The Transformation of Moses: An Exegetical Study of Exodus 4:24-26

by

Laura Mary Elizabeth Hare

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Laura Mary Elizabeth Hare

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Knox College and Biblical Department

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Abstract

This thesis examines Exodus 4:24-26 in its context in order to determine the function and meaning of the passage. The thesis argues that Ex 4:24-26 acts as a parallel to Ex 2:3-10. The circumcision of Moses’ son acts as a vicarious circumcision of Moses. This circumcision has two results: the symbolic death and rebirth of the ritual transforms Moses back into a Hebrew (after having been transformed into an Egyptian in Ex 2:3-10), and the circumcision is also a rite of passage which transforms Moses into a confident, decisive adult. As a result of the attack and circumcision in Ex 4:24-26, Moses becomes an appropriate leader for the Hebrews, and leads them out of slavery.
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INTRODUCTION

Exodus 4:24-26 is one of the most obscure and enigmatic passages in the Hebrew Bible. It seems to be an archaic snippet from a different tradition (perhaps a tradition that had nothing to do with Moses, since his name is never mentioned in the pericope) that has been placed into a new context. Although the grammar of the passage is straightforward, the syntax is unclear—the use of pronouns without clear antecedents creates numerous ambiguities. Moreover, some of the vocabulary is unusual or even unique in the Hebrew Bible, and because the passage is so short there is little context for interpreting this vocabulary. Also, the narrative raises several questions that it does not seem to answer.

The difficulties that this passage poses for exegetes include the following: (1) it is not clear whom YHWH attacks—Moses or his son (and if the latter, which son)—or why he attacks him; (2) the narrative does not specify which of her sons Zipporah circumcises; (3) we are not told whose רַגְלַיִם Zipporah touches with the foreskin—Moses’, her son’s, or perhaps YHWH’s; (4) it is uncertain how רַגְלַיִם should be translated in the passage (it can have the meaning of feet, legs, or genitals); (5) it is unclear what חָתָן means in this context, since the phrase חֲתַן-דָּמִים occurs only here in the Hebrew Bible and its meaning is far from clear; (6) we are not told whom Zipporah is addressing as חֲתַן-דָּמִים (Moses? her son? YHWH?); (7) מּוּלֹת is a hapax legomenon and it is not clear how it should be interpreted or what function the preposition ל has in the phrase לַמּוּלֹת; (8) it is strange that Zipporah, rather than Moses, is circumcising her son; (9) we are not told why

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2 Howell, “The Firstborn Son,” 64.

Zipporah thought that circumcising her son would stop the attack or why the circumcision (or was it the application of blood, or was it the phrase Zipporah said?) caused YHWH to withdraw from attacking.

Any interpretation of Ex 4:24-26 must engage with these problems and must offer an explanation that is coherent, consistent, and plausible. Only then is it possible to propose an interpretation either of the original meaning of the passage or of its meaning and function in its present context in the Moses story.

This thesis will use a synchronic reading of the Biblical text, examining the text as it has been passed down rather than trying to determine what earlier versions looked like. Thus the thesis will not try to determine what Ex 4:24-26 may have meant “originally” (i.e., before being included in the Torah). The thesis will adopt a literary approach, performing a close reading of Ex 4:24-26 and the surrounding material.

By examining this pericope in its context and particularly in comparison with Ex 2:3-10, and by building on Bradley Embry’s argument that the episode is a rite of passage wherein an episode of endangerment brings about a transformation in the hero, this thesis will offer a suggestion for interpreting the function of the pericope in the larger context of the Moses story. The thesis will demonstrate that Ex 4:24-26 functions as a parallel to Ex 2:3-10, transforming Moses back into a Hebrew through the symbolic death and rebirth of the ritual of circumcision in preparation for his role as the leader of the Hebrews. The thesis will also show that this circumcision functions as a rite of passage, bringing about Moses’ maturation from an unconfident young man who runs

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away rather than face his problems to a full adult who faces up to his people, the Pharaoh, and even God and thus is able to lead the Hebrews out of slavery.
CHAPTER ONE
THE HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION OF EXODUS 4:24-26

Ancient Interpretations

The ancient versions offer the earliest interpretations of the passage that we have; their variations from the Masoretic text reflect early Jewish attempts to make sense of the pericope. The Syriac text inserts the name “Moses” into verse 24 as both the subject of the verse (“Moses was on the way”) and the object whom the Lord met.\(^5\) This insertion is presumably an attempt to deal with the ambiguity regarding who is being attacked.

The Septuagint identifies the attacker as an angel of the Lord instead of the Lord himself, since “It could not be accepted that the Lord in person would threaten the life of any man, and particularly not the life of his elect.”\(^6\) The Septuagint also has Zipporah fall at the feet of the angel and say, “The blood of the circumcision of my son has stood,” rather than making a statement about a bridegroom of blood; v. 26 specifies that it was because she said this that the angel left.\(^7\) The Armenian version reads, “Behold the blood of the circumcision of my son,” and the Ethiopic version has “May the blood of the circumcision of my son be in his place.” All three of these versions emphasize the sacrificial aspect of this circumcision: Moses is saved by his son’s blood.\(^8\)

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\(^7\) Vermes, “Baptism,” 310.

\(^8\) Vermes, “Baptism,” 310.
*Targum Onkelos* agrees with the Septuagint in v. 24. In v. 25, Zipporah says, “May my husband be given to us by the blood of this circumcision,” which is a similar interpretation to that of the Septuagint. Then, in v. 26, she says, “Were it not for the blood of this circumcision, my husband had merited execution.” Thus this Targum offers two interpretations of the phrase “bridegroom of blood,” the first being the sacrificial interpretation found in the Septuagint and the second being the possibility of the shedding of her husband’s blood.\(^9\) In *Fragmentary Targum* and *Codex Neofiti*, the attacker is identified as the “Destroyer,” the “Angel of Death,” and the reason for Zipporah’s son’s state of uncircumcision is that Jethro did not allow Moses to circumcise him. Zipporah realizes that Moses is being attacked because he is guilty of not circumcising his son, so she quickly solves the problem and Moses is saved by the blood of his son’s circumcision.\(^10\) *Targum Pseudo-Jonathon* adds that Jethro and Moses had agreed that the eldest son, Gershom, would not be circumcised, but the younger son, Eliezer, would be.\(^11\)

Thus, the Septuagint and all the Targums agree that Moses was the victim of the attack, that the attacker was an angel rather than the Lord himself, that the reason for the attack was the uncircumcised state of his son, that Zipporah spoke to the angel rather than to Moses or her son, and that it was the blood of the circumcision that saved Moses’ life. They generally deal with the problem of the phrase חֲתַן-דָּמִים by focusing on דָּמִים and ignoring חֲתַן.

Josephus, Philo, and several other authors writing “rewritten Bible” omit this pericope entirely, presumably because they found it embarrassing or obscure. Only *The Book of Jubilees* includes


this pericope, and the narrative is greatly altered. It is Mastema (i.e., Satan) who attacks Moses and God (not Zipporah) who saves him.  

Some of the early rabbis suggested that Moses was attacked because he had delayed slightly (“even for an hour”) in circumcising his younger son, who, they suggested, was born eight days before Moses was called to return to Egypt. Moses was torn between circumcising his son at the proper time, having to delay a few days while he healed, and returning to Egypt immediately, delaying to circumcise his son. The rabbis argued that Moses chose correctly but should have circumcised his son immediately upon reaching the lodging place. By not doing so, he sinned, and this was the reason for the attack. Other early rabbis argued that it was not Moses but rather his son who was attacked because he was uncircumcised. This solves the apparent problem of God attacking the one whom he had just called to lead his people out of slavery. For the early rabbis, the main point of the pericope was the importance of circumcision. It was not the blood that saved Moses but his (or rather Zipporah’s) somewhat belated following of the Law. Jewish and Christian exegetes up to the nineteenth century generally followed in the rabbinic interpretation that Moses was attacked because he had failed to circumcise his son. Some commentators offered other possibilities for the reason for the attack. Ibn Ezra and Luzzatto suggested that YHWH was angry because Moses had taken his wife and sons along.

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with him and thus was not showing complete dedication to his mission. The attack showed Moses that he was doing wrong in taking his family back to Egypt with him, and so he sent them back to Midian.\(^{18}\) Luther connected the passage with Genesis 22 and suggested that in both narratives, the threat of death from God is a test of the character’s faith in God’s original word to him. In Luther’s interpretation, Zipporah’s action was born out of fear rather than faith; the reason that God stopped threatening Moses with death was not the circumcision or Zipporah’s words, but rather that Moses held firm in his faith in his calling.\(^ {19}\)

Overall, the ancient interpretations of this passage focused on trying to find a reason for the sudden attack on “him,” who was generally assumed to be Moses; the reason was usually understood to be the fact that Moses had not circumcised his son, a fact which was explained in various ways. Most of the early interpretations largely ignored the phrase חֲתַן-דָּמִים, either by omitting it or by not seeking to explain what is meant by “bridegroom.”

**Modern Interpretations**

The advent of historical criticism brought with it myriads of new theories regarding the interpretation of Ex 4:24-26. Broadly speaking, commentators on the passage fall into one of two main camps: those who seek the original meaning of the passage and those who try to understand what the passage means in its present context and why the author/editor of Exodus chose to include it at this point in the Moses story.


Theories about the Original Meaning

Scholars such as Wellhausen, Gressmann, Kosmala, and Morgenstern have sought to trace the development of the passage backward in time to its origin.

Wellhausen argued that the passage was an etiological explanation for the circumcision of young boys. Originally, he posited, circumcision had been performed on young men prior to marriage (an example of this is Genesis 34, where Shechem must be circumcised before he may marry Dinah), but Moses had not been circumcised before marrying Zipporah. When the deity attacked, Zipporah circumcised Gershom in Moses’ place and touched him with the foreskin, making him a “bloody bridegroom.” This vicarious circumcision appeased the deity and thus the circumcision of infants became a substitute for the circumcision of young men. Wellhausen’s view has been accepted by many scholars and has had an influence on the theories of Meyer, Propp and others. One major problem with Wellhausen’s theory is that there is no support for it in the text as we have it. There is no evidence in the passage that it was intended as an etiology for infant circumcision. Moreover, Genesis 34 is not really an example of the circumcision of a young man preceding marriage, because not only Shechem but all the men of the city (including those who are already married) are required to be circumcised. Rather, Genesis 34 deals with circumcision preceding conversion.

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21 Wellhausen, Prolegomena, 340.

22 Wellhausen, Prolegomena, 340.

23 Childs, Exodus, 97.

Another theory has been put forward by Gressman (as well as others, such as Meyer, with slight variations). Gressman suggests that the story originally took place on Moses’ and Zipporah’s wedding night; YHWH wanted to claim the “ius primae noctis,” and Zipporah fooled him by circumcising Moses and touching the bloody foreskin to YHWH’s genitals, calling him a bloody bridegroom and causing him to think that he had penetrated her. Like Wellhausen, Gressman argues that the story is an etiology—in this case, an explanation of adult circumcision. However, there are significant problems with this theory. Gressman makes several emendations to the text in order to support his interpretation, including emending הּבָנָ to הּאִישָ in order to explain how the story could take place on their wedding night (before any sons were born). Moreover, the story that Gressman proposes as the original is fantastic and finds essentially no support in the text as we have it. Gressman’s theory also provides no reason for the inclusion of the pericope in its present context.

Kosmala has put forward a third theory about the origin of the passage. He argues that the story is a Midianite story about “Zipporah, her son, and JHWH.” The original point of the story, according to Kosmala, was that a deity attacked Zipporah’s son and she protected her son by circumcising him and smearing the blood on his legs, thus creating a “visible sign” of the blood rite. Zipporah then speaks the ritual phrase to her son, a phrase which Kosmala translates

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(based on the Arabic word ḥatana) as “a blood-circumcised one art thou with regard to me.” As a result of the blood of the circumcision and the words of the ritual, the deity is unable to harm her son. However, the word ḥatana refers to circumcision in connection with marriage, not simply circumcision, so this proposal does not solve the problem of the phrase חֲתַן-דָּמִים. Moreover, it is not clear why the Israelites would have preserved a Midianite story. Morgenstern’s proposal is similar to Kosmala’s except that it relies on the idea of beena marriage, where the husband goes to live with the wife’s family and the wife’s brother plays a more important role in the lives of her sons than does her husband. In Morgenstern’s theory, Zipporah fills the role of her brother, who is not present at the time, by circumcising her son. An advantage of this theory is that it explains why Zipporah, rather than Moses, performs the circumcision. However, the theory suffers from the same problems as Kosmala’s theory. Overall, it seems likely that we will never know for sure what the story originally meant, since the passage has been divorced from its original context and has gone through significant development to reach its present form.

**Interpretations of Exodus 4:24-26 in its Present Context**

More recently, many scholars have been interested in seeking to understand what the passage means in the context in which it has been placed. Why did the author/editor of Exodus choose to include this story, and why did he place it specifically here, immediately after God has called Moses to lead his people out of slavery? Form criticism and literary criticism have been particularly important in the quest to understand Ex 4:24-26 in its context in Exodus. Not every interpretation can be examined here, for the interpretations of the passage are as numerous as the

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32 Childs, *Exodus*, 98.

exegetes of the passage, but this paper will briefly review some of the more influential and widely accepted interpretations.

Childs argues that the reiteration of Zipporah’s statement in v. 26b is a redactional comment intended to focus “the whole emphasis of the passage on circumcision.”\textsuperscript{34} In Childs’ view, the passage is not an etiological explanation of circumcision; rather, circumcision explains the passage. Childs suggests that the redactor may not have entirely understood the passage or have known the meaning of תֶגֶרְצָה–דָּמִים, but he included this passage because he wished to stress the importance of circumcision.\textsuperscript{35} One problem with this interpretation of the passage is that it does not offer an explanation of why the redactor would have included a passage and a phrase which was obscure to him, nor does it explain the location of the pericope within the book of Exodus, as this interpretation does not show any connection between 4:24-26 and the surrounding passages.

Another explanation for the meaning and location of the pericope is that it is related to and foreshadows the plague of the death of the firstborn. In this interpretation, it is generally understood to be Gershom, not Moses, who is under attack. In Ex 4:23, God instructs Moses to tell Pharaoh that God will kill his firstborn son, and now, in a thematically appropriate manner, God threatens the life of Moses’ firstborn son. Howell suggests that Gershom was attacked because he was uncircumcised and was therefore susceptible to the tenth plague.\textsuperscript{36} By circumcising him, Zipporah made him a member of YHWH’s people, a “relative by means of

\textsuperscript{34} Childs, \textit{Exodus}, 100.

\textsuperscript{35} Childs, \textit{Exodus}, 100-101.

\textsuperscript{36} Howell, “The Firstborn Son,” 69.
blood” to both Zipporah and YHWH.\(^{37}\) Robinson argues that just as Pharaoh’s son suffered for the sins of his father, Gershom suffered for the sin of his father (not circumcising him).\(^{38}\)

Although this argument has merit, it seems to me that it cannot be the primary meaning of the passage, since the clearest antecedent for the one being attacked is Moses.

Commentators who follow the above line of interpretation also often connect this pericope to the Passover. Howell proposes that Zipporah touched the bloody foreskin to Gershom’s thigh, making a mark like the blood on the doorposts so that God would let him alone.\(^{39}\) Robinson sees Gershom as representing the paschal lamb, while Moses represents the people of Israel. As the Israelites are saved by the “smearing of the blood of the Passover lamb,” Moses is saved by the smearing of the blood of Gershom.\(^{40}\) Propp, although he does not think that paschal foreshadowing is the main point of the pericope, agrees that “It is no coincidence, then, that Moses is symbolically circumcised, and his son actually circumcised, as they set out to join the people of Israel and participate in the first pesah.”\(^{41}\) Sarna argues that in this scene and the paschal narrative, the mentions of circumcision and the firstborn form a chiasm: A) First-born (4:22-23), B) Circumcision (4:24-26), B’) Circumcision (12:43-49), A’) First-born (13:1, 11-15). He suggests that this chiasm “provides an artfully wrought literary framework for the entire narrative, one that encompasses the struggle for liberation from Pharaoh’s oppression.”\(^{42}\)

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\(^{40}\) Robinson, “Zipporah to the Rescue,” 457.


However, it seems a stretch to argue on so little evidence that a chiasm was intended by the author/editor, particularly as both A’ and B’ are significantly longer than their counterparts and Sarna has to divide A’ into two sections that are separated by nine verses.

Propp offers a significantly different interpretation. He argues that דָּמִים refers to Moses’ bloodguilt on account of the murder he committed in Egypt. YHWH attacks Moses because Moses is returning to Egypt while still guilty of murder. According to Propp, Moses has been commanded to go home, but he still bears unexpiated bloodguilt so he cannot return; this causes a dilemma for YHWH, which Zipporah solves by purifying Moses with the blood of circumcision. The problem with this interpretation is that it makes YHWH seem to be opposed to himself and unable to solve a problem that he has caused without the help of Zipporah; moreover, if he knew this was going to be a problem, why did he not instruct Moses in what to do about it in the first place? Overall, although Propp offers a new and interesting explanation of the phrase חֲתַן-דָּמִים, his interpretation of the pericope as a whole seems implausible.

Houtman understands the passage as telling of the vicarious circumcision of Moses as the “consecration to his commission” and a dedication to the LORD. He points out, based on numerous Biblical passages, that “circumcision was associated with the notions of dedication, sanctification, and purification.” He briefly notes that circumcision is the sign of the covenant and of belonging to the Jewish people, but does not seem to connect this point to Ex 4:24-26. Houtman’s interpretation does not really deal with the phrase חֲתַן-דָּמִים, however. Houtman’s

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interpretation has merit, but I think that it can be expanded upon, particularly by noting that circumcision is the sign of being one of the Hebrews and relating that fact to this passage. Thus, this thesis will expand upon Houtman’s interpretation, among others.

A final suggestion is that this pericope represents a rite of passage for Moses and that the theme of the endangerment of the hero is part of the specific literary form of the “missionsal journey narrative.” Robinson sees parallels between this pericope and the story of Jacob at the Jabbok, while Embry argues that this passage is connected to the Balaam story. According to Embry, there is no need to search for a reason for YHWH’s attack on Moses; the attack is simply part of the literary form. Moses is attacked not because he has done anything wrong but because it is necessary for the hero to endure endangerment before he can continue on his journey. The episode of endangerment brings about a transformation in the hero. This theory is compelling because it takes into account the function of the pericope within the larger narrative and sees this passage as being integral to the story of Moses’ life. According to this theory, it is not necessary to look outside the narrative of Moses’ life to understand Ex 4:24-26. It is this theory that this thesis will build on.

49 Embry, “Endangerment,” 181.
50 Embry, “Endangerment,” 185.
CHAPTER TWO
EXEGESIS

A Close Reading of Exodus 4:24-26

This strange passage is located immediately between YHWH’s instruction to Moses to return to Egypt and tell Pharaoh that YHWH will kill his firstborn son (vv. 21-23) and the meeting between Aaron and Moses in the wilderness (vv. 27-28). Allen notes that this pericope is linked with what comes before by the use of the word “son,” and it is linked with what comes after by the word “encounter,” the verb פָגַשׁ. Thus it is evident that this story has not been randomly inserted here; the entire narrative has been very carefully constructed.

In its wider context, the passage is preceded by Moses’ call at the burning bush (3:1-4:17). After much protestation, Moses finally agrees to return to Egypt and go before Pharaoh, asking him to free Israel. In 4:20, the reader is told that Moses took his wife and sons and returned to Egypt. There follow three brief stories about events that took place on the way to Egypt, of which 4:24-26 is the middle story. Chapter 5 narrates Moses and Aaron’s first meeting with Pharaoh, which leads Pharaoh to increase the labours of the Hebrews, causing the Hebrews to become angry with Moses.

52 Since Moses does not relay this threat to Pharaoh until 11:4-6, Hyatt and other commentators have suggested that vv. 22-23 may have originally stood just before the tenth plague. J. Philip Hyatt, Commentary on Exodus (New Century Bible; London: Oliphants, 1971), 85. However, Propp suggests that these verses are “foreshadowing later events and creating a framework for the Plagues cycle.” Propp, Exodus 1-18, 218. In addition, the threat against Pharaoh’s firstborn helps to set up the shedding of the blood of Moses’ son in the next pericope.


54 Benno Jacob states, “We have constantly rediscovered the thoughtfully planned unity of these tales; therefore, we must reject the notion that a block of material was randomly inserted.” Jacob, Second Book, 108.

55 This is the first mention of multiple sons; the reader has only been told of the birth of the first son, Gershom. The second son will not be mentioned again until 18:4.
The context of 4:24, then, is that Moses is on the road to Egypt with his wife and son(s). Moses, of course, is not named in this pericope, but the context of the passage makes it clear that (at least here, if not originally) this is a story about Moses. Although the versions provide translations that depart from the Masoretic Text, as discussed in Chapter 1, nevertheless, there are no significant problems with the Hebrew text. The MT seems to reflect accurately the underlying Hebrew text.\(^{56}\)

Many commentators have made attempts to assign Ex 4:24-26 and the surrounding verses to various sources, with little agreement among scholars as to which verses should be assigned to which source. However, dividing up the text in this way “fragments still more an already loose unity.”\(^{57}\) Since these verses have been brought together, it seems best to examine them in context and as a unity.

Along the way to Egypt, Moses and his family stop for the night at a מָלוֹן, a lodging place or night stop (the noun is derived from the verb לָין, “to spend the night”).\(^{58}\) Some commentators have suggested that מָלוֹן may instead be related to the verb מָל, “to circumcise,” thus having the meaning “circumcision” or “place of circumcision” rather than “lodging place/night stop.”\(^{59}\) However, the word מָלוֹן never occurs with the meaning “circumcision” in the Hebrew Bible, but it does occur with the meaning “lodging place/night stop”; for example, in Gn 42:27 and Jo 4:3. Nevertheless, this may be an instance of word play with the word מָלוֹן in v. 26.\(^{60}\) The use of the

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\(^{56}\) Vermes, “Baptism,” 309.


\(^{58}\) Houtman, Exodus, 433.


\(^{60}\) Propp, Exodus, 218.
definite article is notable, since no lodging place has been mentioned previously. Durham suggests that the specific location may have been mentioned in the original context of the narrative. 61 This proposal is not necessary to explain the definite article, however; local objects can take the definite article, as in Gn 28:11 and 1 Kgs 19:9. 62

At the מָלוֹן, “YHWH met him and sought to kill him.” Who is “him”? The antecedent to the pronoun is not clear. It could be Moses or his son. Moses was last mentioned by name in v. 21; what immediately precedes v. 24 is YHWH saying “I will kill your firstborn.” Of course, YHWH is instructing Moses to say this to Pharaoh, but it creates the possibility that the antecedent to “him” in v. 24 is “your firstborn.” However, the fact that it is Zipporah who acts in this story suggests that it is Moses who is under attack and thus incapacitated. 63 Moreover, the son is specifically mentioned in v. 25, which would not have been necessary if it were the son who was in view in v. 24. 64

The verb פִּגַּשׁ has the connotation of “a meeting or encounter of consequence.” 65 In v. 27, the encounter between Moses and Aaron leads to a kiss of affection; here, the encounter leads to an attempt on the character’s life. 66 The Hiphil of מָתַת can simply mean “to kill,” but it can also have the meaning “to put to death, execute,” often with YHWH as the subject. 67 Thus the use of this

61 Durham, Exodus, 53.


63 Propp, Exodus I-18, 233.

64 Childs, Exodus, 98.

65 Durham, Exodus, 53.

66 Houtman, Exodus, 434.

verb, rather than הרג, “to kill,” may imply that YHWH was punishing some wrongdoing on Moses’ part. Some commentators, such as Cassuto, have suggested that the phrase “the LORD ... sought to kill him” is simply a Hebrew idiom for falling ill or reflects the ancient Hebrew tendency to attribute everything “to the direct action of God.”

Reis suggests that Moses was suffering from a suicidal depression. However, within the narrative, it is clear that the reader is to understand that YHWH really is attacking the character, and for whatever reason, the circumcision of the child led YHWH to desist.

It is interesting that in v. 25 the child is referred to as “her son” (i.e., Zipporah’s), rather than “his son.” It is very unusual in the Hebrew Bible for a child to be identified as the son or daughter of his or her mother. This emphasizes the important role that Zipporah plays in this passage, which will be discussed further in Chapter 4. This is the only place in the Hebrew Bible where a woman performs a circumcision. Also, only in this verse is the verb כרת used to describe circumcision.

Zipporah touches the foreskin to “his feet.” Whose feet, and what does רֶגֶל mean in this context? In the context, the antecedent to the pronominal suffix could be Zipporah’s son, Moses, or even

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70 However, Propp notes that “in ancient orthography ‘her son’ and ‘his son’ would both have been spelled bnh.” Propp, “That Bloody Bridegroom,” 495n5.


72 Propp, Exodus 1-18, 219.

73 Houtman, Exodus, 437.

74 Houtman, Exodus, 346.
YHWH. Moreover, although רֶגֶל usually means “foot” or “leg,” it can be used as a euphemism for genitalia, a possibility that must be considered in this story about circumcision.\(^{75}\)

Interpretations of this verse vary widely, as discussed in Chapter 1. However, it seems most likely that Zipporah is touching Moses’ “feet” (probably his genitalia) to symbolize the vicarious circumcision of Moses through the circumcision of his son. This will be discussed further in Chapter 3. The verb נגע, “to touch,” is not easy to interpret here. Ordinarily, in the Hiphil, it has the meaning “to approach,” leading some of the versions and interpreters to translate the phrase “she approached his feet” or “she fell at his feet.”\(^{76}\) Houtman suggests “she cast it at his feet.”\(^{77}\) נגע occurs in the Hiphil (as here) in Ex 12:22 (the Passover story) with the meaning “to smear” (with blood), which may be its sense here.\(^{78}\)

Then Zipporah makes the statement that has baffled interpreters for millennia: “You are a חֲתַן-דָּמִים to me.” Again, she could be addressing her son, Moses, or YHWH; presumably (although not necessarily) she is addressing whomever she just touched with the foreskin. What does this statement mean, and why does Zipporah say it? What does the phrase חֲתַן-דָּמִים mean? This statement is clearly important for the interpretation of the passage, since it is reiterated in v. 26. This phrase will be examined closely below.

The word יח could perform one of several functions in v. 25. First of all, it could simply be introducing the direct quotation (“she said that ‘you are a חֲתַן-דָּמִים to me’”). Alternatively, it could be part of the quotation, either adding emphasis (“she said, ‘Indeed, you are a חֲתַן-דָּמִים to


\(^{76}\) Propp, “That Bloody Bridegroom,” 496.

\(^{77}\) Houtman, *Exodus*, 437.

me’”) or an explanation of what Zipporah has just done (“she said, ‘Because you are a חֲתַן-דָּמִים to me’”). Any of these suggestions would fit the context.

It is unclear, in v. 26, whether Zipporah is repeating herself or whether the adverb אָז is to be understood in the sense of “that was when,” “it was then that.” Most likely the author/editor is repeating Zipporah’s statement in order to specifically relate it to the circumcision and “put an emphatic end to the narrative.”

The word חֲתַן-דָּמִים is a *hapax legomenon*, the plural of the non-extant noun חֲתִינָה, which is a derivative of the verb חָתָן and probably means “circumcision.” The reason for the plural here is unclear, and it is usually translated as a singular. Possibly it is a “plural of abstraction,” i.e., “the act of circumcision.” Combined with the preposition ל, the phrase probably means “in view of the circumcision” or “because of the circumcision.”

Altogether, although the grammar of Exodus 4:24-26 is straightforward, it is not an easy passage to understand. Its combination of pronouns without clear antecedents, *hapax legomena*, and a strange plot make for a puzzling pericope.

**חתן-דמאים: A Linguistic Study**

The noun חֲתַן occurs forty-one times in the Masoretic Text. In twenty of these instances it is vocalized as חָתָן (generally translated “son-in-law” or “bridegroom”), and in the other twenty-one

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it is vocalized as חֹתֵן ("father-in-law"). The root also appears once as the feminine noun חֹתֶנֶת (mother-in-law). The verb חָתָן occurs eleven times in the MT, always in the Hithpael. The root חָתָן occurs throughout the Hebrew Bible: in the Torah, the Former and Latter Prophets, and the Writings.

Both the origin and the meaning of the word חָתָן are debated. The Arabic cognate to חָתָן, ḥatana, means “circumcise.” Derived from this word are ḥātana, “become related by marriage,” and ḥatan, “male relation by marriage, son-in-law.” This suggests that there was a connection between circumcision and marriage at some point in the ancient Semitic culture. Some scholars have argued that the word ḥatan originally meant “the circumcised one”; since it was young men who were circumcised in preparation for marriage by their fathers-to-be, the word came to mean “son-in-law.” Similarly, it is surmised, hoten originally meant “circumciser,” but came to mean “father-in-law.” Thus it is possible that חָתָן-דָּמִים is to be translated not “bloody bride-groom” but “blood-circumcised one.” However, as Childs points out, the Arabic word ḥatana “does not just mean ‘circumcise’ by itself, but denotes the act of circumcising the bridegroom.”

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90 Childs, *Exodus*, 98.
Propp, on the other hand, argues that “the original sense of the Proto-Semitic root *khtn was ‘to be related by marriage,’ since this is the usage most widespread in the Semitic family.”\footnote{Propp, “Origins,” 358, n. 9.} Howell notes,

The Ugaritic, Syriac, and Jerusalem Aramaic roots all mean ‘to marry’ when used as verbs, and ‘son-in-law’ when used as nouns. The Akkadian root carries the idea of protection through a marital relationship. In Hebrew, the verb is used only as a hithpael and therefore carries the passive/reflexive idea of one who has become a חָתָן.\footnote{Howell, “The Firstborn Son,” 65.}

It may be that because some groups practised “antenuptial circumcision,” the meaning of the root then became extended to include circumcision in Arabic and possibly Hebrew.\footnote{Propp, “Origins,” 358, n. 9.}

The root חָתָן occurs with the meaning “bridegroom” in Old Aramaic, Arabic, and possibly Akkadian, in addition to Hebrew.\footnote{Ernst Kutsch, “חתן,” in Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 5:271.} Whenever the root has the meaning “bridegroom” in the Hebrew Bible (with the possible exception of Ex 4:24-26), it refers not to a specific individual but rather to a generic bridegroom (e.g., “as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, Is 62:5).\footnote{Kutsch, “חתן”, 273.} This may suggest that “bridegroom” is not an appropriate translation in Ex 4:24-26.

In various Semitic languages, nouns derived from this root have meanings including “affinity,” “marriage,” and “wedding.”\footnote{Kutsch, “חתן,” 271.} In Akkadian, the verb hatānu means “to protect.”\footnote{Kutsch, “חתן,” 272.} Perhaps this meaning is related to the meaning of חָתָן in Ex 4:24-26: if it is Moses who is being addressed by
Zipporah, it would make sense for her to say that he has been protected by the blood that has been shed by the circumcision of her son.

Mitchell has carefully examined each occurrence of the root חתן both in the Hebrew Bible and in cognate languages in an attempt to determine its basic meaning.\(^98\) His conclusion, which scholars such as Kutsch,\(^99\) Howell,\(^100\) and others have followed, is that חתן “has some such general meaning as ‘relation-by-marriage’ which it bears in every context in relation to a male ego.”\(^101\) Mitchell points out that if we understand חתן in this more general way, it solves the problem of the three different names given for Moses’ “father-in-law” (Reuel, Jethro, and Hobab). Reuel, who is identified in Ex 2 as Zipporah’s father, is Moses’ father-in-law, and the other two characters (usually understood as being the same character, with different names coming from different sources) are simply relatives to Moses by marriage.\(^102\)

Although the word חתן has attracted more attention from scholars, דמים is also difficult to interpret. Why has the author chosen to use the plural of דם, which usually carries the negative connotation of “bloodshed” or “bloodguilt”?\(^103\) Propp suggests that the phrase חתן-דמים is applied to Moses, who, having committed murder in Egypt, is guilty of bloodshed.\(^104\) He compares this construction to אוש-דמים, “man of blood,” i.e., “murderer,” a common phrase in the Hebrew


\(^100\) Howell, "The Firstborn Son," 66.


\(^102\) Mitchell, “Meaning,” 105.

\(^103\) Propp, “That Bloody Bridegroom,” 496-497, n. 10.

Bible. In this interpretation, Zipporah’s statement is not part of a ritual; rather, it is a condemnation of her husband, whom she has just realized is a murderer. Some of the problems with Propp’s interpretation have been discussed in Chapter 1. In addition, although it is true that דם usually has a negative connotation, in Lv 12:4 the plural of בֵּין is used to refer to the blood of purification after childbirth. Perhaps the usage of בֵּין in Ex 4:24-26 is similar to the usage of the plural in Lv 12:4.

Altogether, it seems best to assume a fairly basic meaning of the word חתן (i.e., “one who is related by marriage”) when first looking at Ex 4:24-26. It may be possible to narrow down the meaning of the word in this passage once one has come to a conclusion regarding the meaning of the passage as a whole. With regard to the word דָמִים, it seems that here the plural is best translated as a singular. It is possible that it has the meaning “bloodshed,” however, referring to the blood that was shed in the circumcision of Zipporah’s son. It does not seem likely that דָמִים has a negative connotation in this passage.

**Biblical Tales of Endangerment**

The concept of the biblical type-scene was elucidated by Alter in his groundbreaking book *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. Alter argued that it is necessary to understand the literary conventions of the time in order to truly understand a text and in order to appreciate the points which the author makes by making use of and subverting conventions. A type-scene is “a story pattern or situation that recurs often enough in biblical narrative so that the reader can identify a set of

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conventions and expectations for each one.” An example of a common biblical type-scene is the barren wife who bears a hero (e.g., Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah, Samson’s mother, Elizabeth). By making use of the elements of a type-scene, the author is able to direct his audience’s understanding of the scene. Exodus 4:24-26 has a number of similarities to other tales of endangerment found in the Hebrew Bible, including the stories of Jacob wrestling with the angel (Gn 32:25-33) and Balaam and his donkey (Nm 22:22-35). It seems possible that these narratives follow the pattern of a type-scene of endangerment while journeying.

Both Ex 4:24-26 and the story of Jacob at the Jabbok tell of an unexplained attack by a divine being upon the protagonist. In each case, the attack occurs at night while the protagonist is on a journey, returning to his home but also to a dangerous situation. In both stories, the danger is averted, but at the cost of an injury (symbolic or real) to the protagonist’s leg/genitalia. Both pericopes are immediately followed by a meeting (פגש) between two long-separated brothers (and in fact, in both cases, it is the younger brother who is returning home and is met along the way by his older brother). Both characters have a new name or epithet applied to them, a name that relates to the experience they have just had (“Israel,” חֲתַן-דָמִים) and undergo a “reformation

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108 Keith Bodner, “Go Figure: Narrative Strategies for an Emerging Generation,” in Go Figure! Figuration in Biblical Interpretation, ed. Stanley D. Walters (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2008), 13.

109 Bodner, “Go Figure,” 13.

110 Where the Masoretic Text differs from the English in chapters and verses, I follow MT.

111 Greenberg, Understanding Exodus, 111.


113 Note, however, that Exodus is not entirely clear about which of Moses and Aaron is the elder. Exodus 2 seems to imply that Moses is the firstborn son, while 7:7 states that Aaron is 83 and Moses is 80. Seth Daniel Kunin, “The Bridegroom of Blood: A Structuralist Analysis,” Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, no. 70 (June 1996): 14-15.
of character”: Jacob, who has previously treated Esau very poorly, is now affectionate and contrite (although admittedly, this may be out of fear of what Esau might do), and Moses, who has been reluctant and afraid to respond to God’s call, no longer hesitates but becomes more decisive.\textsuperscript{114}

There are also numerous similarities between Ex 4:24-26 and Nm 22:22-35, similarities that have long been noticed by interpreters. \textit{Numbers Rabbah} understands Balaam as the counter-hero (that is, a non-Israelite whose actions mimic an Israelite hero) to Moses.\textsuperscript{115} The crisis of each story is that God prevents the hero from doing what he has been instructed or permitted to do by God.\textsuperscript{116} In addition to this basic similarity around which both stories are centered, the two narratives contain similarities in both structure and vocabulary.

In both narratives, the protagonist has been allowed or commanded by YHWH to go on a journey to another land to deliver YHWH’s word to a foreign ruler. Along the way, YHWH\textsuperscript{117} threatens the protagonist, whose life is saved by the actions of another character—a female character (Balaam’s donkey is specifically a female donkey). The actions of this character, while saving the protagonist’s life, injure his רֶגֶל.\textsuperscript{118} Both protagonists carry a staff, and despite having been sent to prophecy, “both have trouble speaking and both are accompanied by another character who speaks (Aaron, donkey).”\textsuperscript{119} There are also various verbal correspondences between the two narratives.

\textsuperscript{114} Robinson, “Zipporah to the Rescue,” 452.

\textsuperscript{115} Embry, “Endangerment,” 178.

\textsuperscript{116} Cassuto, \textit{Exodus}, 59.

\textsuperscript{117} In the Balaam story, it is actually the angel of YHWH who threatens Balaam, but YHWH is also portrayed as acting in the story, opening the donkey’s mouth and Balaam’s eyes.

\textsuperscript{118} Embry, “Endangerment,” 180.

\textsuperscript{119} Embry, “Endangerment,” 180.
passages, especially when the contexts of the passages are also examined. The purpose of the journeys the protagonists are making is “to deliver a ‘word’ of Yahweh to a foreign ruler” (יְהוָה, Ex 4:12 and Nm 22:20).\(^{120}\) In both narratives, before the protagonist sets out on the journey, YHWH is angry with him (יהָּרָּא, Ex 4:14 and Nm 22:22).\(^{121}\) There is also a phonetic similarity between the names Zippor (father of Balak, the king of Midian) and Zipporah (a woman of Midian).\(^{122}\)

While some of the similarities between Ex 4:24-26 and Gn 32:25-33 and between Ex 4:24-26 and Nm 22:22-35 could be coincidence, it seems reasonable to assume that these narratives either were intended to make reference to one another or at least are examples of the same literary form. Embry argues that Ex 4:24-26 and Nm 22:22-35 are both examples of the “missional journey narrative.”\(^{123}\) Although in Genesis 32 Jacob is not on a mission from God, he is on a journey to a foreign land (actually, his homeland, which he has not seen for two decades). It seems likely that Gn 32:25-33 should be considered an example of the same literary form as these other two passages. Perhaps, then, this form should be called “endangerment while journeying.” The endangerment of the protagonist by a divine figure is a necessary part of this form.\(^{124}\) It is for this reason that Moses is attacked on his way back to Egypt.

If this suggestion is correct, it seems probable that the author/editor’s original audience would have recognized that Ex 4:24-26 was a type-scene and would not have been concerned with

\(^{120}\) Embry, “Endangerment,” 187.

\(^{121}\) Embry, “Endangerment,” 187.

\(^{122}\) Embry, “Endangerment,” 189.

\(^{123}\) Embry, “Endangerment,” 179.

\(^{124}\) Embry, “Endangerment,” 181.
finding an external reason for YHWH’s attack. They would have understood that the attack on the protagonist was part of the form and that its purpose was to bring about a transformation in the character.
CHAPTER THREE
EXODUS 2:3-10 AND EXODUS 4:24-26: DEATH, REBIRTH, AND TRANSFORMATION

Commentators on Ex 4:24-26 have long sought a reason for God’s attack on Moses in the passage, often coming to the conclusion that God was punishing Moses either for not being circumcised or for not circumcising his son. After all, why should God seek to kill the one whom he has just called to free his people from slavery? Moses must have committed some sort of sin for which he is being punished. However, as Embry points out, the attack on Moses has a function in the wider narrative.125 Exodus 4:24-26 cannot be separated from the Moses story as a whole; this passage plays a key role in the literary form of Exodus 1-4.

Exodus 4:24-26 acts as a parallel to Ex 2:3-10, where Moses is symbolically transformed into an Egyptian. The function of Ex 4:24-26 is to transform Moses back into a Hebrew before he returns to Egypt to free the Hebrew people. In this interpretation, it is Moses who is attacked by YHWH, it is Moses’ רַגְלַיִם that Zipporah touches with the bloody foreskin, and it is Moses who is called חֲתַן-דָמִים.

Exodus 2:3-10 and 4:24-26 tell similar stories. In each passage, Moses is threatened by a powerful authority, women act to both appease the attacker and save Moses, Moses undergoes a symbolic death and rebirth ritual, and he is saved, given a new name that is explained as being related to the experience he has just undergone, and transformed. The following table briefly sketches out some of the main parallels between these two passages, which will then be discussed in more detail below.

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### Table 1: Parallels Between Exodus 2:3-10 and Exodus 4:24-26

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Exodus 2:3-10</th>
<th>Exodus 4:24-26</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attacker</td>
<td>Pharaoh</td>
<td>God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Moses’ mother and sister; Pharaoh’s daughter[^126]</td>
<td>Zipporah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic death and rebirth</td>
<td>Placed into and drawn out of the river</td>
<td>Vicarious circumcision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New name</td>
<td>Moses (“because I drew him out of the water”)[^127]</td>
<td>שֵׂתַן דָמִים (explained as referring to circumcision)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Result</td>
<td>Becomes a high status Egyptian</td>
<td>Becomes the leader of the Hebrews</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It should also be noted that when Pharaoh heard about Moses killing the Egyptian, he sought (בֹּשַׁ) to kill him (2:15), which is a parallel to YHWH seeking (בֹּשַׁ) to kill him in 4:24. In addition, in 4:19, God assures Moses that those who sought (בֹּשַׁ) his life (i.e., Pharaoh) are dead. Kaplan notes that “in the Pentateuch the verb “בֹּשַׁ” is used in connection with killing in

[^126]: The Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, although they are not present in Exodus 2, also play a role in saving Moses from Pharaoh by refusing to kill the Hebrew boys.

[^127]: This explanation of the meaning of the name Moses is probably neither philologically sound (מֹשֶה should mean “the one who draws out,” not “the one who is drawn out”) nor historically sound (the name is probably Egyptian) (Propp, Exodus 1-18, 152-153), but what matters here is how the author/editor understood and chose to explain the name.
these three verses and only these three verses [emphasis in original].”¹²⁸ Thus it seems clear that there is a connection between these passages.

Comment

As a baby, Moses was transformed into an Egyptian by his mother and sister and by Pharaoh’s daughter and her maid. His mother placed him in the Nile, following (in her own way) the instructions of Pharaoh to throw all Hebrew baby boys into the Nile and thus symbolically killing him. He was then drawn out of the water in a symbolic rebirth. By giving him a new name, Pharaoh’s daughter emphasized that he had been symbolically reborn as her son, and thus as an Egyptian.

The association of water with birth and death can be found both in biblical texts and in other Ancient Near Eastern sources. Hammurabi Code §185 “speaks of adopting a son ina mēšu ‘from his water,’ i.e., from birth.”¹²⁹ Hammurabi Code §2 prescribes that the river is to be used to determine the guilt or innocence of a man who has been charged with sorcery. If he dies, that is an indication that he was guilty; if he lives, he is declared innocent. Thus water is associated with bringing about death and also with sparing innocent life (and, in a sense, giving new life to the man charged with sorcery, since he is no longer under the threat of death).¹³⁰ Also, numerous sections of the code prescribe throwing people into the water as a form of execution.

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¹²⁹ Propp, Exodus 1-18, 158.

Israel as a nation is born out of the Suph Sea, and Job 38:8-9 compares the waters of the Suph Sea to amniotic fluid.\(^\text{131}\) From a somewhat later period, the rite of baptism in both Jewish and Christian conversion ceremonies represents a symbolic rebirth.\(^\text{132}\) In Exodus 1-2, water is also explicitly associated with death, as Pharaoh has ordered (Ex 1:22) all Hebrew baby boys to be thrown into the river. Thus in Ex 2:3-10 Moses, having been placed in the river and then drawn out of it, symbolically dies and is reborn as an Egyptian.

Exodus 4:24-26 is functionally parallel to 2:3-10. Since Ex 2:10, as far as the reader knows, Moses has been living as an Egyptian. Even when Moses flees to Midian, the daughters of Jethro identify him as an Egyptian (2:19). The text gives us no reason to believe that he has told Jethro or even his wife who he truly is; when he tells Jethro that he is returning to Egypt, he simply refers to wanting to see whether his relatives are alive (4:18). If he has not told Jethro who he is, this statement allows Jethro to continue to believe that he and his relatives are Egyptians.\(^\text{133}\) Moses is still functionally an Egyptian, and it is necessary for him to become a Hebrew again before he can lead the Hebrews out of slavery.

In Ex 4:24-26, Moses is transformed back into a Hebrew through the rite of circumcision. To the author/editor of Exodus, circumcision is the identifying mark of a Hebrew. Circumcision is also a “symbol of sacrifice and death, which lead to rebirth and transformation.”\(^\text{134}\) The Targums reveal that the blood of the circumcision was considered necessary to the rite, specifying that

\(^\text{131}\) Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 158.

\(^\text{132}\) Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 158.

\(^\text{133}\) Reis, “Bridegroom of Blood,” 326-327. The fact that Moses’ son is uncircumcised may be another indication that Moses has not been living as a Hebrew in Midian. Joseph A. Walters, “Moses at the Lodging Place: The Devil is in the Ambiguities,” *Encounter* 63, no. 4 (Autumn 2002): 422.

even if there were no foreskin to cut off, there needed to be blood to complete the rite.\textsuperscript{135} The rite of circumcision brought the person into the Covenant with YHWH, while the blood of the circumcision fulfilled the sacrificial aspect characteristic of any covenant.\textsuperscript{136} Levenson sees in both circumcision and animal sacrifice the “sublimation of child sacrifice.”\textsuperscript{137} Ex 22:28-29 requires that all first-born sons and animals be given to God on the eighth day; these verses seem to imply that God demanded that the Israelites sacrifice their first-born sons. Ex 34:19-20, however, explains that they are to redeem their first-borns, sacrificing animals in the place of their children.\textsuperscript{138} It should also be noticed that circumcision is to take place on the eighth day (Gn 17:12, Lv 12:3), the day when the first-borns are to be given to God. This suggests there is a connection between circumcision and giving sons to God; circumcision, perhaps, is a rite that replaced child sacrifice.\textsuperscript{139} Thus circumcision represents a symbolic death (sacrifice) and rebirth (redemption from God).

Despite the fact that Moses is not the one who is circumcised in this passage (one of the few clear facts in the whole passage!), it seems that he is vicariously circumcised and therefore symbolically dies and is reborn again, as a Hebrew this time. Zipporah becomes a third mother to Moses (after his biological mother and his foster mother) as he is reborn through her actions. In this interpretation, then, as in the theory proposed by Embry, the reason for the attack is “internal

\textsuperscript{135} Géza Vermes, \textit{Scripture and Tradition in Judaism}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 190.

\textsuperscript{136} Vermes, \textit{Scripture and Tradition}, 190.

\textsuperscript{137} Jon D. Levenson, \textit{The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 52. He sees “paschal lamb, Levitical service, monetary ransom, and Naziritehood” as other traditions that replaced child sacrifice (51).

\textsuperscript{138} Levenson, \textit{Death and Resurrection}, 3-4.

\textsuperscript{139} Levenson, \textit{Death and Resurrection}, 51.
to the narrative.” YHWH attacks Moses not because of any wrongdoing on Moses’ part but because the attack and resulting circumcision is a necessary part of the narrative in order to bring about Moses’ transformation.

Although many scholars have tried to determine whether or not Moses would have been circumcised before the events of Ex 4:24-26 by looking into Egyptian and Midianite circumcision practices, in this interpretation, the question of whether or not Moses was already circumcised is not important. In Ex 4:24-26, Moses is vicariously circumcised by means of his son’s circumcision. Circumcision, as the sign of the covenant between God and Abraham and his descendants, is the symbol of being an Israelite. Through this vicarious circumcision, Moses is ritually confirmed as a member of the Hebrew people. Since Moses has been living as an Egyptian for almost his whole life, he needs to be circumcised to symbolize that he has now become an Israelite. Moses’ son is circumcised in his place either because Moses is already circumcised or because circumcising Moses would delay his journey.

Understanding Ex 4:24-26 as a parallel to Ex 2:3-10 helps to shed light on the difficulties and ambiguities of the passage. It also helps the reader to appreciate the significance of this pericope. Far from being a random insertion into chapter 4, this passage has been deliberately placed in this location so that Moses can be an appropriate leader for the Hebrews upon his arrival in Egypt.

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140 Embry, “Endangerment,” 181.

CHAPTER FOUR
LIFE STAGES AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE MOSES NARRATIVE

The episode of endangerment related in Ex 4:24-26 brings about not only Moses’ transformation into a Hebrew, but also a transformation of character as Moses enters full adulthood. Exodus 4:24-26 marks the end of the first stage of Moses’ life. Although Moses is physically an adult for much of this stage, the stage represents childhood or youth. Moses depends on the help of others, particularly women, and is unsure of his own abilities and hesitant when God calls him. After this episode, Moses becomes an adult. Women no longer play a significant role in his life and he is firm and decisive. Like his transformation from an Egyptian into a Hebrew, this transformation is necessary for Moses to be an appropriate leader of Israel.

The book of Exodus overtly divides Moses’ life into three stages: his early years in Egypt, ending with his murder of an Egyptian and his flight; his time in Midian, ending with his call at the burning bush at the age of eighty (Ex 7:7); and forty years in the Sinai desert, ending with his death (which is related in Dt 34). However, the final form of Exodus also includes another division of Moses’ life, a division that is not stated explicitly but is evident when liminal events and the important role of women in Exodus 1-4 are examined. These clues give us a division between Moses’ life prior to his return to Egypt (implicitly his childhood, youth, and young-manhood) and the adult stage of his life, which begins with his return to Egypt. Without the statements about Moses’ age and the passing of time, there would be no reason to think that

 Acts 7:23 (the speech of Stephen) tells us that Moses was forty when he killed the Egyptian, which would mean that Moses spent forty years in Midian. Although the book of Exodus does not specifically state that Moses spent forty years in Egypt and then forty in Midian, the statement in Acts attests to the fact that this was a view held by early Jews. Given the importance of the number forty in the Hebrew Bible and the fact that Moses is said to be eighty when he delivers God’s word to Pharaoh, it is easy to see where the idea that Moses was forty when he left Egypt came from.
Moses is eighty at the time of his call. Rather, the narrative seems to present him as a young father with a young son. Thus the final form of Exodus holds the narrative of Moses’ life in slight tension with explicit statements about his age.

Although Ex 4:24-26 takes place when Moses is eighty years old (based on the chronology given in Ex 7), the sense that one gets from reading the story is that it is a narrative about a young family. For one thing, Moses puts his sons on a donkey with his wife, which makes the sons seem young (they do not get on themselves, they share a donkey with their mother, and they ride instead of walking). Moreover, the scene of Zipporah circumcising her son has led almost all commentators to see the son as a child. It seems likely that this portrayal of Moses as a (presumably fairly young) man with a young family is intentional, with the purpose of emphasizing Moses’ coming of age in this pericope.

Women play a significant role in the first four chapters of Exodus. They are particularly active and involved in protecting Moses. Shiphrah and Puah refuse to murder the Hebrew baby boys, defying Pharaoh; Moses’ mother hides him and then places him gently in the reeds of the river in a vessel rather than throwing him in to drown, defying Pharaoh; Moses’ sister keeps watch over him and is brave enough to approach Pharaoh’s daughter; Pharaoh’s daughter’s maidservant retrieves Moses from the water; Pharaoh’s daughter, realizing that Moses is a Hebrew, decides to raise him, defying her father; and finally Zipporah steps in when Moses is under attack from a deity and performs a rite that would usually have been performed by a man in order to save her husband from the deity. Fox, noticing that Moses is saved by a woman in Exodus 4, just as he
was as a child, comments, “In a sense, Moshe’s early life is now over, having come full circle.”

No men speak in either Ex 2:3-10 or 4:24-26. Moses’ attackers are silent. Moses does not speak, even in chapter 4, where he is an adult (he does cry in chapter 2). Moses’ female rescuers do speak, however. They also act quickly and decisively. There are few places in the Hebrew Bible where women are as vocal and active as they are in Exodus 1-4.

Propp suggests that women shine in the Moses story because of the focus on procreation. I would suggest that Propp is on the right track but that there is more to it than that. As has been argued above, the first four chapters of Exodus represent the first stage of Moses’ life, and in the first stage of life one is dependent on one’s mother and other women. Moreover, the emphasis is not only on procreation but on rebirth, which is why in chapter 4, when the focus is no longer on procreation, Zipporah still plays a significant role.

It seems clear that the event that takes place in Ex 4:24-26 is a liminal event for Moses. It takes place in a liminal setting: on a journey, at night. In cultures that perform circumcision at puberty, it is “a rite of passage into social and religious adulthood.” If, as some scholars have suggested, circumcision was originally performed at puberty or preceding marriage among the Hebrews, that sense of passage into adulthood may be present in this story. Propp notes the similarity between Moses’ time in Midian and male initiation rites in other cultures, which

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“frequently feature elements of danger ... and a symbolic death and rebirth into adulthood.”\textsuperscript{147}

This story also marks the last time that Moses will be protected by a woman.\textsuperscript{148} Moreover, Moses’ character undergoes a transformation as a result of this event, as will now be discussed.

When God calls Moses at the burning bush and tells him to go back to Egypt and lead Israel out of slavery, Moses’ response is to protest and make excuses. Why me? he asks (3:11). And when God reassures Moses that he will be with him (3:12), Moses complains that he needs to know God’s name (3:13). God gives Moses his name and promises that the people will listen to him and that he will be successful in his mission (3:14-22). Yet even after this reassurance, Moses protests that the people might not believe him (4:1). God gives him miracles to perform as proof that he has been sent by God (4:2-9). Moses’ next excuse is that he is not good at speaking (4:10). God responds that he has the power to make Moses able to speak (4:12). Finally, Moses asks God to send someone else (4:13). At this point, God says that Aaron will speak on Moses’ behalf, but that Moses is to go to Egypt (4:14-17). Moses finally stops arguing and leaves for Egypt (4:18-20).

On the way to Egypt, Moses is attacked by God, vicariously circumcised, and undergoes a transformation of character. When he arrives in Egypt, he goes confidently both to the people of Israel and to Pharaoh, speaking the words God has told him to speak. At first, Moses speaks through Aaron, but by the point of the plague of frogs in Exodus 8, it is Moses himself who speaks to both Pharaoh and the Hebrews. No longer does Moses claim to be unable to speak. Only briefly, in Ex 6:30, does Moses show any of the timorousness and reluctance to do as God asks that was characteristic of Moses in chapters 3 and 4. Chapter 6 is essentially a re-iteration of

\textsuperscript{147} Propp, \textit{Exodus 1-18}, 240.

\textsuperscript{148} Propp, “Bloody Bridegroom,” 514.
the call of Moses (it was probably a parallel account to Ex 3-4). In the final form of the text, it serves as a confirmation of Moses’ mission and an introduction to the plague narrative. Moreover, in 6:30, although Moses makes an argument similar to the one he made in 4:10, here it reads less like an excuse and more like a concern: Moses is legitimately concerned that Pharaoh will not listen to him. Once YHWH solves this problem by supplying Aaron as the speaker (7:1-2), Moses does not argue further and does as YHWH has commanded him (7:6).

Throughout the dialogue at the burning bush, Moses, although he has asked for and been told the divine name YHWH, addresses YHWH as “Adonai” (4:10, 4:13). The only time Moses uses the name “YHWH” is in 4:1, when he protests that the Hebrews will say that YHWH had not appeared to him. But after his vicarious circumcision in Ex 4:24-26, Moses speaks the name YHWH with confidence (5:1, 5:3), and the next time he addresses God, he addresses him as YHWH (5:20).

After his brush with death in Ex 4, Moses is not only brave and bold when speaking to Pharaoh and to the Israelites, but he even boldly defends the Israelites from God when God wants to destroy them (for example, in Ex 32, Nm 14 and Nm 16). It seems clear that YHWH’s attack on Moses in Ex 4:24-26 brought about a transformation in Moses’ character, bringing him into true adulthood and making him into a bold and strong leader for the Hebrews.

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149 Childs, Exodus, 111.


151 Walters, “Moses at the Lodging Place,” 420.
CONCLUSION

Solutions for the Issues of Exodus 4:24-26

The introduction to this paper included a list of some of the major issues that Ex 4:24-26 poses for interpreters. An interpretation of the passage in its present context should engage with all or most of the difficulties and supply explanations that are internally consistent and that are plausible based on the Hebrew text as we have it. Thus it seems a good test of the interpretation proposed above to review the difficulties of the passage and examine the explanations that this interpretation provides.

1) Whom is YHWH attacking, and why? It seems most likely that YHWH is attacking Moses. Since, in this interpretation, Moses symbolically dies and is reborn, it makes sense that YHWH would be seeking Moses’ death, not the death of Moses’ son. Moreover, as Childs and others have argued, the mention specifically of the son in v. 25 suggests that it is Moses who is being referred to in v. 24, since if v. 24 were referring to the son, the specification of the son in v. 25 would be unnecessary. As for why YHWH is attacking Moses, this interpretation suggests that it was not because of any wrongdoing by Moses but rather because it was necessary in order to bring about the desired result (Moses’ transformation). In addition, YHWH seeking to kill Moses parallels Pharaoh seeking to kill Moses and all the Hebrew boys in chapters 1-2. In chapter 2, the result was that Moses’ mother placed him in the river, symbolically killing him, and here, the result is that Zipporah symbolically kills him. In both cases, the attack on Moses’ life brings about transformation.

152 Childs, Exodus, 98.
2) Which son does Zipporah circumcise? The question of which son is circumcised is largely irrelevant to this interpretation, since the point of the pericope is the vicarious circumcision of Moses. However, since Gershom is the only son who has been named at this point in the narrative, it seems reasonable to assume that he is the one circumcised. The mention of the firstborn son immediately preceding this passage also leads the reader to assume that it is the firstborn that is in view here.

3) Whose רַגְלַיִם does Zipporah touch with the foreskin? Since the point of the pericope, in this interpretation, is the vicarious circumcision of Moses, she presumably touches Moses’ רַגְלַיִם. There are several possible reasons for her not circumcising Moses directly, including not wanting to incapacitate him (if the son is a small child or infant, he can simply be put back on the donkey with his mother) and the possibility that Moses is already circumcised.

4) To what does רַגְלַיִם refer? It seems likely that it refers to Moses’ genitals, since, as above, the purpose of circumcising her son is the vicarious circumcision of Moses. Zipporah smears the blood of the foreskin on Moses’ genitals in order to create the semblance of a circumcision.

5) What does חָתָן mean in this context? Since this story seems to understand Moses and Zipporah as a young couple with a young son, it is possible that חָתָן means “bridegroom,” because it can denote a recently married husband. However, every other example of חָתָן with the meaning “bridegroom” in the Hebrew Bible refers to a generic bridegroom, so it seems strange that this passage would break from that pattern. It is probably best to interpret the word with a fairly general meaning, i.e., “a relative by marriage.” It is notable that the Akkadian cognate to the root חָתָן, ḫātānu, has the meaning “to protect.”

Although there are no instances in the Hebrew Bible of the root חָתָן having a meaning specifically related to the idea of protection, in the context of Ex 4:24-26, the meaning “protected one” would make sense.

6) What is the meaning of חֲתַן-דָּמִים? The meaning of the phrase largely depends on the meaning of חָתָן. I would understand דָּמִים to refer to the blood which has (in this interpretation) been transferred to Moses’ genitals by Zipporah with the bloody foreskin. Although the use of the plural of דָּם is strange, Lev 12:4 provides an example of the plural referring to the blood of purification. For the phrase as a whole, the translation “one protected by blood [of the circumcision]” would make sense, but is unfortunately not well supported by linguistic evidence. It does not really make sense for Zipporah to say, “You are my relative-by-marriage of blood” (what would that even mean?). Perhaps, then, the best translation is the one usually given: bridegroom of blood, or bloody bridegroom. It is possible that the author/editor of Exodus did not know what the phrase meant but knew that it was an important part of the story (perhaps it is a ritual phrase that was once spoken at circumcision) and so included it, explaining it by לַמּוּלֹת—whatever the phrase meant, it was related to the circumcision.

7) Whom is Zipporah addressing as חֲתַן-דָּמִים? Since, in this interpretation, Moses is the focus of the passage, and the one upon whom blood has just been smeared and who is therefore bloody, as well as being Zipporah’s bridegroom (assuming that translation of חָתָן is correct), it seems most likely that she is addressing Moses.

8) What is the meaning of לַמּוּלֹת? In this interpretation, it seems to mean something like “by means of circumcision” or “with regard to circumcision” (which are the translations that most commentators offer).

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154 Childs, Exodus, 100.
9) Why is Zipporah, rather than Moses, performing the circumcision? Since, in this view, Moses is the one who is under attack, he is presumably incapacitated and is unable to perform the circumcision. Moreover, the fact that a woman is acting to save Moses from a threat on his life from a more powerful person/deity (God is the functional equivalent of Pharaoh in this passage) fits well in the first four chapters of Exodus, where women take on the role of protector, and which represent the childhood/youth of Moses, a time in life when protective mother figures are particularly important.

10) How did Zipporah know to perform the circumcision, and why did the circumcision cause YHWH to let Moses alone? In this interpretation, how Zipporah knew what to do is unimportant; the focus of the passage is on the circumcision itself, not on the thought process of Zipporah. YHWH stopped attacking Moses after the circumcision because the purpose of his attack was to bring about the vicarious circumcision of Moses.

Overall, it seems that the interpretation of the passage offered in this thesis provides explanations of the complexities of the passage that are coherent and faithful to the Hebrew text.

**Conclusion**

A major function of the pericope in Ex 4:24-26 is to transform Moses into a suitable leader for the Israelites by having him symbolically die and be reborn as a Hebrew, because he had been living as an Egyptian since infancy. The attack on Moses and vicarious circumcision also have the effect of bringing him into adulthood and making him into a confident leader.

There are significant, largely unexplored parallels between Ex 4:24-26 and Ex 1-2, particularly 2:3-10, and these parallels shed light on the meaning of Ex 4:24-26. For example, in Ex 4:24-26, YHWH plays the role that Pharaoh plays in Ex 1-2. Zipporah acts in the same capacity as the various women in Ex 1-2; her role is particularly parallel to the role of Pharaoh’s daughter, and
like Pharaoh’s daughter, she is an outsider, not a Hebrew. As Moses symbolically dies and is reborn out of the water in Ex 2:3-10, so he symbolically dies and is reborn through the rite of circumcision in 4:24-26. These two passages book-end the first stage of Moses’ life.

This interpretation of the function and meaning of the passage in its present context is not incompatible with other interpretations, such as the theory that this pericope is related to the plague of the death of the firstborn and/or the Passover. The ancient rabbis considered various interpretations of this passage without necessarily choosing one as correct, a practice that perhaps should be continued with regard to difficult passages such as this one.155 There are ambiguities present in the text that allow for multiple interpretations, and it seems likely that at least some of the ambiguities were intentional on the part of the author/editor.156 In fact, Ex 4:24-26 seems to serve several functions in the final form of Exodus, including creating inclusio for both Moses’ time in Midian (Moses leaves Egypt for Midian under the threat of death—Pharaoh seeks to kill Moses in 2:15, and now Moses is leaving Midian for Egypt and YHWH seeks to kill him) and the Plague narrative (this passage foreshadows the tenth plague, as well as foreshadowing the smearing of blood on the Hebrews’ doorposts as protection from YHWH’s destruction (12:12-13, 22-23).157 The transformation of Moses into a true leader of the Hebrews is just one of the functions of this passage.

Whatever the original story may have been about, the pericope has been included in the Moses saga because it was understood to be a story about Moses. Although the passage has long seemed obscure to both casual readers and exegetes, the author/editor of Exodus included it in the book


156 Kaplan, “‘And the Lord Sought to Kill Him’,” 65-74; Walters, “Moses at the Lodging Place,” 407-425.

157 Fox, Five Books, 276.
and placed it in this location because he saw it as illuminating the larger Moses and/or Exodus story.

Exodus 4:24-26 is a passage that has never been satisfactorily explained. This thesis has endeavoured to provide an interpretation of the passage that is coherent and plausible and explains why the pericope has been included in the book of Exodus. Exploring the function of Ex 4:24-26 in its context has provided a new way of understanding Moses’ transformation into the leader of the Hebrews. Exodus 4:24-26 is, in fact, a meaningful and important passage within the Moses narrative, a passage that need not and should not be avoided by interpreters. Hopefully the method used in this thesis of looking for liminal events and character transformations will help exegetes to shed light on other difficult Biblical narratives.
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