

THE ENIGMATIC DIVINE ENCOUNTER IN EXODUS 4:24-26

Kenneth A. Cherney, Jr.

Introduction

Treatments of Exodus 4:24-26 in sermons, Bible classes, etc., are fairly rare, and squeamishness about the subject matter is probably not the only reason. While the text, vocabulary, and morphology pose no real problems, this been called the most obscure passage in the entire book.¹ Brevard Childs proposed that it represents a tradition that was put into writing by an author who no longer understood it.² Martin Noth viewed the original as a “demon-encounter” tale that was later fused with an etiological narrative—i.e., a story told to explain the origin of a personal or place name, custom, etc.—yielding a result that is practically unintelligible.³

If anything, this account is the exact opposite of an etiology. The incident at the lodging place does not explain circumcision, but circumcision is called in to explain Zipporah’s remark, a fact which I regard as the key to understanding it. Childs’ and Noth’s views are extreme, and yet the problems in the pericope are undeniable. The large number of proposed interpretations going back to antiquity indicates that a humble and cautious approach to this enigmatic text is best.

Solving the puzzle requires disambiguating the pronouns—i.e., deciding who is doing what to whom—and settling on a meaning for Zipporah’s words “a bridegroom of blood.” Other questions include what the account is doing here in the book, how it can be that Moses has an uncircumcised son, what Moses is doing while the encounter takes place (if in fact he is there), and why the Lord would threaten to kill Moses (if that is what happens) just after having persuaded him—and with difficulty!—to go and set Israel free.

¹J. P. Hyatt, *Commentary on Exodus* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott Ltd., 1971). For a list of proposed interpretations see J. I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary vol. 3 (Dallas: Word, 1987). The position closest to that of this article is D. K. Stuart’s, *Exodus*, New American Commentary vol. 2 (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2006), 152-158, although it differs in a few details.

²B. S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 104.

³M. Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary*, J. S. Bowden, trans. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 49f.

Translation

²⁴And it happened on the way, at a certain lodging place, that the Lord confronted him and sought to kill him. ²⁵But Zipporah took a flint knife and cut off her son's foreskin, and she touched [it] to his feet and said, "You are my bridegroom of blood."

²⁶And [the LORD] let him go. [That was] when she said "bridegroom of blood," with reference to circumcision.

Textual notes

4:24 בַּמְּלֹךְ בְּדֶרֶךְ יְיָ—Syriac adds "Moses" to the verse twice, both as the one who was "on the way" and as the one who was in danger of being killed. Both יְיָ and the definite "the way" (i.e., the way from Midian to Egypt) link this account back to 4:20, resuming the account of Moses' journey after it was interrupted by the divine speech in 4:21-23.

In the translation above, "lodging place" is preferred over the traditional rendering "inn" for בַּמְּלֹךְ, not because of the noun's derivation from לֹוֹן/לֵוִן ("to lodge"), but because for modern English readers "inn" is freighted with connotations that are not relevant here. The definite article on בַּמְּלֹךְ probably does not mean that the place was assumed to be known to the reader ("the lodging place"). This is most likely a case of "imperfect determination" (Joüon §137n3); cp. "a certain blackberry bush" in Ex 3:2. בַּמְּלֹךְ does not prove the encounter took place at night, since a stop to rest during the heat of the day is also a possibility. A consonant change from בְּדֶרֶךְ ("on the way") to בְּכֶרֶךְ ("your firstborn son;" see v. 23) is one proposed solution to the problem of the identity of the LORD's intended victim,⁴ but the suggestion does not seem to have been widely accepted.

וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ יְהוָה וַיִּבְקֶשׂ הַמַּיִתוֹ—LXX, *Targum Onqelos*, and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* "the angel of the LORD met him and sought to kill him;" later Old Greek manuscripts have simply "an angel." In an attempt to supply a rationale for the LORD's behavior, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* adds "because of Gershom his son, who had not been circumcised; [this was] on account of Jethro his [Moses'] father-in-law, who did not let him circumcise him, although Eliezer had been circumcised as an agreement between the two of them." Both Targums view Moses as the antecedent of both pronominal suffixes—i.e., the one whom the LORD confronted and intended to kill. So does Rashi, although he thinks Eliezer rather than Gershom was the uncircumcised son and that Eliezer's circumcision had been neglected because of the impend-

⁴R. G. Hall, "Circumcision," in D. N. Freedman et al., *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 1, 1026.

ing journey (based on the Talmud, *Ned.* 32a). Others see the intended victim as not Moses but one of the sons (v. 25), i.e., either Gershom or Eliezer (so Ibn Ezra). Whoever the intended victim was (on which see below), it is interesting that we are told the LORD “sought to kill him” (וַיִּבְקֹשׁ הַמִּיתוֹ).⁵ Why did he merely “seek to”? The extra (Hebrew) word is not intended to launch us into speculations about whether God’s intention could have been thwarted. Instead, it serves a narrative function, slowing down narrative time just enough to permit Zipporah’s quick action.

4:25 זָר—Although the incident takes place in the Late Bronze age, a sharpened stone (flint or obsidian) is still the tool of choice for circumcisions (See Jos 5:2). This is probably not a matter of a primitive technology being preferred in a ritual context (like our use of candles in church), but because metal tools could not surpass the sharpness of chipped stone until fairly recent times.

בְּנֵהּ—Naming can be highly significant in biblical narrative. Obviously the boy is Moses’ son too, and he does have a name. By calling him “her son,” however, the narrator implies that maternal concern moved Zipporah to action, which puts Moses’ puzzling inaction into sharp relief. This is the only time in Scripture that circumcision is performed by a mother.

וַתִּגַּע לְרַגְלָיו—lit. “she caused [it] to touch” (*hip’il*). The goal (feet) of the verb is specified but its patient is not, although it has to have been the foreskin. The goal for נָגַע in *hip’il* is more often indicated with אֶל־ or עַד־; cp. Isa 6:7. The real problem is the question of whose feet the foreskin touches: Moses’, Zipporah’s son’s, or the angel of the LORD’s. Unfortunately, a rite involving touching the foreskin to the “feet” (others “legs” or “genitals”) is otherwise unknown. Attempts have been made to connect this (presumably bloody) foreskin touching the boy’s feet, which saved the boy from death, with the application of blood to Israelite doorframes at Passover (Ex 12:13).⁶ Obstacles to this view include the lack of shared vocabulary between these two texts and verse 26’s entirely different explanation for why Zipporah mentions “blood.”

כִּי—כִּי is not the so-called “asseverative” (“Surely”), but the כִּי *recitativum* that introduces direct speech and is best left untranslated (Joüon §157 VI. c.). Once again, the difficulty lies in the pronoun (“you”). There are three candidates in the context

⁵T. E. Fretheim, *Exodus, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1991), 79.

⁶J. Currid, *Exodus: A Study Commentary* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2000), vol. 1, 116.

for its antecedent—Moses, the LORD, or Zipporah’s son—and in each case there is some problem with calling the candidate a זָרְתָּן (“bridegroom” or “daughter’s husband”; see below). LXX: “She fell at his (i.e., the Angel of the LORD’s) feet and said, ‘The flow of blood from my child’s circumcision has stopped’” (cf. Lk 8:44). Especially since an identical rendering appears in v. 26 below, where the Hebrew is quite different, LXX’s translation probably does not represent a different Hebrew *Vorlage*.⁷ The translator is simply trying his best to make sense of a difficult passage, understanding it as an emphatic assertion that her son’s circumcision has been decisively taken care of and there is no longer any reason for the Angel of the LORD to kill him.

But if the translator was wrong, and this is not the point of Zipporah’s remark, then what is? It is important to note that by her use of זָרְתָּן Zipporah clearly ties circumcision and marriage together in a way that the institution of circumcision in Genesis 17:9-14 does not. A זָרְתָּן can be a “bridegroom” (i.e., the counterpart to a כַּתְּוָה , a “bride;” e.g., Jer 7:34), but it is not clear why Zipporah would call her own husband a “bridegroom” if they have been married long enough to have two children. More importantly, while the word “bridegroom” has nothing to do with “circumcision” or “blood” for an English reader, clearly these were related concepts in Zipporah’s mind. The Arabic root that is cognate with זָרְתָּן means both “to marry” and “to circumcise,” and a meaning “candidate for circumcision” for זָרְתָּן persists in Mishnaic Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac, where it can even mean “a candidate for baptism.” In my view (see “Commentary” below) this is very helpful toward understanding Zipporah’s remark—or more precisely, what exactly it was about Zipporah’s remark that the narrator felt a need to explain.

4:26 $\text{וַיִּרְחַץ מִיָּדָיו}$ —lit. “and he relaxed/let [it] drop from him;” Samaritan Pentateuch $\text{וַיִּרְחַץ מִיָּדָיו}$, “from/because of her”—possibly the meaning is that the threat had been to Zipporah; possibly it is that her quick action *caused* the LORD to relent, in which case the Samaritan text has been adjusted toward the general point. It is true that the importance of circumcision is emphasized in the account of the institution of Passover (Ex 12), but this account has very little vocabulary in common with the Passover story (where “blood” is the singular דָּם , and the verb is פָּסַח , not רָפַח). It is therefore doubtful that the present text is “a paradigm of the later Passover event.”⁸ LXX “and he went away from him; therefore she said, ‘The flow of blood from my child’s circumcision has stopped’” (as in v. 25).

⁷Pace W. Dumbrell, “Exodus 4:24-26: A Textual Reexamination,” *Harvard Theological Review* 65 (1972):285-290.

⁸Pace J. Currid, *Exodus*, 116.

לְבוּיִלוֹת—lit. “with reference to the circumcisions.” The plural with the article is used for “circumcision” as an abstract concept (GKC§124d, §126n[c]; cp. “blindness,” Ge 19:11). It is significant, though unfortunate for us, that Zipporah’s statement is the one thing in the account that the narrator thinks needs an explanation. *Targum Onqelos*’s rendering of her statement as “if it were not for the blood of this circumcision, the bridegroom [i.e., Moses] would have been killed” is clear, but highly interpretive, and its interpretation is not the one preferred here.

Commentary

4:24 וַיֵּיָּחֶד picks up the story of Moses’ departure from the presence of the LORD (v 20). It had been interrupted by a reminder from the LORD to perform before Pharaoh all the signs that the LORD had given Moses to do, and by the LORD’s instruction to be sure to tell Pharaoh, “Israel is my firstborn son, and I said to you, ‘Release my firstborn son so that he may serve me.’ But you have refused to release him; therefore, I am about to kill your firstborn son” (vv. 22-23). “In the way” requires vv. 18-21 to be understood: the “way” is the road from Midian back to Egypt, which Moses has asked Jethro to allow him and his family to take. It was proposed by Abraham ben HaRambam (son of Maimonides) that the “way” referred to here is actually the journey taken by Zipporah and her children back to Midian, from which they do not return to Moses until 18:1-9.⁹ This would mean that Moses was not even along on the journey when the incident recorded here took place. While this would explain the absence of any mention of Moses during the incident, the proposal does not seem to have gained a lot of traction.

Parallels between this account and Numbers 22:20-35 (Balaam’s journey) have been pointed out frequently,¹⁰ and to read each in the light of the other does seem productive. I cannot agree, however, that both texts are literary “type scenes” whose meaning is that to embark on a divinely commissioned journey is inherently dangerous, or that we should seek no reason beyond this for the dangers the travelers face.¹¹ The present account places tremendous importance on circumcision, and this plays no role in the Balaam stories whatsoever. A further weakness in the Moses//Balaam parallel is that, while English translations generally hide this fact, the Masoretic Text does not men-

⁹Cited in F. Blumenthal, “The Circumcision Performed by Zipporah,” *Jewish Biblical Quarterly* 35 (2007): 255-259.

¹⁰For a list of parallels see V. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 82f.

¹¹B. Embry, “The Endangerment of Moses: Towards a New Reading of Exodus 4:24-26,” *Vetus Testamentum* 60 (2010): 177-196.

tion Moses at all, and in the position of this article the threat at the “lodging place” is not to Moses directly. The context immediately prior suggests that we understand “the LORD confronted him and sought to kill him” (v. 21) differently.

The best answer to the question of why the LORD would threaten Moses with death right after convincing him to lead Israel out of Egypt is: the LORD didn't. One reason not to understand Moses as the LORD's intended victim is that in the Torah a lack of circumcision can have severe consequences for an individual (Ge 17:14), but nothing is ever said about consequences for the father. A more important reason is that in the unit immediately prior to this one, there are three references in the space of two verses to someone's “son” or “firstborn son,” either God's or Pharaoh's.¹² If plot advancement or chronological order were the prime considerations, then that unit (4:21-23) would either follow 4:17 immediately or would appear much later in the book. 4:21-23 appears before vv. 24-26 for exactly this reason: so that reverberations of “my son” and “my firstborn” from vv. 21-23 will lead us to understand *Moses'* firstborn, Gershom, as the one who is confronted and threatened with death. The next definite noun (other than “Zipporah”) after the two occurrences of the ambiguous pronoun “him” (2x) is בְּנֵי הָאִשָּׁה (“her son”), which points back to these pronouns and confirms for the reader that this is who they refer to.¹³ In other words, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan's* understanding that LORD threatens Gershom is essentially correct, minus the speculation about a pact with Jethro that allowed Moses to circumcise Eliezer. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan's* suggestion that there was tension between Moses and Jethro over the circumcision of Jethro's grandchildren also hints at an explanation for how Moses came to have an uncircumcised son, which in turn might help to explain Zipporah's strange remark. See below.

4:25 Even if it was not Moses whom the Lord wanted to kill, and even if failing to circumcise a son did not normally carry the death penalty, neither Moses' having an uncircumcised son nor his apparent inactivity while Zipporah springs into action puts him in a favorable light. If anything is clear in this puzzling account, it is the importance of circumcision. For some reason it is not Moses but Zipporah who sees to it and saves the boy, whom the narrator meaningfully refers to as “her son”—not “their son,” not “Gershom.”¹⁴

¹²This argument does not depend on the proposal that we emend בְּרִיךְ (“in the way”) to בְּכֹרֶךְ (“your firstborn son”), which to me is unpersuasive and unnecessary; see “Textual Notes” above.

¹³For a similar position see Stuart, *Exodus*, 153.

¹⁴Like Hamilton (*Exodus*, 83) I am puzzled by how many commentators think this account puts Zipporah in a bad light.

There is no question about whose foreskin is involved, but the description of Zipporah's subsequent action contains two more ambiguous pronouns. The first pronoun leaves it unclear whose feet the foreskin touches (suggestions include Gershom's, Moses, or the LORD's) and the second pronoun requires a decision about who is meant by "you" in "You are my bridegroom of blood." To answer the second question, it is necessary to ascertain who Zipporah could plausibly have referred to as a "bridegroom" (יְדוּדִיךָ) so it seems best to take up that matter first.

Although probably the majority of commentators take יְדוּדִיךָ to be Zipporah's way of referring to her husband, there are at least three obstacles to this view. One of these, mentioned above, is that it is unclear why she would call Moses her "bridegroom" rather than her husband (שׂוֹשְׁבֵינִי or לְבַעְלִי) if they have been married long enough to have two children. The second is that the point of בְּדַמְּךָ ("blood") is then less than obvious, since it is her son, not Moses, who is bleeding. Third and most important: when the narrator senses a need to explain Zipporah's expression, he does not mention marriage or a familial relationship at all. He mentions circumcision (see below on v. 26).

To return to the question of whose feet Zipporah touches with the foreskin, if it is Gershom who has been circumcised and it is Gershom to whom בְּדַמְּךָ יְדוּדִיךָ refers (as will be argued below), it is most natural to see the feet as belonging to Gershom as well. The interpretation preferred in this article makes Moses an unlikely candidate, and for Zipporah to refer to the Lord as her "bridegroom of blood" seems to make little sense. Proposed explanations of the symbolism behind Zipporah's action have the advantage of being impossible to disprove. It seems best to acknowledge that its significance has been lost, which means that the question of whose feet are touched ultimately has to go unanswered. This also means that the common speculation that "feet" here actually means "genitals" is no more than that.

4:26 "And he let *him* go"—another ambiguous pronoun. It must refer to the one who had been facing death, which, according to the interpretation preferred in this article, is Moses' firstborn, Gershom. It is significant that the LORD relents and is satisfied with a circumcision performed well past the eighth day of life, by a woman while her husband apparently stands by and does nothing, and by a non-Israelite (though a worshiper of the LORD) to boot.

Circumcision was not unique to Israel. It is an extremely old and widespread religious rite, although exactly how it is carried out and for what purpose varies considerably (when its purpose is known or explained, which is not always the case).¹⁵ In most cultures circumci-

¹⁵M. V. Fox, "The Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in the Light of Priestly *ô*t Etiologies," *Revue Biblique* 81 (1974): 557.

sion is a marriage or fertility rite.¹⁶ Among Abrahamic peoples, it is known to have been practiced by the Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites, and the various Ishmaelite tribes.¹⁷ The Arabic root that is cognate with נָּתַן means both “to marry” and “to circumcise,” which BDB attributes to an ancient custom by which a bridegroom was circumcised by his father-in-law (Hebrew חָתָן) just before his wedding. For our purposes it is significant that the root נָּתַן never has the meaning “to circumcise” in biblical Hebrew; in the Bible, circumcision is always indicated by forms of the root כָּרַח (or simply כָּרַח , “to cut”).

It is for exactly this reason that, in the narrator’s opinion, Israelite readers will need some kind of explanation for Zipporah’s remark, “You are my נָּתַן of blood.” It seems likely that circumcision would have been practiced among the Midianites, who were the descendants of Abraham and Keturah (Ge 25:1-6) and who apparently also later came to be closely associated with the Ishmaelites (Ge 37:25-36). It therefore is not hard at all to see the practice and understanding of the rite of circumcision as having diverged at some point from the “sign of the covenant” given by God to Abraham (Ge 17). It could easily have shifted from a rite performed on the eighth day of life to a liminal rite associated with marriage and fertility, a view that is more commonly found among peoples that circumcise (cf. Ge 34:13-17). Midianite influence would then explain (if not justify) the fact that Moses and Zipporah still have an uncircumcised son, more or less as *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* conjectures.

This scenario would also explain Zipporah’s choice of the term נָּתַן בְּמִיִּם for her newly circumcised son. Her words would then carry the meaning, “This custom of Jacob’s descendants that the Lord is insisting on—i.e., circumcising small boys, not bridegrooms—is strange to me. But if I can save my son’s life by doing it—then son, as far as I’m concerned, you’re a bridegroom!” The narrator’s commentary then means, “Zipporah said ‘bridegroom of blood’ because, as a Midianite, she associated what we Israelites call ‘circumcision’ (בְּמִילָה) with a bridegroom (נָּתַן). Imagine that!”

Reflection

It is terrifying to think that God would seek to bring death into the household of the greatest hero of faith in the Old Testament simply because one of its members was uncircumcised. What was circumcision, after all? A minor but painful surgery performed on defenseless baby boys; a ritual that seems arbitrary at best and that later civiliza-

¹⁶Hall, “Circumcision.”

¹⁷Fox, “The Sign of the Covenant,” 589f.

tions would see as barbaric and repugnant. And yet the uncircumcised would not be allowed to eat the Passover (Ex 12:43-49). They were to be cut off from God's people (Ge 17:14). The consequence of evading the divinely instituted sign by which one entered God's family was that membership in God's family was forfeited.

Today, we enter God's family by way of a procedure that is less painful, but to some seems just as primitive or arbitrary: Holy Baptism (Col 2:11-12). It seems unthinkable that a would-be spiritual leader in Christ's church could have an unbaptized child in his own house, although experience shows that it can happen. A more common sight is the spiritual leader who is boldly striding toward Egypt with visions in his head of changing the world, but who has forgotten the important task that lies much closer to home: seeing to it that members of his own family enter and remain in God's covenant of grace (1 Ti 3:4,5).

The example of Zipporah shows that God responds with compassion and forgiveness when somebody in the house—*anybody*—cares enough to take action. A colleague of mine is a Lutheran seminary professor today because, when he was a child, his mother announced one night at dinner that the family's neglect of God's house was going to stop, and everyone should be ready for church the following Sunday morning. Just as with Moses in this account, I honestly don't know how my friend's father reacted. How the LORD reacted shows the power of grace.