

Popular Commentaries

This is a strange verse, but it reveals the third real objection of Moses. He had neglected to circumcise his sons. Circumcision was the evidence or seal of the covenant of God made with Abraham. If Moses would proclaim God's will to others, he too had to be obedient to God's will. God had to forcibly remind Moses of his disobedience.

Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet, and said, Surely a bloody husband art thou to me.

So he let him go: then she said, A bloody husband thou art, because of the circumcision [Exod. 4:25–26].

This incident is difficult to understand, and we must retrace our steps somewhat to examine the problem. When Moses fled as a fugitive from Egypt, he went to the land of Midian. The Midianites were the offspring of Abraham and Keturah. These people were monotheistic. They were not idolaters but worshiped one God. Moses felt at home with these people. He became close friends with the priest of Midian who had seven daughters. Moses married his daughter Zipporah—a name that sounds like a modern gadget to take the place of buttons. Actually, as we have said before, her name means “sparrow” or “little bird.” The wife of Moses was the first “Lady Bird.”

God blessed Moses' home in the beginning. His first son Gershom, meaning “stranger”, was born in Midian. Moses had been a stranger in his land, but he had made it his home.

In Moses' married life, unfortunately, there was a problem. God called Moses at the burning bush and commissioned him to go to Egypt. Pharaoh was dead and it was safe for Moses to return. As Moses started his journey to Egypt, God attempted to kill him. Why? Moses had neglected the rite of circumcising his son. Circumcision was the badge and seal of God's covenant with Abraham that was designed to teach the Israelites to have no confidence in the flesh. The flesh was to be cut away, and each Israelite was to place his trust in God.

Genesis 15:6, Psalm 106:31, Romans 4:3, and Galatians 3:6 tell us that Abraham believed God and it was counted unto him as righteousness. Isaac and Jacob followed the example of Abraham. They were Israelites by birth, but circumcision was the badge of it. It was an act of faith for them to perform that rite. Circumcision was the evidence that a man was the son of Abraham. It was an evidence of their faith.

Apparently Zipporah had resisted the ordinance of circumcision, and Moses had not insisted upon it. Perhaps Moses did not feel this act was so important, and obviously his wife felt it was a foolish and bloody thing to do. At any rate, Moses did not want to precipitate a marital rift. Moses' wife was not atheistic; she was monotheistic. She was simply resisting the ordinance of God, and Moses did not want to make an issue of it. Moses could stand up against Pharaoh, but he could not stand up against his wife. Moses could tell Israel when they were wrong, but he did not oppose his wife when she was wrong.¹

Absurdly blames Zipporah! Really no analysis.

¹ J. Vernon McGee, vol. 04, *Thru the Bible Commentary: The Law (Exodus 1-18)* (electronic ed.; Thru the Bible commentary Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 42-44.

A second incident that takes place on the return journey to Egypt is the bizarre attack on Moses or his son (vv. 24–26). This story is marked by several obscurities. The Lord meets and seeks to kill *him* (v. 24). There is no antecedent in the sentence to be certain whether it is Moses or his son who is attacked. Apparently, Moses had failed to circumcise his sons as demanded by the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 17:11–14). We would expect the attack to be directed at Moses who was responsible for carrying out the rite. Why he should have been attacked at this time at this place is odd. Zipporah, apparently sensitive to what is taking place, circumcises her son with a flint. The precise meaning of her statement “Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me” (v. 25b) is also obscure. Zipporah’s action brings an immediate end to the attack.

Meanwhile, God has spoken to Aaron, telling him to join his brother in the wilderness. They meet at “the mountain of God” (v. 27). There Moses recounts God’s intentions for Israel and the two then hasten on to Egypt to meet with the elders, as God has instructed. The message, delivered by Aaron, is believed and the people bow their heads and worship.²

This one actually has an important observation about the ambiguity of the antecedent.

² Walter A. Elwell, vol. 3, *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible* (Baker reference library; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1996), Ex 4:18.

24–26 The narrative moves location to *a lodging place on the way*. Here we have a brief and enigmatic report of God’s attempt to kill Moses (24–26). His life was spared only after his wife Zipporah intervened by circumcising their son Gershom (*cf.* 2:22). This unusual incident possibly centres on Moses’ continued lack of faith regarding his mission. Although God had assured him that he would deliver the Israelites out of Egypt because of his covenant with Abraham, Moses had failed to circumcise his own son as required by God under that very covenant (*cf.* Gn. 17:10–14). The incident serves as a reminder of the danger of failing to take God seriously.

With a minimum of detail the narrative records Moses’ encounter with Aaron and the elders of Israel. The brief description of these events stands in sharp contrast to the prolonged discussion which Moses had with God.

Contrary to what he expected, Moses received a most favourable welcome. When they learned of God’s concern for them, the Israelite leaders bowed down and worshipped. As his earlier conversation with God reveals, Moses never anticipated a scenario like this. Everything looked set for a successful mission.

Note. 25 The precise meaning of *a bridegroom of blood* is uncertain.³

Hard to imagine how this one could be more unhelpful. (“It’s a problem.” No kidding).

³ D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition* (4th ed.; Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), Ex 4:24.

Verses 24–31⁴

Moses is here going to Egypt, and we are told,

I. How God met him in anger, v. 24–26. This is a very difficult passage of story; much has been written, and excellently written, to make it intelligible; we will try to make it improving. Here is,

1. The sin of Moses, which was neglecting to circumcise his son. This was probably the effect of his being unequally yoked with a Midianite, who was too indulgent of her child, while Moses was too indulgent of her. Note, (1.) We have need to watch carefully over our own hearts, lest fondness for any relation prevail above our love to God, and take us off from our duty to him. It is charged upon Eli that he *honoured his sons more than God* (1 Sa. 2:29); and see Mt. 10:37. (2.) Even good men are apt to cool in their zeal for God and duty when they have long been deprived of the society of the faithful: solitude has its advantages, but they seldom counterbalance the loss of Christian communion.

2. God's displeasure against him. He met him, and, probably by a sword in an angel's hand, sought to kill him. This was a great change; very lately God was conversing with him, and lodging a trust in him, as a friend; and now he is coming forth against him as an enemy. Note, (1.) Omissions are sins, and must come into judgment, and particularly the contempt and neglect of the seals of the covenant; for it is a sign that we undervalue the promises of the covenant, and are displeased with the conditions of it. He that has made a bargain, and is not willing to seal and ratify it, one may justly suspect, neither likes it nor designs to stand to it. (2.) God takes notice of, and is much displeased with, the sins of his own people. If they neglect their duty, let them expect to hear of it by their consciences, and perhaps to feel from it by cross providences: for this cause many are sick and weak, as some think Moses was here.

3. The speedy performance of the duty for the neglect of which God had now a controversy with him. His son must be circumcised; Moses is unable to circumcise him; therefore, in this case of necessity, Zipporah does it, whether with passionate words (expressing her dislike of the ordinance itself, or at least the administration of it to so young a child, and in a journey), as to me it seems, or with proper words—solemnly expressing the espousal of the child to God by the covenant of circumcision (as some read it) or her thankfulness to God for sparing her husband, giving him a new life, and thereby giving her, as it were, a new marriage to him, upon her circumcising her son (as others read it)—I cannot determine: but we learn, (1.) That when God discovers to us what is amiss in our lives we must give all diligence to amend it speedily, and particularly return to the duties we have neglected. (2.) The putting away of our sins is indispensably necessary to the removal of God's judgements. This is the voice of every rod, it calls to us to return to him that smites us.

4. The release of Moses thereupon: *So he let him go*; the distemper went off, the destroying angel withdrew, and all was well: only Zipporah cannot forget the fright she was in, but will unreasonably call Moses *a bloody husband*, because he obliged her to circumcise the child; and, upon this occasion (it is probable), he sent them back to his father-in-law, that they might not create him any further uneasiness. Note, (1.) When we return to God in a way of duty he will return to us in a way of mercy; take away the cause, and the effect will cease. (2.) We must resolve to bear it patiently, if our zeal for God and his institutions be misinterpreted and discouraged by some that should understand themselves, and us, and their duty, better, as

⁴ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), Ex 4:24–31.

David's zeal was misinterpreted by Michal; but if this be to be vile, if this be to be bloody, we must be yet more so. (3.) When we have any special service to do for God we should remove as far from us as we can that which is likely to be our hindrance. *Let the dead bury their dead, but follow thou me.*

A few non-sequiturs; preachy, but that's its nature.

b. *The circumcision of Moses' son (4:24-26)*

4:24-26. The circumcision of Moses' son (either Gershom or Eliezer) seems strange. In his years in Midian **Moses** had neglected to obey God's command (cf. Gen. 17:10) to circumcise one (or both?) of his sons. So God **was about to kill** Moses, perhaps by causing him to be gravely ill. **Zipporah** reluctantly circumcised her son with **flint** and then God healed His prophet. Her touching **Moses' feet** with the **son's foreskin** was possibly a symbolic act of substitution, in which obedience was seen as replacing disobedience. Zipporah called Moses **a bridegroom of blood**. The meaning of this phrase is unknown, but some say it was used in a derogatory way to suggest that she did not favor the rite. (Yet she did it to save her husband's life.) Others propose that she saw in the act a sort of redemption by which the blood of the youngster restored Moses to the Lord and also to her as a new bridegroom.

At this time Zipporah and the sons may have returned to Jethro (18:2-3). Moses' sudden illness was a warning that he must obey God wholly and fulfill his mission. Also this incident follows up the emphasis in 4:22-23 on sons (Pharaoh's son, and Israel as God's son).⁵

Raises an item or two worth pursuing – but of course lacks the space to pursue anything.

⁵ John F. Walvoord et al., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-), Ex 4:18–26.

Expositional Commentaries

4:24–26 *God Attacks Moses*

Just when our attention has been focused on the approaching dangerous confrontation with Pharaoh, a different danger breaks in on Moses from a totally unexpected source: *the LORD met him and tried to kill him* (4:24). Commentators have puzzled and theorized much about this passage (Childs: 95–101, surveys views). Some features remain mysterious, but others seem clear. The precise external nature of the threat to Moses' life remains unnamed; perhaps it is a sudden sickness.

The saving act is performed by Zipporah, adding another instance to the theme of salvation through women (cf. TBC for Exod. 2). The act itself is a circumcision rite performed on Moses' son. That only one son is mentioned does not contradict 4:20, as only one son is required to describe Zipporah's action. Since the preceding verses speak of firstborn sons, we may assume that Moses' firstborn son is meant here. The use of a flint knife, rather than a more modern metal (bronze) knife, points to the tendency of rituals to use traditional objects (cf. Josh. 5:2–9).

Although the Hebrew text says that Zipporah touched *his feet* with the bloodstained foreskin, the pronoun must refer to Moses, not to his son. *Feet* is a euphemism for genitals here as elsewhere (e.g., Isa. 6:2; 7:20; Ruth 3:4–14). The suggestion is that the son's circumcision is transferred, by this symbolic action, to Moses himself, who apparently has not been circumcised. Zipporah's statement *Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me!* may represent a ritual formula that must have already been archaic when the story was written, since 4:26 offers a partial explanation (for an alternative view, see Propp).

The exact meaning of the explanation eludes us, though theories about its possible background in various societies abound. Here it simply expresses, together with the flint knife, that Zipporah knows how to perform the rite properly, using objects and words handed down by ancient custom. It is unwarranted, however, to see evidence here that Zipporah "may have been endowed with priestly status" (Setel: 30f.). Circumcision was a family rite. Since Moses, the father normally expected to perform it, is himself in some sense the object of the action (see below), Zipporah is the only adult available to carry out the ritual.

Why this whole strange incident? Jewish interpreters have taken the lead, followed by others, in assuming that Moses has neglected the law of God (Gen. 17:9–14) by not seeking circumcision for himself and/or by not circumcising his son(s). Thus he has incurred God's judgment, for obedience to the law supersedes even a special calling like that of Moses. W. H. Propp, on the other hand, suggests that Moses forfeited his life by killing an Egyptian (2:12). Zipporah improvises a ritual of atonement by the blood of the firstborn, foreshadowing the events of the Passover night (495–518).

It may well be true that Moses' neglect of circumcision—or even his act of manslaughter—constitutes the cause of the incident endangering his life, and that the vicarious circumcision of his son atones for his guilt of omission or commission. Overtones of the protecting blood of the Passover can hardly be missed by the repeat reader here: Moses' life, prefiguring that of Israel, is saved by blood (notes on 12:21–28). The circumcision has to be applied vicariously to Moses' son, since a circumcision of Moses at this time would have incapacitated him temporarily from pursuing his mission.

Though possibly correct, these interpretations seem to place the accents incorrectly. Here one question is important: Why does this event occur at this particular point in the story? The story of Jacob at the Jabbok (Gen. 32:22–32) may provide a clue. There Jacob, also on a journey, was

caught up in a growing suspense concerning the outcome of his impending meeting with his hostile brother Esau. Just when that tension reached its peak, on the eve before the meeting, a totally unexpected attack on him occurred. It came from a man later identified as God.

The experience changed Jacob's whole life, as symbolized by his new name, *Israel*, and it taught him that the crucial confrontation over the stolen blessing was not with his brother, Esau, but rather with God. After this crucial confrontation with God, the meeting with Esau on the following day proceeded peacefully, almost like an anticlimax.

Similarly Moses, just warned of Pharaoh's hard heart and the fierce struggle awaiting him, is reminded in a mysterious night experience that the decisive encounter is not with Pharaoh, fierce as that may be, but with God. If Moses' relationship to God is set right—through atonement by blood, as we noted—then the way to victory over Pharaoh lies open.⁶

Raises some interesting trajectories, but does he ever really explain it?

⁶ Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus* (, Believers church Bible commentary Waterloo, Ont.; Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2000), 84-86.

4:24–26.⁷

Moses, the ‘blood bridegroom’. This is an obscure passage, even to early Jewish commentators, yet its very obscurity and the problems that it raises show it to be a genuine piece of Mosaic tradition (cf. Gen. 6:1–4). It is connected with the necessity of circumcision, the ‘covenant sign’ given by God to Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 17:10), which Moses’ son apparently did not yet bear, perhaps owing to his birth in Midian (but see Jer. 9:25, 26 for circumcision in these areas). At all events, its acceptance on this occasion is another forging of the link between the new revelation at Sinai and the ‘God of the fathers’, since circumcision was the patriarchal sign. Compare the ceremonial circumcision of the generation born in the desert, before embarkation on the ‘holy war’ against Canaan (Josh. 5:7). Circumcision is a symbol of putting away all that is unpleasing to God, and of dedication to God for the task ahead. But this dedication to God is only man’s response of obedience to God’s prior grace and calling (Gen. 17:10). True circumcision is an inward, not an outward, matter (Jer. 9:26; Rom. 2:29). It had of course, like much of the Mosaic law, great hygienic value, although this was presumably unknown to the original recipients. That circumcision was widely practised in other surrounding countries need not disturb us: not the nature of the sign, but the thing signified, is important.

24. A lodging place: a ‘caravanserai’ where travellers may camp for the night. Such an ‘overnight camp’ or ‘halting place’, always by water, is not an anachronism, provided that we rid our minds of the modern associations of the ‘inn’ of the older translations. The ‘good Samaritan’ found a more sophisticated version on the Jericho road (Luke 10:34). A larger group would have pitched a ‘caravan camp’, but this is a lonely traveler, with his wife and child. *Sought to kill him.* ‘Him’ is ambiguous, and could refer to either Moses or Gershom; the natural presumption would, however, be Moses. On the other hand, if the ‘him’ refers to Gershom, then there is a closer link with the context (death of the first-born), as showing how Moses’ first-born nearly died. Some have assumed that Moses, like his son, did not bear the sign of the covenant on his body, but this is unnecessary (Moses was a baby in a Hebrew home) and unlikely in view of the known Egyptian practice. In any case he was struck down by some dangerous sickness or other blow as the sign of God’s displeasure.

25. A flint. This is the flint knife used in Joshua 5:2, showing the archaic nature of the custom. Such stones are common in the desert. Perhaps the stone knife, as a natural object, uncontaminated by human hand, is more fit for God’s service. For the same reason YHWH’s altar must be unhewn natural stones (Exod. 20:25). At best, men can only mar God’s creation by their workmanship. *Touched Moses’ feet with it:* see modern translations and footnotes. This is a better translation than the old ‘cast it at his feet’. However, the Hebrew does not contain the word ‘Moses’, but simply says ‘his feet’, leaving the identity of the person unsolved.

26. A bridegroom of blood. The exact meaning of the phrase, in the original context, is now lost to us. Later the phrase was sometimes used of the circumciser: but this may be purely a late development, based on this text. Davies well says that the point here is the necessity of circumcision, and not the ‘when’ or ‘upon whom’ it is practised.

Spots the pronoun ambiguity, but misses the euphemism about the genitals (“feet”).

⁷ R. Alan Cole, vol. 2, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 85-86.

Scholarly Commentaries

THE NIGHT ENCOUNTER AND CIRCUMCISION³¹ (vv. 24–26)

The account of Moses' return to Egypt is interrupted by a brief but thoroughly perplexing story. At first glance, the obscure, three-verse narrative seems to lack integration into the larger context of the chapter. Moses is not mentioned. If he is the afflicted person, one could well ask how God could want to kill him, the chosen instrument for the liberation of Israel, as he sets out in fulfillment of the divine command. To complicate matters further, the application of some of the verbs, personal pronouns, and pronominal suffixes is unclear. Finally, there is also uncertainty about the meaning of some of the language and about the person to whom it is directed.

These various obscurities arise primarily because the account here is only a truncated version of a larger, popular story that circulated orally in Israel. Its details were well known and were expected to be supplied by the audience. There are several such fragmentary narratives in the Book of Genesis: the marriage of Cain (4:17), the Song of Lamech (4:23–24), the celestial beings and terrestrial girls (6:13), the depravity of Canaan (9:18–29), the nocturnal assailant of Jacob (32:23–33), and Reuben's affair with his father's concubine (35:22).

In point of fact, the sketchy tale of the night incident in verses 24–26 is not as unconnected with the larger context as is often claimed. The introductory phrase, "It happened on the way," immediately establishes the chronological linkage with verse 20. Then there are several verbal tie-ins with both the foregoing and the following texts. Thus, the phrase "sought to kill" in verse 24 echoes "who sought to kill you" in verse 19; "her son" in verse 25 recalls "his sons," "My son," "your son" in verses 20, 22, 23, and the Hebrew for "encountered him" (*va-yifgeshehu*) in verse 24 is identical with that for "met him" in verse 27.

Aside from these shared expressions, there are other indications of careful design. The featuring of the circumcision episode following the reference to the first-born provides an artfully wrought literary framework for the entire narrative, one that encompasses the struggle for liberation from Pharaoh's oppression. That struggle begins with Moses' setting out to return to Egypt (v. 20), and its successful conclusion is signaled by the death of the Egyptian first-born (12:29–36). This latter is followed immediately by the law requiring circumcision as the precondition for participation in the paschal sacrifice (12:43–49), which in turn is followed by the law of the first-born (13:1, 11–15). The effect is a thematically arranged chiasm:



³¹ On this episode, see S. Talmon, "The 'Bloody Husband,'" *Eretz-Israel* 3 (1954): 93–96; J. Blau, "*Hatan Damim*" *Tarbiz* 26 (1957): 1–3; B. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* (Naperville: I11.: A. R. Allcnson, 1960), 58–63; idem, *The Book of Exodus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 103–104; M. H. Segal, "The Religion of Israel before Sinai," *JQR* 52 (1961): 52–86; H. Kosmala, "The Bloody Husband," *VT* 12 (1962): 14–28; J. Morgenstern, "The 'Bloody Husband'?" (Exodus 4:24–26) Once Again," *HUCA* 34 (1963): 35–37; S. Loewenstamm, *The Tradition of the Exodus in Its Development* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1965), 87–88; J. M. Sasson, "Circumcision in the Ancient Near East," *JBL* 85 (1966): 473–476; T. C. Mitchell, "The Meaning of *HTN* in the Old Testament," *VT* 19 (1969): 93–112.

In addition to the literary structure, there is also a functional correspondence between the blood of circumcision and the visible sign of the blood on the paschal sacrifice. In both instances, evil is averted on account of it (4:26; 12:7, 13, 22–23). This inextricable tie between circumcision and the Passover, as plainly set forth in 12:43–49, is also unmistakably operative in chapter 5 of the Book of Joshua. It is related there that after crossing the Jordan into the promised land a mass circumcision ceremony was performed as a prelude to the first celebration of the Passover feast inside the country (vv. 2–11).

Rabbinic exegesis gave midrashic expression to this association in interpreting Ezekiel 16:6: “When I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you: ‘Live in spite of your blood.’ Yea, I said to you: ‘Live in spite of your blood.’ ” The Hebrew phrase *be-damayikh hayi*, emphatically reiterated, was interpreted by the rabbis to mean “survive through your blood [plural]”; that is, the survival and redemption of Israel was assured because of the two mitzvot—that of circumcision and that of paschal sacrifice.³² Genesis 17:9–14, it should be noted, made circumcision the indispensable precondition for admittance to the community of Israel.

In sum, the brief narrative in verses 24–26 underscores the paramount importance of the institution of circumcision and the surpassing seriousness of its neglect.³³

24. a night encampment Hebrew *malon* may be word play on the stem *m-w-l*, “to circumcise,” used in verse 26.

encountered him Whereas polytheistic literature would attribute the experience to a demonic being, Israelite monotheism admits of no independent forces other than the one God. Hence, the action is directly ascribed to Him. In order to soften the anthropomorphism, rabbinic sources, as reflected in the Targums and medieval commentaries, introduce an angel as the instrument of affliction.

sought to Rather, “was on the verge of killing him.” This is the force of the Hebrew phrase.³⁴ The victim was suddenly smitten with a deadly ailment.

kill him It would be wholly inconsistent with the drift of the preceding narrative to assume that Moses was the one stricken. The sequence of verses strongly suggests that it was Moses’ first-born, Gershom, whose life was imperiled.³⁵

25. Zipporah Knowledge of her identity is taken for granted (2:21). It is not to be wondered that she, a Midianite, was familiar with the rite of circumcision; the practice was widespread among the ancient Semites and was prevalent in Egypt.³⁶ The reason for the mother’s attribution of her son’s illness to uncircumcision must have some background that now eludes us. Moses may well have neglected this rite because of the danger of exposing a newly circumcised boy to the rigors of the journey through the wilderness. This widely held explanation receives some support from Joshua 5:5, 7, which tells that the generation born in the course of the wilderness wanderings was not circumcised. Targum Jonathan reflects a tradition that Jethro had disallowed the operation.

³² MdRY Bo’ 5, p. 14, Exod. R. 17:3, Targ. Jon. to Exod. 12:13, and Ezek. 16:6.

³³ Cf. Gen. 21:4; 34:14; Lev. 12:3; Judg. 14:3.

³⁴ So Gen. 43:30; Zech. 12:9; and in postbiblical Heb., e.g., Mish. Yoma; 1:7; cf. the Aram, equivalent in Dan. 2:13.

³⁵ So R. Simeon ben Gamaliel in Ned. 32a; TJ Ned. 3:16 (38b), Exod. R. 5:8; so Targ. Jon., Shadal. Samuel ben Hofni, Saadia, Ramban take the victim to be the second son, Eliezer.

³⁶ Herodotus, Histories 2.37, 104; cf. Jer. 9:24–25; Ezek. 28:10; 31:18; 32:22–30.

a flint Rather than a metal knife, even though the events occurred in the Late Bronze Age.³⁷ A stone knife is still widely preferred in primitive societies that practice circumcision, a testimony to both the great antiquity of the rite and the inherent conservatism of religion.

cut off ... The unique use of the Hebrew *k-r-t* for this action rather than the otherwise invariable *m-w-l* may reflect Midianite terminology. But there may also be a double word play here, for *k-r-t berit* is the Hebrew term for making a covenant, and in Genesis 17:9–14 circumcision is called “the sign of the covenant.” Further, in that same text (v. 14) it is stated that he who fails to fulfill the rite—the first command in the Torah specifically enjoined upon Abraham and his descendants—“shall be cut off from his kin; he has broken My covenant.” The Hebrew term for the prescribed penalty is *karet*. An uncircumcised Israelite who thereby alienates himself from the community of Israel would be excluded from the Passover and from the redemption from Egypt. Joshua 5:5 explicitly records that all the males who came out of Egypt had undergone the rite. It would have been ironically paradoxical indeed had the son of the central figure in the story of the Exodus been an outsider.

touches his legs Whose legs is unclear, as is the symbolism of the gesture. “Legs” may be a euphemism for the genital organs,³⁸ here of the child. The act might signify: See, the foreskin has been cut off; the requirement of circumcision has been fulfilled! Or it may well be a reference to placing a bloodstain on the child because the Hebrew verb used here (rendered “touched”) is the same as that used for the daubing of the blood of the paschal lamb on the lintel and doorposts in 12:22 (rendered “apply”). In both cases, the purpose would be the same: The blood would act as a protective sign against plague; the Destroyer would not smite.³⁹

a bridegroom of blood This is the traditional English rendering of the unique Hebrew phrase *hatan damim*, for which, so far, no parallel has been found in ancient Near Eastern literature. If *hatan* possesses its usual meaning of “groom,” it would hardly be applicable to Moses, who by now has been married for some time. Conceivably, it might be a term of endearment addressed to the child, but the meager evidence for such a usage stems from rabbinic, not biblical, times.⁴⁰ *Hatan damim* may be a linguistic fossil, pre-Israelite or Midianite, the meaning of which has been lost. However, it can hardly be coincidental that in Arabic the stem *h-t-n* denotes “to circumcise” as well as “to protect.” This latter is also its meaning in Akkadian. Hence, the enigmatic phrase could convey, “You are now circumcised [and so] protected for me by means of the blood—the blood of circumcision.” Curiously, *p-s-h*, the Hebrew stem behind Passover, can also mean “to protect.” See Comment to 12:11.

26. He let him alone The subject is God. The crisis has passed.

³⁷ Cf. Josh. 5:2–3; Ps. 89:44; cf. 2 Sam. 2:16.

³⁸ Cf. Judg. 3:24; 1 Sam. 24:3; 2 Kings 18:27 = Isa. 36:12; 7:20; cf. Deut. 28:57; Ezek. 16:25; Ruth 3:4, 7.

³⁹ Exod. 12:13, 22.

⁴⁰ Ned. 32a, TJ Ned. 3:14 (38b), TJ Kid. 4:11 (66c); cf. Mish. Nid. 5:3; Sem. 3:1; Ibn Ezra to Exod. 4:25.

she added Literally, “then she said,” perhaps invoking or coining a proverb that may mean “circumcision has been performed, and he is no longer liable to *karet*,” the penalty of being “cut off” from one’s kin.⁴¹

because of the circumcision Hebrew *la-mulot* is another unique form, apparently an abstract noun.⁸

⁴¹ Cf. Gen. 27:26–27; 29:11, 13; 31:8; especially Exod. 18:7.

⁸ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus* (English and Hebrew; commentary in English.;, The JPS Torah commentary Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 25.

24–26 These verses are among the most difficult in the Book of Exodus, not in terms of their translation, which is quite straightforward, but in terms of their meaning and their location in this particular context. From ancient (see the review of Vermes, *NTS* 4 [1958] 309–18) to modern times (see the review of Morgenstern, *HUCA* 34 [1963] 35–46), a wide range of interpretations, both fanciful and plausible, has emerged. Some of these have involved the alteration of the text, without justification, to support a given interpretation. Others have imposed wildly improbable theories designed to explain the difficulties of the passage. Most of them have been aided and abetted by the ambiguity of subject and object in the section. Moses can only be assumed to be one of the actors, since he is never mentioned by name; and the antecedents of the subject and object pronouns are far from clear. The interpreter is further blocked by the problem of the meaning and application of the obscure phrase “bridegroom of blood,” which appears in both v 25 and v 26.

Thus Moses is said to have had no part at all in this narrative (Kosmala, *VT* 12 [1962] 18–25, who thinks it a Midianite narrative; cf. Schmid, *Judaica* 21 [1965] 115–18) or at most only the part of “a passive and helpless witness” (Morgenstern, *HUCA* 34 [1963] 66–70, who thinks it “a part of the Kenite Code”). Zipporah is said (Meyer, *Israeliten*, 59; Gressmann, *Mose und seine Zeit*, 55–61) to have moved to avert (1) a fatal attack on Moses by a demon, later displaced by Yahweh, demanding the right of first intercourse with a virgin wife on the wedding night; or (2) an attack upon Gershom (Fohrer, *Überlieferung* 45–48, Cassuto, 59–61) because he had not been circumcised; or (3) even an attack upon Moses (Hyatt, 87) for the same reason. The passage is said to be the most ancient description of circumcision in the Bible (Beltz, *ZAW* 87 [1975] 209–10); an etiology for circumcision (Beer, 39; Auerbach, *Moses*, 49); and a justification for the change of circumcision from a rite performed on adult males just before marriage to one performed on boys soon after birth (Gunkel, *Archiv für Papyrusforschung* 2/1 [1902] 17–18) or even at puberty (Buber, *Moses* [Oxford: East and West Library, 1946], 56; Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 340–41). Vriezen (*Outline*, 155, n.5), following a suggestion of Beer (39), even thinks of the narrative as one in which Yahweh is not an enemy, but one who “thwarts” Moses to give him “his means of grace (circumcision as a protective sign of the Covenant).” Hehn (*ZAW* 50 [1932] 4–8) argued that the different reading of LXX in vv 25 and 26 arose from a different Hebrew *Vorlage*, and Junker (*Studien*, 122–28), that the LXX translator understood the Hebrew original differently on the basis of his view of the significance of circumcision; Dumbrell has contended (*HTR* 65 [1972] 288–90) that the LXX translator consciously altered a Hebrew original he found difficult, either for theological or linguistic reasons.

Given the strangeness and ambiguity of these three verses, such differing and imaginative interpretations are likely to be multiplied, with even stranger and more ambiguous results. Yet what can be said of the passage *as* it stands in Exodus, and, just as important, *where* it stands in Exodus? To begin with, the main point of this brief narrative is clearly circumcision, and at that, a specific circumcision. Childs (100–101) is quite correct to argue that the etiology of

NTS New Testament Studies

HUCA Hebrew Union College Annual

VT Vetus Testamentum

Judaica Judaica: Beiträge zum Verständnis ...

ZAW Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft

LXX The Septuagint, Greek translation of the OT

HTR Harvard Theological Review

circumcision in Israel, often offered as the reason for the inclusion of this section, is not in view here. And whatever “demonic” roots this narrative may once have had, if indeed there ever were such, are now completely absent. Yahweh is plainly named as the one who meets his male quarry with intentions the narrator viewed as deadly. One could wish this quarry had been as clearly indicated as is the attacker.

Whatever the narrative’s origin and whatever its original context and its meaning in that context, these verses must be understood now in their present context. The editor who assembled the sequence of which they are nearly the middle component must have understood them as both adding to that sequence and as gaining specific clarity from it. That being so, it is hardly reasonable to claim that anyone except Moses is the object of Yahweh’s encountering action. Moses is the center of Yahweh’s concern everywhere else in the section, even in the intrusive verses involving Aaron. The sudden emergence to the forefront of Moses’ son would make no sense whatever in such a sequence.

The reason for this attack, as the redactor’s explanatory note in v 26b makes clear, is that Moses had not previously been circumcised. The difficulty of such a conclusion for the later generations of Jewish scholars, who proved themselves capable of contending that Moses, along with other great OT heroes, was born circumcised (Vermes, *NTS* 4 [1958] 314–15), has made it difficult also for a great many Christian scholars. But no other explanation of this passage in this context answers more questions than it raises.

Sasson (*JBL* 85 [1966] 473–74) has pointed out convincingly that Egyptian circumcision was not only performed on adults, but was, by comparison with Hebrew circumcision, merely a partial circumcision. Indeed, he contends (475–76) that circumcision may well have come to Egypt from North Syria, where it was practiced early in the third millennium B.C. For whatever reasons, the compiler who set vv 24–26 in their present context had apparently reached a conclusion confirmed by these facts. Perhaps he combined the abnormal circumstances by which the infant Moses had to be hidden away at birth with some knowledge of the Egyptian practice and even a belief that the circumcision of infant boys was a late development in Israel’s life. Quite possibly, he too was searching for some reason for Yahweh’s serious encounter. Whatever the case, he clearly believed that Moses was uncircumcised and that Yahweh determined to stop him en route to Egypt for that reason.

Zipporah, the only person available to perform the rite, seizes the mandatory flint cutting tool (Josh 5:2–9; cf. Sasson, *JBL* 85 [1966] 474) and circumcises not Moses, who would have been temporarily incapacitated by the surgery (cf. Gen 34:18–31) at a crucial time when he could no longer delay his journey, but her son. For the child, who was not to make the journey to Egypt in any case, the effects of the circumcision would be less problematic. To transfer the effect of the rite, Zipporah touched the severed foreskin of her son to the genitals of Moses, intoning as she did so the ancient formula recalling circumcision as a premarital rite: “For a bridegroom of blood you are to me!” This ancient phrase, as Mitchell [*VT* 19 [1969] 94–105, 111–12) has demonstrated, is a phrase of marital relationship—and it was already old enough at the time of the compilation of this sequence to require a specific comment by the redactor that the context of reference for the phrase was circumcision (v 26b). The final establishment of circumcision as the crucial point of these verses is of course that Zipporah’s action worked and that Yahweh thus “fell back” or “backed off” from Moses.

The point at issue in vv 24–26 is thus that Moses had not been circumcised or, at best, had received only the partial circumcision of the Egyptians, referred to in Josh 5:9 as a “disgrace” or “reproach” (חרפה). A comparable memory for the compiler of this section may indeed have been the one recorded now in Josh 5:2–9, which reports the circumcision of all those born in the wilderness following the exodus who had not been circumcised and so had to be before the crossing of the Jordan for the conquest and settlement of the promised land.

At the beginning of Moses’ special mission for Yahweh, this omission, or perhaps this “Egyptian disgrace,” had to be remedied. Vv 24–26 pose the problem and describe its immediate and surely temporary remedy. The language of v 24, “sought to put him to death,” may reflect an earlier layer of the story, but here it describes the seriousness of the crisis and indicates dramatically that Yahweh is still very much in charge. The language may be compared to the language of the account of the testing of Abraham’s faith (Gen 22:2) or of the struggle of Jacob at Jabbok (Gen 32:22–32). Zipporah’s reaction to the crisis is a vicarious circumcision of Moses to prevent his being painfully crippled at the beginning of the most important undertaking of his life. And what Zipporah says is the ritual statement which accompanied the premarital circumcision as a declaration to a young man’s in-laws that he was of an age appropriate for marriage. The “bridegroom of blood” of circumcision was being prepared to become a bridegroom of a bride. Perhaps there was a similar ritual statement in the wedding ceremony. To the redactor who included this narrative in Exod 4, this ritual phrase was already arcane enough to require the explanation he appended at v 26b.⁹

⁹John I. Durham, vol. 3, *Word Biblical Commentary : Exodus* (, Word Biblical Commentary Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 56.