparently it has been worked into the J traditions secondarily. It seems certain that an earlier form of the tradition existed, unattached to the broader range of the exodus traditions. In its present stage, 4:24-26 is an etiology, which is a narrative designed to support an explanation for a situation or name that exists at the time of the storyteller, and which builds a connection between a saying in the body of the genre and a conclusion that provides the explanation.

The narrative in 4:24-26a grows out of the etiology in 4:26b. The focus is on the circumcision ritual. In its present position, 4:24-26 is part

10 O. Bocher, *Dämonenfurcht und Dämonenabwehr. Ein Beitrag zur Vorgeschichte der christlichen Taufe* (BWANT 90; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1970) 21-22, 123, 129, 132-33, 157, 211-13, 228.

11 D. Michel, 'Beschneidung und Kindertaufe,' *Studien zur Überlieferungsgeschichte alttestamentlicher Texte* (hrsg. von A. Wagner et al; ThB 93. Altes Testament; Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 1997) 119-20.



of the Moses saga. The etiological narrative in 4:24-26 as it now stands offers an etiological explanation of the performative words 'Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me' in 4:25b. Whatever these words meant, they gained their significance from the rite of circumcision.<sup>12</sup>

## 27. Magical Incantation Blood Rite

Y. Avishur begins his reasoning on Exod 4:24-26 with the interpretation of this passage by the Midrashim. They say Exod 4:24-26 relates the attack of a desert demon (or desert demons) on Moses, who swallows him to the genitals. Avishur says this understanding is supported and illuminated by Phoenician amulets from Arslan-Tash and by Babylonian incantations. Two lime tablets from Arslan-Tash from the seventh century B.C.E. depict demons swallowing a man as far as his genitals. Like the Midrashic interpretation of Exod 4:24-26, the man being swallowed is in danger, but since he is not entirely swallowed, he has a chance to be saved. The amulets and the incantations on them are apotropaic. Further, Babylonian incantation tablets contain descriptions of demonic monsters that assault desert travelers, attack them and try to murder them and spill their blood. A desert traveler must recite these incantations to ward off such demons. Similarly, in Exod 4:24-26, as Moses and his family are traveling across the Sinai desert, Moses is in mortal danger, and only Zipporah's apotropaic act, the circumcision of her son, could prevent the fulfillment of the fiend's evil intent against Moses. Zipporah's deed and the Babylonian incantations are both apotropaic acts with the same purpose: to save desert travelers from the forces of evil. Zipporah's words are words of incantation. They are primitive, whereas the Babylonian incantations are more refined and exhibit perfect literary structure. Originally Exod 4:24-26 followed 4:20. So the reason for the attack was that Yahweh was angry with Moses because he refused to accept Yahweh's mission. One should understand *ḥātān* in light of the Akkadian verb *hatanu*, 'to protect.' So *ḥātān dāmīm* means 'protected by blood.'

12 G. W. Coats, *Exodus 1-18* (ed. R. P. Knierim and G. M. Tucker; FOTL IIA; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 44-46, 160-61.

Zipporah's words are a rhyme, which she speaks to the blood she has smeared on Moses' legs:

Surely a husband, blood, you are to me,  
A husband, blood, because of the circumcision.

Zipporah anticipates that the blood will protect her and her circumcised child. This is like the Israelites taking some of the blood of the Paschal lamb and placing it on the doorpost as a protection against the destroyer. The custom of circumcision at a time of mortal danger is known from the Phoenician tradition reported by Philo of Byblos, who says that at the time of pestilence and death, El took his only son up to the heaven, his father, cut off his foreskin and forced his allies to do likewise. In both cases, the purpose of this act was to avoid mortal danger.<sup>13</sup>

W. Hüllstrung essentially adopts Avishur's position, but modifies it in several details and expands on Avishur's arguments. Hüllstrung argues that Zipporah and her son were threatened in Exod 4:24-26, not Moses. This text never mentions Moses. The mention of the death of the firstborn son of Pharaoh in 4:23 suggests 4:24 has in mind the death of Moses' firstborn, Gershom. The rite that Zipporah performs here is not circumcision, but an ancient blood rite with an accompanying saying designed to ward off a demon or illness. Zipporah's purpose in cutting off the foreskin of her son was to obtain blood for the blood rite. The symbolic act is touching with blood, not circumcision. By doing this, Zipporah protects her son from mortal danger by a divine power. Since the Hebrew Bible contains no parallels to Zipporah's act, one must seek possible parallels in ancient Near Eastern literature, especially that from Assyria and Babylon. In this material, there are significant parallels in the realm of magic, which is essentially connected with belief in demons and the warding off of demons. The Babylonians believed that illnesses – especially in children – were caused by demons and evil spirits, against which one fought by the means and techniques of magic. They used human blood in the magical-medicinal treatment of epilepsy. Smearing with blood possibly functions as a protection rite for the sick. Babylonian incantation rites are usually accompanied with statements by which the function of blood warding off illness and demons is first activated.

13 Y. Avishur, *Studies in Biblical Narrative: Style, Structure, and the Ancient Near Eastern Literary Background* (Jerusalem: Graphit Press, 1999) 137-58.

The meaning of these statements often is unintelligible, just like *ḥātān dāmīm* in Exod 4:25-26. The Lamastu-amulets, which are widespread in the ancient Near East, document dissemination of the idea of a blood-drinking demonic power causing illness and death. Yahweh's attempt to kill Zipporah's son in Exod 4:24 is analogous to Lamastu's causing illness and death among children in Babylonian incantation texts. In the story of Zipporah and her son, in the sense of homoeopathic magic, the infection originating with a demon and possibly transported by blood battles against the blood of the infected child. The magical rite exorcises the demonic danger and the child survives. If one deals with Exod 4:24-26 as an ancient isolated text, the assailant is a demon; but if one deals with it as part of the Exodus narrative, the assailant is Yahweh.<sup>14</sup>

## 28. An Apotropaic Ritual

Several interpreters of Exod 4:24-26 hold a view very similar to that of Hüllstrung, but maintain that this passage does indeed refer to circumcision. Essentially the point they make is that *both* Zipporah's act of circumcision *and* the smearing with the bloody foreskin are necessary parts of a ritual the purpose of which is apotropaic, i.e., to protect a threatened individual from a destroying deity or demon.

Origen, in his work *Against Celsus* (246-248 C.E.), claims that what is unique about Jewish circumcision is that it occurs on the eighth day after birth (Gen 17:12-23). In 48, 5, he defends an apotropaic view of Jewish circumcision: it thwarted the powers of a threatening angel over uncircumcised Jews. This is why God commanded Abraham to practice circumcision in the first place. Origen combines the MT and LXX of Exod 4:25-26 to argue that Zipporah knew that the blood of

14 W. Hüllstrung, 'Wer versuchte wen zu toten? Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis von Exodus 4,24-26,' in *Die Dämonen. Demons. Die Dämonologie der israelitisch-jüdischen und frühchristlichen Literatur im Kontext ihrer Umwelt. The Demonology of Israelite-Jewish and Early Christian Literature in Context of their Environment* (ed. A. Lange, H. Lichtenberger and K. F. Diethard Romheld; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 2003) 182-96, esp. 184-94.

circumcision ‘checked’ (staunched, stopped) the power of the angel and this is why she said to Moses, ‘A bloody husband art thou to me.’ The angel attacked Moses, and the son’s (Eliezer’s) circumcision blood saved Moses’ life. Origen asserts that the angel mentioned in the LXX of Exod 4:24-26 had power over all Jews who were not circumcised as long as Jesus had not taken on a human body. But when Jesus took on a human body, he overthrew this angel, so that Jesus’ disciples do not have to be circumcised.<sup>15</sup>

F. M. Th. Bohl suggests that the original meaning of Exod 4:24-26 is that Moses and his family got too close to the border of the Holy Land around Mount Horeb without knowing it. The divine owner of the land prevented Moses from going into the Holy Land, and Moses’ life was in danger. Exod 4:24-26 explains how circumcision of young males in preparation for marriage was changed to circumcision of infants. Zipporah circumcises her infant son, and applies the blood of his foreskin to Moses to save and protect him from the deity. In the present narrative, Zipporah circumcises Gershom. Firstborn males belong to Yahweh and must be sacrificed properly (Exod 22:29; cf. Genesis 17). Just as the blood of the Paschal lamb, smeared on the doorposts, protects against the Destroyer (Exod 12:23), so here the blood of circumcision prevents death and ruin and causes reconciliation.<sup>16</sup>

In S. E. Loewenstamm’s review of H. Schmid’s *Mose*, he argues that one cannot interpret Exod 4:24-26 in isolation. This pericope is connected with what follows by the keyword ‘and he met him’ (4:24, 27), and with what precedes by the divine threat of death of Pharaoh’s first-born (4:23, 24). The verb ‘smear’ in 4:25 and Exod 12:22 is an archaic technical term for the apotropaic smearing of blood. Perhaps this rite was considered especially efficacious when performed with the blood of circumcision, which is supported by the fact that Philo of Byblos says the Phoenicians practiced circumcision as an apotropaic rite in times of mortal danger.<sup>17</sup>

15 Origen, *Contra Celsum* (trans. H. Chadwick; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953) 302; see Blaschke, *Beschneidung*, 430, 476-82, 490; Winslow, ‘Framing Zipporah,’ 360-63.

16 F. M. Th. Bohl, *Exodus* (TeU; mit Medewerking van Prof. Dr. L. H. K. Bleeker et al; Groningen, Den Haag: J. B. Wolters’ U. M., 1928) 107-08.

17 S. E. Loewenstamm, ‘Review of H. Schmid, *Mose. Überlieferung*. BZAW 110; Berlin, 1968,’ *Bib* 50/1 (1969) 430-31.

B. Kedar-Kopfstein contends that in Exod 4:24-26 the blood of circumcision is a powerful and effective protection of Moses against Yahweh's threat to kill him. This passage also is an etiological narrative designed to explain the historical origin of the expression 'bridegroom of blood.' However, the text does not make clear what this expression means.<sup>18</sup>

D. Flusser and S. Safrai point out that Philo Byblus, in his treatise on the history of the Phoenicians (Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* I 10, 33, 44=IV 6, 11; I 10, 20), relates a Canaanite etiological story to explain why circumcision was customary and why beloved children (preferably sons) were occasionally sacrificed. El offered his son as a burnt-sacrifice to appease the demons of vengeance during a time of serious dangers in the land, and dressed him for the sacrifice in royal garments: since El was a king, he succeeded through his son's royal garments to divert the death which threatened him to his slaughtered son, and prevented disaster for himself and his confederates by circumcision. The two motifs of circumcising a man and his confederates and of sacrificing one's only and beloved son as a burnt offering are connected with El by the Phoenicians and with Abraham in Genesis. In both places, they are separated from their original apotropaic meaning. Exod 4:24-26 hints at this ancient apotropaic meaning. The Passover sacrifice is also based on an ancient apotropaic concept, because the blood put on the doors protects human beings (Exod 12:13, 23). Here the protection is against the Destroyer who threatened the lives of Israelite infants on Passover night. But one must be circumcised to partake of the Passover (Exod 12:48). Circumcision, like Passover, has an apotropaic significance. The Damascus Document (6QD 16:4-6) apparently thinks of circumcision as apotropaic. The author of 6QD connects entrance into the covenant of the sect with the covenant of Abraham. 6QD says that if a man enters the covenant of the sect, the angel Mastema will leave him. 6QD believes the angel Mastema leaves the infant who is circumcised. Josephus and Manual of Discipline connect entrance into the Essene sect with immersion. Some of the sect believed Prince Mastema leaves the man who joins the sect, and compared entrance into the covenant of the sect with the covenant of circumcision. It is likely that the Christian idea that in baptism a person is freed from the dominion of Satan and his angels of

18 B. Kedar-Kopfstein, '𐤁𐤌𐤕 *dām*,' *TDOT* 3 (1978) 246.

destruction was influenced by ideas of the Dead Sea sect, whose source of this belief is the apotropaic nature of circumcision. The most important testimony concerning the apotropaic nature of circumcision is the blessing recited to this day when the circumcised infant is introduced into the covenant of Abraham. In the blessing, God is said to have 'sealed' the descendants of Abraham with a sign of the covenant of holiness. 'Sealed' is connected with circumcision and baptism. The blessing says circumcision saved the circumcised infant from destruction. This is the same view which was always fundamental to circumcision, viz., circumcision saves one from mortal danger. The 'destruction' from which circumcision saves one is like the destroyer who went through the land of Egypt (Exod 12:13, 23) and the 'destroying angel' (2 Sam 24:16), i.e., the domain of the demons. The 'Beloved' in the blessing is Abraham. God sanctified Abraham in the womb; so God already freed Abraham from the domain of evil before he was circumcised. Since Abraham had already been sanctified in the womb, he did not have to be circumcised to be saved from destruction. Rabbinic tradition names several who were born circumcised. Abraham was not born circumcised, but he was saved from destruction from birth because God sanctified him in the womb. The blessing expresses the fundamental idea that circumcision has an apotropaic aspect. It asserts that the descendants of Abraham were saved from destruction by virtue of circumcision, because God sanctified him in the womb.<sup>19</sup>

L. Kaplan argues that one should interpret Exod 4:24-26 not to determine its original meaning as an isolated unit, but to determine what the redactor had in mind by placing it in its present position in Exodus 4. Kaplan contends that the central question of this passage is: Whom did God attack: Moses or his son?, and that the redactor deliberately placed this unit in its present position to make the meaning ambiguous, i.e., to allow for both readings, even though they are mutually exclusive. He thinks J. Blau correctly observes that once the destroyer has been given permission to destroy, he no longer distinguishes between the righteous and the wicked. So, when God states in 4:23 that he will kill Pharaoh's son, as the destroyer is on his way to do that, he attacks Moses' son – and only the act of circumcision can protect Moses' son. However, if

19 D. Flusser and S. Safrai, 'Who Sanctified the Beloved in the Womb,' *Imm* 11 (1980) 46-55.

4:24-26 follows 4:18-20 immediately, 4:19 says Pharaoh, who sought Moses' life, is dead, but 4:24 says God sought to kill Moses, indicating a confusion of identities between God and Pharaoh. The effect of the redactional comment in 4:26b is to focus the whole passage on circumcision, which saved the victim, Moses. Read as a whole, 4:18-26 is mysterious, non-rational, and demonic. There is no reason for God's attack: it was not due to a misdeed of Moses, nor did it serve some moral or religious purpose, but it was the result of an inexplicable confusion of identities that indicates the strangeness or irrationality permeating the incident as a whole. There is nothing in the passage to suggest that God attacked Moses because he was reluctant to accept the mission which God charged him to execute. The redactor thinks the function of Zipporah's act of circumcision is to dispel the deadly confusion, the demonic gloom, and to restore the previous religious order, to reinstate the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between the human oppressor and the divine savior. The incident in 4:24-26 is similar to the incident concerning the death of the firstborn in Exodus 12. In both passages, the destroyer is going through the region indiscriminately destroying all in his path; the blood of circumcision and the blood of the Paschal lamb respectively protect Moses or his son and the Israelite firstborn son from death, and thus has an apotropaic function. Aaron's meeting with Moses in 4:27 signifies the restoration of order.<sup>20</sup>

W. H. Schmidt argues that Zipporah was a part of this story from the beginning, and that Yahweh attacked Moses in the original story; but the text gives no reason for Yahweh's attack. Zipporah saved Moses by circumcising their son, applying the blood to Moses' genitals, and declaring the explanatory word for her action in v. 26b. The point of the story is to emphasize that circumcision is a protection rite, means of deliverance or means of healing. Before this event, Moses was Zipporah's bridegroom. Now he is her 'bloody bridegroom,' indicating a stronger relationship between the two than previously.<sup>21</sup>

L. J. de Regt says that the narrator of the book of Exodus introduces Moses in 2:2, and Moses remains the central figure throughout the book.

20 L. Kaplan, "'And the Lord sought to kill him'" (Exod 4:24-26): Yet Once Again,' *HAR* 5 (1981) 65-74.

21 W. H. Schmidt, *Exodus* (BKAT 2/1; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1988) 225-26, 227, 229-32.

The genealogies in Exodus 6 and in Numbers 3 and 26 mention Aaron before Moses only because Aaron is Moses' older brother. Exod 4:24 apparently means that Yahweh sought to kill Moses, because the two pronominal suffixes 'him' in v. 24 refer back to Moses in the first narrative clause preceding this at the beginning of v. 21. Moses' son is not mentioned until v. 25, so the antecedent of 'him' in v. 24 cannot be Moses' son. The narrator of the book of Exodus makes the references vague in 4:24 in order to associate Moses' firstborn son and Pharaoh's firstborn son in 4:23 on a rhetorical level. Zipporah apparently touched Moses' feet (genitals) in 4:25, because by doing this she intended to save the person under attack by this symbolic act. This corresponds with the fact that Moses is the central figure in the immediate and broader context of the book of Exodus.<sup>22</sup>

C. L. Meyers observes that ancient societies often connected circumcision with rites of passage into manhood at adolescence or marriage. During the historical period covered by biblical texts, one out of every two children died by the age of five. This presented the Israelites with a serious demographic problem, because their existence depended on a growing population to maintain their farmlands and rural communities. So they practiced the circumcision of infants, believing that circumcision had a powerful protective nature, appeasing the deity by producing life-blood at the dangerous transition from newborn to infant. They assumed an infant fully existed on the seventh day after birth, so performed the rite of circumcision on the following (eighth) day. Comparing human circumcision with the circumcision of vegetation (cf. Lev 19:23), Meyers proposes that the Israelites believed that by circumcision, male sexuality was 'pruned' in order to increase fertility. In Exod 4:24-26, the deity attacks Moses. Zipporah, a member of a Midianite priestly family, knows what to do to protect her husband, and does it expertly. Zipporah's choice of the surgical instrument (a flint knife), her use of the severed foreskin [to daub Moses' genitals with blood], and her statement, 'a bridegroom of blood are you to me,' all indicate her act of circumcision was a magical incantation rite with a powerful apotropaic [protective] purpose and quality. The Hebrew word *ḥātān*, 'bridegroom,'

22 L. J. de Regt, 'Aspects of the Syntax and Rhetoric of Participant Reference in Exodus,' in *Studies in the Book of Exodus: Redaction-Reception-Interpretation* (ed. M. Vervenne; BETL 126; Leuven: University Press, 1996) 516-18, 521-22.



is from the same stem as an Arabic and Akkadian word meaning ‘to protect.’ On a literary level, Exod 4:24-26 foreshadows the way blood will protect the firstborn Israelites from the last plague Yahweh will bring on the Egyptians (Exod 12:7, 13, 22-23) and anticipates the biblical dictum that only the circumcised may partake of the Passover (Exod 12:43-49). P affirms that God instituted circumcision as a sign of the covenant and a symbol of membership in his faith community (Gen 17:9-27).<sup>23</sup>

## 29. Moses’ Preparation for Pharaoh

In the first fragment of Eusebius of Emese on ancient Greek Commentators on the Octateuch, he discusses Exod 4:24-26. Eusebius says the angel accused Moses of taking his wife and sons with him, which showed Moses had no faith in God’s promise to deliver his people. Threatened by death, Moses returned his wife and sons to his father-in-law, Jethro; then, after the exodus, Jethro returned Moses’ wife and sons to him (Exod 18:2-6). In another fragment commenting on Exod 4:24b, Eusebius says the angel only pretended to want to kill Moses in order to fight fear with fear. Moses’ fear of the angel was so great that it made his fear of Pharaoh seem insignificant. Eusebius makes the same argument in Pamphlet 12 among the pamphlets of the Collection of Troyes (end of the 4<sup>th</sup> or beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century C. E.), supporting it with the parallel stories of Balaam in Num 22:4-35 and Jacob in Gen 32:22-32.<sup>24</sup>

J. Plastaras, C. M., argues that the story in Exod 4:24-26 has different levels of meaning. In the original, pre-J, story, Yahweh attacks Moses for no apparent reason, afflicting Moses with some sort of critical illness. Apparently the Egyptians did not practice circumcision, and Moses had not been circumcised. Zipporah circumcises her son, and touches Moses’ genitals with the bloody foreskin, hoping to effect a vicarious circumcision on behalf of her dying husband. When she

23 Carol L. Meyers, *Exodus* (NCamBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 63-67.

24 See Le Boulluec, ‘Moïse menacé de mort,’ 84-91.

touches Moses, she exclaims: 'You are to me a bridegroom of blood (or a bloody husband)!' i.e., 'You come to me as a circumcised bridegroom.' Yahweh's hostility subsides and Moses' illness diminishes. The primitive, pre-J, purpose of this story was to justify the practice of infant circumcision. Originally circumcision was a rite of initiation into manhood and preparation for marriage, signifying putting away all encumbrance so that the young man might be fit to assume the role of husband and father; and was performed either before marriage or at puberty. Since adult circumcision was very painful, certain peoples, including the Israelites, performed it on infants. The Israelites justified this by telling the story in 4:24-26. In the ancient story, Moses' uncircumcision was a purely ritual defect for which he was not responsible, not a moral fault or deliberate negligence. Yahweh appears as an unpredictable, terrifying demonic power.<sup>25</sup>

J was not interested in justifying infant circumcision, because by his time it was a long established custom. J states that Yahweh sent Moses to Egypt (4:21). Then suddenly this same Yahweh confronts Moses as a threatening enemy, apparently to thwart the mission he had initiated. Biblical writers often affirm that Yahweh is a God of mystery. So sometimes Yahweh acts in ways counter to human expectations. 4:24-26 affirms that there are moments when the reasons for God's actions are hidden from human beings, and when God might appear to humanity a terrifying adversary rather than the God who saves. J does not try to explain away Yahweh's actions. Yahweh behaves toward Moses in 4:24-26 much like he behaves toward Jacob in Gen 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33]. In both stories, Yahweh attacks Jacob and Moses at night as a threatening demonic force. Jacob is on his way to meet Esau. Unexpectedly, the critical encounter comes the night before, not with Esau but with God. Similarly, Moses is on his way to an encounter with Pharaoh. Unexpectedly, on the way he had a critical encounter with Yahweh. J presents a pattern in God's dealings with his chosen instruments. Before entering the decisive stage of their ministry, God's chosen servants first pass through a period of testing, where the enemy appears to be God. When the test is over, they are not afraid to face the human adversaries of God's plan to save. The agony of Jesus in the garden be-

25 J. Plastaras, C. M., *The God of Exodus: The Theology of the Exodus Narratives* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1966) 103-105.

fore his arrest reflects this pattern. Where God's plan is hindered, it is not because of the power of the opposition, but because of a lack of response by God's chosen instruments. In the exodus narrative, the crucial question is not: Will Pharaoh and the Egyptians prove too strong for the Israelites? but: Will Moses and Israel measure up to the demands which God makes for his chosen instruments?<sup>26</sup>

The story of Moses' circumcision in Exod 4:24-26 seems to have another more specific theological dimension. Tradition saw Moses' life as a prophetic sign of Israel's life. I saw in the narrative in Exod 4:24-26 a prophetic sign of the salvation that Israel would experience. Just as Zipporah's touching the bloody foreskin of her son to Moses saved his life from Yahweh's attack, so the touching of the blood of the Passover lamb to the doorposts and the lintel saved the lives of the firstborn sons of the Israelites from the Destroyer on the Passover night (Exod 12:22-23).<sup>27</sup>

H. R. Jones states that in Exod 4:24-26 God attacks Moses to punish him for neglecting to circumcise his son without specifying which son. Realizing the reason for this attack, Zipporah circumcises their son and associates Moses with her act by touching Moses with blood on the foreskin. Zipporah addresses Moses as 'a bridegroom of blood' to express her relief and gratitude that her marriage, threatened to be terminated if God kills Moses, survives. As a result of the blood of the circumcision, Moses becomes Zipporah's bridegroom again. This incident at the overnight camping place engraves in Moses' psyche that a person needs protection from God's wrath, not Pharaoh's wrath, and that God will protect him as he carries out God's mission in Egypt. The similar event of shedding the paschal lamb's blood on Passover night drives home this message.<sup>28</sup>

W. Janzen thinks that the threat to Moses' life in Exod. 4:24 is probably a sudden illness. By performing a circumcision rite on Moses' son, Zipporah saved Moses' life. Since 4:21-23 speak of firstborn sons, one may assume that 4:24-26 refers to Moses' firstborn son. By touching Moses' 'feet' (genitals) with the bloody foreskin of his son, Zipporah

26 Plastaras, *The God of the Exodus*, 105-108.

27 Plastaras, *The God of the Exodus*, 108.

28 H. R. Jones, 'Exodus,' *NBC* (Third Edition; eds. D. Guthrie and J. A. Motyer; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970; reprinted as *EBC*, 1987) 124-25.

symbolically transferred the son's circumcision to Moses, who apparently had not been circumcised. Zipporah's statement, 'Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me!' may represent a ritual formula that must have already been archaic when the story was written, since 4:26 gives a partial explanation. It is impossible to know the exact meaning of the explanation. Here this statement and the flint knife show that Zipporah knows how to perform the rite properly, using objects and words handed down by ancient custom. But this does not mean Zipporah had a priestly status. Circumcision was a family rite. Since Moses, the father normally expected to perform it, is himself in some sense the object of the action, Zipporah is the only adult available to perform the ritual. It may be that Moses' neglect of circumcision, or even his manslaughter of the Egyptian (2:12), is the reason Yahweh attacked him, and that the vicarious circumcision of his son atones for his guilt of omission or commission. Here there are overtones of the protecting blood of the Passover: Moses' life, prefiguring that of Israel, is saved by blood (cf. 12:21-28). The circumcision of Moses' son has to be applied vicariously to Moses, since a circumcision of Moses at this time would have incapacitated him temporarily from pursuing his mission. But the important question is: Why does this event occur at this particular point in the story? The story of Jacob at the Jabbok (Gen. 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33]) may provide a clue. There Jacob, also on a journey, was greatly concerned about his forthcoming meeting with Esau. Just when the tension reached its peak, on the eve before the meeting, a 'man,' later identified as 'God,' attacked Jacob unexpectedly. The experience changed Jacob's life, and taught him that the crucial confrontation over the stolen blessing was not with Esau, but with God. After this confrontation with God, the meeting with Esau the following day was peaceful, almost like an anticlimax. Similarly Moses, just warned of Pharaoh's hard heart and the fierce struggle awaiting him, is reminded by a mysterious night experience that the decisive encounter is not with Pharaoh, but with God. If Moses' relationship with God is set right – through atonement by blood – the way to victory over Pharaoh lies open. It will not do to try to explain away the clear meaning of these texts: Yahweh attacks without provocation people whom he had chosen and who loved him. Believers accept this biblical

affirmation, because from time to time they experience an attack from God on their life. But beyond this, there may be a way of salvation.<sup>29</sup>

### 30. From Puberty to Infancy

Several scholars think the story in Exod 4:24-26 was designed to explain how circumcision was transformed from a puberty rite or preparation for marriage to an infancy rite performed a few days after birth.<sup>30</sup>

H. Holzinger reasons that Exod 4:24-26 is very ancient because of its pagan concept of Yahweh and the use of a stone knife for circumcision, and assigns it to J1. *lammûlôt*, 'with reference to the circumcision,' in v. 26b suggests that as a result of the event described in vv. 24-26, the expression, *ḥātān dāmīm*, 'bridegroom of blood,' was connected with circumcision. The Yahweh encountered in this passage is a sinister, hostile, angry numen, a jinn, which reflects fearful pagan religions. Yahweh's wrath is provoked because Moses had not circumcised his son (v. 25a). Zipporah may have performed this circumcision because it needed to be done simply and quickly, or because a wife may circumcise a child but not an adult. The purpose of this narrative may be to explain how the circumcision of boys came into existence as a softened equivalent for the original circumcision of young men. The expression 'bridegroom of blood' reflects the original connection of circumcision and the explanation of puberty or marriage (Genesis 34).<sup>31</sup>

H. Gunkel argues that in Exod 4:24-26, circumcision is the means to avert Yahweh's wrath: it is an atonement ceremony; if Zipporah had not performed circumcision at the last moment, God would have killed Moses. God attacked Moses because Moses was not circumcised. If Moses had been circumcised, God would have disregarded him; thus, the

29 W. Janzen, *Exodus* (BCBC; ed. E. A. Martens; Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 2000) 84-86, 90-91, 93-94.

30 Other scholars to which this applies are J. Wellhausen, B. Baentsch, A. H. McNeile, M. Noth, and R. E. Clements, on which see the explanations under 26, 31, 40.

31 H. Holzinger, *Exodus erklärt* (ed. D. Karl Marti; KHCAT II; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1900) 9, 16-17.

circumcision of the child is a substitute for the actual necessary circumcision of the adult; the words Zipporah speaks about Moses show the same thing, and present the formula which is common with regard to actual circumcision of adults. So Exod 4:24-26 is the etiological legend which is supposed to explain the transfer of circumcision from adult male to infant. The words of Zipporah: 'You are my blood bridegroom,' show that the circumcision of adults originally preceded marriage. The root *ḥtn*, from which Hebrew *ḥātān*, 'bridegroom,' comes, means in Arabic 'to circumcise,' and 'father-in-law' in Hebrew is *ḥōtēn*, which perhaps means 'the circumciser.' So, originally in Israel, circumcision meant entrance into manhood and acceptance into the tribe and declaration of marriageability. Gunkel insists that

diese Sage [Exod 4:24-26] hat also gar keinen Zusammenhang mit dem übrigen; es ist eine ganz selbständige Tradition, die hierher gesetzt worden ist, weil sie eben hierher lediglich zu passen schien. Alle Erklärungen also, die an solcher Stelle aus dem Zusammenhang genommen sind, sind principiell zu verwerfen.<sup>32</sup>

G. Fohrer contends that Exod 4:24-26 must come from N, because Moses takes his family with him on the journey from Midian to Egypt, which is not the case in J and E. The main difficulties in 4:24-26 are the uncertainties as to whom Yahweh really wants to kill and whom Zipporah touches with her son's foreskin. The difficulty of understanding this narrative is due to the fact that N uses an old tradition like Gen 32:22-32, which comes from semi-nomadic circles. It is set in the wilderness at an unspecified place. The demon living there attacks the anonymous unsuspecting sleeping man and seeks to kill him. The demon wants to see blood. The anonymous wife obtains blood by circumcising her son (indicating the man had already been circumcised), and ritually touches the man's genitals with the bloody foreskin or rubs some blood on his legs, and declares him to be 'blood-circumcised.' The real reason this tradition originated and was handed down is that it describes the establishment of the practice of circumcising infants. It affirms that at some time the practice of circumcising infants replaced the earlier practice of circumcising adults. When N takes over the old tradition, he says Yahweh [not a demon] attacked Moses [not an anonymous man], and that Zippo-

32 H. Gunkel, 'Über die Beschneidung im alten Testament,' *A/P* 2 (1902) 17-19 [quote on p. 19].

rah [not an anonymous wife] circumcised her son and satisfied Yahweh by the shed blood. Exod 4:24-26 in its present position introduced the practice of infant circumcision to replace adult circumcision or legitimated infant circumcision as a practice fitting for the Yahweh cult, as P does in Gen 17:9ff.<sup>33</sup>

T. Lewis and C. E. Armerding believe the main thought in Exod 4:24-26 is that Zipporah's symbolic act of circumcising her son and applying the circumcision blood to Moses' genitals to save Moses from death at the hands of Yahweh, along with Zipporah's words: 'You are a blood-bridegroom to me,' which suggest that smearing the infant's blood on Moses' genitals made Moses ceremonially clean in a way previously accomplished by adult circumcision, indicate this narrative is connecting the Israelite custom of circumcising an infant with the original and widely practice custom of circumcising adults as a puberty or marriage rite. A subsidiary thought in this passage is that Zipporah, by circumcising her son, was dedicating him to Yahweh's service.<sup>34</sup>

33 G. Fohrer, *Überlieferung und Geschichte des Exodus. Eine Analyse von Ex 1-15* (ed. G. Fohrer; BZAW 91; Berlin: Alfred Topelmann, 1964) 45-48.

34 T. Lewis and C. E. Armerding, 'Circumcision,' *ISBEFR* 1 (1979) 701.

## Chapter VI

# Neglected Circumcision

The broad approaches, Source Criticism, Form Criticism, Tradition-Historical Criticism, and Social Scientific Criticism, inevitably encounter the possibility that the motivation for the assailant seeking to kill Moses or the person pursued in the story in Exod 4:24-26 is the neglect of circumcision. This contingency also appears in other approaches discussed later in this work, but this explanation is so prominent in the present group of methods that it seems natural to discuss this at this juncture. Scholars do not agree as to the identity of the individual who had not been circumcised as the cause for the attack described in Exod 4:24-26. This study attempts to delineate and discuss each proposal.

### 31. Moses Was Uncircumcised

One early rabbinic explanation of Yahweh's or an angel's attack on Moses is that Moses had not been circumcised. Exod. Rab. v. 8 says Zipporah knew Moses was in trouble because he had not been circumcised, because the angel swallowed Moses from his head to the place of circumcision. Immediately Zipporah circumcised Moses, and the angel departed.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, R. Judah b. Bizna taught that Af and Hemah, angels of wrath and anger, swallowed Moses, one from his head and the other from his feet to his legs (genitals), and immediately Zipporah circumcised her son and they withdrew (Exodus Rabbah-Shemot 1.32-33, 4.1-4, 5.3-8).<sup>2</sup> L. Ginzberg relates the rabbinic story in this way:

1 See Vermes, 'Circumcision and Exodus IV 24-26,' 185-90.

2 See Winslow, 'Framing Zipporah,' 228.



Moses was loyal to the oath he had given his father-in-law Jethro, never to return to Egypt without securing his consent. His first concern therefore was to go back to Midian and obtain his permission, which Jethro gave freely [...] At last Moses sallied forth upon his journey to Egypt, accompanied by his wife and his children. He was mounted upon the very ass that had borne Abraham to the 'Akedah on Mount Moriah, the ass upon which the Messiah will appear riding at the end of days. Even now, his journey begun, Moses was but half-hearted about his mission. He traveled leisurely, thinking: 'When I arrive in Egypt and announce to the children of Israel that the end of the term of Egyptian slavery has come, they will say, "We know very well that our bondage must last four hundred years, and the end is not yet," but if I were to put this objection before God, He would break out in wrath against me. It is best for me to consume as much time as possible on the way thither.' God was ill pleased with Moses for this artifice, and He spake to him, saying, 'Joseph prophesied long ago that the oppression of Egypt would endure only two hundred and ten years.' For his lack of faith was punished while he was on the road to Egypt. The angels Af and Hemah appeared and swallowed his whole body down to his feet, and they gave him up only after Zipporah, nimble as a 'bird,' circumcised her son Gershom, and touched the feet of her husband with the blood of the circumcision. The reason why their son had remained uncircumcised until then was that Jethro had made the condition, when he consented to the marriage of his daughter with Moses, that the first son of their union should be brought up as a Gentile. When Moses was released by the angels, he attacked them, and he slew Hemah [...]<sup>3</sup>

Source critics ordinarily assign Exod 4:24-26 to J [Morgenstern assigns it to his Kenite source K; Eissfeldt to his Lay source L; Fohrer to his Nomadic source N; and Simpson to his J1 source],<sup>4</sup> and attempt to determine the meaning of this passage in that source. Some argue that as Moses and his family were traveling from Midian back to Egypt, Yahweh sought to kill Moses because he was angry with him for not having been circumcised. Zipporah discerned the situation and created a substitute for Moses' circumcision by circumcising their son and touching his bloody foreskin to Moses' 'feet' (i.e., genitals), saying, 'Surely you [Moses] are a bridegroom of blood to me!' At this, Yahweh left Moses

3 L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* II (tr. from the German manuscript by H. Szold; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1910) 327-28.

4 See A. H. McNeile, *The Book of Exodus with Introduction and Notes* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; ed. W. Lock; WC; London : Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1931) xiii, 27. M. J. Oosthuizen, 'Some Thoughts on the Interpretation of Exodus 4:24-26,' *Exodus 1-15: Text and Context. Proceedings of the 29<sup>th</sup> Annual Congress of the Old Testament Society of South Africa (OTSSA)* (ed. J. J. Burden; Pretoria: V & R Printing Works, 1987) 4.

alone. Accordingly, J knew nothing of the institution of circumcision in the time of Abraham related by P in Gen 17:1-14.<sup>5</sup>

J. Wellhausen, B. Baentsch, A. B. Ehrlich, G. A. Barton, J. de Groot, H. Junker, F. Sierksma, G. Ricciotti, S. Talmon, G. Te Stroete, M. V. Fox, J. I. Durham, S. J. Binz, S. Ackerman, and C. V. Camp all assert that Yahweh or an angel attacked Moses at the lodging place (Exod 4:24-26) because Moses had not been circumcised.<sup>6</sup>

J. Wellhausen reasons that the purpose of Exod 4:24-26 is to explain why the Israelites circumcise male infants. Zipporah circumcises her son *instead of* her husband, symbolically makes her husband a blood-bridegroom by touching his 'feet' with the severed foreskin, thereby delivering him from the wrath of Yahweh, which Moses aroused because he was not a blood-bridegroom, i.e., because he had not submitted to circumcision before his marriage. Exod 4:24-26, then, explains the circumcision of male infants as a milder substitute for the original circumcision of young men before marriage. The word *hātān* shows that the original custom was to circumcise young men to prepare them for marriage, because *hātān* means both circumcision and bridegroom. Genesis 34 indicates Shechem had to submit to circumcision before marrying Dinah.<sup>7</sup>

B. Baentsch admits that Exod 4:24-26 does not say why Yahweh attacked Moses. He suggests that on an impulse Zipporah circumcised her son and touched the genitals of Moses with the bloody foreskin to apply the circumcision to him and thus to protect him from the wrath of Yahweh. He concludes from this that Yahweh must have become angry with Moses because Moses was not circumcised. He asserts that Josh 5:9 indicates the Israelites, apparently including Moses, neglected circumcision while they were in Egypt. The purpose of Exod 4:24-26 is not to explain the origin of circumcision, but to explain the change of circumcision from the age of puberty to childhood. Originally among the Israelites, circumcision signified the consecration of the origin of procreation to the deity and the admission of the one circumcised into the fellowship

5 See McNeile, *The Book of Exodus*, 29-30; Hyatt, *Commentary on Exodus*, 86-88; G. A. F. Knight, *Theology as Narration. A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 34-35.

6 On de Groot, see under 34; on Te Stroete, see under 36.

7 J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957 [first published in German in 1878]) 340.

of the tribe. It was also a declaration that the male is now marriageable. With the change to the circumcision of a male infant, circumcision now signified only membership in the Israelite tribal or cultic community. Zipporah for the very first time called her husband a ‘bloody bridegroom,’ meaning a bridegroom whom she had protected and saved by touching the bloody foreskin of her son to his genitals. Thus, she introduced this expression with reference to circumcision. Originally, it was probably applied to the bridegroom himself on whom the circumcision was performed.<sup>8</sup>

A. B. Ehrlich asserts that the story in Exod 4:24-26 illustrates that even in Yahweh’s wrath, he showed compassion. Yahweh waited to attack Moses until Moses was at a night lodging where he could endure the attack. Yahweh attacked Moses because neither Moses the father nor his son had been circumcised, and the father is responsible for this neglect on the part of both. In ancient times, the Hebrews practiced circumcision at puberty shortly before marriage, so *ḥātān* meant ‘relationship by marriage.’ The father-in-law or *ḥōtēn* was responsible for seeing to it that a young man marrying into his family or *ḥātān*, ‘bridegroom,’ was circumcised. Later, when circumcision was performed on male infants, *ḥātān* referred to the circumcised infant. But to avoid misunderstanding, this infant was called *ḥātān dāmîm*, meaning a candidate for circumcision. On the occasion related in Exod 4:24-26, probably Yahweh said something which indicated to Zipporah that Yahweh attacked Moses because he had neglected to circumcise himself and his son. Moses was too sick to come to the place where Zipporah performed the circumcision, so Zipporah circumcised her son and promised Yahweh she would circumcise Moses by touching Moses’ genitals with the foreskin of the son and saying to Moses: ‘A candidate for circumcision are you to me,’ i.e., it is my responsibility to see to it that you are circumcised. *ḥātān dāmîm* cannot refer to Moses’ relationship to Zipporah. 4:26b is a redactional remark which means: ‘At that time – the time of Moses – people said *ḥātān dāmîm* with reference to cases of circumci-

8 B. Baentsch, *Exodus-Leviticus-Numeri übersetzt und erklärt* (HKAT I/2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1903) 35-36.

sion,' i.e., people called someone who was supposed to be circumcised *ḥātān dāmīm*.<sup>9</sup>

G. A. Barton asserts that probably initially circumcision among Semites was a sacrifice to, or a mark of consecration to, the goddess of fertility, the purpose of which was to secure her favor in producing offspring. At first it was performed on the male at the time of marriage, which is J's understanding of the account in Exod 4:24-25. Moses had not been circumcised, so Yahweh tried to kill him. Zipporah cut off the foreskin of her son, placed it on Moses' penis, and said: 'Surely a bridegroom of blood art thou to me.' This vicarious circumcision satisfied Yahweh and he let Moses go. By the time of P, circumcision was considered the sign of the covenant between the people of Israel and Yahweh (Gen 17:1-5).<sup>10</sup>

H. Junker thinks the key to understanding Exod 4:24-26 is to realize that in the last line of v. 25, Zipporah does not originate or coin the statement she makes, but quotes an ancient fixed formula traditionally used in connection with circumcision and applies it to her husband Moses: 'A bloody bridegroom are you [Moses] to me (now).' Yahweh attacked Moses at the lodging place [i.e., Moses became very ill, perhaps with a severe fever] because he had not been circumcised. His parents had thought it best not to circumcise him because when he was born the Egyptians were killing male babies, presenting an unusually stressful time much like the Israelites during the wilderness wanderings, during which time they did not circumcise their male babies (Josh 5:2-9). Pharaoh's daughter raised Moses, and the Egyptians did not practice circumcision except among their priests. Zipporah realized Moses was ill because he had not been circumcised, but he was too ill for her to circumcise him. So she circumcised their son, and touched Moses' genitals with the bloody foreskin, symbolically vicariously cleansing and purifying him with the blood, which was a symbol of cleansing and purification (Lev 17:11). Her act made Moses what he should have been when they married: a 'bloody bridegroom.' Cognate words in Arabic show that ancient Semitic peoples circumcised at puberty or in prepara-

9 A. B. Ehrlich, *Randglossen zur Hebräischen Bibel textkritisches, sprachliches und sachliches* 1: Genesis und Exodus (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1908) 275-77.

10 G. A. Barton, 'Circumcision (Semitic),' *ERE* 3 (1910) 679-80.

tion for marriage to make the bridegroom suitable for marriage (see Gen 34:14ff). Since Zipporah is quoting a fixed formula in v. 25, it is no problem that she refers to Moses as a 'bridegroom' in spite of the fact that they had been married for a long time. The only emendation 4:24-26 requires is a change from *'ām<sup>e</sup>rāh*, 'she said,' to *'ām<sup>e</sup>rû*, 'they said,' or more simply *'āmar*, 'one said,' in the last line of v. 26, and translating: 'At that time one said 'bloody bridegroom' with regard to the circumcisions [plural].'<sup>11</sup>

F. Sierksma combines psychological and anthropological analyses of contemporary tribes in Galla in West Ethiopia, South Arabian Bedouins, inhabitants of Vao, etc., literary-historical or source criticism, and traditio-historical criticism to support a history of the development of circumcision. Prior studies of H. Gressmann, G. Beer, and S. Freud clearly influence his thinking and conclusions. Sierksma delineates four stages or phases in the development of circumcision. Initially, circumcision was a symbol of matriarchal castration framed in rites of new birth among primitive peoples. At the heart of circumcision and other puberty ceremonies is that man does not accept himself in his natural state, but finds it necessary to change his nature, thereby 'perfecting' or 'completing' himself. In circumcision, a man loses his natural sexual passion to gain culture or spirit. Tribal initiations are puberty rites whose source is the miracle of sexual maturity, in which a male becomes conscious of his sexuality. As primitive man progressed from being guided by the rhythm of nature to being detached from nature, circumcision was transferred from puberty to preparation for marriage.<sup>12</sup> Second, circumcision became a symbol for patriarchal lower castration in Israel (Exod 4:24-26), where Yahweh appears as a devouring monster or demon of initiation and where the sacrifice of blood is the means of defense against Yahweh. Exod 4:24-26 is the most primitive account of the origin of circumcision in the OT. Sierksma agrees with H. Gressmann and G. Beer that pre-nuptial circumcision is hidden behind the etiological myth in Exod 4:24-26. Here Yahweh as a demon disputes with Moses the bridegroom over the *ius primae noctis*, 'right of the first night.' Zipporah circumcises her son and offers the blood of the foreskin as a substitution for the

11 Junker, 'Der Blutbräutigam,' 120-28, esp. 125-28.

12 F. Sierksma, 'Quelques remarques sur la circoncision en Israel,' *OTS* 9 (1951) 136-40.

blood of Moses' uncircumcised foreskin to persuade Yahweh to withdraw his plan to kill Moses. Circumcision connected with the figure of the father calls to mind castration and the sacrifice of one's manhood. Circumcision of the penis is a substitute for castration of the penis. The primitive fear of castration is impersonal. Man fears disappearance in the unconscious and defends his conscious. Yahweh in Exod 4:24-26 is a symbol of the fear of patriarchal lower castration, i.e., castration of the penis. Satan is the feminine side of Yahweh. The essential problem with monotheism is how the god Yahweh is reconciled with his unconscious, his feminine and destructive complement. In Exod 4:24-26, circumcision is not a ritual act, but a barbaric sacrifice to reconcile a murderous demon=Yahweh; Yahweh accepts the severed foreskin in place of a severed penis, just as he accepted the ram caught in the thicket in place of Isaac (Gen 22:13-14). Exod 4:24-26 describes a 'substitute sacrifice' – the son instead of the father, and the foreskin instead of the penis – which characterizes well this religion of the father. Zipporah, a woman, invented and performed this circumcision. A triple exegesis is suggested: the bottom layer is the circumcision of the adolescent son; the middle layer is the prenuptial circumcision of the groom; and the top layer is the transfer of the age of circumcision from the man to the male infant. In Exod 4:24-26, circumcision is a defensive 'sacrifice' to satisfy the deity thirsty for blood. It is an expiatory sacrifice to satisfy the angered God. This God makes an attempt on Moses' life, and God truly receives life in the form of blood (Lev 17:11).<sup>13</sup> Third, circumcision is a symbol of patriarchal upper castration, where Yahweh is an ethical deity, so that the defense assumes a negatively spiritual, rationalistic character, and physical circumcision becomes a sign of nationality, which can be symbolized as a sign of the covenant, and which is also used as a symbol of circumcision of the heart. In Israel, then, circumcision unites two transferred meanings: it is a sign of nationality, and it is an initiation into the cult of a single God, Yahweh, which fit the circumcision of small infants. These ideas would have been of great importance to the Jews during the Babylonian exile. In Gen 17:1-14, 23-27, circumcision is a sign of the covenant between Yahweh and Abraham, the sign of admission into the chosen people, i.e., the religious community. The relationship between Yahweh and Israel is a contract of blood, the blood of sacrifice. Man in

13 Sierksma, 'Quelques remarques,' 140-56.

Israel is changed or converted by developing his conscious to drive back his unconscious, his natural passions. The prophets (Jer 4:4; 9:25-26) and Deuteronomy (10:16; 30:6) spiritualize circumcision as circumcision of the heart, which is conversion.<sup>14</sup> Fourth, circumcision is a symbol assimilated by Paul into baptism, by which is reestablished the new birth which in Paul and John is under the sign of the father, who is nevertheless an incarnated God, entered into flesh, i.e., nature.<sup>15</sup>

S. Talmon argues that Yahweh attacked Moses because Moses was not fully committed to the mission Yahweh had given him. Zipporah moves quickly to save Moses' life by circumcising their son and touching Moses' genitals with the blood of the severed foreskin. The foreskin and blood function as a *pars pro toto* in place of Moses' [the victim's] life. Prior to this event, Moses did not have a serious relationship with Yahweh. The *yod* following *l* in Zipporah's statement in v 25c is an abbreviation of 'Yahweh,' so Zipporah says: 'A bridegroom of blood are you to Yahweh,' indicating that Moses' encounter with Yahweh at the lodging place led to a fundamental covenantal interrelationship between Yahweh and Moses. The uncommon use of *krt*, 'cut,' in the sense of circumcise in v 25a supports this, because the Hebrew expression *kārat b'erît* is the normal phrase for 'making [cutting] a covenant.'<sup>16</sup>

G. Ricciotti comments that after God convinced Moses to return to Egypt from Midian, Moses, Zipporah and their two sons left Jethro and headed toward Egypt. In general, scholars think the statement 'the Lord sought to kill Moses' is an anthropomorphism for a fatal malady, because when the Lord left Moses, the Lord seems to allude to Moses' recovery. Zipporah thought the illness was due to the lack of circumcision. So she circumcises the son, then touches 'his' (Moses') feet (genitals) with the severed bloody foreskin, which compensated in some way for the lack of circumcision. This shows Moses was not circumcised. Zipporah's expression 'bloody spouse' indicates an interpretation of circumcision as a pre-marital rite.<sup>17</sup>

14 Sierksma, 'Quelques remarques,' 156-65.

15 Sierksma, 'Quelques remarques,' 165-69.

16 S. Talmon, 'Hatan Damim,' *EI* 3 (1954) 93-95.

17 G. Ricciotti, *The History of Israel. Volume I: From the Beginning to the Exile* (trans. Clement Della Penta, O.P., S.T.Lr., Ph.D. and Richard A. T. Murphy, O.P., S.T.D., S.S. Doct.; Milwaukee: Bruce, 1955) 179-80.

M. V. Fox thinks that originally circumcision was a fertility device associated with puberty and marriage, and that it applied to all Abrahamic tribes (including the descendants of Ishmael and the sons of Keturah). In Gen 17:1-14, P transfers this promise from the Abrahamic tribes to Isaac, transfers the age of circumcision from 13 years to 8 days of age, and tries to eliminate its magical function by interpreting it as an *'ôt*, a cognitive (mnemonic) sign to remind God of his promise of posterity to Israel. The idea is that God will see the Israelite's circumcised penis during or before sexual intercourse and will remember to keep his covenant by making the union fruitful. Although P usually includes the purpose and function of his cognition signs, he omits them in the *'ôt* of circumcision here because he feels it inappropriate to describe this. Fox proposes that the problem in Exod 4:24-26 may be that Moses was uncircumcised and so illicitly married; so Yahweh sought to kill him, but Zipporah saved him by circumcising their son and touching Moses' genitals with the bloody foreskin, thus vicariously circumcising him.<sup>18</sup>

J. I. Durham appeals to the conclusion of J. M. Sasson that the Egyptians did not circumcise male infants, but young men as a rite to prepare them for marriage; since Pharaoh's daughter raised Moses, he was not circumcised. Zipporah circumcises her son to avoid temporary incapacitation of Moses at a crucial point in their journey back to Egypt, then touches her son's foreskin to Moses' genitals to transfer the effect of this rite to him, simultaneously intoning the ancient formula recalling circumcision as a premarital rite: 'For a bridegroom of blood you are to me!' This was a declaration to a young man's in-laws that he was of marriageable age. Zipporah's action works, and Yahweh leaves Moses alone. The redactor must explain the meaning of what Zipporah did and said, because this was an ancient story and its meaning had been lost by the time the redactor included it in his narrative.<sup>19</sup>

S. J. Binz reasons that because of abnormal circumstances of Moses' infancy, it is probable that he had not been circumcised. While Moses and his family were traveling from Midian to Egypt, God threatened Moses' life because Moses could not be leader of God's people unless this serious omission be remedied. Zipporah quickly circumcised

18 M. V. Fox, 'The Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in the Light of the Priestly *'ôt* Etiologies,' *RB* 81 (1974) 586-96; on Exod 4:24-26, 592-93.

19 J. I. Durham, *Exodus* (WBC 3; Waco: Word, 1987) 57-59.



her son and daubed Moses' genitals with the bloody foreskin. This vicarious circumcision on behalf of Moses averted God's anger. The phrase 'a spouse of blood' recalls that originally circumcision was a puberty rite and preparation for marriage. These words may be part of an ancient formula used in the marriage ritual. When God saw the blood and heard Zipporah's words, he withdrew from his intention to kill Moses. This event prefigures the Passover night when, seeing the blood touched on the lintel and the doorposts, God will turn away the destroyer from the firstborn sons of Israel.<sup>20</sup>

C. Camp thinks Yahweh attacked Moses because he had not been circumcised, but she treats details in the text in very imaginative ways. She says Zipporah is the Cushite of Numbers 12; both women are foreigners. But she goes on to aver that Numbers 12 identifies Miriam with the Cushite. Zipporah is a foreign (Midianite) wife, but she performs the Israelite priestly task of circumcising her son/husband. Jethro is Moses' *hōtēn* = father-in-law = circumciser, and Moses is Zipporah's *hātān* = bridegroom = circumcised. So, in creating a *hātān*, 'bridegroom, circumcised one,' Zipporah adopts her father's role as *hōtēn*, 'father-in-law, circumciser.' Zipporah plays the role of savior who overcomes the deadliness of Yahweh. Moses requires two kinds of circumcision: that by Zipporah of his penis (Exod 4:24-26), sandwiched between two versions of circumcision of his tongue, both involving Aaron (Exod 4:10-17, 27-30 and 6:10-13, 28-30; 7:1-2). Aaron and Zipporah are closely related. Zipporah has circumcised Moses' penis in defense against Yahweh; now Yahweh uses Aaron to operate on Moses' lips. As second generation priests, Zipporah and Aaron are in effect daughter and son to father Jethro, and thus sister and brother to each other through this priestly connection. In Exodus 4-6 and Numbers 12, the narrative transforms Moses' wife Zipporah into his sister: the black Cushite disappears and re-emerges as the whitened Miriam. According to Exod 4:20, 25-26, Moses, carrying the staff of God, goes to get the wife who will circumcise him; then he goes to the wilderness to meet, with a kiss, his brother (4:27). Just when we expect Aaron to appear, Zipporah takes the staff from Moses' hand. At the crucial moment, she handles the penis, which saves Moses from Yahweh, and when Moses meets Aaron, who might

20 S. J. Binz, *The God of Freedom and Life. A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1993) 27.

have been expected to perform the circumcision, they touch no more than mouth to mouth. But Zipporah's status as daughter of the priest Jethro and her performance of the priestly act of circumcision bind her to Aaron. Exodus 4 identifies Aaron with the circumcising wife and thus, indirectly, with the wife-sister Miriam. Numbers 12 makes the Aaron-Miriam identification explicit, because both their mouths speak against Moses. In Exodus 2 and 4 and Numbers 12 and 20, Moses stands for Israel, God's wife, so Moses becomes God's wife. The women, Zipporah and Miriam, are dangerous to men because, as the more natural partners of the male deity, they pose a threat to men's intimacy with God. But Zipporah's action shows that women can save these expendable men through circumcision, the sacrifice of their masculinity to God. The implication of Exod 4:16 is that if Moses is as God to Aaron, then Aaron is as a wife to Moses. The sister Miriam becomes the brother-wife. With her death, the brothers achieve full genital union – one rod, struck twice. Thus Moses and Aaron had a homosexual relationship.<sup>21</sup>

S. Ackerman argues that the story of Moses as an individual presents in microcosm much of what the story of Israel as a community presents in macrocosm. Both stories are filled with liminal markers. Moses and Israel are aliens, and God tests them both. In Exod 4:24-26, Yahweh attacks Moses. Zipporah circumcises their son Gershom, then touches Moses' 'feet' = genitalia with his bloody foreskin, thus actually or symbolically circumcising Moses. Then Zipporah utters a formulaic pronouncement: 'You are surely a bridegroom of blood [or a bloody bridegroom] to me.' These acts indicate Zipporah is some sort of ritual specialist. She is taking the place of her father Jethro, and thus is Moses' surrogate father-in-law. But Jethro is a priest. In the book of Exodus, the blood offering of circumcision is closely associated with the blood offering of sacrifice (Exod 12:1-28, 43-49; cf. Josh 5:2-12), and sacrifice is exclusively the task of a priest. Since Zipporah makes a sacrificial-like offering in Exod 4:24-26, she assumes a priest-like role, which ordinarily was the task of males. Liminal space and time in the story of Moses made it possible to characterize Zipporah as a priest. Liminality is re-

21 C. V. Camp, *Wise, Strange and Holy: The Strange Woman and the Making of the Bible* (ed. D. J. A. Clines and P. R. Davies; JSOTSup 320; Gender, Culture, Theory 9; ed. J. C. Exum; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) 236-46.

placed by reintegration when Moses is reunited with Aaron and Israel in Exod 4:27-31, and Zipporah essentially disappears from the text.<sup>22</sup>

## 32. Eliezer Was Uncircumcised

One tendency in early rabbinic literature is to create new interpretations for apologetic motives. Some manuscripts of a long exegetical section on Exod 4:24-26 in Ned 31b-32a substitute 'Satan' for 'Angel.' Some later Rabbinic sources say Moses swore to remain with Jethro as the agreement to marry Zipporah, not that he promised to dedicate his son to idol worship. When God commanded Moses to return to Egypt to deliver his people from bondage, God absolved Moses from his oath. Mekh. II, 169-70 and Exod. Rab. v. 8 say that Moses' only fault was that he was a little late in performing the circumcision of his younger son Eliezer. R. Yose argues that Eliezer was born eight days before God commanded Moses to return to Egypt, so Moses had to decide whether to perform the circumcision and wait a little while to leave, since it would have been a risk to the child's life to travel until his circumcision cut healed, or to leave immediately. He decided correctly it was more important to leave immediately than to circumcise Eliezer, but he should have circumcised Eliezer when his family reached the first lodging place for the night. Moses delayed to do this because he was so tired, and thus he sinned.<sup>23</sup> But the second century C.E. rabbis would have excused Moses because their intention was to exalt circumcision.

L. Ginzberg relates two ancient Jewish legends in which Zipporah keeps Moses alive seven years in a pit and then persuades her father, Jethro, to draw him up out of the pit and saves Moses from a serpent who swallowed him down to his genitals. The serpent attacks Moses because he had not circumcised his younger son, Eliezer. The legend of the latter rescue is this:

22 S. Ackerman, 'Why is Miriam also among the Prophets? (And is Zipporah among the Priests?),' *JBL* 121 (2002) 71-76.

23 See Winslow, 'Framing Zipporah,' 224.

[...] Jethro [...] bestowed his daughter Zipporah upon him [Moses] as wife, giving her to him under the condition that the children born of the marriage in Jethro's house should be divided into two equal classes, the one to be Israelitish, the other Egyptian. When Zipporah bore him a son, Moses circumcised him, and called him Gershom, as a memorial of the wonder God had done for him, for although he lived in a 'strange' land, the Lord had not refused him aid even 'there.' Zipporah nursed her first child for two years, and in the third year she bore a second son. Remembering his compact with Jethro, Moses realized that his father-in-law would not permit him to circumcise this one, too, and he determined to return to Egypt, that he might have the opportunity of bringing up his second son as an Israelite. On the journey thither, Satan appeared to him in the guise of a serpent, and swallowed Moses down to his extremities. Zipporah knew by this token that the thing had happened because her second son had not been circumcised, and she hastened to make good the omission. As soon as she sprinkled the blood of the circumcision on her husband's feet, a heavenly voice was heard to cry to the serpent, commanding him, 'Spew him out!' and Moses came forth and stood upon his feet. Thus Zipporah saved Moses' life twice, first from the pit and then from the serpent.

The following paragraph relates that when Moses arrived in Egypt, Dathan and Abiram confronted him and accused him of planning to kill them as he had killed the Egyptian. Moses then fled back to Midian, and waited there two more years until God at Horeb told him to return to Egypt and deliver the Israelites from bondage.<sup>24</sup>

Origen (150-225 C.E.) follows the Jewish explanations that the son circumcised in Exod 4:24-26 was the younger son, Eliezer; that Moses' only fault was hesitating to circumcise his son after his family arrived at the nocturnal resting place; and that after Zipporah circumcised her son, she said to the threatening angel in 4:25: 'You are for me a husband of blood if you restore to me my husband as a result of the blood of the circumcision.' In *De Principiis* III,2,1, Origen says the angel in Exod 4:24-26 is one of the adverse powers. In *Against Celsus* V, 48, Origen treats Exod 4:24-26 as an etiological story: circumcision deprives of strength the enemy angel of the Jewish nation, rendering him incapable of hurting them due to the blood of the circumcision. Further, the angel in Exod 4:24-26 had power against the uncircumcised and against all who worship only the Creator and not Jesus Christ the Son.<sup>25</sup>

24 Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* II, 294-95.

25 See Le Boulluec, 'Moïse menacé de mort,' 79-82.

J. G. Murphy asserts that Moses needed to feel acutely the pain of death in order to fathom the threat he was to give to Pharaoh that Pharaoh's firstborn son would die if Pharaoh refused to let the Israelites go into the wilderness. Apparently Moses had failed to circumcise his younger son Eliezer through some fault of Moses. This was serious since Moses was to be the leader and lawgiver of God's people. Moses needed to learn that God is earnest when he speaks and will certainly do all he has threatened. So the Lord sought to kill Moses, probably by some disease or sudden stroke, which threatened immediate death. Zipporah's quick reaction to this crisis indicates she was in some way the cause of the delay in circumcising the child. Zipporah's casting the severed foreskin of her son at Moses' feet indicates Moses had told Zipporah he wanted the child circumcised. 'For' in the statement 'for you are a spouse of blood to me' (v. 25) refers to Zipporah's casting her son's foreskin at Moses' feet, implying that Zipporah's connection with Moses had necessitated this bloody rite. The statement 'because of the circumcision' (v. 26) explains Zipporah's greeting Moses as a spouse of blood, since Zipporah felt constrained to perform the masculine task of circumcising their child to save Moses from death. This was a salutary lesson to Zipporah as well as to Moses. After the circumcision, the child was not fit for travel, so Moses sent Zipporah and their two sons back to Jethro (Exod 18:2) to avoid dangers and inconveniences on the road ahead.<sup>26</sup>

G. Rawlinson says that when Moses and his family were at a recognized resting place on their journey from Midian to Egypt, God met Moses, i.e., struck Moses with a severe illness which threatened his life. Immediately Moses and Zipporah realized God was punishing them for neglecting to circumcise their newborn son Eliezer. Zipporah circumcised Eliezer and cast his foreskin at Moses' feet as a symbol of petulance and reproach, as though Moses were a Moloch requiring a bloody offering. Zipporah considered the bloody rites of Moses' religion cruel and barbarous. 'A husband of bloods' (vv. 25-26) means a husband who causes the blood of his children to be shed unnecessarily for some unintelligible reason. When Zipporah did this, God let Moses alone, i.e., God accepted Zipporah's act as sufficient reparation, even though it was late, and spared Moses' life. When Moses had recovered sufficiently, Zippo-

26 J. G. Murphy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Exodus, with a New Translation* (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1874) 53-54.

rah explained to him why she had called him ‘a bloody husband;’ it was because of the ‘circumcisions,’ i.e., the circumcision of Gershom in Midian many years earlier and now the circumcision of Eliezer. Exod 18:2-3 indicates Moses sent Zipporah and their two sons back to Jethro, probably just after the event described in Exod 4:24-26, when Moses was in a hurry and the newly circumcised son Eliezer was in no condition to travel for several days.<sup>27</sup>

H.-J. Crelier believes Exod 4:24 makes it clear that God sought to kill Moses because Moses had not circumcised his younger son. One must assume that the older son had already been circumcised when Moses and his family left Midian for Egypt. It is likely that the reason Moses’ second son had not been circumcised is that at the circumcision of the first son, the blood and suffering of this son caused Zipporah to despise circumcision, so she opposed circumcising the younger son. Only when God attacked Moses (either by a severe illness or directly as a person) did Zipporah resign herself to make amends for this omission. Moses probably told Zipporah why God was threatening to kill him. God commanded Abraham and his descendants to practice circumcision as a sign of God’s covenant with them, and said that those who were not circumcised were to be cut off from God’s people as a punishment for breaking the covenant (Gen 17:14). When a parent did not circumcise a child, God punished the parent, especially the father. Since God chose Moses to deliver his people from Egypt and to give them the law, God would not tolerate Moses disobeying his command of circumcision. The MT of Exod 4:25 says Zipporah threw the bloody foreskin of her son at Moses’ feet, then said: ‘a bridegroom of blood are you to me,’ an action and words indicating Zipporah’s resentment for having to circumcise her younger son. Moses is ‘a bridegroom of blood to her’ because he is the reason she had to shed the blood of her son because she could not save Moses’ life any other way. Then Moses sent Zipporah and his two infant sons to his father-in-law, since his younger son’s circumcision made it impossible for him to continue the journey to Egypt. This explains the

27 G. Rawlinson, *Exodus* (The ‘Layman’s Handy Commentary’ on the Bible; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961 printing [first published in 1882]) 41-42.

statement in Exod 18:2 that Moses met Jethro and Zipporah and their two sons when he arrived at Mount Sinai.<sup>28</sup>

H. J. Grimmelsman proposes that God attacked Moses with some critical disease as he traveled to Egypt to show him how strongly he insists on circumcision. This is God's reproof because Moses had not circumcised Eliezer. God could not allow the leader of His people to omit this important sacrament. Grimmelsman seems to follow Weiss, who believes that Zipporah touched Moses' feet with her son's bloody severed foreskin as an expression of her joy at having saved her husband's life (citing 2 Kgs 4:7; Matt 28:9). The expression 'blood bridegroom' may refer to a husband secured to his wife by the circumcision of their son. At first Zipporah thought Yahweh would require her husband's life, but when she realized God wanted only the circumcision of their child, she used the current expression 'bridegroom of blood.' The blood of the circumcision was the price Zipporah paid for Moses' life.<sup>29</sup>

P. F. L. Ceuppens, O. P. is satisfied to admit that Exod 4:24 does not state how God tried to kill Moses. At the time the event described in Exod 4:24-26 took place, one must assume Moses had already circumcised his older son Gershom. 4:25 indicates that God wanted to kill Moses as he and his family journeyed to Egypt because Moses had not circumcised his younger son Eliezer. Apparently, Zipporah was horrified when she saw the pain and blood of Gershom when Moses circumcised him, so she refused to allow Eliezer to be circumcised. Moses must have honored his wife's feelings for some time in order not to displease her. But now, God refuses to allow Israel's deliverer and leader to carry out his mission without being blameless and exemplary to his people in every way. When Zipporah circumcised Eliezer, she probably threw his bloody foreskin before Moses' feet and with a gesture of dissatisfaction said to her husband: 'A bridegroom of blood are you to me,' because of the bloody circumcision which she had to perform on her son in order to save Moses' life. After this event, Moses probably sent his wife and two

28 H.-J. Crelier, *L'Exode. Introduction critique et commentaires* (La Sainte Bible; French trans. M. l'abbé Bayle; Paris: P. Lethielleux, 1886) 40-41.

29 H. J. Grimmelsman, *The Book of Exodus. A Study of the Second Book of Moses with Translation and Concise Commentary* (Cincinnati: The Seminary Book Store, 1927) 33-34.

sons back to Jethro (Exod 18:2); at this juncture in their journey, they had not traveled far from Midian (Exod 4:27).<sup>30</sup>

W. H. Gispen reasons that Yahweh attacked Moses because he had not circumcised his younger son Eliezer (cf. Exod 18:4). Moses had been circumcised as a child in Egypt, and Moses had circumcised his older son Gershom. Exod 4:20 says the 'sons' of Moses and Zipporah were traveling with them from Midian to Egypt, and 'circumcisions' is plural in 4:26, indicating the concern in 4:24-26 is that the younger son Eliezer had not been circumcised. Zipporah's quick action of circumcising her son and her words about Moses being her 'bloody bridegroom' indicate she had pressured Moses not to circumcise Eliezer because she considered circumcision of her child cruel. By touching the feet of Moses with the bloody foreskin of her son, Zipporah was indicating symbolically the sacrifice her marriage to Moses had required of her. Since Yahweh let Moses alone when Zipporah circumcised Eliezer, it is clear that Yahweh's anger was provoked because Moses had not circumcised his younger son. Since Yahweh spared Moses' life, Zipporah viewed him as her 'bridegroom' once again, but not without shedding of blood. Zipporah declares Moses became her bridegroom (again) after and because of the circumcision of their younger son. The purpose of this story is to show that before Moses could act as leader and redeemer of Israel, he had to obey Yahweh as God of the covenant by having his younger son circumcised. By not circumcising his younger son earlier, Moses had committed a transgression in Yahweh's eyes (cf. Gen 17:14). Zipporah rectified this by circumcising Eliezer. This story also shows that Yahweh ruled over Moses and his children, counteracting Zipporah's negative influence.<sup>31</sup>

R. B. Allen holds basically the same view as Gispen. Allen argues that Zipporah did not circumcise Moses vicariously; if Yahweh were about to kill Moses because he was not circumcised, the blood of his son's foreskin on his uncircumcised organ would not appease God's wrath. Further, circumcision is not a premarital rite in Exod 4:24-26, because Moses and Zipporah had already been married several years and had two sons (4:20). At night during the return of Moses and his family

30 P. F. L. Ceuppens, O. P., *Het Boek Exodus* (Oud Testament, Deel 1, Nr. 2; Brugge [Belgie]: Karel Beyaert, 1932) 22.

31 W. H. Gispen, *Exodus* (BSC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 63-64.



from Midian to Egypt, the pre-incarnate Christ attacks Moses and holds him in a death grip, because Moses is supposed to lead the circumcised Israelites out of Egypt, and yet Moses has not circumcised his younger son Eliezer, probably because Zipporah had shown her disgust when Moses circumcised their older son Gershom. But Christ uses restraint, hoping he will not have to kill Moses. When Zipporah sees Moses in Yahweh's death grip, she quickly circumcises Eliezer and brings the foreskin to throw at Yahweh's feet to show her disgust that Yahweh would demand that an eight day old boy be circumcised, crying out to Yahweh in anger: 'You are a bloody bride-father to me.' This explains why Moses sent his family back to Jethro (Exod 18:1-5) following his encounter with Yahweh at night in the camping place. Zipporah may have separated from Moses from this time on, so that Moses married again (Numbers 12).<sup>32</sup>

### 33. Moses Threatens Gershom

F. Maciejewski states that many peoples in the ancient Near East practiced circumcision, including the Israelites. J does not indicate that the Israelites practiced circumcision. The closest parallel to circumcision is the account of Abraham's binding of Isaac in Gen 22:1-19, where Abraham enacted his paternal act of violence of the sacrifice of his only son. Initially, Abraham planned to make Isaac a burnt sacrifice. Child sacrifices are like those of the god Molech. P in Genesis 17 makes it clear that Abraham must not kill his own son, but rather circumcise him. There is a close connection between the sacrificial cult of a male child and the circumcise rite. Exod 4:24-26 is an etiological saga which attempts to explain the origin of circumcision among the Israelites. Yahweh charges Moses to go to Egypt to deliver Israel from bondage. Moses has divine nature (Exod 4:16; 7:1). By speaking 'uncircumcised lips,' Moses as his son rebels against his father Yahweh, and Yahweh desires to kill Moses as his only-begotten son. The dual sovereignty of Yahweh

32 R. B. Allen, 'The "Bloody Bridegroom" in Exodus 4:24-26,' *BS* 153 (July-Sep 1996) 259-69.

and Moses is like the words of Jeroboam I when he erected the golden calf at Dan: 'These are your gods, Israel, who led you out of Egypt!' (1 Kgs 12:28). Exod 4:24 means that Moses wanted to kill Gershom. There is a parallel between Abraham ritually killing his firstborn son Isaac and Moses ritually killing his firstborn son Gershom. Zipporah cuts off the foreskin of her son Gershom and throws her bloody foreskin at the man Moses on the shame [his genitals], like the ram substituting as the sacrifice for Abraham's son Isaac. Moses accepts the circumcision of his son as a substitute for his ritual killing, and leaves him. In Arabic, *ḥatana* means 'circumcise,' and *ḥātān* means 'bridegroom.' In the hour of danger, Zipporah executes the bloody ceremony of circumcising her son, i.e., she receives the Israelite instead of the Midianite practice, which possibly in the earliest Genesis narrative may have separated infant circumcision from the earlier common Semitic circumcision of a male child when he reaches marriageable age. The gloss in Exod 4:26b shows that *ḥātān* means a youth of marriageable age, so a 'bridegroom.' The Israelites practiced this in the pre-monarchical period. So Exod 4:25c indicates Moses was circumcised as a young man in preparation for marriage with Zipporah, and thus was a 'bloody bridegroom.' Exod 3:1 indicates Jethro was Moses' 'father-in-law,' as 'circumciser' and 'father-in-law' are closely related terms. Genesis 17 shows that circumcision of a male infant is the *introduction* of a new rite. Zipporah, the Midianite, changes her traditional practice of circumcision in preparation for marriage to circumcise Gershom as her infant son to prevent Moses sacrificing her son, thus initiating the Israelite practice of circumcising male infants. Infant circumcision indicates transition from child sacrifice to infant circumcision.<sup>33</sup>

33 F. Maciejewski, *Psychoanalytisches Archiv und jüdisches Gedächtnis: Freud, Beschneidung und Monotheismus* (Wien: Passagen Verlag, 2002) 217-26; re-published as 'Das biblische Archiv der Beschneidung,' *BN*, 117 (2003) 33-39.

### 34. Gershom Was Uncircumcised

Tg. Ps.-J., A. Dillmann, H. Lesêtre, K. Kohler, W. H. Bennett, J. Hehn, P. C. Zalalis, A. Clamer, U. Cassuto, B. S. Childs, R. L. Cate, L. Meyer, A. S. Maller, S. Frolov and R. B. Chisholm, Jr. think Yahweh attacked Moses because Moses had not circumcised his older son, Gershom; otherwise, why would Yahweh leave Moses alone when Zipporah circumcised the child?<sup>34</sup>

Tg. Ps.-J. says that Yahweh wanted to kill Moses because Moses listened to his father-in-law and did not circumcise his [older?] son. The Targumim are much more concerned with theology than with form. God's way of communicating with human beings is a delicate issue in the Targumim. Since the Targumim exploit extant inner-biblical resources, R. Syren argues that the appropriate term to describe the genre of Targum is 'Bible *reread*.' The Targumists assumed that any biblical text can be read in light of, and interpreted on the basis of, any other relevant text. One line of texts in the rereading process of the Targumim has to do with God's people encountering strangers: Gen 18:1-16; 32:22-32; 37:15; Exod 4:24-26; and Josh 5:13-15, with which one should also compare Gen 19:1-22 and Judg 13:2-22. These texts have in common the appearance of 'a man' or 'men' unknown by name and appearance, whose task is to carry messages of crucial importance. Judg 13:2-22 calls the unnamed 'man' the angel of the Lord, the man of God, the man, and God. Gen 19:1-22 usually calls the two 'angels' who visit Lot (v. 1) 'men.' The Targumim use 'angels' and 'men' interchangeably, indicating angels sometimes appeared in the form of men.

In Gen 18:1-16, Tg. Neof. and Tg. Ps.-J. keep the Lord and the three angels clearly separated. Abraham *saw* the angels, but *heard* God's voice. Tg. Neof. and Tg. Ps.-J. present all passages in the singular as a dialogue between Abraham and God. They assign different tasks to the three angels: the first angel announced the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah; the second angel was sent to rescue Lot before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; the third angel carried out the destruction. Tg. Ps.-J. says Isaac was born at Passover, and separates the angel who vis-

34 On Cassuto, see under 40.

ited Abraham and thus fulfilled his assignment from the other two angels who were yet to fulfill their assignment.

Tg. Onq. thinks the struggle between Jacob and ‘the man’ at the Jabbok River was verbal and spiritual. All Palestinian Targumim present the ‘man’ as ‘an angel in the likeness of a man.’ Hos 12:4 [Hebrew 12:5] calls him an ‘angel.’ Tg. Ps.-J. says Jacob was left alone because he had forgotten or neglected to pay the tithe for his children, so he was delayed for the time it took to make up for his neglect; and the angel had to leave Jacob at dawn because in the Targumic heaven, angels serve in shifts following the order and model of the Jerusalem temple priests.

Tg. Neof. identifies ‘the man’ Joseph met during his search for his brothers (Gen 37:15) as ‘an angel in the likeness of a man,’ and Tg. Ps.-J. identifies him with Gabriel. The MT says the man ‘found’ Joseph, suggesting the man was engaged in an active and planned search for Joseph.

The real question in Exod 4:24-26 is: What is the message of this text? This passage involves four figures: two active figures: Yahweh and Zipporah; and two passive figures: Moses and his son. The hearer (reader) cannot tell whether the victim of the attack was Moses or his son. The LXX and all the Targumim read ‘the angel of the Lord’ for the Hebrew ‘the Lord.’ The textual flow of Tg. Onq. is much smoother than the MT, but Tg. Onq. does not answer the question: Why should Zipporah circumcise her son in order to give ransom for her husband? Tg. Neof. identifies ‘the angel of the Lord’ with ‘the angel of Death,’ who must be appeased by Zipporah’s action. Tg. Neof. introduces Moses’ father-in-law into the story. Moses had wanted to circumcise his son, but his father-in-law stopped him from doing so. Tg. Ps.-J. adds to the biblical text that the ‘bridegroom’ Moses committed a sin by neglecting his duty to circumcise his son; circumcision, as an act identical to the one he had neglected, was now being performed on Moses himself; and the blood, material proof of its completion, was offered in atonement. The rite reported in this story is circumcision, the rite of admission into the community, and the visible sign of belonging to it. This rite had to be performed to exculpate Moses from the charge of neglecting his duty. The hermeneutical key to this verse was to deduce what is unknown from what is known – a principle also underlying several *middot* of R. Hillel and R. Ishmael. Tg. Ps.-J. provides the names of Gershom the firstborn and Eliezer the younger son of Moses (cf. Exod 18:4), and of Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law. Reading Tg. Onq., Tg. Neof., and Tg. Ps.-J.

in that order means accumulating information, not so much about the text itself as about its presentations to the community through the ages. Reading in reverse order means tracing the presentation back to its more rudimentary forms (i.e., inner logical coherence, not internal chronological order). The key to the meaning and message of this story lies in the practices of the community. If Exod 4:24-26 is read as reporting and constituting a praxis rather than a set and closed text, it will not be closed off from further understanding. The reader and the community will recognize in the text, and read back into it, its own familiar praxis. Then the text will contribute to the molding of an identity for the community, and to its endurance. Conversely, the community, its preconceived understanding in mind, will accept and confirm the wording of the text. Once established (as circumcision certainly was for all the Targumic writers and transmitters), a certain praxis of conduct will be interpreted according to prevailing values in the community. Some of the beliefs attested in Tg. Ps.-J. existed only on the fringes of the community, far from the center. Tg. Ps.-J. was written by the populace for the populace. Tg. Onq., which offered a more 'neutral' text than Tg. Ps.-J., enjoyed a semi-official status, which shut it off from such influence. But taken together, the Targumim convey a view of Scripture reading as an act of communication, a dialogic process. Reading means learning and perceiving and understanding. But reading also may provoke reaction and putting into practice, and the text may well thereby exert a much greater influence than the mere number of its primary readership would indicate.

In a theophany in Josh 5:13-15, Joshua sees 'a man' and talks to him. Joshua does not immediately recognize this 'man' as superhuman. Puzzled by the man's drawn sword, Joshua asks his identity. As soon as 'the man' introduces himself as 'commander of the army of the Lord,' Joshua falls to the ground to worship. The commander tells Joshua to take off his shoes, because he is standing on a holy place. Like Moses in Exodus 3, Joshua receives a divine command at a crucial stage in his career – before beginning the conquest of Jericho. Tg. Ps.-J. is close to the Hebrew, but it removes the military equipment and turns the figure into 'an angel sent from before the Lord.' Joshua's worship of the angel is like Abraham's behavior in Genesis 18. Except for Exod 3:2, the MT and all the Targumim identify the person speaking to Moses as 'the Lord.'

The Targumists agreed in their general concept of how God communicates with human beings. They recognized that Gen 18:1-16; 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33]; 37:15; Exod 4:24-26; and Josh 5:13-15 belong together. These texts may have belonged to pre-Israelite oral folklore, but early transmitters and interpreters, Jewish and Christian, were not so much concerned with the prehistory of the text as with its aftermath. The Targumists extracted a meaningful message from these texts by drawing on the Bible; the result was a 'domesticated' version of the 'untamed' biblical original. This implied a willingness to inquire into the underlying meaning of each textual entity.<sup>35</sup>

A. Dillmann says that Exod 4:24-26 comes from A (=J); however, A (=J) may have adopted it from B (=E). God wanted to kill Moses because Moses had not circumcised his older son Gershom. When God threatened Moses' life, Zipporah quickly circumcises Gershom and throws his foreskin at Moses' feet with violence and resentment. Then Zipporah says to Moses: 'For a bloody bridegroom are you to me,' indicating she had obtained Moses as her bridegroom long before at the expensive price of the shed blood of her child and now can affirm this. When Zipporah circumcised her son, God was satisfied and he drew back from his intention to kill Moses. Then Zipporah knew that God did not want blood by killing the child but by circumcision, which was intended to secure the circumcisions of his child and additional children. Then Zipporah spoke more calmly the modified word: 'Bloody bridegroom by the circumcision.' The duplicated statement in vv. 25c and 26b shows that circumcision is a bloody sacrifice by which the son is dedicated to God, and that by this gift of the son to God the life of the father is redeemed.<sup>36</sup>

H. Lesètre says the Egyptians practiced circumcision from very early times, but they were not scrupulous about circumcising their children. One may presume that in imitation of the Egyptians the Israelites in Egypt did not always rigorously practice circumcision. Moses himself failed to circumcise one of his sons (Lesètre does not specify which

35 R. Syrén, 'The Targum as a Bible Reread, or, How Does God Communicate with Humans?,' *JAB* 2 (2000) 247-64 [his discussion of the Targumic interpretation of Exod 4:24-26 is on 260-63].

36 A. Dillmann, *Die Bücher Exodus und Leviticus* (für die Zweite Auflage nach Dr. August Knobel neu bearbeitet; KEHAT; Zwölfte Lieferung. Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1880) 45-47.

one). Thus God sought to kill him, and Zipporah hastened to circumcise the infant, and after the painful operation she called Moses a 'bridegroom of blood' (Exod 4:24-26). Lesètre argues that for the Hebrews circumcision is primarily 'the sign of the covenant' between God and Abraham and his descendants (Gen 17:11, 13). It was the sacrament of the old law intended to procure the remission of original sin. But it was a figurative sacrament, not producing the result by itself, but only by faith in the future merits and grace of Jesus Christ who had to accompany this sacrament. It did not have the same significance as baptism, which is an instrument of Christ's suffering already accomplished.<sup>37</sup>

K. Kohler argues that circumcision was enjoined on Abraham and his descendants as 'a token of the covenant' with God for all generations (Gen 17:9-14). Exod 4:24-26 says Moses did not circumcise his firstborn son, which possibly was associated in some way with Moses' marriage to a Midianite woman, so Yahweh sought to kill him. But ultimately Zipporah showed her allegiance to the God of the Hebrews by cutting off her child's foreskin and making it touch (or casting it at) Moses' feet; so Moses was ransomed by the blood of his son's circumcision.<sup>38</sup>

In discussing Exod 4:24-26, W. H. Bennett vacillates between an ancient tradition which J used but the meaning of which J did not fully understand, J, and the present meaning of Exod 4:24-26 in the Pentateuch. On some points, Bennett follows E. Meyer. Bennett thinks Exod. 4:24-26 in its present place in the Pentateuch says God sought to kill Moses because Moses had failed to circumcise his son [apparently Gershom, although Bennett does not state which son he means]. But it does not make sense for God to seek to kill the individual whom he had chosen to deliver Israel from Egyptian bondage. So Exod 4:24-26 must come from a tradition so ancient that J did not fully understand the original meaning. The story in this text was connected with an ancient theory of circumcision, which J did not endorse and thus obscured by omission and alterations. J probably inserted this story here in connection with his theory of the origin of circumcision to prepare for Josh 5:2-3. In the original story, Zipporah touched Yahweh with the severed foreskin of her son as a magic spell to make Yahweh abandon his intention to kill Moses. At one time, circumcision was regarded as a spell which pro-

37 H. Lesètre, 'Circoncision,' *DB* 2/1 (1895-1912) cols. 773, 774, 777, 778.

38 K. Köhler, 'Circumcision,' *JE* 4 (1903, 1910) 92.

tected a newborn child from hostile spiritual powers. In the present form of the Pentateuch, 'his feet' refer to Moses' feet. In the original story, Yahweh was the 'bridegroom of blood,' but later this expression was applied to human bridegrooms. J suppressed the original meaning, and applied this expression to Moses. 'Bridegroom of blood' means 'the bridegroom who was the cause of the shedding of that blood.' 'He let him alone' in v 26 means Yahweh did not kill Moses. The explanatory phrase in v. 26: 'A bridegroom of blood art thou, because of the circumcision,' was probably derived from the ancient ritual of circumcision.<sup>39</sup>

L. H. Gray (is not clear but) implies that Yahweh attacked Moses on the journey from Midian to Egypt because Moses had failed to circumcise his son [apparently Gershom]. Gray affirms that this was probably due to Moses' Midianite marriage, since the Midianites, like the Sodomites, apparently performed the rite shortly before marriage. Gray cites Gen 34:14ff; Exod 12:48; and Josh 5:2-9 to support the view that in the early time of the Hebrews, they circumcised at the age of puberty in preparation for sexual life in marriage. Yet, Gray denies that these passages show this was the original reason for circumcision among the Hebrews. Yet he says that circumcision was a preparation for sexual life in that it prepared one for the duties and privileges of manhood in general. Gray rejects the idea that circumcision was the token of the covenant between Yahweh and the Hebrews, because the concealment of the part of the body affected by such a mark makes this explanation improbable. Rather, he thinks circumcision was the sanctification of the sexual organs to Yahweh and initiation into the Hebrew community, based on Gen 17:10ff; Exod 12:48; and possibly Gen 34:14ff.<sup>40</sup>

J. F. McLaughlin contends that Exod 4:24-26 comes from great antiquity with very primitive views of thinking. Moses becomes very ill at the lodging-place, and this text attributes this illness to the anger of God against Moses because Moses neglected circumcising his son. Josh 5:4-5 indicates Moses had been circumcised. However, the Midianites and Moses' wife did not practice circumcision, and thus Moses and his wife did not circumcise their son. [I assume McLaughlin has in mind Moses' older son – JTW]. When Moses became ill, Moses and his wife concluded that the only way to save Moses from dying was to circumcise

39 W. H. Bennett, *Exodus* (CB; Edinburgh: T. C. & E. C. Jack, 1908) 67-69.

40 L. H. Gray, 'Circumcision (Introductory),' *ERE* 3 (1910) 662, 664-65, 667.



their son. Then God let Moses alone, i.e., ceased to afflict him from illness, and Zipporah declared Moses is 'a bridegroom of blood,' saved to her by the blood of her son. One can readily understand that when Moses was returning to Egypt to face the elders of his own people, Israel, as their divinely appointed leader, Moses became very disturbed in his mind by neglecting to circumcise his son and by the effect this might have on their minds and thus hinder the success of his mission. Then, it is possible that the disagreement between Moses and his wife at this incident led Moses to send her back to her father while Moses went on with his brother, Aaron, to Egypt (see Exod 18:2).<sup>41</sup>

J. Hehn reasons that Moses cannot be the 'bloody bridegroom' in Exod 4:24-26, because he and Zipporah had been married several years and they already had two sons. Hehn agrees with the majority of scholars that the reason Yahweh attacked Moses is that he had neglected to circumcise his son (but Hehn does not specify which son this was!), and that Zipporah's circumcision of this son was what saved Moses from being killed. Hehn favors the LXX over the MT in 4:25b, which says that when Zipporah had circumcised her son, she cast the bloody foreskin at Yahweh's feet [as a plea or demand] and prayed: 'It endures (arises, appears, treads on) the circumcision of my child' – therefore, leave my husband alone, the wrong of his neglecting to circumcise our son is atoned for.<sup>42</sup>

P. C. Zalalis thinks Exod 4:24-26 fits well into the flow of the narrative in the book of Exodus. Moses, whom Yahweh has sent to deliver the Israelites from Egyptian bondage (Exod 3:10; 4:19), was traveling from Midian to Egypt with his wife Zipporah and their firstborn son Gershom. During the journey, at a camping site, Yahweh or an angel of Yahweh attacked Moses. This means Moses suddenly became severely ill, which he regarded as a punishment Yahweh inflicted on him because he had failed to circumcise his older son Gershom. This incident occurred after Moses and Zipporah had been married several years and had their firstborn son. Eleazar had not yet been born. Zipporah realized Moses was sick enough to die and that he was sick because he had not circumcised Gershom. So she circumcised Gershom and touched Moses'

41 F. L. McLaughlin, 'Exodus,' *ABC* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1929) 257-58.

42 Hehn, 'Der "Blutsbräutigam",' Ex 4 24-26,' 1-8.

feet with the severed foreskin, which was a courageous act. Zipporah then said to Moses: 'A bridegroom of blood are you to me,' which expressed her love for Moses and her joyful hope that now that Gershom was circumcised, Moses may recover from his illness. Zipporah had considered Moses as good as dead because his illness was so severe, but now she imagines that he will return to good health and that she will marry him again. This 'marriage' and the shedding of her son's blood at his circumcision led Zipporah to call Moses 'bridegroom of blood.' This expression does not indicate circumcision was a premarital rite, since such a view contradicts Gen 17:12; 21:4, which teach one is to circumcise a male child when he is eight days old. 'He let him go' in Exod 4:26 means Yahweh or the angel of Yahweh let Moses go.<sup>43</sup>

A. Clamer suggests that Exod 4:24 may refer to a serious illness that threatened Moses' life. That Zipporah circumcised her son suggests she thought the illness or mortal wound was because her son had not been circumcised. The statement in 4:26 that Yahweh left Moses alone suggests Moses was healed or the threat to his life ended when Zipporah circumcised their son. Apparently Jethro and Zipporah persuaded Moses to postpone the circumcision of his son until puberty or just before marriage as the Midianites did, in violation of Yahweh's command that the Israelites circumcise their male infants at eight days of age. Zipporah apparently circumcised her son to show Yahweh she did not ignore his precept to circumcise male infants at eight days of age. Clamer thinks Symmachus, Theodotion, the Syriac Peshitta, and the LXX offer the most satisfactory explanation by reading: 'and she fell at his feet,' and said to Moses, 'You are to me a bridegroom of blood.' This means that at the price of the blood of her son her husband was still alive; or the statement may indicate circumcision is a premarital rite. Arabic cognates support this. Moses had to be circumcised before he got married. Since Moses was raised in Egypt, he must have been circumcised, but this had no religious value. So, the blood of the circumcision of his son Gershom became necessary to assure to Moses, by symbolic imputation, the benefit of the covenant.<sup>44</sup>

43 P. C. Zalalis, O.F.M., *Sponsus Sanguinum. Ex. 4,24-26* (Romae: Edited by Int. Co. 'Lux' Nr. 6, 1947) 63-67.

44 A. Clamer, *Exode* (StB; Paris-VI: Letouzey et Ane, Editeurs, 1956) 91-93.

In his later study of Exod 4:24-26 in his commentary on the book of Exodus, B. S. Childs insists that one must interpret Exod 4:24-26 as part of the narrative of the book of Exodus. 4:26b is the redactor's reference to Zipporah's words in 4:25b. 'az means 'at that time,' i.e., when Zipporah had first said: 'You are a blood-bridegroom to me,' in v. 25b. One should translate v. 26b: 'At that time she had said "blood-bridegroom" in reference to circumcision.' The redactor is simply relating the phrase 'blood-bridegroom' to circumcision. This focuses the whole emphasis of the passage on circumcision. Exod 4:24-26 implies that Yahweh attacked Moses because he had failed to circumcise his son (Childs does not specify which son!). Zipporah's act of circumcising this son spared Moses' life.<sup>45</sup>

R. L. Cate argues that the statement in Exod 4:24, 'he met him and tried to kill him,' means that Yahweh met Moses as Moses and his family were traveling from Midian to Egypt, and that Yahweh tried to kill Moses by smiting him with a severe illness. The reason Yahweh did this is because Moses had neglected to circumcise one or both of his sons, which was a symptom that Moses also neglected other parts of his religious heritage. This illness made Moses realize that Yahweh was punishing him for some sin. Because of Moses' illness, he was too weak to circumcise his son, so he had to have his wife Zipporah do it. When Zipporah had finished, she flung their son's foreskin at Moses' feet in disgust. The meaning of Zipporah's words in vv. 25 and 26: 'Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me,' has been lost, but apparently it was part of an ancient ritual of circumcision. Moses had failed to fulfill the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 17:23; 21:4) and could not proceed in his service to Yahweh without doing so.<sup>46</sup>

L. Meyer contends that the best approach to understanding Exod. 4:24-26 is to leave aside the insoluble details and ask what this episode adds to the larger story to which it belongs. Exod 4:26 makes clear that the main point of this episode is the practice of circumcision. Gen 17:9-14 says circumcision provides the required mark of membership in the community of God. Perhaps Exod 4:24-26 is saying Moses disobeyed Yahweh by failing to circumcise his son [apparently Meyer has Moses'

45 B. S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus. A Critical, Theological Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) 99-101, 103-04.

46 R. L. Cate, *Exodus* (LBBC; Nashville: Broadman Press, 1979) 37-38.

older son in mind]. The penalty for disobedience to Yahweh is the death of the firstborn son, as in the case of Pharaoh in 4:22-23. But Moses' wife (the child's mother) heads off Yahweh's punishment of Moses by circumcising her son and marking her husband in such a way as to associate him with her in this act of obedience. Yahweh accepts the circumcision, withholds his threat to punish Moses, and Moses goes on his way as an agent obedient to Yahweh's will.<sup>47</sup>

A. S. Maller builds his interpretation of Exod 4:24-26 on some assertions of R. Eleazar of Modiin in Mekhilta-Amalek (a 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> cent. C. E. midrash) that Jethro made Moses swear that if Jethro gave Zipporah to Moses as wife, Moses would give their first child to idolatry, then all the rest may belong to Moses' God. Eleazar viewed a failure to circumcise one's son as equivalent to raising him to be a pagan, especially if one is married to a non-Jew. Moses would be worthy of early death for agreeing to such a proposition. If Moses swore to raise Gershom as a pagan, in the weeks following his experience at the burning bush (Exod 3:1-4:17), he must have felt guiltier and guiltier. As he and his family traveled from Midian to Egypt, his guilt increased. Moses probably feared that if God killed the firstborn sons of non-Israelites in Egypt (as he warned in Exod 4:21-23), Gershom would be included. At the night lodging on the road, Zipporah got Moses to confess why he was so depressed. Moses felt he could not circumcise Gershom because he had given his oath to Jethro to devote Gershom to idolatry. Zipporah acted decisively: she circumcised Gershom and in that act converted him, making him a member of the tribes of Israel. *ḥātān dāmīm* is a man who becomes a member of the tribe not by birth but by legal adoption and circumcision. Circumcision is a conversion ritual, and compensates for the sin Moses committed in order to acquire Zipporah as his wife.<sup>48</sup>

S. Frolov agrees with W. H. C. Propp that Exod 4:24-26 was produced by an interplay of three motifs: murder, circumcision and marriage, against the background of the Passover story in Exodus 11-12. But Frolov disagrees with Propp's view that the *Sitz im Leben* of this story was the transition from pre-nuptial circumcision to the circumcision of

47 L. Meyer, *The Message of Exodus. A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1983) 58-60. See also Meyer's remarks on Moses' two sons in his comments on Exod 18:3-4 on p. 108.

48 Maller, 'The Bridegroom of Blood,' 94-98.

infants. The Hebrew Bible never refers to pre-nuptial circumcision. *ḥātān dāmīm* probably means ‘bridegroom deserving of death for a first-degree murder’ (so Tg. Onq.), not ‘in-law protected by blood-vengeance,’ since the Hebrew Bible never refers to blood vengeance by in-laws. The fossilized expression the author of Exod 4:24-26 was trying to explain was *ḥātān dāmīm lammûlôt*. 1 Sam 18:20-27 and 2 Sam 16:7-8 help explain the meaning of this expression: having performed a mass circumcision of Philistines (*mûlôt*), David becomes Saul’s son-in-law (*ḥātān*), but later commits a capital offence against Saul and his family. So *ḥātān dāmīm lammûlôt*, ‘bloody bridegroom by circumcisions,’ was originally a pejorative reference to David coined by his political adversaries. As David became a national hero, it became increasingly difficult to identify him with the proverbial ‘bloody bridegroom.’ So a new explanation emerged in the Passover story, possibly using an existing tradition: Moses’ uncircumcised son is attacked by Yahweh, who mistakes him for one of the Egyptian firstborn, but the infant’s mother saves him by her prompt action. This new explanation was based on the motif of the mortal threat to firstborn sons, which had nothing to do with the original meaning of the phrase. This motif probably prompted the author of the ‘bloody bridegroom’ narrative to place it after Exod 4:23, where Yahweh promises to kill Pharaoh’s heir.<sup>49</sup>

R. B. Chisholm, Jr. contends that Yahweh was angry with Moses because he had not circumcised his [older] son, but Chisholm proposes a somewhat different explanation of Exod 4:24-26. If one reads this passage in isolation, it would seem that Yahweh was on a mission to kill Moses, but if this was the case, Yahweh is a demonic, malevolent figure whose actions contradict his earlier promise to Moses. If one reads Exod 4:24-26 as a part of a larger context in the book of Exodus, that larger context says Yahweh commissioned Moses to go to Egypt on a redemptive mission and promised him his protective presence. Surely the same Yahweh would not seek to kill Moses. And if Yahweh wanted to kill Moses, he surely could have done so. Chisholm argues that Exod 4:24-26 was written from Moses’ limited perspective. Yahweh was angry and unleashed his wrath on Moses because he had not circumcised his son, so much so that Moses must have felt that Yahweh was trying to kill

49 S. Frolov, ‘The Hero as Bloody Bridegroom: On the Meaning and Origin of Exodus 4:26,’ *Bib* 77 (1996) 520-23.

him. The narrator wrote from Moses' perspective so that his audience might feel the terror experienced by Moses and appreciate the importance of circumcision as a sign of the covenant which prompted Yahweh's outburst. The statement 'Yahweh sought to kill Moses' in 4:24b is hyperbolic.<sup>50</sup>

### 35. Assailant Attacks Moses' Son

Another interpretation of Exod 4:24-26 appears in rabbinic literature: R. Simeon b. Gamaliel said the child, and not Moses, was in danger because of the uncircumcision. The child was the 'bridegroom of blood.' Moses was a little late in circumcising Eliezer. Immediately an angel appeared to kill the child. Gen 17:14 threatens the uncircumcised with extinction, but not their parents. Zipporah performed the circumcision, or reminded Moses to do it. After Zipporah circumcised Eliezer, she touched his feet, and called him 'bridegroom' by the blood of the circumcision. The child's life was saved by observing the commandment of circumcision prescribed by the law.<sup>51</sup> This explanation eliminates embarrassing consequences, and gives the narrative coherence to emphasize the importance of circumcision. The Rabbinic tradition tries to diminish Moses' responsibility and to reduce the disturbing effect of God's apparent behavior. The Rabbis are obliged to stay closer to the biblical text than the Book of Jubilees. In the Rabbinic interpretation, the redemptive *observance* of the law of circumcision replaces the sacrificial *blood* of circumcision. All the Rabbis who insist strictly on the necessity of circumcision and minimize Moses' sin taught after the end of the Hadrianic War. After the Romans defeated Bar Kokhba, they decreed that performing circumcision was punishable by death. So R. Nathan encourages contemporary Jews to give their lives, if necessary, to obey God's command to circumcise their sons on the eighth day (Mekh. II, 247).

50 R. B. Chisholm Jr., 'A Rhetorical Use of Point of View in Old Testament Narrative,' *BS* 159 (Oct-Dec 2002) 407-09.

51 See Winslow, 'Framing Zipporah,' 224.

J. Blau, W. Beltz, F. C. Fensham, E. A. Knauf, N. M. Sarna, R. G. Hall, L. H. Fink, T. J. Lehane and J. M. Cohen also argue that Yahweh did not attack Moses, but Moses' son.

J. Blau argues that Exod 4:22-23 is intended to clarify the meaning of 4:24-26. The point of 4:22-23 is that Yahweh will kill Pharaoh's firstborn son because Pharaoh had oppressed Yahweh's firstborn son, Israel. Thus, 'him' in 4:24: 'The Lord met *him* and sought to kill *him*,' must refer to Moses' firstborn son, Gershom. Moses' firstborn is both the victim and the one circumcised. The destroyer who will kill the firstborn in Egypt has already left to accomplish his mission, and he will kill any firstborn indiscriminately without distinguishing between the righteous and the wicked unless he sees blood smeared to ward him off. Even in Egypt, he will kill firstborn of the Israelites if they are not in houses whose doors and lintels are smeared by the blood of the Paschal lamb (Exod 12:7, 13, 21-23). In order to understand *ḥātān* correctly, one should compare it with the Akkadian verb *hatanu*, 'to protect.' Thus, *ḥātān dāmīm* is one protected by blood. On his way to Egypt, the destroyer comes upon Moses and his family, and seeks to kill Moses' firstborn son, Gershom. Zipporah saves her son's life by circumcising him and smearing the blood on his legs so the destroyer will see the blood and pass over the child.<sup>52</sup>

W. Beltz contends there is a connection between Exod 4:24-26 and 4:20b-23 since in 4:23 Yahweh tells Moses that he will kill Pharaoh's firstborn son when Pharaoh refuses to let Yahweh's firstborn son Israel go into the wilderness to worship Yahweh, and in 4:24 Yahweh seeks to kill Moses' son because he is not circumcised. The object of 'he met *him*' in 4:24 cannot be Moses, but must be Moses' son. It does not make sense for Yahweh to want to kill Moses immediately after he had commissioned him to liberate Israel from Egypt in 4:19-23. 'His feet' in 4:25 are Yahweh's feet, reflecting a ritual in which the mother circumcises her son ritually, then touches the genitals of the cult image or god with the foreskin, saying, 'You are my bloody bridegroom,' thereby contracting marriage with the god and making her son the son of the deity. The mother's act assuages Yahweh's wrath, causing Yahweh to leave the son alone since he is now Yahweh's son. Circumcision functions here as an

52 J. Blau, 'The Ḥatan Damim (Ex. IV, 24-26),' *Tarbiz* 26 (1956) 1-3. [Hebr.]

adoption. This same interpretation of circumcision appears in P in Gen 17:10-14 and in E in Josh 5:2.<sup>53</sup>

F. C. Fensham suggests that Exod 4:24-26 means that Yahweh sought to kill Moses' oldest son Gershom because Moses had not circumcised him. Before Moses and his family could enter Egypt, Moses' oldest son had to be circumcised in an ancient ritual way. *ḥātān dāmīm* does not mean 'bloody bridegroom,' but 'one circumcised by blood'='a blood-circumcised one.' This passage may be called a legitimating of circumcision.<sup>54</sup>

E. A. Knauf is concerned primarily with demonstrating that Exod 4:24-26 is not of Midianite origin, but possibly of Canaanite origin with influences from ancient Western Arabia; yet he assumes this passage states that Yahweh attacked Moses' son [he does not specify whether this was the older or younger son]. Knauf argues that Exod 4:24-26 contains as its tradition center the Arabic, not Canaanite, expression *ḥātān dāmīm*, connected with a vague knowledge of circumcision practiced by women in ancient Western Arabia. Intellectuals and literate people produced Exod 4:24-26, which scholars usually attribute to J. Many think Exod 4:24-26 originated in antiquity in Midian. There were no longer Midianite-Israelite relations at the end of the second millennium B.C.E. Exod 4:24-26 has the same close relationship to a Phoenician tradition in Philo of Byblos as Genesis 4. Philo Fragment 2,33 says that when a disease arose, Kronos offered his own son to his father Uranos and circumcised him; and he imposed the same behavior on his allies. Like this passage in Philo, Exod 4:24-26 depicts circumcision as originating in a dangerous situation caused by a god, gives circumcision a sacrificial character in order to appease the god, and assigns to circumcision an apotropaic effect for the benefit of the one who was circumcised. The text of Philo and Exod 4:24-26 must have originated in the same intellectual world. The fact that in Exod 4:24-26 the son is the one threatened but not the one sacrificed is due to the fact that in Israel child sacrifice was never a general custom as it was in Phoenicia, so no etiology for child sacrifice was needed in Israel. P did not accept the narrative culture

53 W. Beltz, 'Religionsgeschichtliche Marginalie zu Ex 4 24-26,' *ZAW* 87 (1975) 209-10.

54 C. Fensham, *Exodus* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; ed. A. van Selms, A. S. van der Woude, and C. van Leeuwen; POT; Nijkerk: G. F. Callenbach B. V., 1977) 28-29.



in which the Yahwists participated. So, Exod 4:24-26 may suggest a Canaanite origin, but not a Midianite origin.<sup>55</sup>

N. M. Sarna suggests that 4:20-13:15 is a larger section in the book of Exodus, the theme of which is the struggle for Israel's liberation from Pharaoh's oppression. The literary framework for this section has a chiasmic arrangement: the contrast between Yahweh's firstborn and Pharaoh's firstborn in 4:22-23 followed by Zipporah circumcising her son in 4:24-26 at the beginning, and the law requiring circumcision in order to participate in the Passover in 12:43-49 followed by the law of the firstborn in 13:1, 11-15 at the end. Sarna reasons that it would be completely inconsistent with the flow of the narrative in Exod 3:1-4:26 for Yahweh to attack Moses, whom he had just commissioned to return to Egypt and lead his people out of oppression. If *hātān* means 'bridegroom,' this would not apply to Moses at this point in his life, because he had been married for several years and had two sons. He thinks Moses' son became ill, and Zipporah attributed it to uncircumcision, but the reason she did so comes from a background which has been lost in history. He conjectures that Moses may have neglected circumcising his son because it would be dangerous to expose a newly circumcised boy to the difficulties of a trip through the wilderness. Zipporah circumcised her son, then touched his legs with the severed foreskin, perhaps signifying: See, the foreskin has been cut off; the requirement of circumcision has been fulfilled! or referring to daubing a bloodstain on the child like the Israelites daubed blood of the Paschal lamb on the lintel and doorpost (Exod 12:22), the idea being that blood would act as a protective sign against Yahweh's destructive activities. He suggests that since the Arabic *h-t-n* means 'to circumcise' and 'to protect,' Zipporah's statement in v. 25 using *hātān dāmīm* might mean: 'You are now circumcised [and so] protected for me by means of the blood of circumcision.' In v. 26, Zipporah may be invoking or coining a proverb meaning: circumcision has been performed, and he [the child] is no longer liable to *kārēt*, the penalty of being 'cut off' from one's kin.<sup>56</sup>

55 E. A. Knauf, 'Supplementa Ismaelitica. 11. Ex 4,24-26, Philo Byblius und der kanaanäisch-städtische Hintergrund "jahwistischer" Überlieferung,' *BN* 40 (1987) 16-19.

56 N. M. Sarna, *Exodus* (ed. N. M. Sarna; JPSTC; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991) 24-26.

R. G. Hall essentially adopts Sarna's interpretation of Exod 4:24-26. Since Moses and Zipporah have at least one child when they are traveling from Midian to Egypt, *ḥātān* hardly means 'bridegroom.' Since *ḥātān* in Arabic can also mean one who is circumcised, perhaps Zipporah says: 'You are a blood-circumcised one to me' (so Kosmala). 4:26b is an editorial addition meaning: 'Don't worry about this puzzling phrase; Zipporah was talking about circumcision, nothing more.' The ambiguous personal pronouns in 4:25 most naturally refer to Moses, but Yahweh has just commissioned Moses with a message and sent him to deliver it to Pharaoh. It does not make sense for Yahweh to attack Moses while he is on his way to do what Yahweh commanded. But if God seeks to kill Moses' son in 4:24-26, this story fits the context and makes a positive contribution to the argument. The message Yahweh gave Moses threatens Pharaoh's firstborn son with death (4:23). If Moses' own son is uncircumcised, he is a son of Egypt, unable to live once the prophetic word has gone forth against Egypt's firstborn. Zipporah wards off the threat of death by circumcising her son and daubing him with the blood, thus performing an apotropaic rite. This not only foreshadows the later events of Passover, but also confirms the commission God just gave Moses. The narrow escape of Moses' son is a sign that Moses' message is true: not even Moses' own son is safe apart from the covenant of circumcision, how much less Pharaoh's son! In 4:21-23, the final author of Exodus has been writing about firstborn sons. Hall emends 4:24 from *bdrk*, 'in the way,' to *bkrk*, 'your firstborn son,' reading: 'When his firstborn was at the lodging, God met him and sought to kill him.' Circumcision incorporates Moses' son into Israel, God's firstborn. It fits him to partake in what God is doing.<sup>57</sup>

L. H. Fink asserts that the only place in the Torah where God changes his mind is when Israel worships the golden calf and Moses beseeches God to be merciful to his people (Exod 32:14). Therefore, Fink rejects the possibility that God sent Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt, then attacked Moses at the lodging place in the wilderness for not circumcising his son as Moses was on his way to carry out God's commission. He also cannot imagine Moses finding himself in a dilemma because he had not circumcised his son and arousing God's anger. In

57 R. G. Hall, 'Circumcision,' *ABD* 1 (ed. D. N. Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992) 1026-27.

order to solve this problem, Fink proposes that the episode begins with Exod 4:23, then reads vv 23-26: “Behold I [God] will slay thy [Moses’] son, thy firstborn [Gershom].” And it came to pass on the way at the lodging place, that the Lord met him [Gershom], and sought to kill him [Gershom]. Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off the foreskin of her son [Gershom], and cast it at his [Moses’] feet, and she said: “Surely a bridegroom of blood art thou [Moses] to me.” So he [God] let him [Gershom] alone. Then she said [to Moses]: “A bridegroom of blood in regard to the circumcision.” Zipporah had given birth to Gershom several years before the event described in Exod 4:24-26, and in keeping with local Midianite custom, she resisted circumcising Gershom so that Gershom was uncircumcised when Moses and his family left Midian to go to Egypt. God warns Moses in 4:23 that he will kill Gershom, and v 24 says that God seeks to do just that. Zipporah realizes immediately that her Midianite culture had caused her to resisting circumcising Gershom, so that she is personally responsible for Yahweh’s attack on her son. So she quickly circumcises Gershom, and in her despair she accuses Moses of being a ‘bridegroom of blood in regard to the circumcision,’ i.e., Moses is actually responsible for Yahweh attacking Gershom and thus Gershom’s danger of death. It is not logical to think Zipporah could refer to either of her sons as her ‘bridegroom,’ so Moses is the ‘bridegroom’ in this passage.<sup>58</sup>

T. J. Lehane contends that Exod 4:24-26 relates an episode which is crucial to Moses’ mission and belongs where it is in the book of Exodus. At age forty, Moses went among the Israelites for the first time. He killed an Egyptian who was beating an Israelite, and rescued the Israelite. This foreshadowed later events, for Moses’ mission would ultimately bring death to the Egyptians and rescue the Israelites. Pharaoh discovered Moses’ crime, so Moses fled from Egypt to Midian, where he met and married Zipporah, the daughter of the Midianite priest Jethro. Zipporah bore Moses a son whom he named Gershom to commemorate that he had been a ‘stranger’ in Egypt forty years. Moses now finds his Semitic roots; Gershom reminds him of his new identity. But Gershom also represents the Israelites still in Egypt as ‘strangers’ there. At the burning bush, God told Moses to return to Egypt and tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go, but Moses was reluctant. Moses said he was unfit to speak, and

58 L. H. Fink, ‘The Incident at the Lodging House,’ *JBQ* 21 (1993) 236-41.

Yahweh became angry with Moses. But God's anger was fleeting. Certainly he did not intend to kill Moses, or he could have done so then. This is a clue to understanding 4:24-26. It was non-circumcision and intransigence that prevented Moses from fulfilling God's command. Exod 4:24-26 does not say whom God wanted to kill or why. Exod 4:27 indicates Moses was still up on the mountain when the event at the lodging place recorded in 4:24-26 occurred. Exod 4:20 says Moses took his wife and sons and returned to Egypt. This is mentioned before 4:24-26. In 4:21, God is still speaking to Moses from the bush. God tells Moses he [God] will kill the firstborn of the non-covenant. Immediately, God attempts to kill Moses' firstborn, resulting in Moses' firstborn entering the covenant and being spared. Only then was Aaron sent to find Moses, who was still on the mountain. The reversal of time in 4:21 and the odd event related in 4:24-26 lay the groundwork for the coming Passover and exodus. God spoke to Moses about his covenant with the Israelites, referring to Canaan as the land of their 'sojournings,' root *gēr*, which is significant because this episode is about Gershom.

The real significance of the name Moses is *mas*, 'throw off' – Moses threw off the yoke of oppression. Moses' Israelite mother kept him three months, so it is certain he was circumcised (Josh 5:4). Before the exodus, the Israelites circumcised their sons, but during the forty years of wandering, they did not. After crossing the Jordan, circumcision was reinstated among the Israelites, and the Passover was celebrated (Josh 5:2-12). After the event recorded in Exod 4:24-26, Moses had to be aware of the covenantal importance of circumcision. Liberation from Egypt and circumcision are related. Non-circumcision and bondage are connected. That the Israelites in the wilderness remained uncircumcised meant they were still in bondage. It is hardly surprising that Gershom, the son of a Gentile woman, should remain uncircumcised before the exodus. Why did God seek to kill Gershom in 4:24-26? The last thing God told Moses before 4:24-26 was: 'I will slay your (Pharaoh's) firstborn son' (4:23). 'Him' in 4:24 (2x) is Gershom. Death of the firstborn is the theme of the episode. Delivery from bondage must occur or death of the non-Israelite firstborn will result. Gershom, who had not entered into the covenant, was both a firstborn [by a Gentile woman] and a non-Israelite [uncircumcised]. If Moses will plead for God's firstborn, his own firstborn must be an Israelite. Otherwise, his non-Israelite firstborn will perish, like all firstborns not protected by the blood of the covenant.

Gershom must enter the covenant to escape the coming death of non-Israelite firstborns. Zipporah's response signals the real meaning of the episode. Realizing her son will perish, she removes his foreskin and casts it down, saying, 'Surely a *ḥātān* [bridegroom] of blood art Thou [God] to me.' God let him alone. Then she added, 'A *ḥātān* of blood in regard to the circumcisions.' *mûlôt*, 'circumcisions,' is plural, referring to the circumcision of her husband and of her son. Her new relationship with God results from both. Zipporah is not speaking to Gershom here. Her act of circumcising is her own entrance into the religion of Israel. She is now an Israelite. The word 'bridegroom' makes no sense in this setting. *ḥtn* can mean 'bridegroom' (*ḥātān*) or 'father-in-law' (*ḥōtēn*). Zipporah is speaking to the Lord here. She calls God her 'father-in-law,' because of his covenant with her husband. Under that covenant, the God of Moses is her husband's father. This explains why she uses the plural *lammûlôt*, drawing her husband's covenant into her own profession of faith. Zipporah's acceptance of God's covenant was needed before the people could be delivered from the first bondage.<sup>59</sup>

J. M. Cohen contends that the key to understanding Exod 4:24-26 is to realize that these verses are part of the same pericope as 4:22-23. Both Pharaoh and Moses disobey Yahweh: Pharaoh by refusing to let the Israelites go to the desert to worship Yahweh, and Moses by neglecting to circumcise his firstborn son. Therefore, Yahweh will punish both of them in the same way, viz., by killing their firstborn sons. Zipporah rescues Gershom from Yahweh's attack in the nick of time by circumcising him. She throws Gershom's severed foreskin at Moses' feet to indicate the fearful haste she felt to do the circumcision and to express her great anger at Moses for endangering Gershom's life. Zipporah verbalizes her anger by saying: 'For a bridegroom of blood you are [were] to me,' which can be explained in one of two ways. On the one hand, *ḥātān* is cognate with Arabic *ḥatana*, and thus means 'to circumcise.' Circumcision is performed on young men just prior to marriage. In this case, Zipporah's statement means: You [Moses] should have performed Gershom's circumcision, not me! On the other hand, *dāmîm* can mean 'guilt' or 'responsibility.' In this case, Zipporah's statement means: You [Moses] have proved to be a guilty groom by jeopardizing our child's life! Zipporah may have used *ḥātān* pejoratively or idiomatically, em-

59 T. J. Lehane, 'Zipporah and the Passover,' *JBQ* 24 (1996) 46-50.

phasizing that, by neglecting the circumcision, Moses had behaved more like an inexperienced groom than a mature, responsible husband. In the ancient Near East, circumcision was performed before or at puberty. So we may assume that the ancient Midrash is correct which says Moses delayed to circumcise Gershom because Jethro insisted Midianite practice be observed; so eventually Gershom would have been circumcised at puberty or as a prelude to marriage. This explains why Zipporah called Moses a *ḥātān*, ‘son-in-law,’ who had agreed to a pact with his father-in-law, Jethro. When the immediate threat passed, she breathed an audible sigh of relief: ‘then she said’ (4:26), reflecting more calmly but more specifically on the way Moses had let her down: a bridegroom guilty (of dereliction) in relation to circumcision. Ironically, Zipporah shows righteous indignation while Moses compromises. The statement ‘Yahweh attempted to slay him’ (4:24) suggests a role-play, a symbolic and harmless acting out of the slaying of a firstborn. It was a charade with two purposes: to reassure Moses that every threat he was to make to Pharaoh would come to pass, even the threat that Yahweh would kill Pharaoh’s firstborn son just stated in 4:22-23, so Moses must not fear for his own life as he undertook his mission; and to remind Moses he had to obey Yahweh himself by circumcising his firstborn son without delay before he was in a position to carry out Yahweh’s mission to deliver Israel from Egypt.<sup>60</sup>

Proposals about the meaning of Exod 4:24-26 from the standpoint of literary-critical [source] criticism, form criticism, tradition-historical criticism, and social scientific criticism elicit various observations and responses. (1) If the critic limits himself/herself to Exod 4:24-26 as an isolated pericope, it is quite reasonable to imagine that this story originated in a setting quite apart from the present context of the flow of the Book of Exodus. It may have appeared first in an ancient Near Eastern myth or legend pertaining to deities or demons. It seems bizarre to me that this passage has to do with a nuptial relationship between Zipporah and a deity or a demon or even Yahweh himself. Now, since Jethro and Zipporah were Midianites (Exod 2:15-22; 3:1; 4:18-20; 18:1-12), this pericope may have originated in the context of some type of Midianite [or Kenite] social or cultural customs or practices without any connection to Moses or the Israelites. If so, one may imagine that Israelite

60 J. M. Cohen, ‘*Hatan Damim* – The Bridegroom of Blood,’ *JBQ* 33 (2005) 120-26.

tradents or scribes borrowed such a tale and 'reapplied' or 'Yahwicized' it to address a different Israelite context. While these suggestions are intriguing and titillating, it seems very difficult to accept these views from a careful reading of this passage. Admittedly, *Exod* 4:24-26 does not name Moses specifically, but it does name 'Yahweh' (v. 24), Zipporah (v. 25), and Zipporah's son (v. 25), and the surrounding context naturally suggests Moses (vv. 18-21, 27-28). One has to work very hard to make the assailant a demon or Mastema, admitting that very early ancient versions identified the assailant as 'the angel of the Lord.' However, it seems obvious that such an identification arose from the theological problem that Yahweh sought to kill Moses, the very person Yahweh had just summoned to return to Egypt and guide the Israelites out of bondage.

(2) It is more likely that the cause of the implied lack of circumcision of Zipporah's son (v. 25) had to do with some prior compulsion or agreement between Jethro and Moses or Zipporah and Moses. Moses' parents and siblings were Hebrews (*Exod* 2:1-4, 6-9; 6:20), and yet, the Egyptian daughter of Pharaoh raised Moses from a baby to manhood for forty years. It is extremely difficult to know the influences bearing on Moses during those formative years. I would assume that the Hebrews circumcised Moses. But the Egyptians also practiced circumcision, and we cannot know what Moses' view about circumcision existed as he matured to manhood. In addition, the cultural and social practices of the Midianites must have had a significant impact on Moses during the forty years he lived in the land of Midian. His father-in-law, Jethro or Reuel, was a Midianite priest (*Exod* 2:15-22; 18:1-12), and Jethro his wife was a Midianite, raised, influenced, and taught by Jethro. We can only conjecture what agreements Jethro and Zipporah and Moses struck in preparation for and during the marriage of Moses and Zipporah. It is agonizing to want to know what lay behind these matters, and only imagine. It is possible that the lack of circumcision of the son of Moses and Zipporah is somehow connected with influences on Moses and Zipporah from the Midianite background and setting of this situation. However, the flow of the text in the Book of Exodus suggests another way of explaining this problem, as I will discuss in my own presentation.

(3) The question of the identity of the uncircumcised person attacked in this pericope is very complicated. It is just possible that Moses himself had not been circumcised, at least in the Israelite way. Some

have suggested that the Egyptians circumcised males in a limited way in contrast to complete circumcision as the Israelites do, and Moses was subjected to Egyptian circumcision. However, since Moses' parents were Hebrews, it seems most likely that Israelites circumcised Moses. Exod 18:3-4 clarify that Moses and Zipporah had two sons, the elder Gershom and the younger Eliezer. Exod 4:20 states that Moses took his wife 'and his sons' from Midian back to the land of Egypt. Yet, Exod 4:25 indicates Zipporah's concern was to circumcise 'her son.' One cannot know which son she circumcised. Exod 2:22 says Zipporah bore Gershom in Midian. It is possible that Moses had circumcised Gershom at eight days of age following the Israelite custom, and that Zipporah gave birth to Eliezer only very shortly before Moses and his family set out on this journey. Moses neglected circumcising Eliezer on the eighth day because he was so intent to carry out God's charge that he forgot to circumcise Eliezer, or was afraid circumcision might harm the baby boy on the trip, or assumed it was not important enough to circumcise his child and planned to perform this at a more convenient time. Yet, it is just as possible that Moses had not circumcised Gershom, his firstborn son, because of a prior agreement he had made with Jethro and/or Zipporah or because of Midianite practices which opposed this custom. My own opinion is that, for some reason, Moses had not circumcised Gershom, and this aroused Yahweh's anger in connection with this *in addition to* Moses' hesitation to actually intend to try to guide the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage. I will discuss this more in detail later. While there are well thought out arguments favoring approaches to Exod 4:24-26 as an isolated pericope, separate from its surrounding context, there are good reasons to prefer interpretations of this passage within the larger context of the Book of Exodus.





## Chapter VII

# Redaction Criticism, Historical Criticism, Narrative Criticism, Discourse Criticism, Rhetorical Criticism, Literary Criticism, Canonical Criticism, Theological Criticism, and Reader [Response] Criticism

Many scholars over the past several decades have proposed other ways of understanding Exod 4:24-26. These interpretations arise from and/or are related to another set of scholarly approaches or methods: redaction criticism, historical criticism, narrative criticism, discourse criticism, rhetorical criticism, literary criticism, canonical criticism, theological criticism, and reader [response] criticism. While each of these approaches is somewhat unique, all of these share certain common understandings of the Bible, and help explain the interpretation of Exod 4:24-26. Textual criticism and social scientific criticism play an important role in these methods as well. Three important aspects of these approaches are especially significant in dealing with Exod 4:24-26. (1) Exponents of these critical methods assume and defend the view that one must attempt to interpret each passage in the larger context of which it is a part, not in isolation. (2) These advocates are concerned about the present, final form of the text, all the while acknowledging that each text probably experienced a much earlier origin and evolutionary or developmental tradition. In earlier stages of each text, including Exod 4:24-26, different tradents may have used and [re]applied that text in a certain setting or culture, but the first responsibility of the biblical researcher is to try to determine the meaning of that text in its present, final form. (3) The inquirer must examine texts similar to each text under consideration, since parallel or related texts may shed light on the meaning of the text the examiner is studying. It is no surprise, e.g., that numerous scholars analyze Gen 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33]; 34; Exodus 12; Num 22:21-34; Josh 5:2-12 and similar passages in attempting to determine the pos-

sible meaning of Exod 4:24-26. Briefly, it is important to summarize the current understanding of these approaches.

Redaction Criticism as a scholarly discipline has evolved significantly from its origin to its present situation. Scholars in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century thought of redactors as ‘epigones,’ ‘revisers,’ or ‘scissors and paste editors’ of already established, well-known sources. These redactors had such great reverence or respect of their sources that they did not dare alter the sources they received and incorporated and passed down to their own audiences and succeeding generations. They performed a little arrangement or addition or explanation to the earlier sources, but only to clarify their own audiences. The assumption was the ‘the word of God’ resided in the sources, not in the redactors. These redactors worked not only in the final, present form of biblical books, but also in the earlier sources lying behind the present biblical books. Over time, scholars have come to the realization that redactors did indeed use earlier sources [oral and written], but also, and primarily used those earlier sources to produce new, fresh [re]applications of their sources in an attempt to address the needs and problems of their own audiences in their changing situations. Certainly, earlier sources affected and shaped redactors, but also redactors used their sources in new ways and for new purposes. These redactors were composers, writers, and authors in their own right. For NT scholars, studies of the Synoptic Gospels [Matthew, Mark, and Luke] from this understanding of Redaction Criticism have opened significant theological interpretations of these works. The same is true in the Hebrew Bible, including Exod 4:24-26. In one sense, Redaction Criticism is the final stage in the prior work of Source Criticism, Form Criticism, and Traditio-Historical Criticism, but this is an oversimplification. L. E. Stone’s succinct description of Redaction Criticism is very helpful:

Redaction criticism could be conceived as an integrative method describing the kinds, levels, and mechanisms of conceptual unity operating in documents thought to possess compositional diversity. Redaction criticism begins by discerning, through analytical methods like source- and form-criticism, the source materials behind the text. The redaction critic then explores how the material was reshaped and organized, assessing both the possible intentionality at work as well as the literary effect of the final text. The redaction critic also inquires into the historical,

cultural, and social contexts for such compositional processes. Redaction criticism thus potentially integrates synchronic and diachronic concerns in a single method.<sup>1</sup>

Historical Criticism is inseparably related to Redaction Criticism, and vice versa. At least theoretically, a historian exploring ancient Israel must use the same methods any historian in any discipline employs. The data investigated concerning events, sources, customs, and beliefs pertaining to OT and NT peoples and place and experiences are significantly removed from modern time and ways of life by centuries and even millennia. Methods and conclusions proposed by ancient Near Eastern and biblical historians intersect a veritable intellectual, sociological, political and religious mine field. Biblical historical critics work with biblical and related ancient Near Eastern written sources and all types of artifactual evidence excavated and discovered by archaeologists and associated experts in various disciplines. Broadly speaking, biblical historical criticism usually attempts to approach biblical materials in three ways. (1) The researcher strives to adopt a critical stance in dealing with his/her sources, written or artifactual. The ideal goal is to recover actual facts or data, which often leads the inquirer to question or discount claims or declarations found in biblical and extra-biblical sources. (2) The historian is commonly very skeptical or suspicious about accounts reporting or claiming supernatural or miraculous events of the ancient past lying outside current, modern experiences of human peoples, especially when trained by thinkers in Western societies. By definition, the researcher supposes any biblical or ancient Near Eastern claim of divine activity in human affairs is unhistorical. (3) The historian is keenly aware of the subjective and tentative nature of her/his own historical conclusions. Every human being, including the historian, brings his/her own baggage into the discipline of attempting to recover historical data.

The available sources available to the historian are themselves selective and arranged in a certain order for a variety of possible reasons depending on the nature and purposes of the authors and/or tradents of their works. Similarly, the historian himself/ herself is selective. While she/he strives to determine historical data, in the process she/he inter-

1 See J. Barton, 'Redaction Criticism (OT),' *ABD* 5 (1992) 644-47; L. G. Stone, 'Redaction Criticism, OT,' *NIDB* 4 (2009) 752-53 [quote p. 753].

pretends the data she/he studies and employs. Current historical studies of the Bible fall into two groups. B. T. Arnold summarizes the situations:

On the one hand, 'revisionists' (minimalists, nihilists) typically reject the biblical account of Israel's history and maintain that the OT contains no reliable historical data and that, in fact, a history of ancient Israel cannot be written and should not be attempted. On the other hand, traditionalists (maximalists, literalists) insist that the referential dimension of the Israelite historical writings is vital and an integral part of interpretation, so that the historical reconstruction of Israel's past is never far removed from the actual events as described in the Bible itself.<sup>2</sup>

In dealing with Exod 4:24-26 historically, several factors must come into consideration. From a social scientific perspective, the historian attempts to discover cultural, sociological, and religious practices pertaining to Egyptian, Midianite and Hebrew customs and how these relate to one other, especially marriage and family understandings, circumcision, and inter-tribal or inter-national relationships and treaties. From a chronological and geographical perspective, the historian tries to reconstruct the dating of the events involved in the biblical sources, locations of designated places [Horeb or Sinai – Exod 3:1, 12; 4:27;<sup>3</sup> ancient travel routes from Midian to Egypt – 4:24; lodging places on this route—4:24; location of the land of Midian – 3:1; 4:19;<sup>4</sup> location of the Israelites in Egypt in the land of Goshen – Gen 45:10; 46:28 (2x), 28, 34; 47:1, 4, 6, 27; 50:8; Exod 8:22 (Hebrew 8:18); 9:26].<sup>5</sup> From a traditio-historical perspective, the historian must strive to reconstruct the history of the development of the 'original' account of Exod 4:24-26 to its present final form in the Book of Exodus. In recent studies of this passage, there is a growing consensus that DtrH or Genesis-2 Kings belong to the exilic or post-exilic period, and this has an important bearing on the interpretation of Exod 4:24-26. The ultimate conclusion determined by each interpreter

2 See J. M. Miller, *The Old Testament and the Historian* (GBSOT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976); T. L. Thompson, 'Historiography (Israelites),' *ABD* 3 (1992) 206-12; J. M. Miller, 'Reading the Bible Historically: The Historian's Approach,' in *To Each Its Own Meaning* (eds. S. L. McKenzie and S. R. Haynes; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999) 17-34; B. T. Arnold, 'History and Historiography, OT,' *NIDB* 2 (2007) 833-37 [quote on p. 836].

3 See G. I. Davies, 'Sinai, Mount,' *ABD* 6 (1992) 47-49.

4 See M. G. Vanzant, 'Midian, Midianites,' *NIDB* 4 (2007) 79-81.

5 See D. D. Pioske, 'Goshen,' *NIDB* 2 (2007) 628-29.

of these decisions plays a significant role in the researcher's position. Several of the interpretations discussed previously deal with some of these 'historical' matters, but I have chosen to wait until this point in order to include a consideration of the history of the development of Exod 4:24-26 from its origin to its present final form of the Book of Exodus and attempts to determine the date of the Book of Exodus, including DtrH or Genesis-2 Kings as the entire composition.

In some ways, narrative criticism, which came into vogue in the 1970s, is closely connected to historical criticism. But in other ways, this approach is occupied with its own set of pursuits. Ordinarily, narrative criticism seeks to determine five components of narratives in the Hebrew Bible: (1) the development of the plot; (2) an evaluation of the characters in the narrative, both human and divine; (3) the role of the narrator, who reveals his/her own intentions and purposes with a view of his/her perceived audience; (4) determination of the time and space indicated in the narrative; and (5) interpretation of the function of the narrative as the narrator seeks to communicate his/her message. Hence, narrative criticism is not concerned with the historical origin of events reported in the narrative, but with the unity and coherence of the flow of the narrative and the relationship between a certain pericope and the entire narrative or story.<sup>6</sup> The scholar's understanding of Exod 4:24-26 differs significantly with regard to whether one thinks of this pericope as an ancient isolated passage or fragment, or holistically as a coherent part of the ongoing flow of the narrative previous to and following it.

Discourse Criticism or Discourse Analysis is a newly expanding discipline which began to take a hold in the 1960s. It is closely related to linguistics, literary criticism, form criticism, narrative criticism, rhetorical criticism, theological criticism, and canonical criticism. Different analysts understand this method in various ways. W. Bodine observes that the sentence is the largest unit for linguistic analysis. But experts in this field insist that this involves a text, a sequence of sentences, or the context beyond the sentence. Biblical studies are closer to literary criti-

6 See D. M. Gunn, 'Narrative Criticism,' in *To Each Its Own Meaning* (eds. S. L. McKenzie and S. R. Haynes; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999) 201-29; D. N. Fewell and D. M. Gunn, 'Narrative, Hebrew,' *ABD* 4 (1992) 1023-27; D. Rhoads, 'Narrative Criticism,' *NIDB* 4 (2009) 222-23; Y. Amit, 'Narrative Literature,' *NIDB* 4 (2009) 223-25.

cism than to linguistics. They treat complete texts and whole books. The concern is the present, final form of a biblical work. Researchers contend that discourse analysis embraces events, participants, setting, background, collateral, and performatives. Six levels of significance are a part of discourse information: peak, pivotal events, backbone events, ordinary events, significant background, and ordinary background. The tasks of discourse analysis are explication of definitivization and the use of deictics; pronominalization; use of tense, aspect, mode, voice; word order; use of locative and temporal expressions; adverbial clauses; sequence signals and conjunctions; variation in reported speech; variation in length of syntactic units; particles and affixes. For L. G. Bloomquist, discourse indicates a particular text, conversation or speech, oral or written, the argument or flow within a speech or text, complex genres, a range from particular speech mode within a text to complex issues of style and textual form, the culture out of which one speaks or writes, cultures associated with genres, narrative lines of cultures, language or dialect for articulating culture, part of a larger field of power and practice whose relations denoted in various way by different paradigms, interpretation and the culture of the world of the interpreter, a particular form of analysis of texts, a formal analysis of narrative structure, analysis of cognitive structures making discourse possible, a deconstructive interpretation of language and culture and ideology through which each is expressed and the discourse or culture of the interpreter, a tool for critical analysis of ways in which language is formally used in social, cultural, and ideological contexts. R. Alter's treatment of discourse in biblical studies emphasizes certain aspects of direct and indirect discourse in the Hebrew Bible, including narrative movements from rapid summary to suddenly slowing down to a significant scene usually by dialogue, a full-scale dialogue or sequence of dialogues, embedded direct discourse within direct discourse, interplay between direct discourse and narratorial report, repetition of a character in dialogue what the narrator or another character has said, the position and attitude of the speaker or audience he/she is addressing, direct discourse representing thoughts of the characters, interior monologues, representation of the unvoiced inner speech of the character not through direct quotation but through the third person grammatical perspective of the narrator, and shifts to bring about dramatically defined moments. Hence, discourse

analysis is a multifarious close reading of the biblical text in its larger context.<sup>7</sup>

A discourse analyst may glean many potential benefits from a close reading of Exod 4:24-26, several of which continually pose difficult problems. Some are: the identity of the pronominal suffix 'him' in vv. 24b (2x), 25b, 26a; the expression 'sought [tried] to kill' in v. 24b; Zipporah 'touched his feet [genitals]' in v. 25b; 'bridegroom of blood' in vv 25b, 26b; 'then she said' in v. 26b; 'by circumcisions' in v. 26b. But in addition, discourse criticism may contribute significantly to the relationship of Exod 4:24-26 to the passages preceding and following this pericope and the overall role and function of this text in the ongoing narrative of the Book of Exodus.

Rhetoric is a very old oral or spoken [occasional written] skill or art of speech [occasional text] by the Greeks in the fifth century B.C.E. designed to inform or persuade an audience to recall, think, consider, and act in response to a certain situation proposed by the speaker [occasional author]. The elements of communication are speaker or author, speech or text, and audience or reader. Communication may be judicial or forensic for the law court, deliberative or hortatory for politics, and demonstrative or epideictic for public ceremony like festivals and funerals. Goals of communication may be intellectual for teaching, emotional for affect feelings, or aesthetic for pleasing to hold attention. The generally acknowledged parts of rhetoric are invention, discovering material appropriate for the occasion; structure, organize the material well; style, use of fit words, figures, metaphors, and tropes; memory, creation of mnemonic systems to prepare the audience for oral delivery; and delivery, aspects of oral presentation. Rhetoric played a major role in societies in the Western world until the Enlightenment, which emphasized scientific inquiry and the conclusion or assumption that knowledge is based on observable fact rather than on logic or persuasion. In biblical studies, J. Muilenburg revived rhetorical criticism as an attempt to determine the extent and structure of literary pericopes and to uncover the ancient liter-

7 See R. Alter, 'Discourse, Direct and Indirect,' *ABD* 2 (1992) 212-13; W. R. Bodine, 'Discourse Analysis of Biblical Literature: What It Is and What It Offers,' in *Discourse Analysis of Biblical Literature: What It Is and What It Offers* (ed. W. R. Bodine; SBLSS; Atlanta: Scholars, 1995) 1-18; L. H. Bloomquist, 'Discourse,' *NIDB* 2 (2007) 133-34.



ary devices that give shape and emphasis in a biblical text. Thus, he underlined that form and content are indispensable for studying biblical materials. In the past four decades, scholars following Muilenburg's suggestions have expanded, modified, and honed the use of rhetoric in biblical studies. Several have undertaken a study of entire biblical books or large portions of biblical books from a rhetorical perspective.<sup>8</sup> At least three perspectives of Exod 4:24-26 have important potential for interpreting this passage from a rhetorical viewpoint. (1) The primary concern of the inquirer is the present, final form of the Book of Exodus as a coherent composition, of which Exod 4:24-26 is a vital part, in contrast to an attempt to determine the 'original' meaning of a passage in earlier sources or traditions lying behind the biblical work as it now stands. (2) At least in ancient cultures, compositions, often of sizeable length, were prepared and arranged for oral dramatic presentation proclaimed to hearing audiences in contrast to being written for silent perusal by isolated individuals. Conceived in this way, Exod 4:24-26 may take on perspectives entirely different from those who envision this passage read silently in isolation and interpreted apart from its present, final form in the Book of Exodus. (3) Theological threads woven throughout Exod 1:1-15:21 intersecting with Exod 4:24-26 potentially illuminate the meaning of this text, as the possible significance of nocturnal experiences, conflicts between Yahweh and Moses, the relationships of Egyptians, Hebrews, and Midianites, the significance of circumcision, the role of blood, and the relative functions of husbands, wives, fathers, children, in-laws, and tribal associates in family cultural practices. Different scholars attempt to address these types of issues related to Exod 4:24-26.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, 'literary criticism' was the approach or method now called literary-historical or source criticism. But due to a series of gradual changes in research and semantic terminology, in 1968 J. Muilenburg initiated the approach in biblical studies what scholars now call 'literary criticism.' Defined in this way, literary criticism emphasizes the concept that meaning emerges from the entire combination

8 See T. B. Dozeman, 'OT Rhetorical Criticism,' *ABD* 5 (1992) 712-15; P. Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (GBSOT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994); P. K. Tull, 'Rhetorical Criticism and Intertextuality,' in *To Each Its Own Meaning* (eds. S. L. McKenzie and S. R. Haynes; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999) 156-64; D. F. Watson, 'Rhetoric and Oratory,' *NIDB* 4 (2009) 803-804.

of linguistic relationships in a biblical text, without excluding historical or theological concerns. Literary experts focus on linguistic aspects of a text, such as structure, coherence, ambiguity, allusions, dissonance, symmetry, images, tropes, similes, metaphors, repetition, and similar features.<sup>9</sup> A very important contention of this method is that the inquirer must attempt to deal with a text in the ongoing flow of the larger context of which it is a vital part. Like other approaches related to literary criticism, one views Exod 4:24-26 from this type of perspective.

As in all critical approaches, exponents of canonical criticism differ in defining and applying this method. As a major example, J. A. Sanders and B. S. Childs negotiate different treatments of canonical criticism. However, some fundamental principles are crucial in dealing with this approach. First, canonical criticism assumes that Jewish and Christian faith communities received, were shaped by, reapplied, and preserved the books made up of the commonly accepted biblical canon [some with, and some without the apocryphal books]. Simultaneously, the sacred traditions preserved by believing communities and believing communities who shaped the sacred traditions were responsible for the present, final form of the canon. Hence, second, canonical criticism analyzes, understands and interprets the biblical text in its final form, not in some theoretical form of the text. Third, canonical criticism is primarily a theological enterprise. Theological concerns shaped believing communities, and believing communities accepted and transmitted theological beliefs. In the warp and woof of canonical books is a synchronic, coherent, harmonizing interpretation of scripture in spite of apparent discrepancies found in specific texts throughout the canon. Even though a biblical text is difficult, the canonical approach strives to make sense of the passage as it appears in its context, reading a text as a unity and preferring harmonization and coherence above dissonance and uncertainty. 'The canonical context ... gives permanence to unresolved differences between traditions, delimits functional ambiguities, and perpetuates undecoded symbolism integral to a religion's understanding of divine mysteries yet to be fully revealed.' Fourth, 'canonical criticism assumes that hermeneutics by which the scriptures can be appropriated need not (indeed, should not) be imported from philosophical or theological systems, but are to be found within the scriptures themselves.' Fifth, one must

9 See J. E. Lapsley, 'Literary Interpretation, OT,' *NIDB* 3 (2008) 673-74.

strive to consider and understand the meaning of each biblical text within the entire canon.<sup>10</sup> Scholars who embrace canonical criticism offer important contributions to the interpretation of Exod 4:24-26. (1) Conceding that this text originated and was transmitted through several sources or traditions, nevertheless, this passage is now an integral part of the biblical canon, including the Book of Exodus, and thus the researcher must first seek to determine the possible meaning of this text in its present, final form of its ongoing context. (2) While ancient Near Eastern cultures and practices may seem similar and in some ways related to Exod 4:24-26, the inquirer's first concern is to attempt to interpret this text in light of the culture presented in the biblical canon in which it was preserved. (3) Theological ideas and concerns are the primary focus of Exod 4:24-26, which may include Yahweh's attitude toward Moses, the narrator's viewpoints of Egyptians, Hebrews, and Midianites, the significance of circumcision, the importance of blood, underlying practices or beliefs about 'touching the feet [genitals],' 'circumcisions [plural],' and related matters.

Broadly conceived, Theology of the Hebrew Bible or Theological Criticism or the Theological Approach(es) is the explication of the theological contents of the Hebrew Scriptures. But through many decades, experts in this field have produced a wide variety of perceptions and problems. Protestant Reformers (ca. 1550-1650 C.E.) used biblical texts as a type of systematic theology as a means of supporting dogmas of Protestant orthodoxy against the dogmas of Roman Catholicism. Between ca. 1650-1800 C.E., biblical thinkers gradually changed to a general understanding that Scripture presents theological thought in the form of historical narrative through a series of covenants between God and humanity. Concurrently, personal experience and awareness of God's presence replaced stern dogmatism. G. I. Zacharia and J. P. Gabler proposed the dual concept that thinkers should think of the Bible as both descriptive and historical in interpreting the intent and purposes of the biblical writers as well as constructive and normative in applying biblical

10 See G. T. Sheppard, 'Canonical Criticism,' *ABD* 1 (1992) 861-66 [second quote on p. 863]; M. C. Callaway, 'Canonical Criticism,' in *To Each Its Own Meaning* (eds. S. L. McKenzie and S. R. Haynes; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999) 142-55 [first quote on p. 147]; R. W. Wall, 'Canonical Criticism,' *NIDB* 1 (2006) 563-64.

teachings to contemporary issues and life. With the rise of Rationalism (ca. 1750-1875 C.E.), several significant scholars advocated the study of the history of religion in the Bible itself. The general understanding was that ancient Near Eastern beliefs influenced and motivated beliefs now found in the Hebrew Bible, and in turn the Hebrew Bible evolved and was transformed in the New Testament. Naturally, theological ideas in the Hebrew Bible are superior to those of the earlier ancient Near Eastern cultures, and theological concepts in the New Testament are superior to those of the Hebrew Bible. In the 1930s and the 1950s, W. Eichrodt and G. von Rad attempted to compose a holistic picture of the entire Hebrew Bible. Eichrodt proclaimed that the unifying unity of the Hebrew Bible focuses around three themes: God and the People [Israel], God and the World, God and Man. Von Rad contended that the scholar's role is to retell the confessional story of the traditions of the Hebrew Bible, resulting in several 'theologies' rather than a unified 'theology.' In the past six decades, numerous theologians have published theological treatments of the Hebrew Bible. Jewish scholars have not produced a full-fledged 'theology' of the Hebrew Bible, but significant thinkers in this area have made and are making great progress toward such an accomplishment, especially A. Heschel, M. Goshen-Gottstein, and J. Levenson. During the history of theological approaches to the Hebrew Bible, five distinct attitudes have emerged. (1) Some Christian thinkers reject the teaching of the Hebrew Bible, or assume NT teaching is superior to the Hebrew Bible. (2) Some Christian believers think of the Hebrew Bible as a historical presupposition of the NT. (3) Some Christian exponents attempt to 'Christianize' the Hebrew Bible. (4) Certain Christian groups declare that Christians must adhere to the teachings of the Hebrew Bible literally. (5) Both Jews and Christians may agree that the God of the Hebrew Bible is the same as the God of the NT. The Hebrew Bible continues to be a valid source of divine revelation and truth for Jews and Christians concerning God's nature, teachings, and relationship to humanity and the world. This fifth and final understanding is most healthy and complete.<sup>11</sup> Whether an interpreter approaches Exod 4:24-26 as an isolated pericope originating in an ancient Near Eastern myth or legend, or as part of an earlier source lying behind the present final form of the Book of Exodus, or as part of the ongoing flow of the narrative in

11 See W. E. Lemke, 'Theology (OT),' *ABD* 6 (1992) 449-73.

Exod 1:1-15:21 or the entire Book of Exodus or the Pentateuch or Genesis-2 Kings, that interpreter must struggle with the theological implications of this passage. This raises such issues as the nature of God or the angel of the Lord or a demon, the theological perspectives of Zipporah and Moses and their cultural backgrounds in Egypt or among the Hebrews or in Midian, the religious significance of circumcision, the meaning of the expression *hātān dāmīm*, and other related issues. Obviously, these matters have a bearing on treatments of Exod 4:24-26 in isolation, but I have arbitrarily saved a discussion of this approach until one confronts scholarly proposals of this text in its broader function in the present, final form of the Book of Exodus.

Reader Response Criticism entered into biblical studies from North American literary criticism and has been fueled by sociological, rhetorical, and philosophical disciplines. Biblical critics using this approach are far from unified. One extreme view affirms that readers alone make the meaning of a text. Reasonable thinkers have always understood that there is a certain element of subjectivity in understanding and interpreting an oral or literary piece. At the same time, the author and the text have a significant effect on the reader. Biblical texts consisted of an ancient document with original meaning, but also offer a dynamic message with contemporary significance and application for modern life. By necessity, there must be an interaction between the biblical text and the active reader in light of her/his own context. Biblical texts speak, act, and influence the reader, and the ways biblical texts affects the ways readers react to these texts. Reader response respects the author and intention of the author, but goes beyond these concerns and acknowledges the role of the reader in the process of interpretation. Some terminology used by experts advocating certain reader responses methods is highly technical and elicits confusion, such as distinctions between the real author and the implied author, the real audience and the implied audience, and the like. But in attempting to treat biblical texts, each interpreter must at least take into consideration reader response approaches.<sup>12</sup>

12 See B. C. Lategan, 'Reader Response Theory,' *ABD* 5 (1992) 625-28; E. V. McKnight, 'Reader-Response Criticism,' in *To Each Its Own Meaning* (eds. S. L. McKenzie and S. R. Haynes; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999) 230-52; R. C. Webber, 'Reader Response Criticism,' *NIDB* 4 (2009) 738.

The following explanations of Exod 4:24-26 represent a variety of combinations of the critical methods described above. I will comment briefly on each of these views, then conclude with my own interpretation.

### 36. Yahweh's Capriciousness

E. Kellenberger understands four OT passages which represent Yahweh as fickle or capricious, one who threatens the life of one of his faithful servants without justifiable reason. First, Yahweh instructed David to carry out a census in Israel, but when David obeyed Yahweh's instructions, Yahweh became angry and punished the Israelites for this undertaking (2 Sam 24:1-17). Second, Yahweh commanded Jacob to go from Haran back to his native land of Canaan, but on the way Yahweh attacked Jacob at the Jabbok River without any justifiable reason (Gen 31:3; 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33]). Third, Yahweh explicitly told Balaam to go on his trip but instructing Balaam to say only what Yahweh told him to do and Balaam did this, yet Yahweh attacked Balaam on the way without justifiable reason. Balaam confesses that if he has done anything against Yahweh's will, and the angel of Yahweh instructs Balaam to go on his trip but again instructing Balaam to say only what Yahweh told him to do (Num 22:20-35, especially vss. 20, 22, 32, 34-35). Fourth, Yahweh commanded Moses to go to Egypt to deliver the Israelites from bondage, but Yahweh threatened to kill Moses on the way without any justifiable reason (Exod 4:19, 24-26). Kellenberger concludes that several OT passages, including Exod 4:24-26, depict Yahweh as threatening or attacking his faithful servants without any explicable justifiable reason.<sup>13</sup>

W. Brueggemann reasons that since Yahweh, at the burning bush, finally coerced Moses to return to Egypt to lead the Israelites out of bondage (Exod 3:1-4:20), it is odd for him to seek to kill Moses as he and his family were on their way to Egypt (Exod 4:24-26). Brueggemann

13 E. Kellenberger, 'Yahwes unerwarteter Widerstand gegen seinen Beauftragten. Erwägungen zur Episode von Bileams Eselin,' *TZ* 45 (1989) 69-72.

says Yahweh's behavior here can be explained only by the fact that he possesses deep, untamed holiness and operates in inexplicable, undisciplined freedom. It is impossible to understand why Zipporah's circumcision of her son (Gershom: Exod 2:22) protected Moses from Yahweh's threat.<sup>14</sup>

D. E. Gowan argues that the point of Exod 4:24-26 is circumcision. Exodus 3-4 portray Yahweh as both gracious and helpful to Moses, and seeking to kill Moses. Exod 4:24-26 depicts the 'demonic' in Yahweh. It contains one of the few expressions in the Hebrew Bible of the numinous in its most elemental form, uncontrollable power without any of the moral qualities that usually accompany it. Gen 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33] and Num 22:22-35 provide near parallel instances of this. Israel's proclamation of monotheism presented the dilemma of accounting for evil. The God of the Hebrew Bible is wrathful, distant, and self-concealing. He withholds his presence, nearness and support. The near God is threatening, but a dangerous encounter with him results in the salvation of the person he meets.<sup>15</sup>

D. H. Sunoo advocates a similar view. She says two things are certain in Exod 4:24-26: (1) Yahweh met 'him,' and (2) Yahweh sought to kill 'him.' The most obvious problem in interpreting this passage is lack of clear referents for the several pronouns and pronominal suffixes in it. One cannot know who the victim is in 4:24: Moses or one of his sons, so the interpreter must admit uncertainty about this. Exod 4:24-26 says clearly that Yahweh sought to kill someone, not that that individual was battling physical or emotional distress. This passage affirms clearly that Yahweh performed a random act of unprovoked divine violence. Exod 4:24-26; 2 Sam 6:6-11; 24 come from 'voices of dissent' like those of the authors of Job and Ecclesiastes, who declare that Yahweh may have burst forth against faithful servants in these instances without warning and without just cause.<sup>16</sup>

14 W. Brueggemann, 'The Book of Exodus: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,' *NIB* 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) 718, 720.

15 D. E. Gowan, *Theology in Exodus: Biblical Theology in the Form of a Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994) 37-38.

16 D. H. Sunoo, 'God Bursts Forth: Unexpected Disruptions in the Narrative Landscape of the Hebrew Bible' (diss. Princeton Theological Seminary, 1999; Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 1999) 31-64, 110-122.

C. B. Hays argues that Exod 4:24-26 follows 4:20 directly, so 4:21-23 is a later insertion which interrupts the flow of the narrative. Exod 4:24-26 is from J or earlier, so prior to the law of circumcision in Genesis 17. Hays 'translates' Exod 4:24-26 interpretively: '4:24 – While Moses was on the way to Egypt with his wife and sons, they stopped for the night at a camping-place. There the Lord came upon Moses and sought to kill him. 4:25 – But Zipporah took a flint and cut off the foreskin of her son. She touched it to the feet of the Lord and spoke these words, "Surely you are a blood relative to me." 4:26 – And the Lord remembered his promises to his people, and withdrew from the family. Thus Zipporah marked her family as kin to the Lord by blood, by means of circumcision.' Accordingly, the person ['him'] whom Yahweh sought to kill was Moses. Zipporah touched the bloody foreskin of her son to the feet of Yahweh to *protect* Moses and her family from Yahweh because it is *dangerous* to be close to God, an idea found in the stories of Isaac in Genesis 22; Jacob in Genesis 32; Job; and the prophets. The feet of Yahweh were central to Israelite worship, as in the temple where the ark of the covenant was a footstool and on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:14-15). Ancient Near Eastern apotropaic texts include ritual actions similar to those in Leviticus 16, e.g., the Mesopotamian *namburba* texts, which include spoken incantations and action rubrics. These actions include sevenfold sprinkling similar to the Day of Atonement rite (cf. Lev 16:14, 19), and painting the doors with various substances in order to ward off evil, much like the Hebrews do with the blood of the paschal lamb in Exodus 12 for protection from the Destroyer. As the blood of Zipporah's son is a prototype of the blood of the lamb, so Abraham's blood is a prototype of the bull and goat. So one element of the touching of the child's blood to the feet of the deity is its vicarious sacrificial value. Zipporah's statement 'You are kin to me by blood' applied the blood to the feet of Yahweh may mean her inclusion in the family. The use of oath and covenant was a widespread legal means by which the duties and privileges of kinship may be extended to another individual or group. Through this ritual, Zipporah claims her family's relationship to the Divine Kinsman, Yahweh. As the blood of bulls is dashed on the altar and the people in Exodus 24 to mark the covenant, so in Exod 4:24-26 the child's blood is touched to the feet of the deity, envisioned as resting on the cover of the ark. Thus, the blood of the circumcision of Zipporah's son functions not only as a sublimated sacrifice,



but also as a marker of the covenant between God and his people. Zipporah's action is an apotropaic blood rite that invoked his family's kinship to Yahweh, the Divine Kinsman.<sup>17</sup>

H. Ausloos argues that two originally separate traditions of the story of Balaam came into biblical texts: Numbers 22-24 and Mic 6:5 portray Balaam in a positive light as an obedient prophet who blessed the Israelites, while Numbers 31; Deut 23:5-6; Josh 24:9-10; Rev 2:14; 2 Pet 2:15-16; Jude 11 portray Balaam in a negative light as an evil prophet who cursed the Israelites. The stories of Jacob (Gen 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33]), Moses (Exod 4:24-26), and Balaam (Num 22:22-35) depict these three persons were faithful servants of God, yet God attacked them without cause. The problem in these cases is inherent in a monotheistic religion. A polytheistic religion includes different gods to represent different aspects of human life, so that they have one love of god and a different love of war. However, monotheism seeks to encompass all these aspects in one god. Hence, Yahweh manifests love in dealing with people, but also behaves in a fickle or capricious manner, suddenly attacking people like Jacob, Moses, and Balaam without warning for no good reason. Accordingly, the attack on Moses related in Exod 4:24-26 is not due to some wrong Moses or some other person committed, but due to the nature of Yahweh himself as a God of caprice as well as love and compassion.<sup>18</sup>

Admittedly, Yahweh, the God of Israel, may indeed by nature be fickle or capricious, or it may be that certain biblical tradents or communities or composers or authors portray Yahweh as fickle or capricious. W. Brueggemann's treatment of the Hebrew Bible embracing both 'core testimony' and 'counter testimony' allows for certain biblical texts presenting one view of Yahweh as clashing with other views of Yahweh elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. At the same time, there are other reasonable ways to explain Yahweh's anger which motivated Moses to kill him on his journey from Midian to Egypt described in Exod 4:24-26. Likewise, there are available explanations of Gen 32:23-33 [Hebrew 32:22-32]; Num 22:21-35; and 2 Sam 24:1-17 other than the view that Yahweh

17 C. B. Hays, "'Lest Ye Perish in the Way': Ritual and Kinship in Exodus 4:24-26," *HS* 48 (2007) 39-54.

18 H. Ausloos, 'On an Obedient Prophet and a Fickle God. The Narrative of Balaam in Num 22-24,' *OTE* 20/1 (2007) 84-104, especially pp. 98-100.

was capricious. A logical explanation why Yahweh commanded Abraham to offer Isaac as a burnt offering (Gen 22:1-14) is that Yahweh is fickle or capricious, yet scholars usually seek other interpretations of this text. Accordingly, it seems appropriate to explore other interpretations.

### 37. Zipporah's Conversion to Israel's Religion

G. Richter advanced five reasons for rejecting the common view of his day that the purpose of the story in Exod 4:24-26 was to explain and justify the transfer of circumcision from the age of puberty (as a preparation for marriage) to infancy. First, it is highly unlikely that there were different traditions of the origin of a practice of such fundamental significance as the circumcision of male infants. Second, Exod 4:24-26 does not give the impression of intending to narrate the origin of the practice of circumcising male infants. Third, it is very unlikely that the redactor of the Pentateuch could have put an entirely different tradition concerning the origin of the circumcision of male infants alongside the detailed priestly account of the origin of this practice in Gen 17:1-14. Fourth, one cannot demonstrate that adult circumcision was common in ancient Israel in spite of Gen 34:24ff and Josh 5:2ff. Fifth, the idea that Moses was not circumcised in Egypt, and that Zipporah, on a sudden impulse, circumcised her son and then symbolically circumcised Moses by touching his genitals with the severed bloody foreskin, is unthinkable.

Instead of the common view, G. Richter argued that Zipporah's statement in Exod 4:25, 'You are to me a bloody bridegroom,' indicates Yahweh's wrath was kindled because of the neglect of the circumcision of the child. The common view says that Zipporah directed these words to Moses to declare that she has received and reclaimed him at the costly price of the blood of her child. But when she spoke these words, this was not clear at all because we do not learn that 'he let him alone' until 4:26. 'His feet' in 4:25 can only refer to Yahweh. So Exod 4:24-26 is saying that Yahweh is angry with Moses because he neglected to circumcise his son. This neglect was not due to the haste of the journey, but to the fact that as a fugitive Moses had stayed with his pagan father-in-law. During that time, Moses undoubtedly told Zipporah often that his religion de-

manded that their son be circumcised, but she refused to agree to this. However, when she saw the angry Yahweh, she knew immediately that he was angry because their son was not circumcised. By throwing the foreskin of her son at Yahweh's feet, she is declaring that she will follow her husband's religion and submit herself to Yahweh ['You'] as his possession. She declares her submission to Yahweh in the most drastic way imaginable, viz., by performing the ceremony of admission into the Yahweh religion of her firstborn son herself. Zipporah's words in 4:25: 'A bloody bridegroom are You to me,' mean: By the blood of my son is now formed a covenant between You (Yahweh) and me, which did not exist by nature in me as in the daughters of Abraham. This is the stereotyped formula by which foreign wives carried out their admission into the Israelite religious community. Yahweh had not attacked Moses or the child earlier because they were in the home of Jethro, and thus Zipporah was formally justified in refusing the circumcision. But now she was about to cross over into the prohibited area of Israel. 4:26b is a concluding remark of the narrator or redactor, who inserted it to make the expression 'bloody bridegroom' the point of the story in 4:24-26. *lmwlt* is incorrectly written for *lammālôt*, 'the female circumcisers,' i.e., the mothers who circumcised their sons. The ancient Israelite reader would know automatically that this referred to foreign mothers who circumcised their firstborn sons.<sup>19</sup>

B. Jacob was working on a commentary on the book of Exodus when he died. E. I. Jacob collected his notes posthumously and bound them in typed form. Benno Jacob crossed out several paragraphs, wrote notes by hand in the margin, and marked a line through numerous words and phrases. It is obvious that his commentary was 'in process' and that he had not formulated completely his conclusions on numerous passages and ideas. Therefore, it is impossible to report Benno Jacob's 'position' on Exod 4:24-26. What follows represents his thoughts on what is available from him. Benno Jacob comments that the dominant early view of Exod 4:24-26 was that Moses was stricken with an illness and threatened with death. Benno Jacob argues strongly that Exod 4:24-26 is an integral part of the context of Exodus 4. Several linguistic connections between Exod 4:24-26 and its context support this. The statement, 'Yahweh

19 G. Richter, 'Zwei alttestamentliche Studien. I. Der Blutbräutigam,' *ZAW* 39 (1921) 123-28.

sought to kill Moses,' in 4:24 means Yahweh had in mind to kill Moses, as the same statement in 2:15 shows. Since the blood of the Passover lamb in Exod 12:22 does not exist yet, the blood of circumcision prevents Yahweh from killing Moses. The pronoun 'him' in Exod 4:24-26 means Moses throughout. Zipporah addresses Moses when she says: 'A bloody bridegroom are you [Moses] to me [Zipporah].' Zipporah touches Moses' feet. By the blood of the circumcision of her son, Zipporah will be connected with her husband all the more and will continue to be connected with him beyond the temporary separation mentioned in Exod 18:2-4. These observations by Benno Jacob seem to imply that Zipporah submitted to the Jewish faith of her husband by circumcising their son, although Benno Jacob does not say this explicitly. 'By circumcisions' (plural) in Exod 4:26b refers to earlier births of sons and circumcisions in an Israelite family. Each 'cutting off of the foreskin' renews and strengthens the covenant of the husband. In performing circumcision, husband and wife celebrate marriage once again. Zipporah circumcised the younger son, Eliezer, because Exod 4:20 says Moses and Zipporah took their 'sons' with them on their journey from Midian to Egypt, and in Exod 18:2-4, Zipporah takes Eliezer with her, so he must have been born before Moses and Zipporah separated.<sup>20</sup>

M. Buber argues that when Zipporah circumcised her son, she replaced the Midianite custom by the Israelite custom, which, according to Gen 17:1-14, was the Israelite practice from the earliest times, which had already replaced the general Semitic circumcision of the adolescent. Zipporah's act of touching her son's legs with the bloody foreskin had a symbolic meaning like putting hands on the head of an animal to be sacrificed – it identified the one performing the action (here Zipporah) with the creature he or she touched (here Zipporah's son). Zipporah intended for her son to represent and personify the entire clan, and she added the protective words that for her, the clan mother, and hence for the clan, he had already become a *ḥātān* by the shedding of blood. By this action of touching her son's legs, she placed her clan, those born and those unborn, under the God of Israel, and thus conciliated him. Yahweh was Moses' assailant in Exod 4:24 from the very beginning of the story. Yahweh attacked Moses because Moses' devotion to him, after Yahweh

20 B. Jacob, *Das Zweite Buch der Tora. Exodus übersetzt und erklärt* (No place or publisher, 1945) 136-42.

overcame his resistance to his commission at the burning bush, was not full enough.<sup>21</sup> J. G. Janzen follows Buber.<sup>22</sup>

G. Schneemann insists that one must interpret Exod 4:24-26 in its position as part of the unit 4:18-26 and as part of the exodus narrative. So the event described here took place as Moses and his family were going from Midian to Egypt. The death of the firstborn mentioned in 4:20b-23 anticipates the last plague in Exodus 11. The setting in life for circumcision is the Passover festival. The editors of the exodus narrative omitted the name 'Moses' in 4:24-26 because a Midianite [pagan] woman circumcised the son. The narrative shows that Yahweh attacked Moses (v. 24). Schneemann contends that *ḥātān dāmīm* in Exod 4:25-26 means 'a bridegroom who has shed blood,' which in this context can only be Yahweh, the person who intended to shed blood in 4:24. A bridegroom who has shed blood is one who has entered into a marriage with a woman. So in 4:25-26, Yahweh enters into a spiritual marriage relationship with a foreign woman, Zipporah. Hos 2:16 [Hebrew 2:18] and Isa 62:4 designate Yahweh as 'husband' of his people Israel. By saying to Yahweh: 'You are a bloody bridegroom for me' (v. 25), Zipporah is proclaiming her loyalty to the God of Israel as her bridegroom. V. 26b explains how Yahweh married a Midianite woman. Here *mûlôt* does not mean the individual circumcision Zipporah performed, but the act of circumcision in general. So one should translate v 26b: 'Then she said 'bloody bridegroom' with a view to the circumcision.' The fact that God left Moses alone when Zipporah circumcised her son shows that circumcision and confession of faith in the God of Israel were the goals Yahweh was trying to attain by attacking Moses. *wattagga' + l'raglāw* in 4:25 means 'she fell at his feet' (so the LXX), an act of subjection, humiliation and homage, as expressions and scenes on the Kurkh stela, the Sabaa stela, and the Black Obelisk indicate. Zipporah's words on this occasion are not a mysterious formula, but a confession (submission) of the Midianite woman to the God of Israel. Circumcision in Exod 4:24-26 has two meanings simultaneously: (1) it intercedes for the life of a man against whom God's wrath has been kindled; and (2) it is the act by

21 M. Buber, *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946) 56-59.

22 J. G. Janzen, *Exodus* (ed. P. D. Miller and D. L. Bartlett; WBC; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997) 44-45.

which the God of Israel enters into a covenant with his people, which has the finality of a marriage covenant.<sup>23</sup>

R. and E. Blum insist that one must read Exod 4:24-26 in its present position in the narrative as a part of the ongoing story. 'Man kann nicht nur, sondern muss wohl das Ganze im Kontext der Moseerzählung lesen.' There are ambiguities in Exod 4:24-26, but the preceding narrative makes it clear that 'him' in vv. 24b and 26a, and 'his' feet and 'you' in v. 25 all refer to Moses. Zipporah is the central figure in this story, and the main concerns of the story are that she is a non-Israelite and her son is uncircumcised. By circumcising her son and touching Moses' genitals with the bloody foreskin, Zipporah established a new relationship between herself and Moses: 'a *ḥātān dāmīm* are you to me.' One cannot understand 4:24-26 without its previous context. Moses and his family departed from Midian to go to Egypt in 4:19-20, and now in 4:24 they are on that journey. There is an important connection between the event in 4:24-26 and the Passover narrative in Exod 12:21ff. In both cases, the nocturnal threat to human life by Yahweh is prevented by the application (touching) of blood, in 4:24-26 protecting the leader of Israel and in 12:21ff protecting Israel.

R. and E. Blum describe two closely related hypotheses concerning the purpose of this story, both of which lead to the same conclusion. According to Text Hypothesis A, Zipporah, by circumcising her son and symbolically touching his bloody foreskin to Moses' genitals, established a kind of 'blood relationship' with Moses (beyond their marriage), a relationship with his family association (Israel). This hypothesis affirms that Yahweh attacked Moses because his wife and son did not belong to Israel. This implies the legitimating of the marriage of Moses to a non-Israelite, a view supported by Zipporah's declaration in v. 25 referring to Moses as her *ḥātān dāmīm*. Originally *ḥātān* was a relative by marriage, and *ḥātān dāmīm* meant 'a blood relative by marriage.' Zipporah's explanation in v. 25 expresses an *intensified* commitment; previously Zipporah was related to Moses only by marriage, not by blood, but now a *blood relationship* has been established. Prior to Zipporah's action in 4:24-26, she was a foreigner and did not belong to Israel. Thus Zippo-

23 G. Schneemann, 'Deutung und Bedeutung der Beschneidung nach Ex 4,24-26,' *TLZ* 105 (1980) col. 794; 'Die Deutung und Bedeutung der Beschneidung nach Exodus 4,24-26,' *CV* 32 (1989) 21-37, esp. 26-36.

rah's circumcision of her son and symbolic act of touching Moses' genitals signifies the relationship of the wife and son to the community of the husband.

According to Text Hypothesis B, it seems more natural to translate *hātān dāmîm* as 'bloody bridegroom,' but the setting of Exod 4:24-26 is not the marriage night. According to this view, Zipporah's action symbolizes a renewed marriage. The absence of the circumcision of the son is a visible expression that mother and son are not members of Israel, the community of Moses. Zipporah said 'bloody bridegroom' with reference to the circumcision of her son, the blood of which she applied to Moses. R. and E. Blum think Hypothesis B is more likely.<sup>24</sup>

A. Blaschke argues that Exod 4:24-26 has several connections to its present context in the book of Exodus, so it is impossible to interpret it as an ancient tradition isolated from its present context. Accordingly, Moses is the one attacked, Zipporah touches Moses' genitals, and Moses is the 'bloody bridegroom.' There is no basis for the view that Exod 4:24-26 refers to a 'right of the first night' by a demon; Zipporah already has a son according to this passage, so the idea of a 'first night' is impossible. There is no support for interpreting Exod 4:24-26 as an etiology, or for thinking the blood of Moses' son smeared on Moses' genitals indicated a vicarious circumcision of Moses. The Hebrew Bible says nothing of the atoning effect of the blood of circumcision. The explanation which fits the flow of the narrative in the book of Exodus best, as well as the narrative in Josh 5:2-9, is that circumcision is a sign of belonging to Israel and to her God and the fulfilling of a divine command. It was necessary for Zipporah to perform this circumcision in order for her and her son to become members of Israel. The intention of Exod 4:24-26 is to legitimate the marriage of Israel's delivered to a foreign wife, as is also the case with Exod 18:2ff and Num 12:1ff.

Blaschke contends that Exod 4:26b is not a later addition, but a part of Exod 4:24-26 from the very beginning. V 26b emphasizes the exceptional character of the expression 'bloody bridegroom': 'At that time she said 'bloody bridegroom' with regard to the circumcision [and not, as

24 R. and E. Blum, 'Zippora und ihr דָּהֵן דָּמִים' in *Die Hebräische Bibel und ihre zweifache Nachgeschichte. Festschrift für Rolf Rendtorff zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. E. Blum, C. Macholz and E. W. Stegemann; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1990) 41-54 (quote on p. 53).

usual, with regard to the first night].’ Here *mûlôt* is an abstract plural meaning ‘circumcision.’ Mere marriage to or merely being a son of an Israelite man is not sufficient for the family of the designated savior of Israel: the circumcision of the son and the symbolically repeated marriage of Moses to Zipporah are required for the social and religious integration of the family of Moses. Yahweh’s attack on Moses shows he was the one who commanded the circumcision of Zipporah’s son, thus this text understands circumcision as the fulfillment of Yahweh’s command.

Blaschke argues that the passivity of the son at his circumcision and the matter of course flow of the narrative in Exodus 4 indicate the son was a child. Exod 4:24-26 assumes that Yahweh’s command to circumcise baby boys is widely known. The fact that Yahweh stops his attack of Moses when Zipporah circumcises her son and smears the blood of the circumcision indicates the apotropaic effect of circumcision or the blood of circumcision. Also, the event described in Exod 4:24-26 was a necessary preparation of the deliverer and his family for the mission on which Yahweh sent him as narrated in Exod 3:1-4:20.<sup>25</sup>

O. Kaiser adopts essentially the same explanation as R. and E. Blum. He reasons that there is a strong connection between Gen 22:1-19; 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33]; and Exod 4:24-26, because in all three accounts, after God has proved true to his promises or has called a person to lead his people out of bondage, he threatens to destroy the very persons he has promised or chosen. The account in Gen 22:1-19 begins by telling the hearer or reader that God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac in order to test Abraham’s faith in him. In Gen 21:18-21, God tells Abraham to cast out Hagar; and in Gen 22:1-19, he tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac; in both cases, Abraham obeys because he trusts in God’s intention to honor his promise despite everything. Thus the narrator presents Abraham as prototype and model of a righteous believer whose loyal obedience to God’s instructions does not waver even when things look dark. In the final form of the narrative, Abraham’s obedience is the paradigm for Israel in her exilic situation. If Israel keeps God’s revealed commandments, she can trust that God will keep the promise originally given to the Patriarch.

In Gen 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33], a mysterious ‘man’ attacks Jacob by night at the Jabbok River. Jacob fights ‘the man’ valiantly, so

25 Blaschke, *Beschneidung*, 19-30, 51, 63, 85, 104, 121, 318.



that 'the man' must ask Jacob to release him at daybreak, indicating he is a night spirit. Jacob releases 'the man' only after 'the man' gives Jacob a blessing. Prior to this, 'the man' gives Jacob the name 'Israel,' because he has striven with God and with humans and has prevailed. Behind this narrative was an older local legend of the nocturnal attack on someone by a river demon at the Jabbok. The final redactor does not identify 'the man' with Yahweh. Only his explanation of the name Israel – 'You have striven with God and with humans' – enables the hearer or reader to conclude that this night spirit is a representative of God. Jacob's struggle at the Jabbok is the story of one's struggle with the primal fear of darkness and death. Whoever passes the test by confronting the fear overcomes the fear and goes away blessed. Deliverance is found only in prayer to God who afflicts us in our fears. Prayer mediates between the *deus absconditus* and the *deus revelatus*, between the God who delivers human beings over to their own fears and the God who still promises his presence as the foundation of basic trust.

Different from Gen 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33], in Exod 4:24-26 God behaves like a bloodthirsty vampire. By nature, God is a God of salvation and a God of disaster. There is no mediating angel or demon in Exod 4:24-26. This text presupposes God's instruction to Moses in 4:19 to return to Egypt to carry out God's mission assigned to him in 3:1-4:17. 4:24-26 looks back to 4:20, which reports that Moses left for Egypt with his wife and son [sic]. So God attacks Moses in 4:24. The context demands that Zipporah touched Moses' genitals with his son's foreskin. Since the son was uncircumcised, this is what provoked God's wrath. In the Australian Aranda ceremony, the one circumcising pressed the severed foreskin of the boy he circumcised against the stomach of his father and older brother to soften the pain, but originally this act symbolized taking the boy into the community of relatives and men. When one reads Exod 4:24-26 in light of this perspective, the point is that the blood rite brought a new relationship between Zipporah and Moses. The text says that Moses became a blood relative of Zipporah by the execution of this rite. The best translation of *ḥātān dāmīm* is 'bridegroom of blood' or 'marriage partner of blood.' Kaiser follows R. and E. Blum that God's wrath here is directed against the foreign wife and uncircumcised son. Zipporah immediately drew the necessary consequences and integrated herself and her son into the blood family of Israel by circumcision and touching. So Exod 4:24-26 asserts that Moses' wife and son were inte-

grated ritually into the blood community of Israel when Zipporah circumcised her son and touched Moses' genitals with the bloody foreskin. The late narrator who inserted Exod 4:24-26 into its present position in the narrative probably used Gen 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33] and Exod 12:23, which relates how the divine Destroyer passed over the doors smeared with the blood of the Paschal lamb. Gen 22:1-19; 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33]; and Exod 4:24-26 remind us that temptation and tribulation are part of faith, and that behind all suffering we must recognize the God who through this suffering instructs us in steadfastness and calls us to surrender ourselves in prayer to him as our God.<sup>26</sup>

It is certainly true that according to the Hebrew Bible, circumcision was a sign of the covenant between Yahweh and his people (Gen 17:1-14, 23-27; Lev 12:3). Exod 12:22-23 declares that the blood of the Passover lamb functions as a protection against the 'destroyer' who passes through the land of Egypt, and Exod 12:43-49 says that a male foreigner may submit himself to circumcision and then participate in the community of Israel and keep the Passover. In addition, Exod 18:1-12 indicates that when Moses reported to Jethro that Yahweh had led the Israelite out of Egyptian bondage, Jethro confessed that Yahweh is greater than all gods and brought a burnt offering and sacrifices to God, showing that Jethro became a convert to the religion of Israel. In light of all this, Zipporah's circumcision on her son might be Zipporah's attempt to submit herself to conversion to Israel's religion. The flow of the narrative in the Book of Exodus could fit into this understanding. However, there are more compelling interpretations in this context.

26 O. Kaiser, 'Deus absconditus and Deus revelatus. Three Difficult Narratives in the Pentateuch,' in *Shall Not the Judge of All the Earth Do What is Right? Studies on the Nature of God in Tribute to James L. Crenshaw* (ed. D. Penchansky and P. L. Redditt; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2000) 73-88.

## 38. Foreshadowing or Preparation for Exodus and Passover

H. P. Smith, J. de Groot, B. Reicke, L. F. Rivera, M. Greenberg, P. Weimar, B. P. Robinson, R. J. Clifford, T. E. Fretheim, W. H. Propp, G. Larsson, P. Enns, T. A. Lenchak, and P. F. Lockwood suggest that the incident related in Exod 4:24-26 is a foreshadowing and/or a preparation for Israel's deliverance from Egyptian bondage and/or Passover (Exod 12:21-23), and/or that Moses' firstborn, whose blood substitutes for Moses' blood, foreshadows the Paschal lamb, slain as a substitute for the firstborn of Israel.

H. P. Smith thinks Yahweh became angry with Moses because he had delayed the sacrifice of his son, and Zipporah saw that Yahweh would accept the blood of Moses' son and spare his life. Circumcision became a substitute for human child sacrifice. Just as the Israelites, threatened with death, were delivered by the blood of the consecrated Passover lamb streaked on the door, so Moses, threatened with death due to a severe illness, was delivered by the blood of his consecrated child rubbed on his feet. Then one must emend the text of vv. 25 and 26 either to *ḥātān dāmīm 'attāh lô*, 'a son of the covenant are you [Moses] to him [Yahweh],' or *ḥātān dāmīm hû' l'kâ*, 'a son of the covenant is he [Yahweh] to you [Moses],' indicating that circumcision brought one into covenant relationship with the deity. Circumcision is a modification of an original rite in which the firstborn son was consecrated and then sacrificed for the family or clan.<sup>27</sup>

J. de Groot argues that Exod 4:24-26 has nothing to do with the origin of circumcision or with the 'law of the first night.' Literally *ḥātān* is someone who has to do with circumcising or being circumcised. The later, derived meaning of this word, 'bridegroom' (or 'son-in-law'), does not fit Exod 4:24-26, because Moses had already been married a long time. *ḥātān dāmīm* means '[You (Moses) are for me (Zipporah)] a person circumcised with blood,' distinguishable from Zipporah's son, who had been circumcised with a stone. V. 26b is an ancient alternative version of v. 25b, and should be translated: '[You are for me] a person circumcised with blood of circumcision.' Exod 4:24-26 describes a symbolic circumcision of Moses, who had not been circumcised. Moses had

27 H. P. Smith, 'Ethnological Parallels to Exodus iv.24-26,' *JBL* 25 (1906) 14-24.

to be circumcised to keep the Passover, because an uncircumcised male could not celebrate the Passover (Exod 12:44, 48; Josh 5:2-12). Zipporah perceived Moses was in danger of his life because he had not been circumcised, so she circumcised one of her sons and performed a symbolic circumcision on Moses, because at that time the real operation was inconvenient to him and would have been dangerous. A ceremony of blood as a means of salvation was an important part of Exod 4:24-26 and of the Passover in Exod 12:7, 13, 22-23.<sup>28</sup>

B. Reicke says the Hebrew Bible indicates two main functions of circumcision. Originally for Israel it was a fertility rite, a *rite de passage*. Later, it was reinterpreted juridically-socially as a sign of election. One should not sharply distinguish between these two aspects. The original fertility aspect is revealed by the connection of circumcision with Passover. That Zipporah saves Moses from attack by circumcising her first-born son (Exod 4:24-26) is connected with the outlook of the whole context of the basic spirit of the Passover festival in which firstlings have a prominent place. Exod 12:44 and Josh 5:2-12 say one must be circumcised to keep the Passover. Josh 5:9 says the foreskin signifies an impurity connected with Egypt, which symbolizes the netherworld. So Israel's wandering from Egypt to Palestine, in light of the connection with the Passover festival, was regarded as a transition from the land of death to the land of life, which, with the whole annual festival, could illustrate the annual arising of vegetation from darkness to light. With this passage, all impurities were removed. The foreskin was a hindrance to the unrestricted development of vitality in that the male reproductive organ could symbolize everything which reproduces and grows. The same idea appears obliquely in Gen 17:10-14, 23-27, but in this text circumcision is a sign of the covenant (as Passover is a perpetual act of renewing the covenant) and a condition for entrance into the land of Canaan and fruitfulness. Later, circumcision ceased to be connected with fertility and was performed on a child at eight days of age. Then circumcision was a sign of belonging to God's people.<sup>29</sup>

L. F. Rivera assigns Exod 4:24-26 to J, which is primitive and which includes 4:1-9 and 4:18-26. Exod 4:24-26 contains a Midianite

28 J. de Groot, 'The Story of the Bloody Husband (Exodus IV 24-26),' *OTS* 2 (1943) 14-16.

29 B. Reicke, 'Omskäreelse,' *SBU* 2 (1963) cols. 391-93.

contribution to Israelite religion. A Midianite circumcises the son of the deliverer of Israel. The Midianites worshipped Yahweh. Yahweh seeks to kill Moses, not his son, because Moses has not been circumcised. Yahweh is testing Moses here. In the original isolated story, *ḥātān dāmīm* was applied to Moses' son, not to Moses. Circumcision was a rite designed to protect the child against the demiurge. The account was etiological. In its present final position in the book of Exodus, this story serves as a forerunner to the account of the salvation of the Israelite firstborn during the last plague in Exod 12:13-14, 43-51. The firstborn son of Moses threatened by death and saved by blood is a sign of salvation of firstborn Israelites from the destroying angel by blood on the lintel and doorposts.<sup>30</sup>

M. Greenberg states that the attack in Exod 4:24 is a deathly illness (following Ibn Ezra). 4:24-26 celebrates the apotropaic value of circumcision. The Palestinian Targumim ascribe atoning and saving power to the blood of circumcision; Ibn Ezra compares it with the Paschal blood that wards off the destroyer; Rashbam gives it the value of sacrifice. Yahweh's nocturnal attack in 4:24 calls to mind Jacob's nocturnal encounter with the man at the Jabbok in Gen. 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33] (following Rashbam). Moses angered God by his reluctance to accept his charge; taking along his family showed his half-heartedness. Jacob's nocturnal struggle with the man was a premonition of Jacob's meeting with Esau; and Moses' nocturnal struggle with Yahweh was a premonition of the Passover night when the destroyer passed over the houses where the blood of the Paschal lamb was on the lintel (so Ibn Ezra and R. Hizqia b. Manoah). *ḥātān* in 4:25 refers to the infant (following R. Simon b. Gamaliel), reading 4:25: 'You (infant) are a sanguinary "bridegroom" for me (since at your circumcision death loomed near) [...] Then it was that she called the circumcised "sanguinary bridegroom".' This view understands 4:24-26 as an etiology for the phrase 'sanguinary bridegroom,' presumably prevalent in biblical times as an epithet of circumcised infants as an expression of endearment; the etiology says that currently understood as a reference to the blood of circumcision, the epithet was first coined when once the threat of death in Moses' family was removed by circumcising the infant. The warding off of the threat of

30 L. F. Rivera SVD, 'El "Esposo Sangriento" (Ex 4, 24-26),' *RevistB* 25 (1963) 129-36, esp. 133-36.

death at Yahweh's hands in 4:24-26 is a foreshadowing or premonition of the warding off of the threat of death in the last plague and the saving of Israel's firstborn by the Paschal blood rite. 4:24-26 and 12:1-51 form an *inclusio* in which 4:24-26 suggests, on the eve of Moses' return to Egypt, what will happen at his final departure in 12:1-51. If J. Pedersen is correct that the message of 4:24-26 is that circumcision is a prerequisite for participation in the Passover (Exod 12:43-49; Josh 5:2-12), an additional or alternative issue in 4:24-26 is the qualification of Moses' family to join Israel. That the foreign mother Zipporah and the foreign-born child Gershom are the protagonists supports this interpretation: by circumcising the child, Zipporah caused Moses' entire family to enter into the redemptive event as full-fledged members of Israel. The roughness of 4:18-26 suggests composition at a late stage by the final redactor. 4:24-26 is a relic of a longer tale now lost. The earlier tale dealt with a threat of life during a journey at a night lodging. The redactor of the book of Exodus identified the journey with Moses' return to Egypt. The redactor did not try to iron out the inconsistencies in his sources, but fused the materials handed down to him, retaining as much as possible of the original form.<sup>31</sup>

P. Weimar argues that Exod 4:26a is the logical conclusion of the pericope beginning with 4:24, so 4:26b is a redactional addition, as the introductory word '*az*, 'then,' indicates. J did not take 4:24-26a from an early tradition, but created this pericope himself and placed it in its present position in connection with Yahweh's summons to Moses to return to Egypt in 4:19 and Yahweh's instruction to Moses to give Pharaoh a message in 4:22-23. The theme of protection 'on the way' is important for J, as his redactional insertions in Gen 28:20 and 42:38 show. An important parallel to Exod 4:24-26a is Num 21:4b-9, which tells of an event 'on the way' (Num 21:4b). Exod 4:24-26a and Num 21:4b-9 are clearly related. In both accounts, moral danger comes from Yahweh, which is averted by a rite or a cult object. There are differences between Exod 4:24-26a and Num 21:4b-9, but the theme of these two passages is related. There is no indication that Yahweh attacked Moses because of some sin he had committed. Exod 4:25 and Josh 5:2-3 are connected in that these two passages are the only pre-P references to circumcision in

31 M. Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus. The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (The Melton Research Center Series 2/1; New York: Behrman House, Inc., 1969) 110-22.

the Hexateuch. In Josh 5:2-3, the rite of circumcision is performed at the end of the wilderness wanderings as a protective celebration with anticipation of beginning the conquest of Canaan. The rite of circumcision in Exod 4:25 indicates the greater literary connection of J in order to connect the beginning and end of the exodus as well as the beginning of the conquest of the land. The emphasis in Exod 4:24-26a is on the cry of Zipporah, not on the rite of circumcision, which is introduced as long known. 4:26a indicates Yahweh left Moses alone because of the cry of Zipporah, not because of the circumcision. The emphasis in *ḥātān dāmīm* lies on the *dāmīm*, which shows that the protection from Yahweh's surprise attack lies in the blood, to which the passage assigns a warding off power. In this emphasis on the protective power of the blood, Exod 4:24-26a is closely related to the command to slaughter the Passover lamb in Exod 12:21-23, which, like Exod 4:24-26a, is from J. In Exod 12:21-23 also, the emphasis lies on the blood rite, which is supposed to afford protection from the 'Destroyer' (Yahweh). The connection of Exod 4:24-26a and 12:21-23 makes the order of 4:19 + 22-23 and 4:24-26a understandable. Both refer to the death of the firstborn, as in Exodus 11-12. 4:24-26a point to a protective blood rite which is supposed to preserve the Israelites from the fate of the Egyptians. The event described in Exodus 11-12 seems to be exemplified by this correspondence in the fate of Moses.<sup>32</sup>

B. P. Robinson thinks Exod 4:24-26 is an ancient tradition the original meaning of which we cannot recover. However, the concern of the biblical interpreter should be with the meaning of this story in its present position in the narrative of the book of Exodus. One should interpret 4:24-26 in light of 4:20, 23: Yahweh is angry with Moses for trying to evade confronting Pharaoh, and although the men who intended to kill Moses are dead (4:19), Yahweh has begun to regret his choice of Moses; after telling Moses his intention to kill Pharaoh's son because Pharaoh resisted his wishes (4:22-23), Yahweh decides to kill Moses too (4:24), for Moses and Pharaoh differ little in attitude. There is a strong connection between Exod 4:24-26 and the Passover in Exodus 12. Yahweh's attack on Moses (Exod 4:24-26) was a symbolic warning of what

32 P. Weimar, *Die Berufung des Mose. Literaturwissenschaftliche Analyse von Exodus 2,23-5,5* (ed. O. Keel; OBO 32; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980) 78-79, 284-90.

would happen if the Hebrews did not go into the wilderness to celebrate a pilgrimage feast for Yahweh. Since the original plan for the wilderness feast was thwarted, Yahweh told the Hebrews to kill and eat the Passover lamb and to smear the blood on their tent posts. In 4:23, Yahweh predicts he will kill Pharaoh's firstborn because Pharaoh will forbid the Israelites to worship Yahweh; in 4:24, the leader of the Israelites is spared because of the spilling and smearing of blood. The action that saves Moses is circumcision. This foreshadows the tenth plague, the escape of the Hebrews because of the smeared blood of the Paschal lamb, and the requirement that circumcision precede eating the Passover (Exod 12:44, 48). In 4:24-26, Moses stands for Israel. Moses deserves to die, as Pharaoh's son deserves to die; Israel deserves to die, as the Egyptians deserve to die. But the Israelites will be spared by the spilling and smearing of the blood of the Passover lamb, which is symbolized when Moses is spared by the spilling and smearing of the blood of Gershom. 4:24-26 and the Passover both happen in the evening. *ḥātān* means 'son-in-law' in Exod 4:25-26. By circumcising her son, Zipporah takes the place of her father Jethro, and thus becomes Moses' surrogate father-in-law. *ḥātān dāmīm* means son-in-law by virtue of pouring out blood. Gershom had not been circumcised, so he was not eligible to eat the Passover. Zipporah rectifies this situation by circumcising Gershom, and by touching Moses with Gershom's foreskin, she symbolically re-circumcises Moses, acting as a father-in-law and circumciser to her husband. The hearer must listen to the story in Exod 4:24-26 along with the story of the confrontation between Jacob and 'the man' at the Jabbok in Gen 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33]. Like Jacob, Moses must undergo a night struggle with God before he can become a worthy instrument of God. Like Jacob, Moses here is a paradigm. Exod 4:24-26 implies that if Israel is to survive the wrath of Yahweh, it must be by virtue of spilling atoning blood. When Zipporah symbolically re-circumcises Moses, Moses as representative of the people as a whole is symbolically prepared for the imminent Passover celebration.<sup>33</sup>

R. J. Clifford affirms that Exod 4:24-26 vividly illustrates the popular belief that the firstborn son is owed to Yahweh, not to Pharaoh. The intent of this passage in its present context is to point forward to the final

33 B. P. Robinson, 'Zipporah to the Rescue: A Contextual Study of Exodus IV 24-26,' *VT* 36 (1986) 447-61.



plague (Exod 12:29-32), and to the redemption of the Israelite firstborn (Exod 13:1-2, 11-16). Facing sudden danger, Zipporah quickly daubs her sleeping husband's penis with the blood from the circumcision of her firstborn son and thus averts the danger.<sup>34</sup>

T. E. Fretheim reasons that the application of Moses' son's blood to Moses foreshadows the application of the Passover blood to the doorposts to save the Israelites in the tenth plague (Exod 12:13, 22-23). Touching the blood to Moses' or to Moses' son's feet protects Moses from the ominous activity of Yahweh. This may anticipate the atoning value of blood in the sin offering (Lev 17:11). So the mediation of Zipporah for Moses or Moses' son is parallel to the mediation of Moses for the Israelites. Moses (as the embodiment of Israel as Yahweh's firstborn) or Moses' firstborn son belongs to God and is consecrated to God by circumcision, which foreshadows the consecration of Israel's firstborn sons after the Passover in Exod 13:1-2, 11-16. Without circumcision, Israel's sons are cut off from God's people (Gen 17:14; Josh 5:2-9). Just as Moses was saved by the blood of his firstborn, so Israel will be saved by the blood of the Egyptian firstborn.<sup>35</sup>

W. H. C. Propp argues that Exod 4:24-26 originally was a part of J, and that in J Yahweh's victim was Moses. Zipporah acts because Moses is incapacitated as a result of Yahweh's attack. Exod 4:24-26 is well integrated into the J narrative, because it points back to Moses' murder of the Egyptian in 2:11-12, and forward to the exodus and Passover in Exodus 12. Exod 4:24-26 functions as a prelude to the Paschal night. Moses' firstborn, Gershom, whose blood substitutes for Moses' blood, foreshadows the Paschal lamb, which was slaughtered as a substitute for the firstborn of Israel. Exod 12:44, 48; and Josh 5:2-11 say that only the circumcised may partake of the Passover. Circumcision became associated with the Paschal rite because in Israel circumcision acquired special significance as a rite of socio-religious initiation and a perpetual reminder of the covenant. Circumcision is a rite of passage into social and religious adulthood, signifying membership in a hereditary group or caste. In Exod 4:24-26, Moses is symbolically circumcised and his son is

34 R. J. Clifford, S.J., 'Exodus,' *NJBC* (ed. R. E. Brown, S.S., J. A. Fitzmyer, S.J., and R. E. Murphy, O.Carm.; Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990) 47.

35 T. E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (ed. J. L. Mays; IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 1991) 79-80.

actually circumcised as they go to join the people of Israel and participate in the first Passover. Propp proposes that circumcision passed through four stages historically: (1) originally circumcision was performed on adolescents, associated with marriage, and probably indicated social and religious maturity; (2) when adulthood came to involve participation in the Yahweh cult, circumcision became a prerequisite for celebration of the Paschal rite as well as for marriage, as is reflected in the symbolic circumcision of Moses and the placement of Exod 4:24-26 before the narrative about the exodus; (3) circumcision was transferred to childhood or infancy, and the bloodied child became a symbol of the Paschal night when the threatened firstborn of Israel were saved by the blood of a lamb; (4) J (or J's source) used Exod 4:24-26 as part of a biography of Moses; J interpreted *ḥātān dāmīm* as 'a bridegroom who has shed blood,' referring to Moses' murder of the Egyptian without divine authorization in 2:11-12, making Moses guilty of bloodshed. Yahweh attacked Moses to kill him as retribution for killing the Egyptian. If Moses returned to Egypt bearing the guilt for his crime, he would have to be executed so the community of Israel would not be polluted on the eve of the exodus. Zipporah solved Yahweh's dilemma. By shedding Gershom's blood and touching Moses with that blood, she symbolically circumcised Moses and performed a rite of expiation or purification, clearing Moses and enabling him to return to Egypt. Circumcision is not a public rite for others, but a private sign between God and the one circumcised. Circumcision reminds the one circumcised of his obligation to God. Worldwide, circumcision is performed on boys as a rite of passage into social adulthood. Five passages indicate that in Israel circumcision once functioned as a rite of passage into maturity, and the Israelites did not practice infant circumcision: Gen 17:24-25 + 25:12-18; 34; Exod 4:24-26 (a story which seems to be some kind of explanation of why circumcision is associated with marriage); 1 Sam 18:17-27; and Josh 5:2-9. The Israelites moved from circumcision as a rite of passage into adulthood to infant circumcision because infants were likely to die. It was connected with Israel's detribalization beginning in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. In cultures that practice circumcision of boys and young men, the rite is typically performed en masse, as all the boys of a settlement periodically assemble to be circumcised by the elders. In Israel, one popular site for mass circumcisions was presumably Foreskins Hill near Gilgal. A popular occasion for doing this was probably Passover, which had a

peculiar association with the circumcision ritual and the city of Gilgal. One could imagine that the original Israelite male rite of passage was circumcision followed by admission to the Passover Feast. But not all boys could make it to Gilgal. If performed on entire cohorts, circumcision would have been a clan ritual, originally carried out through the land at various 'high places,' or local shrines, which the Bible frequently condemns. But with detribalization, sacrifice became a centralized affair licit only in Jerusalem, or at any rate most efficacious there. And circumcision, required on each boy's eighth day of life, became a family celebration.<sup>36</sup>

G. Larsson assesses the significance of Exod 4:24-26 in the larger context of the story of Moses as Yahweh's representative to lead the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage. During Moses' years in Midian, many changes occurred. Moses married the Midianite woman Zipporah, and they gave birth to two sons. As a result of Yahweh's instructions to Moses at the burning bush, Moses and his family return to Egypt so Moses would carry out Yahweh's mission. According to Exod 4:18-23, Yahweh directs Moses to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites, God's firstborn son, go out of Egypt or else God will kill Pharaoh's son. As Moses and his family travel toward Egypt, Yahweh threatens to kill Moses at a lodging place, but Zipporah quickly circumcises their son (Exod 4:24-26). According to Exodus 12, the blood of the circumcision protects. Zipporah puts a sign on her son with the blood shed at the circumcision, which is later analogous to the Israelites smearing the doorposts with the blood from the lambs as a protecting sign. Zipporah touches her son's feet with the foreskin (Exod 4:25). This probably means she makes a sign on her son so the blood is clearly visible. Through this act, the protecting sign of blood is anticipated saving the firstborn of Israel during the last plague. Through the circumcision, the firstborn son – probably Gershom – is grafted into Israel, thus becoming with the people, God's firstborn son (Exod 4:22). The circumcision signifies the act of adoption by Yahweh. This is parallel to Josh 5:2-12, where the Israelites, born in

36 W. H. C. Propp, 'The Origins of Infant Circumcision in Israel,' *HAR* 11 (1987) 355-70; 'The Bloody Bridegroom (Exodus IV 24-6),' *VT* 43 (1993) 495-518; *Exodus 1-18* (AB 2; New York: Doubleday, 1998) 183, 189, 190-97, 218-20, 233-43; 'Circumcision: The Private Sign of the Covenant,' *BRev* 20/4 (Aug 2004) 22-29, 44.

the wilderness, are circumcised before the celebration of the first Passover in the promised land. Immediately, Joshua encounters a man with a drawn sword (Josh 5:13-15). This encounter ends well, probably because Joshua has fulfilled the obligation of circumcising the people. Similarly, the threat in Exod 4:24-26 is averted only after Zipporah circumcises her son. The expression 'bridegroom of blood' in v. 25 may have been a strange expression no longer used when the text was finally edited, since v. 26 required an explanation. Literally, v. 26 should be translated: 'Then she said 'bridegroom of blood' about the uncircumcised.' Perhaps the Indianite [non-Israelite] woman Zipporah by using the expression 'bridegroom of blood' implies she, by circumcising her son, has entered the covenant herself and become an Israelite. Zipporah, courageously, through her resolute action, not only saves the life of the firstborn son but of her people also, since this event anticipates the rescue of the entire nation during the night of the tenth plague in Exod 12:43-49. In this way, the event demonstrates how the saving of the one entails the saving of the many. The main message of Exod 4:24-26 is to stress the necessity of circumcision and the saving significance of blood. The circumcision signifies kinship with the covenant people who are to be saved when the firstborn of Egypt are slain. Circumcision is required for partaking of the paschal lamb (Exod 12:48). After Zipporah's circumcision of her son, Moses' entire family becomes an integral part of the people of Israel, and through this event this approaching liberation is foreshadowed. Just as Yahweh promised, Moses and Aaron meet in joy and together return to their people in obedience to God's command.<sup>37</sup>

P. Enns observes that Exod 4:24-26 presages the importance of circumcision in Exod 12:43-49. The context of Exod 4:24-26 indicates that Yahweh became angry with Moses probably because Moses had not circumcised his son [perhaps Moses himself had not been circumcised]. Zipporah's circumcision of her son appeases God's wrath and causes God to relent. It is logical to understand that circumcision and the Passover was very important in anticipation of the eve of the exodus from Egypt in Exod 12:43-49. God commanded Abraham and his descendants to subject all the males of this people to circumcision. God is known in his connection with the patriarchs, and for the sake of the patriarchs God

37 G. Larsson, *Bound for Freedom. The Book of Exodus in Jewish and Christian Traditions* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999) 40-43, 274-75.

will deliver Israel (Exod 2:24). This connection to the patriarchs imposes a covenant obligation on Moses and the Israelites. The events described in Exod 4:18-23 presage Egypt's consequences for not obeying the command to circumcise. This is such a serious concern that the Lord is willing to kill Moses, whom God had just taken so much time to convince Moses of his role in God's plan. Exod 4:24-26 demonstrates the zeal with which the Lord guards the importance of circumcision. God is willing to deal patiently with many things Moses may say or do, but God will not tolerate uncircumcision. Failure to circumcise leads to swift punishment. God's attack on Moses at the lodging place symbolizes Israel and Moses' subsequent rebellions and God's just anger, followed by propitiation.<sup>38</sup>

T. A. Lenchak points out that Yahweh had commissioned Moses to deliver Israel (Exod 4:21-23; see 3:1-4:17) and had assured Moses it was safe to return to Egypt (4:19). Suddenly, without warning or explanation, Yahweh attacks Moses (probably through some serious illness) and tries to kill him. Zipporah, Moses' wife, faces the divine threat by circumcising her son, touching the 'feet' (genitals) of Moses with the bloody foreskin, and declaring: 'You are a spouse of blood to me' (4:25). Touching Moses' genitals with the bloody foreskin probably symbolizes his own vicarious circumcision. Zipporah's actions and words are so obscure that the biblical narrator thought it necessary to add an explanatory note in 4:26b: 'At that time she said, "A spouse of blood" in regard to circumcision.' Zipporah saved Moses by performing some sort of primitive rite, the meaning of which is no longer understood. Yet it resolved some unknown problem which Yahweh had with Moses, which probably was that neither Moses nor his son had been circumcised (cf. Gen 17:9-14). The purpose of this story may be to affirm that Yahweh is not limited to our ability to understand and explain divine actions. God's freedom may at times threaten us. Moses' mission was dangerous. Before undertaking it, Yahweh exposed him to a life-threatening situation similar to the one Israel would experience at the exodus. As Moses was saved by the circumcision blood of his (older? younger?) son at the night's lodging place, so the firstborn of Israel are saved by the blood of the Paschal lamb on the night of Passover (Exod 12:21-23). Thus this deliverance of

38 P. Enns, *Exodus* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 133-34.

Moses from the threat of death seems to anticipate Israel's experience of salvation from Egyptian bondage.<sup>39</sup>

P. F. Lockwood suggests that Exod 4:21-23 and 4:24-26, framed by 4:18-20 and 4:27-31, span the whole movement of the book of Exodus. He insists that the critic must interpret Exod 4:24-26 in its present context. Yahweh attacks Moses because of his reluctance to accept Yahweh's assignment to lead Israel out of Egyptian bondage. In this night struggle, Yahweh humbles Moses' presumptuous spirit, thus preparing him to lead Israel out of bondage. The daubing of the blood from Gershom's severed foreskin foreshadows the events of the Passover night when the blood of the slain lamb is daubed on the doorposts to save the firstborn son within the house. Circumcision and Passover are closely related. Circumcision is the rite of entry into the covenant, and Passover is the chief festival of the covenant members. Circumcision is prerequisite for participation in the Passover. Zipporah saves Moses from Yahweh, just as Moses later will save Israel from Yahweh (Exodus 32). In Exod 4:21-23, Yahweh designates Israel as his firstborn son; in Exod 4:24-26, Zipporah designates Moses as her bridegroom (better, husband) of blood. Moses is Jethro's son-in-law and Zipporah's husband. But Zipporah represents Jethro, and thus is responsible for performing the rite of circumcision. She also represents God. The ritual of circumcision she performs makes Moses and Gershom God's relative by marriage, God's spouse, representing Israel. Exod 4:21-23 and 4:24-26 answer Moses' question at the burning bush: 'Who am I?' (Exod 3:11). The answer is: He (Moses=Israel) is Yahweh's firstborn son and spouse.<sup>40</sup>

Several scholars have demonstrated that there are similarities between Exod 4:24-26 and the account of the exodus and Passover in Exodus 12. The shedding of the blood in these two texts may indicate that the purpose of Zipporah's shedding the blood of her son by circumcision and the purpose of shedding the blood of the Passover lamb described in the festival in Exodus 12 is apotropaic, i.e., protects the potential innocent child from danger or death. And yet, the narrative in Exod 4:24-26 contains no indication explicitly or implicitly that the purpose of this passage is to prepare or foreshadow the account of the institution of the

39 T. A. Lenchak, 'Puzzling Passages,' *TBT* 38 (2000) 316-17.

40 P. F. Lockwood, 'Zipporah in the Account of the Exodus: Literary and Theological Perspectives on Exodus 4:24-26,' *LTJ* 35 (2001) 120-25.

Passover in Exodus 12. This specific connection is absent in the biblical narrative, and thus raises the suspicion that it may be the creation of the imagination of the interpreter.

### 39. Polemic Against Post-Exilic Exclusivism

T. Römer and K. S. Winslow take the interpretation of Exod 4:24-26 a step beyond that of O. Kaiser (see 32. above). T. Römer denies that Exod. 4:24-26 is an archaic remnant which was later integrated into the epic of the exodus for unknown reasons, and that the god in the archaic story is a demon of pagan superstition and not the Yahweh of the Hebrew Bible. Why would a later redactor identify such a demon with Yahweh, and why would a later redactor consider such an archaic non-Yahwistic episode deserving of being a part of the great story of Israel's liberation by Yahweh? The scholar's concern should be the function of Exod 4:24-26 in its present position in the book of Exodus. Exod 4:24-26 cannot function independent of its present context, because this passage names only two of the four actors in this story: Zipporah and Yahweh. The third person singular suffixes in this passage may refer to Moses and/or his son. 4:24-26 interrupts the coherence of Exodus 1-4. In Exod 3:1-4:17, Yahweh calls Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt, and after Moses voices several objections, all of which Yahweh rejects, Moses accepts Yahweh's commission. 4:18-23 describes Moses and his family setting out from Midian to return to Egypt for Moses to carry out Yahweh's commission. But 4:24-26 says that during this journey, Yahweh attacks Moses with the intention of killing him. This does not make sense in the flow of the narrative.

Exod 4:19-28 underwent three stages of development: (1) the original narrative was 4:19-20, 27-28; (2) a redactor inserted 4:24-26a; (3) another redactor added the first midrash on the text (4:21-23) in an attempt to interpret 4:24-26, and added 4:26b. The reason the first redactor inserted 4:24-26 into this coherent narrative is that he was following the model of the insertion of the story of Jacob's struggle into its coherent narrative in Gen. 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33], as six parallels between these two pericopes suggest. The author of Exod. 4:24-26 radicalized

Gen. 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33] and made it more 'demonic.' From the beginning, Yahweh is the assailant, and his intention is to kill Moses. After Yahweh threatens to kill the firstborn of Pharaoh in 4:23, 4:24-26 can be read as a prolepsis of the Passover night. The blood of the foreskin of the circumcised child protects Moses from Yahweh's destruction, and the blood of the lamb on the doorposts and lintel protects the firstborn of the Israelites in those houses where the blood is applied (Exod 12:1-13). Both texts emphasize that a rite of blood (expiatory) is necessary for Moses or Israel to escape the wrath of Yahweh.

Scholarly explanations of the origin of Exod 4:24-26 fall into three large categories. (1) The purpose of Exod 4:24-26 is to explain how circumcision, which originally was a prenuptial rite performed on young men, came to be performed on small male babies. Moses had not been circumcised, so Zipporah circumcises her infant son and applies the blood to Moses' genitals as symbolic circumcision to save Moses' life. (2) Originally, Exod 4:24-26 was a story in which a demon demanded of the bridegroom the right of the first night, the woman circumcised her husband, touched the genitals of the demon and drove him away. Hence, this story is an etiology of the rite of circumcision. (3) Exod 4:24-26 was originally an ancient Midianite legend in which a deity claimed the child of parents preparing to leave his territory. The circumcision of the child through the blood saved him from the clutches of the demon. Hence, this is an etiology insisting on the apotropaic character of circumcision. Römer argues that two considerations oppose all three of these theories. First, they are all speculative, because they presuppose an earlier form of the story which it is impossible to reconstruct from Exod 4:24-26. Second, they all begin with the idea that Exod 4:24-26 is an etiology of circumcision.

Römer contends that the rite of circumcision plays a central role in Exod 4:24-26. Moses must be the object of Yahweh's attack in this story, because 4:25 explicitly mentions the child; but if Moses is the one in danger, the protective blood must be applied to his body. Exod 4:24-26 does not make clear why Yahweh became angry with Moses and wanted to kill him.

Römer argues that Exodus 1-4 contain a polemic against a segment of Jewish exiles composing the exclusivistic Jerusalemite 'orthodoxy' who had returned from Babylon, represented in particular by Ezra and Nehemiah, who insisted that Jews married to foreign women must di-



voiced their wives. This rigid exclusivism evoked 'subversive' literature against this Jerusalemite 'orthodoxy,' including the book of Ruth, the story of Joseph's marriage to an Egyptian woman (Gen 41:45), and the denunciation of Miriam for criticizing Moses for marrying a Cushite woman (Numbers 12). In opposition to this rigid Jerusalemite 'orthodoxy,' Exodus 1-4 relate three events in which foreign women saved the life of Moses, the man Yahweh had chosen to lead his people Israel out of Egyptian bondage: (1) the Egyptian midwives (Exod 1:15-22); (2) the daughter of Pharaoh (Exod 2:1-10); and (3) Moses' Midianite wife, Zipporah (Exod 4:24-26). Exod 4:24-26 relates how Zipporah, a foreign woman, was integrated into the people of Moses, not only by marriage but also by *blood*. Zipporah herself made this integration possible by opposing Yahweh. By the symbolic act she performed by carrying the blood to Moses' genitals, she repeated the marriage night, which was a night of unity and intimacy par excellence. That the child was not circumcised signifies that mother and son played no part in Israel; by the mother's action, this integration took place. The declaration of Zipporah in Exod 4:25b, 'You are for me a bridegroom of blood,' confirms this new relationship. Following the principle of Gen 2:24, effectual suitably to the created order, Zipporah remains attached to Moses in spite of her foreign origin. It is the foreign woman Zipporah who saves Moses from Yahweh's attack by circumcising her son. When Zipporah performed the rite of circumcision, Yahweh left Moses alone. So this rite functioned as a symbolic circumcision showing the validity of Moses' earlier 'Egyptian' circumcision. Zipporah transgressed a double taboo by performing this act: she performed an act ordinarily reserved for initiates, and she dared confront the God of Israel. By her mediation, Zipporah expanded the covenant which God made with Abraham in Gen 17:1-14 to all who wish to belong to the people of Yahweh. So Zipporah's demeanor is like that of Job (himself also a foreigner) who appeals to God against God.

Exod 4:24-26, then, is not a relic of an archaic age which later the Yahwist integrated into his work in the 10<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.E., or which the Deuteronomistic redactor of the book of Exodus incorporated into his work, since Exod 4:24-26 advocates anti-Deuteronomistic thinking, including making a foreigner conspicuous and presenting Yahweh as seeking to destroy his servant Moses. So Exod 4:24-26 must have originated in the postexilic period, or more specifically in the Persian Period. Since it is a polemic against the rigid exclusivistic Jerusalemite

‘orthodox’ element among the exiles who had returned from Babylon, represented by Ezra and Nehemiah, apparently it comes from the last half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. The idea that Yahweh wishes to kill the one whom he commissioned to lead his people out of Egypt is incomprehensible. Yahweh in this passage is the *deus absconditus*, ‘the hidden God.’ We find this same picture of God in the book of Job, and in the account of David’s census in 2 Samuel 24, in which Yahweh’s anger was kindled against David for no reason. Exod 4:24-26 does not explain Yahweh’s behavior in the event it records. This text has more to do with human cruelty than God’s cruelty. God’s cruelty may be the result of transferring human cruelty to God.<sup>41</sup>

K. S. Winslow, apparently unaware of T. Römer’s works, takes a similar position. She discusses Exod 4:24-26 in the larger context of Exodus 1-2 and 4. Joseph and Moses married outsider women. Genesis and Exodus generally consider such marriages with great favor. Exodus and Numbers depict Midianites as comrades to Israel, but Numbers and Judges depict Midianites as Israel’s enemies. The inclusion of positive and negative renderings of exogamy in the OT reflects conflicting views about exogamy, community identity, and boundary definition among Jews of the Persian period.<sup>42</sup>

The inclusion, structure, and use of the traditions about Moses’ Midianite relations in the book of Exodus show that all these depictions of Moses’ interaction with the Midianites are positive for Moses and Israel. There are four traditions: (a) Exod 2:15-21: (1) Jethro, priest of Midian, gives Moses refuge in Midian; (2) Moses marries Jethro’s daughter Zipporah; (3) Moses and Zipporah have a son; (b) Exod 4:18: (4) Jethro permits Moses to return to Egypt in peace; (c) Exod 4:24-26: (5) Zipporah accompanies Moses on the trip from Midian to Egypt, and she circumcises her son and saves ‘his’ life; (d) Exod 18:1-17: (6) after the exodus, Moses meets Jethro in the wilderness and tells Jethro how Yahweh delivered Israel from Egyptian bondage, and Jethro worships Yahweh. The author of the book of Exodus structured his story about Moses’ Midianite connections so as to convince his audience that these

41 T. Römer, ‘De l’archaïque au subversif: Le cas d’Exode 4/24-26,’ *ETR* 69 (1994) 1-12; *Dieu obscur. Le sexe, la cruauté et la violence dans l’Ancien Testament* (EB 27; Geneva: Editions Labor et Fides, 1996) 70-76.

42 Winslow, ‘Framing Zipporah,’ 11-13.

outsider relations preserved Moses, were essential to his mission, and were vital to Israel's early salvation history. Exod 4:24-26 insists that Zipporah, not her father Jethro, is Moses' 'relative of blood.' Zipporah is to be remembered as crucial to the survival of Moses and Israel. Exod 18:2 says Jethro brought Zipporah and her sons back to Moses in the wilderness after the exodus. The redactional comment that Jethro had accepted Zipporah after her sending away (Exod 18:2) enabled the redactor to include the traditions about Zipporah's journey with Moses away from her father *and* those about Jethro's response to the mighty acts of God. Jethro could not have brought Zipporah back to Moses and thus heard of and responded to Yahweh's works if she had remained with Moses. If the tradition in Exod 4:20-26 had not been essential to the redactor's story, he could have left Zipporah in Midian when Moses returned to Egypt.<sup>43</sup>

Hebrew, Egyptian, and Midianite women were essential for Moses' survival from before his birth through his return to Egypt as Yahweh's envoy (Exod 1:15-4:26). Moses' mother, Jochebed, hid the infant Moses three months, disobeying Pharaoh's command to drown all male children. Moses' sister Miriam saved Moses' life by making sure Pharaoh's daughter drew him out of the water and returned him to his birth mother. Pharaoh's daughter saved Moses' life by taking him into her home. When the adult Moses fled to Midian, Jethro gave him asylum, and Moses married Jethro's daughter Zipporah (Exod 2:16-21). Zipporah saved Moses or his son from death (Exod 4:24-26). The redactor emphasizes Midianite contributions to Israel's story. Circumcision was considered a prophylactic against danger. By Zipporah's statement: 'You are *my* blood relation,' she [a woman] affirmed the 'blood-relation' status of her husband to her through circumcision, a rite that excludes women. Normally circumcision represents a cultural dichotomy between men and women, just as sacrifice reinforces this dichotomy, but in Zipporah's case, the blood of her son's circumcision united her husband to her in a way reserved for male bonding. Zipporah's story in Exod 4:24-26 was especially pertinent and applicable to periods in Israel's history in which there is evidence that having 'foreign' wives was controversial. The redactor of the book of Exodus was especially concerned to include the Zipporah-Midianite traditions to emphasize the positive contribution to

43 Winslow, 'Framing Zipporah,' 17-20, 140-41.

Israel by Moses' Midianite relatives. He shows that a foreign woman, for whom marriage did not confer 'blood relation' status, became bound to Moses through circumcision. This idea was especially relevant for the postexilic Jewish community in Persia. To claim that Israel's liberator married foreigners is a powerful argument for keeping the wives and children whom other Jews insisted be cast out. The original text was Exod 2:23; 4:19, 18, 20, 24. Without 4:21-23, Moses would be the obvious antecedent of the first and second 'him' in 4:24. By inserting 4:21-23 followed by 4:24-26 in their present place in the narrative, the redactor is foreshadowing the Passover and intentionally implicating the woman Zipporah in this important symbolic moment. Because of the introduction of the theme of the death of the firstborn in 4:21-23, one can see Moses and Zipporah's firstborn son as the object of Yahweh's attack in 4:24. If the victim was Zipporah's son, 4:21-26 was woven into the larger section to draw an analogy between Pharaoh's, Yahweh's, and Moses' firstborn. Moses' firstborn was saved by his own bloody circumcision. Zipporah smeared his legs after circumcising him. Israel, Yahweh's firstborn, was saved by lamb's blood smeared on doorways during the Passover night (Exod 12:22). Both blood-redeemed firstborn are contrasted with Pharaoh's firstborn, who was killed on the Passover night. The insertion of 4:21-23 here suggests that, with the death threat to Pharaoh's firstborn ringing in his ears, Moses journeyed toward Egypt with his wife and sons. As they journeyed, Yahweh met 'him' and attacked 'him.' The antecedent of 'him' is ambiguous, but Zipporah knew who was attacked and acted effectively. Winslow thinks 'him' in 4:24 is most likely Moses, since he (not Pharaoh or Pharaoh's firstborn) was on this journey and because Moses is the main character of the preceding and following material (not his sons, although they are also 'on the way'). Yahweh tried to kill Moses, just as Pharaoh attempted to kill Moses after he had smitten the Egyptian. Moses called himself a *gēr* when he named his son Gershom (Exod 2:22). Thus Moses identified his son with himself: both are *gērîm*. On his way to Egypt, Gershom was circumcised to save the self-designated *gēr*, Moses. This thwarted Yahweh's attack, just as the blood on the door warded off the death angel. A *gēr* must be circumcised if he wishes to eat the Passover (Exod. 12:48). As a Midianite, Moses received Yahweh's charge to deliver the Israelites from Egyptian captivity. To this god, Yahweh, Moses the *gēr* had to be circumcised vicariously (through Gershom's circumcision) to be fully

identified with the people whom Yahweh designated for him to lead out of Egypt. Moses' meeting Aaron in 4:27-31 would follow 4:20 well, which indicates the redactor inserted 4:21-26 in its present position. Aaron, rather than Zipporah, could have circumcised Gershom. Thus, the present order of the text indicates a foreign woman and her son were fully qualified to enter Israel – they saved Moses from Yahweh. Midianites play a crucial role in key incidents in the story of Moses in Exodus 1-4: exile from homeland, marriage and birth of sons, journey and night danger, circumcision as sacrifice and/or salvation, and restoration of kin. The author contrived to have Zipporah sent back to her father (Exod 18:2) to include both the story of Moses' meeting with Jethro after the exodus and Jethro's confession of faith in the power of the God of Israel in Exod 18:10-12. The circumcision by Zipporah (Exod 4:24-26) – the circumcision itself, the person who performed it, the circumcised son, how she did it, the effect that resulted, and what she said – was extremely important to the author of this material.<sup>44</sup>

Although Exod 4:24-26 is enigmatic, some particulars in this passage are certain. It is clear that Zipporah circumcised her son. Also one may assume that the one Yahweh met, sought to kill, and released after the circumcision was the same male. Further, Zipporah touched the *r<sup>e</sup>gālīm*, 'legs, feet, genitals,' of one male with the foreskin of her son so shortly after the circumcision that her touching of *another* male's legs is part of the circumcision process, the *ritual action*. One may also conclude that the circumcision worked, because Yahweh relaxed his hold on his victim because of the foreskin excision and the application of the foreskin to someone in the party. On the syntax level, one cannot be certain whom Zipporah touched with the bloody foreskin because the *r<sup>e</sup>gālīm* – legs, feet, genitals – could apply to any one of three persons in this pericope for whom the singular pronoun is used: Moses, Moses' son, Yahweh. There is a question about whether Zipporah's *ḥātān dāmīm* is Moses, Yahweh, or her son. Touching either legs or genitals with the bloody foreskin – or Zipporah's bloody hands – has the effect of transferring the son's blood to a male who has not already been cut and of amplifying the blood's visibility and ritual impact. Since Zipporah's son was already circumcised and bloody, there would be no need to touch his genitals; so Zipporah must have touched the genitals of another male in

44 Winslow, 'Framing Zipporah,' 21-24, 28, 31-34, 37-41.

the story: Moses, the victim of Yahweh's attack. In touching Moses' genitals, the vicarious quality of the circumcision is obvious. Winslow follows T. C. Mitchell in concluding that *ḥtn* in Exod 4:25-26 means 'male relative by marriage.' Zipporah had a unique relationship to Moses because she circumcised her son on his behalf. Zipporah has just performed the bloody circumcision; that makes Moses not only her husband, but also her *ḥātān dāmīm*. By touching Moses and addressing Moses as *ḥātān dāmīm*, Zipporah transferred the effect of the circumcision to Moses. By this bloody ritual act, Moses became her blood/in-law relation. He was more to her than a relation by marriage; he was related to her in a blood ritual manner, analogous to the bonds implemented through sacrifice. Exod 4:24-26 shows that once Moses was outside the safety zone of Midian, he was again threatened, by a force more powerful than Pharaoh: Yahweh. Circumcision of the son was effective against Yahweh's threat to kill Moses, so lack of circumcision was the cause of the attack. The bloody foreskin saved the blood-smeared Moses from death, *and* it bound Moses to Zipporah in a relationship normally reserved for males.<sup>45</sup>

Another indication that the story of the circumcision by Zipporah was part of the redactor's polemic against the exclusivistic position of Ezra and Nehemiah forbidding Israelites to marry foreigners is the contrast between the relationships of Jacob and Moses to their fathers-in-law. Jacob's and Moses' fathers-in-law gave them refuge when they fled their homes under threat of death, gave them daughters for wives by whom they bore children, and they pastured the flocks of their fathers-in-law in the land of their exile. Jacob made an endogamous marriage *within* the Terah-Aramean clan, but this relationship was plagued by deceit and conflict. But Moses' exogamous marriage resulted in hospitality and peace. Eventually Yahweh commanded Jacob and Moses to return to their homeland. Laban tried to hinder Jacob, but Jethro supported Moses. Each man experienced trauma in the wilderness on his journey home. God attacked Jacob (Gen 32:28-30 [Hebrew 32:29-31]) and Moses (Exod 4:18-26). God 'touched' Jacob's groin in an attempt to escape Jacob's grasp, and Zipporah 'touched' Moses' legs and Yahweh withdrew from him. Zipporah's blood shedding saved her family, but Rachel's theft of the household gods and later [ostensibly bloody] sub-

45 Winslow, 'Framing Zipporah,' 41-50.

terfuge endangered her family and ironically brought Jacob's curse against the thief on herself (Gen 31:19, 25-35; 35:16-20). After their nocturnal struggles with deity, Jacob and Moses met their fathers-in-law in scenes clarifying their formations from laboring sons-in-law to leaders (Gen 31:1-55; Exod 18:1-27). Laban pursued Jacob and insisted that the children of Leah and Rachel were his (Gen 31:22-55), but Jethro brought Moses' wife and sons to him (Exod 18:2-3).<sup>46</sup>

Another proof that the story of circumcision by Zipporah in Exod 4:24-26 was part of the redactor's polemic against the ethnocentrism of Ezra and Nehemiah including opposition to marrying foreign wives is the insertion of Exod 18:2-4 in their present place in the text. The redactor made this insertion fully aware that Zipporah accompanied Moses on his journey from Midian to Egypt. The phrase 'after her sending away' in 18:2 shows the author found the circumcision by Zipporah (4:18-24) and Jethro's confession, meal, and advice to Moses (Exodus 18) necessary elements of Israel's founding story. Zipporah had to travel with Moses to perform the salvific circumcision (4:20-26), *and* Moses had to send her away at some point for Jethro to be able to return her to Moses in 18:2-3. If the salvific circumcision tradition in 4:20-26 had not been significant, the redactor could have depicted Jethro bringing Zipporah and her sons to Moses because Moses had left his family in Midian when he returned to Egypt. Or Jethro could have met Moses in the wilderness without having received back Zipporah and her sons; they could have stayed with Moses the whole time. Winslow thinks Zipporah told Jethro how Yahweh delivered Israel from Egypt. When Jethro was convinced of Yahweh's greatness and care for Israel, Jethro gave Zipporah to Moses a second time, along with her sons. Thus, Jethro joined Zipporah and her two sons not only to Moses but also to Israel. The final redactor of the book of Exodus intentionally undermines the ethnocentrism of Ezra and Nehemiah. The Zipporah-Jethro story supports those who oppose expelling foreign wives from the congregations of the exiles.<sup>47</sup>

[D. A. Bernat does not intend to interpret Exod 4:24-26, but proposes that circumcision in the P material in the Pentateuch is a literal slave brand or mark of the Israelite's unconditional unilateral obligation to keep the commandments given by the master, Yahweh (Lev 25:42, 55),

46 Winslow, 'Framing Zipporah,' 50-52.

47 Winslow, 'Framing Zipporah,' 52-68.

who replaced Pharaoh during Israel's bondage in Egypt, a view proposed by earlier Rabbis, Joseph Bechor Shor (11<sup>th</sup> century C.E.) and Malbim (19<sup>th</sup> century CE). This was a common form in the ANE of a slave mark as a tattoo on the slave's arm (Isa 44:5). Bernat delineates three compositional stages of P: P1, P2, and P3. Yahweh obliged that all male Israelites submitted to circumcision at their 8<sup>th</sup> day (Gen 17:9-14). Circumcision is a sign to remind the Israelite male as a slave to Yahweh to commit commands to Yahweh completely (P2). Only non-Israelites may choose to submit to circumcision if they participate in the Paschal Feast (Lev 12:43-49). Israelites must commit themselves completely by circumcision their hearts figuratively or spiritually, but they must also be subject to literal circumcision of the flesh. The Israelites adopted physical circumcision in the exilic period and later, but they practiced circumcision much earlier in the pre-exilic period. It is very difficult to deal meaningfully references to circumcision in Exod 4:24-26, since Bernat emphatically affirms that this text is not part of the P source in the exilic and post-exilic period. Generally, one at least may entertain the view that circumcision is a slave mark or brand.<sup>48]</sup>

It is very difficult, if not impossible, to pinpoint or situate N. Wyatt's treatment of Exod 4:24-26. Three affirmations of Wyatt puzzle me, because it does not seem logical to accept all three views coherently. First, Wyatt argues that certain Ugaritic texts are the basis of Exod 4:24-26 and the core of Genesis 34. Second, in some contexts Wyatt connects circumcision with a *rite de passage* from puberty to adulthood, and in other contexts connects circumcision with the redemption of first-born male children. Third, Wyatt insists that the context of Exod 4:24-26 is the exilic or post-exilic period of Jews. Accordingly, I am arbitrarily summarizing Wyatt's interpretation(s) of Exod 4:24-26 at this point in this study.

Wyatt agrees with H. Kosmala that originally the story of Moses and Zipporah was actually a story about Israel and Hagar. Genesis 17 portrays circumcision as the seal of the covenant between God and Abraham and his sons. Circumcision and fertility are at the heart of this account. In light of the exilic shaping of the Books of Genesis and Exodus, all this material deals with the exile. The authors of this material

48 D. A. Bernat, 'Circumcision and 'Orlah in the Priestly Torah' (PhD diss.; Brandeis University, 2002), see especially pp. 2-20, 75-89, 100-08, 114-29, 172-77, 213-16.



transformed old traditions into the core traditions of a confessing community, which would see themselves in opposition to a state which would temporize in collaboration with Greek or Roman rulers. Circumcision in Genesis 34 is a *rite de passage* rather than birth as was the Israelite-Jewish norm. There seems to be a gradual succession in the Pentateuch: Abraham was circumcised at 99 when he begets sons; Ishmael was circumcised at 13 indicating a *rite de passage* from childhood to adulthood; Isaac was circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day after birth which looks like an etiology for infant circumcision (a birth rite) as a transformation of older patterns.

Wyatt compares Exod 4:24-26 with God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22, with Jacob's struggle with a supernatural foe in Gen 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33], and especially with Genesis 34. Wyatt suggests that the original core of Genesis 34 was a version of a myth surviving in several recensions in Akkadian and Ugaritic, which was a story of reciprocal passion ending with happy nuptials. But the present final form of Genesis 34 concludes with the death of the bridegroom. The couple was a young prince and a girl of the same ethnic origin. The present final biblical narrative symbolizes post-exilic opposition between Jews [the Israelites] and Samaritans [the Horites] living in Shechem. Rgveda 10.95 and KTU 1.24.17-22 contain ancient traditions similar to Genesis 34. The circumcision of Shechem in Genesis 34 was a prelude to his marriage, a motif lying behind Abraham's circumcision in Genesis 17 and in Exod 4:24-26. Hebrew vocabulary connects circumcision and weddings in marriage relations. Shechem's agreement to be circumcised is a concession which brings him into the presence of the sacrificial knife unsuspectingly. This is a human sacrifice, an archetypal marriage myth: it dooms the husband to death. At the same time, it bears the seed of its transformation into a redemption: circumcision will deflect the danger of death for the entire future. The account in Exod 4:24-26 hints at this when it portrays circumcision as a ritual form (the little cut) of redemption. Exod 4:24-26 and Genesis 34 are alternate etiologies of circumcision of redemption, originally in the context of marriage. The shift to circumcision on the 8<sup>th</sup> day has the same function (redemption of the firstborn and all newborns). The primary purpose was to promote fertility. This occurred during the exile, on analogy of the rise of infant baptism in the early church, when several ancient symbolic practices changed their meaning to cope with the transformed life of deportees.

Two Ugaritic texts, KTU 1.23 and KTU 1.24, deal with circumcision related to mythological marriages. In KTU 1.23, the pruning of the vine is circumcision performed in preparation for marriage, probably a pubertal rite, because children were often betrothed before puberty and married soon thereafter. The Ugaritic term *ḥatnu*, ‘wedding,’ ‘marriage,’ appears in KTU 1.24.32, which assumes circumcision as an institution. This concurs with Genesis 34, where the final presentation of the Shechemites as an uncircumcised people has not yet been given its ethnic twist. Following Eilberg-Schwartz, Wyatt thinks pruning the vine is a description in symbolic terms of premarital circumcision: to make this ‘tree,’ viz., the husband’s penis, suitable for purpose. In the myth of the birth of Saharu and Salimi, the mother is purified and a qualified person inspects the *post-partum* medical check on the newborn child to show he is healthy. Eusebius’s *Praeparatio Evangelica* 1.1038d and 40cd portrays circumcision as a sacrifice which is apotropaic. This symbolizes the infant rite when it redeems the child, where there may be an Oedipal twist in the story of Gershom and Zipporah. A psychoanalytical interpretation of circumcision [using infant circumcision as the norm] is that a substitute for killing or castrating the child supplants his father.<sup>49</sup>

Wyatt’s proposals are intriguing, but far from compelling. Connections between Genesis 34 and Exod 4:24-26 with Ugaritic literature on the one hand and the exilic and post-exilic period on the other are anachronistic. Some of the key interpretations of KTU 1.23 and KTU 1:24 are very debatable, as Wyatt himself admits. It is difficult to reach a concrete explanation from this perspective. A growing number of scholars is coming to agree with the proposal that Genesis and Exodus in their present final form belongs to the exilic or post-exilic period.

49 N. Wyatt, ‘Circumcision and Circumstance: Male Genital Mutilation in Ancient Israel and Ugarit,’ *JSOT* 33 (2009) 405-31.

#### 40. Moses' Pertinacity

J. H. Hertz, P. Heinisch, G. Beer, G. Te Stroete, U. Cassuto, J. E. Huesman, S. J., R. E. Clements, F. Michaeli, M. J. Oosthuizen, C. Houtman, R. Shankman, H. Eilberg-Schwartz, G. W. Ashby, R. Coggins, J. Goldingay, D. K. Stuart, A. E. Gorospe, and J. K. Bruckner argue that the reason Yahweh attacked Moses as he and his family traveled from Midian to Egypt is that Moses had not yet submitted fully to Yahweh's will. This is clear from the fact that at this time either Moses himself had not been circumcised, or Moses had not circumcised one of his sons.

J. H. Hertz reasons that as Moses and his family were traveling from Midian to Egypt, Moses still had serious misgivings about his ability to lead the Israelites out of Egypt as Yahweh had commanded him, so at the inn on the journey he hesitated or tarried. This greatly displeased Yahweh. The statement that Yahweh sought to kill Moses is an anthropomorphism meaning Moses suddenly became very ill. Many scholars think the reason for this is that Moses postponed circumcising his son. Jewish tradition says this was because of Jethro and Zipporah, who wanted to wait until the child was thirteen to circumcise him, as was customary among Bedouin tribes. However, Moses had just warned Pharaoh that disobeying Yahweh would lead to serious punishment (Exod 4:23), so it would not be consistent for Moses to disobey Yahweh by not circumcising his son. Zipporah had to circumcise their son because Moses was too ill to do it himself. Different from most scholars, Hertz suggests that Zipporah cast her son's foreskin at Moses' feet to affirm that Moses participated in this circumcision even though he did not perform it himself. Since circumcision is the symbol of the covenant between God and the child, the child was called the 'bridegroom' of the covenant (vv. 25-26). The statement 'so he (Yahweh) let him (Moses) alone' (v. 26a) means Moses' illness abated and soon he was restored to health. V. 26b, 'Then she said, "A bridegroom of blood by circumcision",' indicates Zipporah was the first to use the expression 'bridegroom of blood' in connection with circumcision.<sup>50</sup>

50 J. H. Hertz, *Exodus. The Pentateuch and Haftorahs. Hebrew Text, English Translation with Commentary II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1930) 44-46.

P. Heinisch thinks the purpose of Yahweh's actions related in Exod 4:24-26 is to teach Moses that as leader of Yahweh's people, he must obey Yahweh's laws (here circumcision) himself. Yahweh met Moses at a place where he and his fellow travelers stopped on their way from Midian to Egypt and sought to kill Moses, because Moses had not been circumcised. Possibly Moses thought that he should not be circumcised while living among the Midianites away from his fellow-Israelites; Jethro and Zipporah probably encouraged him not to be circumcised. Circumcision was practiced in prehistoric times, but it was a rite by which a male youth was initiated into manhood, and indicated that now he is marriageable. Zipporah did not oppose circumcision, but did oppose performing it in earliest childhood. The man whom God designated to exhort his people to obey God's commandments could not neglect a commandment (circumcision) out of respect for his wife and father-in-law, but must obey it. Yahweh impressed this indelibly on his mind by meeting him to kill him. Moses had told Zipporah that his people, the Israelites, circumcised boys at eight days of age because of Yahweh's command. When Zipporah realizes she and Moses may die because Moses had not been circumcised, and that Moses is too weak to circumcise their son, she circumcises their son and thereby saves Moses' life. Exod 4:24-26 does not relate the origin of circumcision in Israel, because Gen 17:1-14 proves circumcision was already practiced in the pre-Mosaic period. The idea that Zipporah touched Yahweh's feet=genitalia is grotesque. By circumcising their son and touching Moses' genitalia with the bloody foreskin, Zipporah transferred the circumcision of their son to Moses, suggesting it was a substitution. In Zipporah's statements in vv 25 and 26, she apparently appealed to Yahweh for her husband, and referred to the fact that the circumcision had been performed.<sup>51</sup>

Although G. Beer thinks that originally the story in Exod 4:24-26 portrayed a demon (Yahweh) attacking Moses on his wedding night (see 22. above), he says that in the context of the whole Moses biography in the Pentateuch, it signifies a consecration of Moses for his office.<sup>52</sup>

G. Te Stroete thinks that Exod 4:24-26 is probably the adaptation of an older narrative, but there are not enough data to reconstruct that older

51 P. Heinisch, *Das Buch Exodus übersetzt und erklärt* (ed. F. Feldmann and H. Herkenne; HSAT 1/2; Bonn: Peter Hanstein Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1934) 61-64.

52 Beer, *Exodus*, 39.

narrative, so one must interpret Exod 4:24-26 in its present form in its present context. For J, circumcision in Exod 4:24-26 was a kind of purification and inauguration of Moses. J considers it a deficiency that neither Moses nor his son had been circumcised in light of the great work Yahweh had commissioned Moses to do (Exod 3:1-4:17). 4:24 does not mean Yahweh smote Moses with a severe illness, but that Yahweh attacked Moses violently, because v. 26a indicates Yahweh made a visible appearance on this occasion. Zipporah circumcises their son because Moses cannot do this since he is fighting Yahweh; Zipporah's circumcision of their son is a substitution for circumcising Moses; Zipporah touches Moses' genitals with their son's bloody severed foreskin to circumcise Moses symbolically. This suggests that Yahweh attacked Moses because Moses had not been circumcised, not because Moses' son had not been circumcised. The explanation of Zipporah's words of v. 25b in v. 26b indicates that J understood *hātān dāmīm* to mean 'to circumcise with blood.' The purpose of the explanation in v. 26b is to affirm that *hātān dāmīm* does not have to do with marriage but with circumcision, which is the point of vv. 24-26.<sup>53</sup>

U. Cassuto admits that Exod 4:24-26 does not state why Yahweh sought to kill Moses. 4:24 may go with 4:21-23 as a last warning to Moses to carry out Yahweh's commission fully, like the angel appearing to Balaam in Num 22:22-35. The pivot of the story in Exod 4:24-26 is the circumcision of the child, indicating that the primary purpose of this text is to emphasize the importance of circumcision. Moses' son was not circumcised at the proper time either because Moses was considered a wayfarer in Midian or because Gershom was born just before Moses and his family left Midian and when Gershom was eight days old they are on the journey. That Moses was at the lodging place when Yahweh sought to kill him suggests Moses contracted a severe illness which threatened his life, which is the meaning of the phrase 'sought to kill.' Zipporah learned the importance of circumcision from Moses, and although they were exempt from circumcising their son because they were on a journey, she circumcised Gershom because she thought it was proper that one who was traveling on a special mission given him by God should go beyond the strict letter of the law. Zipporah touched Moses' feet with

53 G. Te Stroete, *Exodus uit de grondtekst vertaald en uitgelegd* (BOT; Roermond en Maaseik: J. J. Romen & Zonen, 1966) 55-58.

Gershom's bloody foreskin to symbolize that Gershom's circumcision took the place of Moses' circumcision. Just as a firstborn son sometimes suffers on account of his father, so the shedding of the blood of Moses' firstborn son, which consecrates the infant to Yahweh's service, serves as an additional and decisive consecration of his father Moses to Yahweh's mission. Zipporah thought that Moses' illness was a warning to remind Moses that from now on he must be wholly dedicated to the fulfillment of his mission, even to the point of giving his life to carry it out. At that moment, Zipporah turned to Moses and said: 'Surely a blood-bridegroom are you to me,' i.e., I am delivering you from death and restoring you to life by your son's blood; your return to life makes you my bridegroom a second time, this time a blood-bridegroom, a bridegroom acquired by blood. The statement that Yahweh let Moses go means the illness abated and Moses became well. V. 26b explains the expression 'blood-bridegroom,' which apparently was a designation for the circumcised infant. This phrase should not be explained on the basis of the Arabic *ḥatana*, 'to circumcise,' which is a secondary sense, coming from the custom of circumcising the groom before the wedding.<sup>54</sup>

J. E. Huesman, S.J., says Yahweh's attack against Moses in Exod 4:24-26 means Moses is very ill and lies helpless because he is uncircumcised or did not circumcise his sons or adopted the Midianite practice of circumcision as a preparation for marriage. Exod 4:24-26 teaches that as leader of God's people, Moses must obey all of God's commands, including circumcision in Gen 17:9-12. Zipporah circumcises her son, then simulates a circumcision of Moses by touching Moses' 'feet,' a euphemism for genitals, with his son's foreskin.<sup>55</sup>

R. E. Clements says Exod 4:24-26 does not say why Yahweh attacked Moses, but the implied reason is that Moses had not been circumcised and possibly that Moses' son had not been circumcised either. The rite Zipporah performs probably indicates Moses is being initiated into God's service by a symbolic rite of initiation before the act of divine deliverance can take place. By touching Moses with the bloody foreskin of her son's circumcision, Zipporah makes her action count for the cir-

54 U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (trans. I. Abrahams; Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1967) 58-61.

55 J. E. Huesman, S.J., 'Exodus,' *JBC I* (eds. R. E. Brown, S.S., J. A. Fitzmyer, S.J., and R. E. Murphy, O.Carm.; Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968) 50-51.

cumcision of Moses himself. 'You are my blood-bridegroom' is an ancient title, reflecting the practice of circumcision in adolescence. Apparently at one time circumcision was performed before marriage by the future father-in-law, since the Hebrew word *ḥōtēn*, which means 'father-in-law,' literally means 'circumciser.' At some indeterminable later date, the practice of circumcising adolescents was transferred to infancy in Israel, perhaps for humanitarian reasons.<sup>56</sup>

F. Michaeli reasons that Yahweh attacked Moses because he had not circumcised his son (Gershom or Eliezer?). Yahweh wanted to make clear to Moses how serious this omission or negligence was, because God's people must accept circumcision before any other obligation. Zipporah performed circumcision on their son, thus saving Moses from God's wrath. The purpose of Exod. 4:24-26 is to say that circumcision is to be performed on male infants shortly after birth in place of the current practice of circumcising young men in preparation for marriage. Circumcision of male infants made them members of the people of Israel by virtue of the covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17). As Moses was on his way to Egypt to speak in Yahweh's name, he acknowledged that the covenant with Abraham must be observed fully. He had just left the Midianites, with whom he had lived for many years, who practiced circumcision as a matrimonial rite. Now Moses must view circumcision from a different perspective – as a rite by which male infants become members of God's people. Moses must set an example before the Israelites in his own family by circumcising his sons. At this crucial time in Moses' life, Yahweh confronts him to rebuke him for his lack of submission to Yahweh manifested by his failure to circumcise his sons, and thus to change him into the kind of person Yahweh needed to lead his people.<sup>57</sup>

M. J. Oosthuizen interprets Exod 4:24-26 synchronically using the 'narrative approach.' There is a thematic connection between 4:21-23 and 4:24-26: 4:21-23 refers to the 'firstborn son' of Yahweh (Israel) and of Pharaoh, and 4:24-26 refers to the '[firstborn] son' of Zipporah [and Moses]. The context suggests that Yahweh attacked Moses in 4:24.

56 R. E. Clements, *Exodus, Commentary* (eds. P. R. Ackroyd, A. R. C. Leaney, J. W. Packer; CBCNEB; Cambridge: At the University Press, 1972) 31-32.

57 F. Michaeli, *Le Livre de l'Exode* (CAT 2; Paris: Delachaux et Niestle, Editeurs, 1974) 60-62.

4:26b is an editorial comment on the phrase 'bloody bridegroom' used by Zipporah in 4:25b, in which the editor or redactor affirms that she was referring to circumcision. Using the 'narrative approach,' one cannot equate the literary construct with 'what actually happened.' When one reads a text, one is seeing it through the eyes of the narrative artist; thus, the interpreter's task is to try to determine the point of view of the narrator. Exod 4:24-26 is part of the larger textual unit, Exodus 1-14, and of the smaller textual unit, Exod 1:1-7:7. Israel is no better than Egypt in Exodus 1-14, and Moses teeters on the brink of tragedy. Exodus 1-14 has a concentric or chiasmic structure: A: 1-2; B: 3-4; C: 5; D: 6; C': 7-11; B': 12-13; A': 14. Exodus 6 is the focal point of the narrative, indicating the narrative has been arranged so as to postpone precise information on Moses' family until chapter 6. This analysis also indicates strong connections between 4:24-26 and the account of the Passover night in chapters 12-13: both events occur at night (4:24; 12:22, 29-31), the divine being intends to kill (4:24; 12:23), and salvation occurs through a blood-rite (4:25-26; 12:23), according to which blood has protective power. The preservation of Moses' son points to the preservation of God's first-born on Passover night, the sign that must convince the Israelites it is indeed Yahweh who leads them out of Egypt. Exod 4:24-26 is part of the tension in 1:1-7:7 that Moses is not yet at peace with the divine commission entrusted to him. Moses fails in his own effort to deliver Israel by killing the Egyptian taskmaster and flees to Midian, where he feels he is a stranger. The quarrel between the two Hebrews in Egypt (Exod 2:13) indicates Israelites hate Israelites as much as Israelites and Egyptians hate one another. Midian is a reminder of Moses' estrangement: here Moses is aware of his failure which climaxes in his fear of Pharaoh, and Moses realizes the moral ambiguity of the Israelites. In Exod 2:23-4:17, Midian assumes significance as a place of Yahweh's revelation, for here Yahweh calls Moses to be his instrument to deliver the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. In 2:23-25, Yahweh promises to give the Israelites the land of Canaan. Now the hearer/reader becomes concerned about whether Moses and Israel will come to share Yahweh's point of view. Moses' objections in 3:10-4:17 indicate his unwillingness to accept Yahweh's claims on his life, and put him on a par with Israel and Pharaoh. A comparison of Exod 4:24-26 and Gen 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33] shows that the basic characteristic of Yahweh is that he claims the entirety of the one he has chosen. Exod 4:14 shows Yahweh is already



frustrated with Moses. As long as Moses is reluctant to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, he is like Pharaoh who refuses to do what Yahweh demands. Thus, Yahweh may kill both Moses and Pharaoh. To Midianites, *ḥātān dāmīm* means 'blood-circumcised one,' because from Zipporah's perspective Moses was related to her as her husband through circumcision which may have been performed on him at the time of their marriage in accordance with the usual Midianite custom. As a result of being circumcised, Moses had the right to participate in the Midianite cultic community. He had become a full member of Zipporah's clan. Zipporah represents a temptation to Moses to reject Yahweh's claims on him and to ignore the Egyptian oppression of the Israelites. But Zipporah, faced with a situation of mortal danger to her husband, circumcises her son. This is not in accordance with Midianite practice. By realizing that the blood of her son can save Moses, Zipporah accepts the authority and demands of Yahweh, and thus is now mentally disposed to think of Moses in light of Yahweh's commission to him. In 4:26b, the narrator hints at the change in Zipporah's perspective from the meaning of the phrase in a Midianite context to its meaning in an Israelite context. Because 'blood' emphasizes the protective power of blood, 'blood-circumcised one' comes to mean 'bridegroom' whom Zipporah has protected and saved by the blood of her son. By circumcising Moses, Zipporah abandons her claim on him and makes him available for Yahweh's service. Although Moses has departed from Midian, he still is reluctant to accept Yahweh's claims on his life. Zipporah's circumcising Moses demands that he change his perspective to that of Yahweh and herself. Just as Zipporah recognizes the superior claims of Yahweh and relinquishes her hold on Moses, so Moses must dedicate his life to the mission Yahweh has entrusted to him. Following immediately after Yahweh's announcement that he will punish Pharaoh by killing his firstborn son (4:21-23), 4:24-26 implies that Yahweh demands that Moses recognize him by dedicating his son to him. As long as Moses withholds his son from Yahweh, he is no better than Pharaoh who prevents Yahweh's 'son' (Israel) from worshipping him. Exodus 5-6 indicate that even after Moses returns to Egypt, he still struggles to commit himself completely to Yahweh. In this, Moses mirrors Israel. After Yahweh delivers Israel

from Egypt, Israel still struggles to commit herself fully to Yahweh in the wilderness.<sup>58</sup>

C. Houtman says the interpreter's task is not to deal with the original meaning of the story reflected in Exod 4:24-26, but to try to understand this passage in its present context. He thinks Yahweh attacked Moses because he was uncircumcised. There is no problem for the author/redactor of the book of Exodus to depict Yahweh as playing a demonic role, since Yahweh threatens Moses with death in Num 20:12 and Balaam with death in Num 22:22-35, because Yahweh demands complete submission from one he has chosen. Zipporah circumcised her son and touched Moses' genitals with the bloody foreskin, thus symbolically circumcising Moses. Moses' circumcision was a total dedication to Yahweh, a consecration to his appointed task. As a result of being circumcised, Moses now is completely at Yahweh's disposal. Also, circumcision may have protected Moses from Yahweh's attack. 4:26b is a redactional explanation: at that time, viz., in Moses' time, the designation *hātān dāmīm* was given to anyone who was circumcised. Exod 3:1-4:17 indicates Moses did not enter Yahweh's service enthusiastically, but declared he was not the appropriate person to deliver Israel from Egyptian bondage. The long dialogue in Exod 3:1-4:17 raises suspense in the narrative, causing the reader to think that the hope of Israel's deliverance from Egypt is gone. But Yahweh intervenes and encourages Moses to return to Egypt, and Moses sets out. On the way, however, Yahweh threatens to kill Moses, again raising the suspense of the reader. But when Zipporah actually circumcises her son and symbolically circumcises Moses, Yahweh leaves him alone, restoring hope in the reader, who can now see that the circumcision of Moses dedicated him to his task in a special way.<sup>59</sup>

R. Shankman, an English professor at Vanier College in Montreal, Canada, adopts this same general interpretation of Exod 4:24-26, but he nuances this text in a certain way and thinks of it from the perspective of

58 M. J. Oosthuizen, 'Some Thoughts on the Interpretation of Exodus 4:24-26,' in *Exodus 1-15: Text and Context* (ed. J. J. Burden; Proceedings of the 29<sup>th</sup> Annual Congress of the OTSSA; Pretoria: V & R Printing Works, 1987) 1-33.

59 C. Houtman, 'Exodus 4:24-26 and its Interpretation,' *JNSL* 11 (1983) 81-105, esp. 98-103; *Exodus I* (ed. C. Houtman, W. S. Prinsloo, W. G. E. Watson, A. Wolters; trans. J. Rebel and S. Woudstra; HCOT; Kampen: Kok Publishing House, 1993) 432-49, esp. 447-49.

a particular kind of reader-response criticism. Shankman argues that at the burning bush, Moses tries to avoid carrying out God's mission that he return to Egypt and lead the Israelites out of bondage. God sees Moses as he really is – a capable, concerned, pure being with the capacity to carry out his mission. But Moses sees himself as unworthy and incapable, and thus as very hesitant and insecure (Exod 3:1-4:17). God, speaking forcefully through his anger, gets the last word. At the lodging place, God does not intend to kill Moses physically, but to kill Moses' old self to prepare Moses spiritually for his God-sanctioned mission. The ritual circumcision which Zipporah performs is a cut through the known, the external, to reveal the symbolically unknown, the internal. God divides to unite. Zipporah's act sets Moses apart and heals him spiritually. By circumcising their son and touching Moses' legs or feet with the foreskin, Zipporah establishes a creative connection between herself and Moses. The words Zipporah speaks after the circumcision are her recognition that her act binds Moses *to her*, that she possesses Moses as God possesses Israel. Now that she has symbolically circumcised Moses, Moses is bound by blood to the covenant of marriage, in the same way Israel is bound to God. Figuratively, she too is circumcised, as her ritual gesture binds her to God and to Moses. This circumcision – and Zipporah's words connected with it – established Zipporah, Moses, and their son within the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 17:11). Zipporah acts on Moses, indirectly through ritual circumcision and directly through the word. With Zipporah's repetition, the hearer/reader is met by the Word and is, metaphysically, circumcised.<sup>60</sup>

H. Eilberg-Schwartz argues that Israelite circumcision had as many of the same meanings as circumcision rites in other societies. He focuses on the understanding of circumcision among Israelite priests who presided over the temple cult in Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.E., who are generally credited with the authorship of P. The literature produced by this group of priests is the first to state that circumcision was practiced on the eighth day after birth and the first to describe circumcision explicitly as a sign of the covenant between Abraham and God (Gen 17:12; 21:4; Lev 12:3). Against many scholars, Eilberg-Schwartz argues that for the priestly community, cir-

60 R. Shankman, 'The Cut That Unites: Word as Covenant in Exodus 4:24-26,' *CrCur* 41 (1991) 168-78.

cumcision not only symbolized the covenant and was performed shortly after birth, but also symbolized the fertility of the initiate as well as his entrance into and ability to perpetuate a lineage of male descendants. His method is symbolic exegesis, which is the attempt to tease out implicit meanings embedded in the practice in question.<sup>61</sup>

In Gen 17:11, P describes circumcision as an *'ôl*, 'symbol' (not sign), of the covenant. The difference between a symbol and a sign is that a symbol has properties appropriate for the content it signifies. Circumcision has an intimate connection with the content of the covenant between Abraham and God, the focal point of which is God's promise that Abraham will have numerous descendants (Gen 17:2, 4-6). For the P writer, fertility is a central issue in the covenant between Abraham and God. The repeated expression, 'Be fruitful and multiply' (Gen 1:22; 9:1; etc.), shows his concern for human reproduction. Circumcision is a symbol that God will make Abraham fruitful and multiply, since the removal of the foreskin symbolically prepares the male organ for reproduction. The terms 'uncircumcised hearts, ears, lips, and fruit trees' indicate that for P circumcision is a symbolic cut that ensures human fertility.<sup>62</sup>

There is an obvious connection between procreation and kinship, because one can ensure the continuity of one's lineage only by reproducing. Circumcision often displays and solidifies lines of male descent. During and shortly after the Babylonian exile, it was important for P to emphasize that circumcision distinguished Israelites from their uncircumcised Babylonian neighbors. The priestly office in Israel was transmitted patrilineally from father to son. Since descent was important for the self-definition of the priestly community, it is easy to see why circumcision seemed like a natural symbol for the covenant between God and Abraham. Circumcision as a symbol of fertility both distinguished Abraham from all humans preceding him and connected him to all his descendants. From the priests' perspective, the only real symbol that would have strengthened Abraham's faith in his covenant with God would be connected with his and his children's fertility, since God had

61 H. Eilberg-Schwartz, 'The Fruitful Cut. Circumcision and Israel's Symbolic Language of Fertility, Descent, and Gender,' *The Savage in Judaism. An Anthropology of Israelite Religion and Ancient Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) 141-44.

62 Eilberg-Schwartz, 'The Fruitful Cut,' 144-62.

promised Abraham that a new lineage would descend from a son of his who had not yet been born. The themes of fertility, procreation, and intergenerational continuity between males are central to Israelite circumcision. Circumcision indicates a male is ready to participate in the affairs of the adult male community, including full participation in religious, political, and juridical activities and discussions. The Israelites circumcised a male child on the eighth day after birth, because for the first seven days after a child's birth, the mother was impure and contaminated other people and household objects which she touched (Lev 12:2-4). So, for the first seven days of life a male infant was unclean and would contaminate any man who performed the circumcision.<sup>63</sup>

Dealing specifically with Exod 4:24-26, H. Eilberg-Schwartz affirms that in Israel's religious thought, there was a danger of intimacy with a male God which could be diminished only by a partial unmaning of the Israelite man. This helps explain God's attacks on Jacob in Gen 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33] and Moses in Exod 4:24-26. One must take seriously the similarity between these two attacks to understand them correctly. The point of these stories is to establish the submission of Jacob and Moses to the deity. Zipporah's act of touching her son's foreskin to Moses' genitals anticipates the blood that the Israelites will later put on the lintels of their houses so God will not slay the Israelite firstborn (Exod 12:23). That Zipporah touches Moses' genitals indicates God's attack on Moses is in part an attack on his masculinity. This is why circumcision appeases God. The blood of circumcision is a symbolic acknowledgment that a man's masculinity belongs to God. Submitting to God and surrendering one's masculinity amount to the same thing. The blood of circumcision, like the blood on the doorposts, is a sign to God that he should pass over Israelite men and not take their lives. In turn, it is a reminder to Israelite men that as men of God they belong to their father in heaven. Zipporah's act emphasizes the way in which women's power always potentially threatens to erupt when men encounter a male God. If that encounter is not handled properly, through a sacrifice of human masculinity and a symbolic submission to a dominating male God, the human male is eliminated. If men do not submit to God and take their proper role as God's wives, human women are always ready to assume that role. In Exod 4:24-26, Zipporah is in danger

63 Eilberg-Schwartz, 'The Fruitful Cut,' 162-76.

of losing Moses to God. Her words: 'You are a bridegroom of blood *to me!*' means 'You belong to me, not God.' The threat to his life and masculinity is associated with Moses becoming a man of God. When the text says Zipporah touched 'his' genitals, it may refer to the deity. Touching God with the circumcised flesh of her son's foreskin, she says: 'You are a bridegroom of blood to me,' i.e., stay away from Moses; he is not your wife, I am. Israelite women are in danger of losing their men to God. But God will leave their husbands intact if as mothers they condone the genital disfiguration of their sons and acknowledge that Israelite masculinity has been sacrificed to God.<sup>64</sup>

G. W. Ashby insists that one interpret Exod 4:24-26 in its present place in the narrative of the book of Exodus. Five important factors figure into the interpretation of this passage. First, the event described occurred during a very significant journey of a very significant man at a very significant stage in his career, at a sinister unnamed place. There are striking, intentional similarities between this story and the story of Jacob's encounter with the 'man' in Gen 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33]. Second, circumcision is a part of this story. The basic idea of circumcision is that it was the means of acceptance into membership of the people of God. Third, blood plays a significant role in this story. Circumcision is a kind of sacrifice; blood and foreskin symbolize the whole person. By touching Moses with foreskin and blood, Zipporah identifies him with that sacrifice. There seems to be a motive of propitiation, because Yahweh is angry and threatening. Zipporah's twice spoken statement is a triumphant declaration that Moses, by virtue of his son's blood, is within the covenant community and qualified to lead the covenant people of God. Zipporah did not need to be liberated from slavery in Egypt since she was not a Hebrew, but through her action Moses lives to lead Israel. Fourth, Moses had previously resisted God's call stubbornly (Exod 3:1-4:17). Yahweh is emphasizing that as long as Moses persists in this attitude, he is no better than Pharaoh. If Exod 4:24-26 prefigures the Passover, it sets a condition on the celebration of Israel's liberation, viz., Israel's willingness to serve Yahweh. Fifth, Yahweh tries to kill Moses, but does not do so. The Hebrew Bible contains several instances in which Yahweh threatens a person, then leaves that person alone.

64 H. Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994) 151-52, 158-62, 170.

Yahweh's threats are challenges to repentance. Moses had omitted the crucial sacrament of integration into covenantal obedience – the sacrificial act of circumcision. Zipporah sets this right, and Moses, now totally conformed to God's will, returns to confront Pharaoh and lead the Hebrews in the liberation that God initiates.<sup>65</sup>

R. Coggins affirms that 'feet' in Exod 4:25 is a euphemism for genitals. The more natural interpretation of the statement that Zipporah touched 'his' feet is that she touched the genitals of her son whom she had just circumcised. Apparently Zipporah had to perform some type of blood-ceremony which was considered necessary to appease an angry god. Whatever 'you are my blood-bridegroom' in v. 25c means, it is a cry of triumph; the threat is warded off. It is clear that vv. 24-26 regard circumcision as an important preparatory rite – here for Moses' arrival in Egypt to carry out God's commission.<sup>66</sup>

J. Goldingay's approach is psychological, following S. Freud, and is informed by feminist questions and interests. Stories in the Hebrew Bible about circumcision indicate subconscious awareness of issues regarding male sexuality. Far below the surface, circumcision may be a merciful alternative to castration, but stories in the Hebrew Bible themselves indicate more concrete concerns with male sexuality: disciplining of procreation, of sexual activity, and of masculinity. In Genesis 17, circumcision signifies disciplining of procreation. It is a sign of God's covenant commitment to the individual and the individual's acceptance of that commitment. It is a kind of self-imprecation: If I am not faithful to the covenant, may God cut off my descendants symbolized by my male sexual organ through which God said he would fulfill his promise that he would give Abraham numerous descendants. Fertility is not a human being's to exercise without divine permission or hindrance. As a result of circumcision, the sexual organ and the power behind it now belong partly to God. Genesis 34 suggests that if circumcision was administered at puberty, it symbolized disciplining of sexuality. In Exod 4:24-26, 'him' in the statement 'Yahweh met him and tried (sought) to

65 G. W. Ashby, 'The Bloody Bridegroom. The Interpretation of Exodus 4:24-26,' *ExpTim* 106/7 (April 1995) 203-205; *Go Out and Meet God: A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (ed. F. C. Holmgren and G. A. F. Knight; ITC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 27-29.

66 R. Coggins, *The Book of Exodus* (ed. I. H. Jones; EC; London: Epworth Press, 2000) 23-24.

kill him' in v. 24b is Moses. Zipporah circumcises her son and touches Moses' legs (perhaps a euphemism for his genitals) with her son's foreskin, and says: 'You really are a bloody bridegroom for me.' This is the only OT passage which mentions bloodiness of circumcision, which hints at a link with bloodiness as a means of pollution and blood as a means of expiation. Smeared blood is graphic evidence that the child's blood has been shed. The reference to Moses killing the Egyptian in Exod 4:19 might hint at why Moses needed a quasi-expiatory rite, viz., because of the bloodguilt attached to him. His son's blood has cleansed him from the blood he shed. Exod 4:24-26 does not indicate Yahweh attacked Moses because either he or his son had not been circumcised. Perhaps Moses' vicarious circumcision signifies symbolically that now he has the courage to carry out Yahweh's mission. Although those who sought to kill Moses in Egypt are dead (Exod 4:19), Yahweh seeks Moses' life. The old Moses must die, and a new Moses under God's control must be born. If Moses does not agree to that, his vicarious circumcision by Zipporah symbolizes it. Here the blood of circumcision is an acknowledgment that a man's masculinity belongs to God. Moses' machismo needs to be circumcised because either he needs to be prepared to act the man for Yahweh's sake or he needs to be held back from acting like a man for his own sake. Circumcision in Exod 4:24-26 is a rite of passage: Moses, Zipporah, and their son(s) are traveling from Midian to Egypt so Moses can bring Israel out of Egypt. Cutting back the flesh with its potency implies subordinating human strength to Yahweh's plan. Perhaps Exod 4:24-26 links with Exod 12:48 – neither Moses nor his son can participate in the first Passover if they are uncircumcised.<sup>67</sup>

J. A. Walters insists that one must interpret Exod 4:24-26 in its present context in the final form of the biblical narrative, because it is impossible to recover the tradition of which this text was originally a part. He follows P. McNutt in arguing that the Kenites and Midianites were metal workers who functioned as ritual specialists and mediators. Zipporah circumcised her son because she was a Midianite from a smithery clan, and one of the primary ritual functions of smiths in Africa and the Middle East is in circumcision rites. Zipporah probably smeared the blood of her son's foreskin on Moses' or her son's upper thigh or feet as

67 J. Goldingay, 'The Significance of Circumcision,' *JSOT* 88 (2000) 3-18, esp. 4-14.



a visible sign to Yahweh that she had circumcised him. Moses probably had been circumcised in Egypt as an infant during the three months his parents had hid him (Exod 2:2). Exod 4:24-26 is describing a blood rite, as the phrase 'bridegroom of blood' and the whole scene in general indicate. Zipporah's words in v. 26 are a ritual formula spoken at a blood rite, the meaning of which is intentionally ambiguous. The redactors intentionally left vv. 24-26 ambiguous as to whether Yahweh attacked Moses or Moses' son. Exod 4:1-13 indicate that even though Moses was going to Egypt as Yahweh had told him, Moses still feared Pharaoh more than Yahweh and thus was not fully committed to the task Yahweh assigned him. The purpose of the statement 'Yahweh sought to kill him [=Moses]' in 4:24 is to emphasize that Moses is to fear Yahweh, not Egypt or Pharaoh. After the night at the lodging place, Moses never shows such a lack of resolve to do what Yahweh commanded. Since 4:24-26 follows 4:22-23, if Yahweh attacked Moses' son, it was his firstborn Gershom. Since Zipporah's circumcision of her son saved her son's life, the text indicates circumcision is important. When Moses was in Egypt and Midian, he pretended to be an Egyptian and did not circumcise his son. The event described in 4:24-26 anticipates the Passover; in both situations, Yahweh distinguishes between Israel and Egypt. In 4:24-26, the redactors of the exodus narrative were encouraging the Jewish community during the exile to maintain a strict and defining identity rather than yield to the cultural pressures of their neighbors.<sup>68</sup>

D. K. Stuart contends that the story in Exod 4:24-26 is consistent with other evidence for Moses' tendency [beginning in 4:13] to resist Yahweh's call to such an appalling commission as that of delivering the Israelites from Egyptian oppression. He thinks Moses failed Yahweh by settling for impartial Egyptian circumcision up until Jethro and the Midianites insisted that he submit to complete circumcision in preparation for marrying Zipporah and by neglecting circumcising his son Gershom. The threat of the death of Pharaoh's firstborn in 4:23 prepares the reader for the threat of the death of Moses' firstborn in 4:24-26; at the overnight camping place, Yahweh attacked Gershom, not Moses. Zipporah circumcised Gershom, then touched the foreskin she had removed to Gershom's genitals ['feet' here is a euphemism for genitals]

68 J. A. Walters, 'Moses at the Lodging Place: The Devil is in the Ambiguities,' *Enc* 63 (2002) 407-25.

from which she had just removed it in order to legitimize the previously neglected but now emergency circumcision, and uttered the proper words for this ceremony: ‘You [Gershom] are a blood relative [*hātān*] to me,’ linking herself closely to Gershom so that her act of his behalf would suffice. Yahweh accepted this as a proper substitute for what Moses should have done, putting Moses in an acceptable relationship to Yahweh to carry out Yahweh’s commission to lead the Israelites out of Egypt.<sup>69</sup>

A. E. Gorospe proposes a way to read Exod 4:24-26 coherently and to explore its ethical possibilities by applying P. Ricoeur’s narrative theory to this text as a part of its larger context: Exod 2:23-4:31.<sup>70</sup> Ricoeur argues that a narrative text is a creative invention breaking with personal experience and ordering incidents into a plot. The norms of a symbolic cultural system, a prefigured ethical evaluation of action extended to the characters of the narrative, always govern human actions. In historical works, ethics is implied in one’s indebtedness to people of the past, especially victims of oppression. Ethics is the aim of an accomplished life centered on the good. Memory is the consciousness of the same self in the past, assuring the temporal continuity of the self and giving the self identity. History is a reenactment of the past in which one rethinks and reconstructs the original chain of events. A historian does not know the past but only her or his thought about the past.<sup>71</sup>

God’s call to Moses at the burning bush awakened Moses’ memory of his Israelite lineage and brought to light Moses’ debt to previous generations and thus his responsibility to his contemporary kinfolk in Egypt. But when Moses and his family left Midian, Moses was hesitant about whether it was best for his to do what Yahweh commissioned. As Moses and his family journeyed from Midian to Egypt, Moses had to have a death encounter with Yahweh to unblock Moses’ memory completely and enable him to embrace his vocation fully. The internal struggle of Moses is reflected externally in Yahweh’s attempt to kill Moses. Moses’ encounter with Yahweh at night at the inn is a liminal experience resulting in a transformation of Moses’ identity. Yahweh’s threat to kill Moses

69 D. K. Stuart, *Exodus* (NAC 2; gen. ed.: E. Ray Clendenen; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006) 152-56.

70 Gorospe, *Narrative and Identity*, 1.

71 Gorospe, *Narrative and Identity*, 27-28, 49, 62, 67, 77-78.

demonstrates that Yahweh requires a complete commitment of one whom he has chosen to lead his people out of Egypt, that Moses must fear Yahweh more than he fears Pharaoh. The verb 'kill' here is synonymous with transformation. At the inn, Moses dies to his old self and is reborn into a new identity and community. Zipporah's performing the rite of circumcision on their son ends Moses' ambivalence by her taking a decisive action, which redefines Moses' social status and role, and makes him embrace his new vocation. With Moses' transformation, Zipporah takes Moses as her new bridegroom by saying: 'A bridegroom of blood are you to me.' A marriage rite is similar to adoption ceremonies. When Moses first married the Midianite Zipporah, Moses was incorporated into Jethro's household, and when Zipporah circumcised her son, Zipporah was separated from her Midianite community and incorporated into the Israelite community, thus marrying Moses again. As circumciser, Zipporah is the 'midwife' who facilitates the transition of Moses and her family into their new identity, status, and community.<sup>72</sup>

J. K. Bruckner thinks the primary theological concern of Exod 4:24-26 is what motivated Yahweh to kill Moses in light of the fact that Yahweh had endeavored so diligently to convince and persuade Moses to return to Egypt. The problem is that some member of Moses' family had not been circumcised. Moses was raised in Pharaoh's house, which raised a question of his identity. Zipporah was a Midianite, which raised a question of her identity. When Yahweh was 'about to kill' Moses, Zipporah immediately realized the situation, acted to save her life by circumcising her son, and satisfied Yahweh's concern. Thereby she proved her commitment to the God of Abraham who commanded circumcision as an everlasting covenant (Gen 17:1-14). Zipporah's concluding comment might be paraphrased: 'Our marriage is marked by the Yahwistic covenant of circumcision given to Abram.' Exod 4:21-23 first mentions God's killing the sons of Egypt, and Moses is about to speak to Pharaoh about his sons and their deaths. It is logical, therefore, that anyone about to say such things should consider his own death and the deaths of his own sons.<sup>73</sup>

72 Gorospe, *Narrative and Identity*, 165-67, 195-97, 203-10, 215-17, 227-28, 302-12.

73 J. K. Bruckner, *Exodus* (NIBC; eds. R. L. Hubbard Jr. and R. K. Johnston; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2008) 54-56.

## Chapter VIII

# Recurring Conflicts between Moses and Yahweh

In this study, I would like to propose another way of thinking about Exod 4:24-26, which in some ways agrees with several of the details advanced in the views presented above, but also differs with several details, and in addition perceives this story in a somewhat different way in the context of the narrative of the Pentateuch of which it is a part. Textual Criticism, Literary Criticism, Narrative Criticism, and Theological Criticism play significant roles in proposing this viewpoint. But Rhetorical Criticism in particular may provide some important insights into ways of understanding Exod 4:24-26. This approach emphasizes that biblical works were composed for oral reading and/or dramatic presentation to be 'heard' by a (religious) assembly. Speaking of the poetry of the Hebrew Bible, D. K. Berry writes: 'Rhetorical criticism analyzes Hebrew poetry in terms of its aural qualities, and this is always of primary importance when dealing with oral poetry. The critic must remember that the printed form of the poem arose only as a by-product of its oral transmission. The specific effects engendered by the written forms of the poem (lineation, strophe, etc.) are important only in so far as they reflect audible patterns.'<sup>1</sup>

The same applies to biblical narrative. Three major concerns of rhetorical criticism are the speaker/author, the text, and the hearer (audience)/reader. This raises numerous issues, as whether modern scholars and/or readers can recover the authorial intention in a text, whether the meaning of a text is limited to authorial intention, whether one can un-

1 D. K. Berry, *The Psalms and Their Readers: Interpretive Strategies for Psalm 18* (ed. D. J. A. Clines and P. R. Davies; JSOTSup 153; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993) 85. See further H. J. B. Combrink, 'The Rhetoric of Sacred Scripture,' in *Rhetoric, Scripture and Theology: Essays from the 1994 Pretoria Conference* (ed. S. E. Porter and T. H. Olbricht; JSNTSup 131; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) 108-09; K. Moller, *A Prophet in Debate: The Rhetoric of Persuasion in the Book of Amos* (eds. D. J. A. Clines and P. R. Davies; JSOTSup 372; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003) 28.

derstand a text apart from the culture, society, and author(s) which produced it, whether the reader determines the meaning of a text or whether there are objective criteria which limit the possible meanings of a text, etc.<sup>2</sup> Rhetorical criticism is a relatively new discipline in the study of the Hebrew Bible, and so predictably scholars are divided over its usefulness and applicability in illuminating the meaning of the Hebrew Bible. At the same time, I think this approach has potential for suggesting some ideas which may be helpful in interpreting Exod 4:24-26.

A primary concern of rhetorical criticism in dealing with biblical narratives is the boundaries or limits of the narrative to which a text belongs, without seeking to find and restore earlier oral or written sources out of which the narrative was constructed. P. Tribble states with great caution: 'Unlike source criticism, it [rhetorical criticism] does not examine antecedent literary strands. Unlike tradition-history, it does not examine development and transmission. Rather [...] it interprets a text as it now appears. Rhetorical criticism practices synchronic, not diachronic, analysis [...] In general, rhetorical analysis begins and ends with the final form of a text, though it is not limited to that form.'<sup>3</sup> Chapter 4 of R. Meynet's excellent volume on *Rhetorical Analysis*, 'Presuppositions of Rhetorical Analysis,' presents three presuppositions of this approach, which Meynet summarizes succinctly: 'the biblical texts form well composed wholes, they are organized according to laws of a specific, Semitic and not western, rhetoric, and one should therefore trust the texts as they are because they have their own internal logic.'<sup>4</sup>

What is the larger narrative to which Exod 4:24-26 belongs? It would seem that it must be at least the story of Moses, i.e., Exodus-Deuteronomy, if not the entire Pentateuch. One may admit that 'originally' Exod 4:24-26 was a Kenite or Midianite tale about an unnamed family traveling across a desert, or a part of a source lying behind the present Pentateuch (L, K, N, J, or J1). However, its meaning and intention in that earlier context is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to

2 See the discussion of these issues by Y. Gitay, 'Rhetorical Criticism,' 136; and Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 95-99.

3 Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 93-94.

4 R. Meynet, *Rhetorical Analysis. An Introduction to Biblical Rhetoric* (eds. D. J. A. Clines and P. R. Davies; JSOTSup 256; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) 180.

determine because this pericope is so tiny, contains several ambiguous details, and, apart from a larger context, lends itself to a wide variety of understandings, as the history of interpretation demonstrates. On the other hand, as a part of the flow of the narrative in the final form of Exodus-Deuteronomy, some understandings of this text seem more reasonable than others, although admittedly, even then absolute certainty is unattainable because of several 'unknowns' in these three verses.

Assuming the composers of Exodus-Deuteronomy designed their work for dramatic performance or oral reading before a (religious) assembly, Exod 4:21-23 would hardly seem to the hearers to disrupt the flow of the story. These verses relate Yahweh's parting instructions of Moses about his mission when he arrived in Egypt as Moses and his family left Jethro and Zipporah's people. The entire focus of vv. 18-24 is the return of Moses and his family from Midian to Egypt. Thus, the person ('him') Yahweh met and attacked (v. 24) was Moses – not Pharaoh's son or one of Moses' sons.

But why would Yahweh seek to kill Moses who had recently left on his journey back to Egypt to lead the Israelites out of bondage (4:18-20)? The flow of the narrative in Exodus-Deuteronomy would suggest it was because Moses had strong misgivings about actually carrying out this mission to its conclusion. Apparently, he had serious doubts as to whether Yahweh could actually deliver the Israelites from the Egyptians and guide them safely through the desert. A review of the account beginning with Exodus 1 supports this hypothesis.

The book of Exodus begins by describing the oppressed plight of the Israelites in Egyptian slavery because 'a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph' (Exod 1:8). Pharaoh attempted to stop the numerical growth of the Israelites by commanding the Hebrew midwives to kill all male children at birth, but the midwives refused (Exod 1:15-22). One Israelite woman of the tribe of Levi put her male child in a papyrus basket plastered with bitumen and pitch, and placed him among the reeds on the bank of the Nile River. Pharaoh's daughter found the child and adopted him, requesting that his mother nurse and care for the child. She named him Moses (Exod 2:1-10).

When Moses was grown, he killed an Egyptian for beating a Hebrew. Pharaoh learned of this, and sought to kill Moses (2:15a). Moses fled to the land of Midian, where he stayed with Reuel the priest of Midian, and in time married his daughter Zipporah, who bore him a son

named Gershom. After a long time, Pharaoh died, the Israelites cried out to God for help, and he took notice of them (2:11-25).

While Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law on Mount Horeb, Yahweh appeared to him in a burning bush, and instructed him to return to Egypt and lead his people out of bondage (3:1-10). However, Moses was very reluctant to do this, so he disputed with Yahweh, giving several reasons why he should not go (3:11-4:17). Moses was so persistent that 'the anger of Yahweh was kindled against Moses' (4:14). In my opinion, it is very important for an understanding of Exod 4:24-26 to realize that the relationship between Yahweh and Moses was filled with conflict, beginning with their disputation at the burning bush.

Yahweh finally applied enough pressure on Moses to cause him to set out towards Egypt. Gaining permission from his father-in-law, Moses and his wife and his sons left Midian to return to Egypt (4:18-20).<sup>5</sup> Yahweh strictly charged Moses to perform all the wonders he had put in his power, and to tell Pharaoh to let 'Israel my firstborn son' go that he might worship me, or else Yahweh would kill Pharaoh's firstborn son (4:21-23). The very fact that Yahweh felt the need to give Moses this charge suggests that even though Moses conceded to return to Egypt, he was not mentally prepared or psychologically equipped to undertake such an awesome and dangerous mission.

As Moses and his family were traveling from Midian to Egypt, they spent the night at an unnamed camping place, and Yahweh sought to kill Moses there (4:24). The pronominal suffix 'him' (in English the direct object of 'met' and 'kill') must refer to Moses and not to his son, because its closest antecedent in the present form of the book of Exodus is Moses in 4:21a, and Moses' son is not mentioned until 4:25.

The narrative following the story in Exod 4:24-26 supports the hypothesis that Moses was not fully committed to the mission Yahweh had given him, but that Yahweh desired and insisted that Moses submit completely to his will. Moses met Aaron at 'the mountain of God' and told him all the words and signs Yahweh had given him. They assembled all the elders of Israel and performed the signs before the people, and the people believed and worshiped Yahweh (4:27-31). Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and asked him to let the Israelites go into the wilderness

5 Exod 4:20 contains the first inkling in the Bible that Moses and Zipporah had a second son. The hearer/reader does not learn his name was Eliezer until 18:4.

three days to sacrifice to Yahweh; but Pharaoh made their work heavier and beat the Israelite supervisors. These supervisors accused Moses and Aaron for the precarious situation of the Israelites (5:1-21). Moses then accused Yahweh of mistreating the people, chided Yahweh for sending him to Pharaoh, and reproved Yahweh for not delivering the Israelites from Egyptian oppression (5:22-23). Yahweh reassured Moses that he would deliver the Israelites from Pharaoh and the Egyptians, and instructed Moses once again to go to Pharaoh and tell him to let the Israelites go out of the land (6:1-11). But Moses told Yahweh that if the Israelites would not listen to him, surely Pharaoh would not. However, Yahweh again told Moses and Aaron to tell Pharaoh to free the Israelites from Egypt (6:12-13). Exodus 6:14-27 identify the Moses and Aaron Yahweh instructed to lead the Israelites out of Egypt by giving their family tree. The delay of the genealogy of Moses and Aaron to this point in the narrative implies that Moses, to whom Yahweh entrusted his mission to lead the Israelites out of Egypt at Mount Horeb (3:1-4:17), was very slow to accept this mission. In this way, he was like the Israelites, who were very slow to believe in Yahweh and to accept his deliverance of them from Egyptian bondage.<sup>6</sup> After the genealogy, Yahweh again told Moses to go to Pharaoh and tell him to let the Israelites go out of Egypt, but Moses tried to excuse himself, saying that Pharaoh would not listen to him because he was a poor speaker. Yahweh told Moses to speak Yahweh's words to Aaron and tell Aaron to speak to Pharaoh. He promised Moses that he would bring his people out of bondage. So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh (6:28-7:7). Thus, Exod 2:11-7:7 relate several instances in which Moses and Yahweh strongly conflicted with one another. And there is ample evidence after the events recorded in 4:24-26 that Moses was not convinced that Yahweh would deliver the Israelites out of Pharaoh's oppression, and was not personally committed to trying to carry out Yahweh's instructions.

At this juncture, it seems appropriate to call attention to the chapter entitled 'The Incident at the Inn' in the recent book of S. A. Tuchman and S. E. Rapaport, *Moses' Women*. Tuchman spent fifteen years involved in a study group at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun, an Orthodox synagogue in Manhattan, New York. After spending a few years working through the Book of Genesis, her study group turned to the Book of

6 So Oosthuizen, 15-16, 27.



Exodus. The latter is the published product of this extended study; S. E. Rapaport co-authored the written book. This is not a commentary. Its unique contribution is that this study consisted of a line-by-line treatment of the biblical text aided by traditional Orthodox commentators and their midrashic explanations. The Rabbinic comments date from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries C. E., so that their values vary. I have dealt with some of the observations incorporated in this study elsewhere in this book as Rashi, Nedarim, Rashbam, and the Talmud Avodah Zara, but some comments are worthy of remark, and correspond to ideas which are similar to my own view.

E. Wiesel thinks Moses was still reluctant to return to Egypt at the inn just as Moses was at the burning bush. Moses felt his fellow-Israelites informed Moses killed the Egyptian taskmaster, and thus was reluctant to return to Egypt.<sup>7</sup> Akeidat Zitzchak says Moses delayed to circumcise the child and spent the night at the inn before moving on to Egypt, indicating Moses was not yet a man of God. Moses still yearned to have marital intimacy with his wife Zipporah at the inn. If Moses had been thinking logically, he could have circumcised his son when they stopped at the inn. But Moses did not, and thus God became angry with Moses. Moses could or should have circumcised Eliezer before leaving Midian or at the inn. Moses should have left the baby with Zipporah and gone on to Egypt. But Moses did neither, and thus God confronted Moses at the inn. The Netziv says the real problem was Moses' spiritual growth. Moses should have grown spiritually more quickly from the burning bush to the inn than he did. As son-in-law to Jethro, husband to Zipporah, and new father of Eliezer in Midian, it was difficult for Moses to tear away from his familiar, long-established roots in Midian and launch out to Egypt to do what God commanded him. Moses was not prepared psychologically to confront God at the inn, so experienced a paralyzing fear.

Sforno solves the problem by asserting that the assailant was the angel of the covenant, who threatened Moses with death because Moses bypassed the commandment to circumcise his newborn son and bring him into God's covenant. Sha'arei Aharon reasons that the angel was the merciful angel who sought to hasten Moses along, urging him to reach

7 E. Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976) 190.

the sanctuary of the inn before complying with God's command to circumcise his newborn son. God's merciful angel did not seek to exact Moses' death. Nachshoni argues that the angel encountered Moses as a signal that the time had come to circumcise his son, but Moses ignored this and the angel sought to kill Moses. Abarbanel says God's abundant presence almost suffocated Moses, paralyzing Moses with fear, and Moses perceived his own imminent death. Here, Moses must learn he must be in a solitude of contemplation to be prepared to accept God's revelations at any time. Bechor Schor and the Netziv say Moses' encounter with God instantaneously plunged Moses into a state of existential angst that became immobile like a corpse. Moses was unable to carry his burden that he felt he was unworthy of God's mission, and could not think or act.

Zipporah was in a difficult spot. She had not seen Moses' vision that God sought to kill him. Zipporah reacted as she did on the basis of what appeared to her to be happening. Alschich says Zipporah concluded two threats faced her: Yahweh was angry because Moses had married a Midianite Zipporah, or Yahweh was angry because Moses had not circumcised their son. Zipporah decided immediately to circumcise their son, thinking this would convince Yahweh that he would accept their marriage and/or Yahweh would accept Zipporah's efforts to participate in God's covenant. In any case, Zipporah saved Moses' life by circumcising their son.

It is difficult to determine Zipporah's purpose of touching or throwing the foreskin of her son at Moses' feet (v. 25). Ibn Ezra says Zipporah threw her baby's foreskin at Moses' feet to appease whatever evil spirit held him in thrall. Chizkuni says the blood of circumcision would atone for and expunge Moses' paralysis. Perush Yonatan says Zipporah threw the baby's foreskin at the feet of God's angel who appeared at the inn to present the foreskin as an unambiguous offering: Her baby's covenantal foreskin in lieu of her husband's life.

The significance of the 'bridegroom of blood' is enigmatic. Some rabbis claim the 'bridegroom of blood' is the child, Eliezer. Ibn Ezra and Sha'arei Aharon argue that the rabbis taught that the mother and other women around call a baby on the day of his 'covenant' a bridegroom or *hātān*, to honor the consecrated new life that is symbolically beginning with the ritual circumcision. However, Chizkuni contends that Moses is the 'bridegroom of blood.' Zipporah says: 'You are *like* a bridegroom of

blood to me,' heroically taking the blame for this whole event on her own. 'To me' suggests that Zipporah is concerned that Yahweh was angry because she was a Midianite.

The plural term 'circumcisions' in v 26b continues to be problematic. Sforno thinks 'circumcisions' are the two technical parts of the circumcision surgery itself. Abarbanel proposes that 'circumcisions' indicates Moses had two opportunities to circumcise his son – either before Moses left Midian or at the inn – and Moses missed both of them. Circumcision was so important that Yahweh almost killed Moses because Moses failed to circumcise his son. The particle 'az, 'thus,' connects what precedes with what follows. So, the angel of death's withdrawal and Zipporah's second 'bridegroom of blood' pronouncement are connected causally. According to the midrash in Torah Shlema, one must jump ahead in the story to the redemption of the Israelites at the crossing of the Red Sea. The term 'āz, 'thus,' appears in Exod 15:1. Here, Moses is harkening back to his own salvation that night at the inn, when Zipporah saved Moses' life by performing the circumcision on her son: 'She gave me back my soul that night. For the Torah says, 'Thus she said, "[You are] a bridegroom of blood for circumcisions!"' In the near future, Moses will acknowledge, echoing 'āz, 'thus,' that Zipporah saved his life.<sup>8</sup>

After following this rabbinic detour, we now return to our line of thought in offering this proposal of Exod 4:24-26. After the events related in this text, Yahweh and Moses engaged in a strong conflict concerning the fate of the Israelites for making the golden calf. Yahweh proposed to destroy the people and to make a great nation from the descendants of Moses (Exod 32:9-10), but Moses pleaded with Yahweh spare the people; so Yahweh 'changed his mind' (Exod 32:11-14). Moses then begged Yahweh to forgive his people, but Yahweh declared he would punish them for their sin, and he sent a plague on them because they had made the calf (Exod 32:30-35).

Another incident in which Moses and Yahweh had a severe conflict had to do with the response of the Israelites to the report of the ten spies that the Israelites could not take the land of Canaan from its inhabitants. The whole congregation threatened to stone Moses and Aaron to death.

8 S. A. Tuchman and S. E. Rapaport, *Moses' Women* (Jersey City: KTAV, 2008) 127-39.

Yahweh responded by proclaiming that he would destroy the people and make the descendants of Moses a nation greater and mightier than they. But again, Moses begged Yahweh not to destroy the Israelites but to forgive them. Yahweh agreed to this, but announced that none of the people who came out of Egypt would see the land of Canaan and live in it except Caleb (Num 14:1-25).

Still another conflict erupted between Yahweh and Moses when the Israelites complained because they had no water, and Yahweh told Moses to command the rock before their eyes to yield its water. Instead, Moses struck the rock twice with his rod. Yahweh rebuked Moses for not trusting in him, and told Moses he would not enter the promised land of Canaan because he disobeyed him (Num 20:2-13). In Moses' first speech in the book of Deuteronomy, he refers to this incident several times, but blames God's denial that he enter the promised land on the people (Deut 1:37; 3:23-29; 4:21).

These examples suggest there is a consistent theme running through the story of Moses in Exodus-Deuteronomy: Yahweh and Moses repeatedly enter into conflict with each other. They have different ideas, and they disagree as to how to handle difficult situations. Sometimes Yahweh prevails over or punishes Moses; sometimes Moses persuades Yahweh to change his mind and do what Moses thinks best. The story in Exod 4:24-26 is quite at home in this narrative.

The story of Balaam and the donkey in Num 22:1-35 paints a similar picture. Balak, king of Moab, sent messengers to Balaam, a Mesopotamian prophet, to hire him to curse the Israelites as they were encamped near the land of Moab. Balaam consulted God, God told him not to go with the messengers, so Balaam refused to go (vv. 1-14). But Balak was persistent. He sent more distinguished officials to Balaam with more payment and greater incentives to come and curse the Israelites. Balaam consulted God, and God said: 'If the men have come to summon you, get up and go with them; but do only what I tell you to do' (v. 20). So Balaam went with the men (vv. 15-21). But the very next line says: 'God's anger was kindled because he was going, and the angel of Yahweh took his stand in the road as his adversary' (v. 22). Balaam did not see the angel, and thus tried to move on, but without success. Finally, the angel revealed himself to Balaam, and Balaam offered to return home (vv. 22-34). But the angel said to Balaam: 'Go with the men; but speak only what I tell you to speak' (v. 35), the very same thing God had told

him before he left with the men in the first place (v 20). The flow of the narrative would make the hearer/reader assume that when Balaam went with the men initially, he had no intention of doing what Yahweh told him; Yahweh knew this; and thus he confronted Balaam and made it quite clear that he must do what Yahweh told him.<sup>9</sup> The result was that Balaam blessed the Israelites instead of cursing them from the mountain-top overlooking their camping place (22:36-24:25). But there is more to this story. Num 25:1-5 says that while the Israelites were encamped at Shittim, the men began having sexual relations with the women of Moab and/or the women of Midian in Moab, and worshiped their gods. Num 31:16 states that these women were acting 'on Balaam's advice.' The logical conclusion the hearer/reader would draw from this is that Balaam sought a different means to curse the Israelites after declaring blessings on them from the mountaintop. In other words, his actions and words did not reflect the intentions of his heart. The flow of the narrative in the book of Exodus suggests that the same may have been true of Moses as he traveled from Midian back to Egypt. At this point, he had no intention of confronting Pharaoh as Yahweh had instructed. His actions and words did not reflect the intentions of his heart.

There are also ways in which Yahweh's attack on Moses parallels his attack on Jacob at the Jabbok River (Gen 32:22-32 [Hebrew 32:23-33]). Both Moses and Jacob were on a journey which would bring them to a formidable enemy. Zipporah 'touched' (*ng'*) Moses' genitals (4:25), and Yahweh 'touched' (*ng'*) Jacob's thigh (Gen 32:25, 32 [Hebrew 32:26, 33]). B. P. Robinson suggests that Yahweh's attack on Moses was a symbolic warning of what would happen if the Israelites did not go into the wilderness to celebrate a pilgrimage festival. Since the original plan for a wilderness festival was thwarted, Yahweh told the Israelites to eat the Passover lamb and to smear the blood on their tent posts.<sup>10</sup> In both cases, Yahweh claims complete possession of the one he has chosen.

Whose 'feet' (legs, genitals) did Zipporah touch, and what is the significance of the act she performed as described in Exod 4:25a-b? These questions are impossible to answer with certainty. With great hesi-

9 So similarly Cassuto, 58-59. See further E. Kellenberger, 'Jahwes unerwarteter Widerstand,' 69-72.

10 Robinson, 452-53.

tation, I adopt the view which seems to me to have the fewest difficulties. The 'act' which Zipporah performed consists of two things, not one: (1) 'she cut off her son's foreskin;' and (2) 'she touched *his* feet with it.' From the standpoint of an audience observing and hearing this narrative in a public reading or performance, the expression *nāga'* + *l*, 'touch,' would naturally return to mind when the readers or actors reported Moses' words to the people concerning the blood of the Paschal lamb in Exod 12:22: 'Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and *touch* (*nāga'* + *'el*) the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood in the basin;' and they would connect this with the words of Yahweh a few lines earlier: 'when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt' (Exod 12:13). The purpose for killing the Paschal lamb is to procure blood to 'touch' or 'smear' on the lintel and doorposts to *protect* those inside the house from Yahweh when he passes through the land of Egypt to destroy the firstborn. If this comparison is valid, the purpose Zipporah had in mind in 'cutting off' her son's foreskin was to procure blood to *protect* the person with whom she 'touched' it or on whom she 'smeared' it. Since it seems most likely that Yahweh attacked Moses (4:24), apparently Zipporah smeared the blood on Moses' feet, legs, or genitals. It seems unlikely that Zipporah was 'circumcising' Moses vicariously or symbolically. Rather, she smeared the blood on him so that Yahweh would 'see' it and 'pass over,' i.e., desist from carrying out his intention to kill, her husband. W. H. C. Propp, in his extended comment on 'Demons and Doorposts' in his commentary on the book of Exodus, argues that *psḥ* should be translated 'protect,' and emphasizes the purifying power of blood. He writes:

[...] The verb *higgā'*, connoting the application of the paschal blood to the Hebrews' door frames and the blood of circumcision to Moses' penis (4:25), also describes the purification (*kippēr*) of Isaiah's mouth by fire (Isa 6:7). In the Exodus account, then, the paschal blood may not avert the Destroyer by its own virtue. Rather, it may create a zone of ritual purity attractive to Yahweh's presence [...] God then protects (*psḥ*) the household from his own demonic side.<sup>11</sup>

- 11 Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 437 [entire section on 'Demons and Doorposts,' pp. 434-39]. See also the discussion of the close connection of purification and apotropaic rites and the efficacy of blood in these rites in D. J. McCarthy, S. J., 'The Symbolism of Blood and Sacrifice,' *JBL* 88 (1969) 168-70, 173-75.

It seems, then, that Zipporah's circumcision of her son was secondary to touching or smearing the blood procured from that circumcision on Moses' feet (legs, genitals). But this does not mean that Zipporah's act of circumcising her son was unimportant. The juxtaposition of *Exod* 4:21-23 and 4:24-26 may supply the key for understanding the significance of Zipporah circumcising her son. Yahweh's instruction to Moses is to tell Pharaoh that since he refused to let Yahweh's firstborn son Israel go that he might worship him (vv. 22-23a), Yahweh would kill his firstborn son (v. 23b). This refers to the last of the ten plagues, in which Yahweh passed through the land of Egypt and killed all the firstborn sons of the Egyptians including Pharaoh's firstborn son, but spared the firstborn sons of the Israelites who had killed the Passover lamb and smeared some of its blood on the doorposts and lintels of their houses (*Exod* 12:3-7, 11-13, 21-23). *Exod* 12:43-49 emphasizes that males must be circumcised in order to participate in the Passover celebration and meal. Yet, up until the incident related in *Exod* 4:24-26, Moses had not circumcised his own son (whether Gershom or Eliezer); if he, as Yahweh's designated representative to lead the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage, had not circumcised his son, how could he persuasively encourage his fellows to do this? Moses' neglect or failure to circumcise his son was a 'symptom' of a much deeper problem: Moses' reluctance to carry out the mission Yahweh had given him. Zipporah sought to change the image of Moses' lack of trust in Yahweh and reluctance to carry out his mission by rectifying one failure of Moses to follow Yahweh's instructions: she circumcised their son.

How did Zipporah know that the way to prevent Yahweh from killing Moses was to circumcise her son and touch Moses' feet (legs, genitals) with the bloody foreskin? One cannot give a definitive answer to this question. I would conjecture that since Zipporah seems to have done what she did immediately without giving it a second thought, either her cultural environment in Midian and the surrounding region assumed that blood smeared on a person or an object protected that person or object from danger, or she and Moses had had conflictual discussions about circumcision and smearing blood because they came from cultures which differed on these matters in one or more ways and this was a matter of serious religious difference between them that troubled their relationship.

What does *ḥātān dāmīm* (4:25, 26) mean? In the narrative context of the book of Exodus, it seems very unlikely that *ḥātān* here means 'bridegroom,' because at this point in the story of Moses, Moses and Zipporah had been married for several years and they had two sons (4:20). This leaves at least two options. On the one hand, *ḥātān* may be a cognate of the Arabic *ḥatana*, 'to circumcise,' and thus *ḥātān dāmīm* may mean 'blood circumcised one.' If so, it could refer to the son of Moses and Zipporah whom Zipporah has just actually circumcised, or it could refer to Moses if it could be demonstrated that by touching Moses' feet (legs, genitals) Zipporah was vicariously or symbolically circumcising him. On the other hand, *ḥātān* may be a cognate of the Akkadian *ḥatanu*, 'to protect,' and thus *ḥātān dāmīm* may mean 'one protected by blood.' This is the view which I have adopted tentatively in the discussion above.

How is the hearer/reader to understand and evaluate the function of Exod 4:24-26 in the narrative of the book of Exodus (or the entire Pentateuch)? Jacob and Moses apparently play a similar role in the Pentateuchal narrative: each figure functions as a microcosm of the people Israel. The Hebrew Bible makes a strong connection between Jacob 'the man' and Jacob 'the people.' 'Jacob' means 'supplanter,' 'conniver,' 'trickster,' 'deceiver,' 'manipulator' (Gen 25:26), a characteristic Jacob vividly displays in securing Esau's birthright (Gen 25:29-34) and blessing (Gen 27:1-40, esp. vv. 35-36). When rich Israelites oppress their defenseless neighbors, using deceit and dishonesty, Hosea (12:2-9 [Hebrew 12:3-10]) and Jeremiah (9:2-9 [Hebrew 9:1-8]) declare that they are 'living up to their name:' Jacob. This is but one of many examples of parallels between the story of Jacob in the book of Genesis and the story of Israel.

The same is true of Moses. A clear example of this is the complaints of Moses and the Israelites against Yahweh when it seemed that Yahweh was not acting in behalf of his people as he had promised. The complaints of the people are well known. The 'pattern' of these complaints in the books of Exodus and Numbers is: (1) the Israelites complain to Moses; (2) Moses complains to Yahweh. For example, when the Egyptians increased the difficulty of making bricks for the Israelites, the Israelites said to Moses and Aaron: 'The Lord look upon you and judge! You have brought us into bad odor with Pharaoh and his officials, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us' (Exod 5:21). Moses' reaction



was to turn to the Lord and say: 'O Lord, why have you mistreated this people? Why did you ever send me? Since I first came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has mistreated this people, and you have done nothing at all to deliver your people' (Exod 5:22-23).

Many similar events in the life of Moses and of Israel appear in the books of Exodus-Deuteronomy. One of these appears to be the similarities between Zipporah circumcising her son and smearing the blood on Moses' feet (legs, genitals) to protect him from death at Yahweh's hand (Exod 4:24-26) and the Israelites killing the Paschal lamb and smearing the blood on the lintels and doorposts of their houses to protect their firstborn male children from Yahweh as he passed through the land of Egypt to kill the firstborn (Exod 12:7, 13, 22-23). In the story of Moses, circumcision + smearing the blood is an apotropaic rite designed to protect the person on whom the blood is smeared.

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The interpretation of Exodus 4:24-26 is very controversial. Scholars have treated this text from various viewpoints on the basis of divergent methods or approaches. Two fundamental problems cause uncertainty about the origin and meaning of this text. One problem has to do with the nature of Exod 4:24-26. Another problem is the identity of the persons mentioned in Exod 4:24-26. This book arranges forty-two documented interpretations under each approach or approaches, presenting the view of each scholar proposing his/her interpretation of Exodus 4:24-26 in chronological order. The author presents his own view in the concluding chapter, essentially adopting a redactional, canonical, narrative, rhetorical methodology.

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