

EXODUS 4:24-26: TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING
OF THE ACCOUNT OF THE "BLOODY HUSBAND"

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Divinity in
Grace Theological Seminary
May 1982

Title: EXODUS 4:24-26: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ACCOUNT
OF THE "BLOODY HUSBAND"
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Degree: Master of Divinity
Date: May 1982
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Few texts have shown themselves to be more perplexing than Exodus 4:24-26. Because of the difficulties raised by a spectrum of contextual problems, the potential impact of this passage has been clouded and lost in a haze of speculation and preconception.

The ambiguity concerning the antecedents throughout the passage render it difficult to specify the agents involved. Scholars have pointed out the inconclusiveness of the antecedent of the personal pronouns *וַיִּפְגֹּם אֱלֹהִים, הָמִיתוֹ, לְרַגְלָיו, אֶת־מֹשֶׁה*. Whom did Yahweh seek to kill in verse 24, Moses or his son? Again in verse 25 the antecedents of the pronouns are uncertain: "She touched his feet and said, 'You are to me a blood-bridegroom.'" Is the same person intended throughout the verse and who then is meant? In addition to the inconclusiveness of antecedents, the passage has little apparent connection with its larger context. Why should Yahweh suddenly seek to kill? No reason is given for the assault. Again, the reaction of Zipporah is without explanation. How did she know what to do?

This thesis concludes that Jehovah is seeking to kill Moses because of his negligence in performing the covenantal rite of circumcision upon his youngest son Eliezer. These conclusions are based upon lines of argument stemming from biblical and cultural data relating to Moses' culpability to covenantal demands, the binding nature of the covenantal sign, and the Midianite setting of the account.

Accepted by the Faculty of Grace Theological Seminary
in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree
Master of Divinity


Adviser

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ABBREVIATIONS OF PERIODICALS AND REFERENCE

WORKS USED IN THIS THESIS

BDB	F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, <u>Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</u>
CBTEL	<u>Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature</u>
ERE	<u>Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics</u>
GCK	<u>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</u> , tr. A. E. Cowley, ed. E. Kautzsch
HTR	<u>Harvard Theological Review</u>
HUCA	<u>Hebrew Union College Annual</u>
ISBE	<u>International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia</u>
JBL	<u>Journal of Biblical Literature</u>
LXX	Septuagint Version: the Greek translation of the Old Testament
MT	Masoretic Text
OT	Old Testament
OTS	<u>Oudtestamentische Studien</u>
RB	<u>Revue biblique</u>
RES	<u>Répertoire d' épigraphie sémitique</u>
UJE	<u>Universal Jewish Encyclopedia</u>
VT	<u>Vetus Testamentum</u>
ZAW	<u>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</u>

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: AN INTERPRETIVE OVERVIEW

The account of the circumcision given in Exodus 4:24-26 is one of the strangest stories in the Old Testament and one of the most difficult to explain. Professor de Groot begins his treatment of this passage by stating, "Not only is the expression $\text{וַיִּהְיֶה-לְיִשְׂרָאֵל}$, a mysterious and extremely obscure expression, but also the short, bizarre story (savage anecdote it has been called), in which it occurs twice, will probably never leave exegetes in peace."¹ This passage affords interpretive difficulties because of its apparent disconnection from its larger context and the inconclusiveness regarding the identities of antecedents. For these reasons, exegetes have struggled to answer at least three basic questions: first, who was Jehovah seeking to kill; second, who was the uncircumcised one; and third, why was Jehovah seeking to kill.

The thesis of this paper maintains that it was Moses whom Jehovah intended to kill because of his negligence in performing the covenantal rite of circumcision according to the command of God upon his youngest son Eliezer. While the

¹Joh. de Groot, "The Story of the Bloody Husband," OTS 2 (1943):11.

writer recognizes that the inconclusiveness of this passage will not allow for interpretive dogmatism, the primary intent of this paper will be to establish the credibility of the thesis and to demonstrate its consistency with both biblical and cultural data.

Historic Interpretations

Interpretations of the Early Versions

The interpretive difficulties of this passage are reflected by the various translation attempts found in some of the ancient versions. Many of these versions have handled the Masoretic Text rather loosely, presumably to clear up the ambiguities.

LXX Vaticanus

The LXX Vaticanus, an early fourth century Greek manuscript, replaces Yahweh with His angel as the One who did the attacking. The Vaticanus renders the MT phrase, וַיִּפְגְּמֵהוּ אֱלֹהִים בְּיָדֵי מַלְאָכָיו with συνήντησεν αὐτῷ Ἄγγελος κυρίου καὶ ἐζήτην αὐτὸν ἀποκτεῖναι. It also changes Zipporah's role in that while the MT states that Zipporah took a stone and cut off the foreskin of her son and caused it to touch his feet, the Vaticanus portrays her as falling at the angel's feet and announcing that the rite had been performed.

Targum of Onkelos

The Targum of Onkelos draws attention to a perceived atoning characteristic of this passage. Morgenstern translates this Targum as follows:

It happened on the way in the lodging place that the angel of the Lord attacked him and sought to kill him. But Zipporah took a stone and cut off the foreskin of her son and drew near to him and said, "Behold, through this blood of circumcision the bridegroom has been restored to us." So he laid off him because she had said, "had it not been for this blood of circumcision the bridegroom would have incurred death."¹

Targum Pseudo Jonathan

This Targum has taken considerable liberty with the MT. Morgenstern translates this Targum's passage as follows:

And it happened upon the journey in the lodging house that the angel of the Lord attacked him and sought to kill him, because Gershom, his son, had not been circumcised; for Jethro, his father-in-law, had not permitted him to circumcise him. But Eliezer had been circumcised because of the agreement which both of them had agreed. And Zipporah took a stone and cut off the foreskin of Gershom, her son, and brought the severed foreskin near to the feet of the angel, the Destroyer, and said, "The husband wanted to circumcise, but the father-in-law prevented. And now let the blood of this circumcision atone for my husband." And the angel, the Destroyer, desisted from him, whereupon Zipporah gave thanks and said, "How precious is the blood of this circumcision, which had saved the husband from the hand of the angel of destruction."²

Midrash

Dumbrell shows that the rabbinic midrash (Mekilta, Exodus Rabbah) developed the idea that Moses nearly lost his life because he had failed to circumcise his son by the eighth day. He points out that the classic medieval Jewish commentators continued, by and large, within this exegetical

¹Targum of Onkelos, trans. by Julian Morgenstern, "The 'Bloody Husband' (?) Once Again," HUCA 34 (1963):40.

²Targum Pseudo Jonathan, trans. by Julian Morgenstern, "Bloody Husband Again," pp. 40-41.

tradition, i.e. attributing the attack to a sin on Moses' part.¹ With some minor variations, the majority of conservative, evangelical scholars follow in this tradition.

Historical-Critical Interpretations

With the coming of the historical-critical period and the presupposition that this passage reflects a long history of development prior to its present form, the traditional interpretation which had connected the incident with Moses' failure to circumcise his child was rejected as inadequate. It was argued that the sudden attack had not been clarified. Moreover, there was nothing in the text to allow the interpreter to postulate that Moses had disobeyed God, especially since the command respecting circumcision in Genesis 17 was now dated in the post-exilic period. Out of this historical-critical tradition have emerged several classical theories that have supplied scholars with serious options for understanding this passage.

Julius Wellhausen

Many of Wellhausen's views have had a significant influence on the thinking of Old Testament scholars, this passage being no exception. Wellhausen's interpretation of this passage is based upon the hypothesis that Moses should have been circumcised at the time of his marriage to Zipporah but for some reason this marriage rite had not taken place.

¹William Dumbrell, "Exodus 4:24-26: A Textual Re-examination," HTR 65 (1972):285-86.

Because of Moses' negligence in this matter, the deity of Zipporah's tribe would have killed Moses had not Zipporah cut off the foreskin of her child as a substitute for that of Moses. Wellhausen argued that this passage was an attempt by P¹ to explain how circumcision, which Wellhausen believed was originally a marriage rite, was transferred from adulthood to childhood in Israel.²

Gressmann and Meyer

Some scholars base their interpretation of this passage on the hypothesis that it was given to explain the origin of circumcision among the Israelites. Frequently, they connect circumcision with some magical rite. For example, Morgenstern translates Gressmann's paraphrase of the narrative as follows:

It once happened that Yahweh attacked Moses upon the way at a lodging place for the night and tried to kill him. Thereupon Zipporah took a flint-stone, with it circumcised her husband and (with the cut-off foreskin) touched his (Yahweh's) legs (i.e., his genitals), while she said, "You are a bridegroom of blood to me." Thereupon he

¹Michael Fox ("The Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in the Light of the Priestly 'ôt Etiologies," RB 81 [1974]:558) explains why some scholars (e.g. Wellhausen) believe that the P document (Priestly Code) contains specific information regarding the administration and significance of circumcision. Fox states: "... the great importance P attaches to circumcision is a product of the exile experience, when the suspension of the cult gave fresh emphasis to rites that can be observed by the individual, and further, that there was need for the circumcision to distinguish Jews from their heathen neighbors."

²See Morgenstern ("Bloody Husband Again," pp. 38-48) for a critique of Wellhausen's interpretation of Exodus 4:24-26.

(Yahweh) left him (Moses) alone. At that time they used to call the circumcised man "bridegroom of blood."¹

Morgenstern then presents Gressmann's interpretation of his own paraphrase:

Gressmann holds that this event must have transpired upon the marriage night of Moses and Zipporah. Unknowingly he agrees with Reinach that Yahweh, as the god of Zipporah's tribe, was entitled to receive the virginal blood of Zipporah, and when he saw himself about to be deprived of this right by Moses, in his anger he sought to take Moses' life. But Zipporah, perceiving this, quickly circumcised Moses, and with the cut-off foreskin touched the sexual organ of Yahweh, so that it became smeared with blood, quite as if he had just had intercourse with her, and his organ had thereby become covered with her virginal blood. And when the gullible deity perceived this, he believed that He had received his due, and so he withdrew and left Moses in peace. Since then it became the custom in Israel to circumcise all young men upon their arrival at the age of puberty, and to have this circumcision actually performed by their future wives as an immediate and indispensable preliminary to marriage.²

Morgenstern cites Meyer as another example of this kind of "far-fetched" interpretation. Morgenstern translates Meyer as follows:

It is clear that Zipporah employs a magical rite, intended to affect Yahweh; likewise the following words (דְּמִימָא אֶחָדָה לִי כִּי חֹתֵן) can be addressed only to Yahweh, and not at all to Moses. Therefore it must have been Yahweh, and not Moses, who was affected by her magical act. Clearly therefore she cast the foreskin at Yahweh's

¹Gressmann ("Mose und seine Zeit," ZAW 39 [1922]:56-61), trans. Morgenstern, in "Bloody Husband Again," p. 44, n. 27. (It should be noted that Gressmann substitutes אֶחָדָה לִי for כִּי חֹתֵן, אֶחָדָה לִי for אֶחָדָה לִי and changes לְמִוּלָּה to לְמִוּלָּה.)

²Gressmann's ("Mose und seine Zeit," pp. 56-61) interpretation of Exodus 4:24-26 is summarized by Morgenstern, "Bloody Husband Again," p. 44, n. 27.

male organ, so that this became bloody; therefore he is now her חתן דמים, her "bridegroom of blood."¹

Hans Kosmala

A more recent attempt to understand the narrative has been made by Kosmala with the 1962 publication of his Midianite theory. According to this theory, the Exodus 4:24-26 passage reflects the Midianite heritage of Zipporah. The circumcision story deals with the preservation of the first-born son. A Midianite deity sought to claim the child. Zipporah performed the blood rite and pronounced the formula, which according to its original Midianite meaning, designated the child as a "blood-circumcised one." The deity, upon seeing the blood, disappeared and the first-born was saved.²

Miscellaneous Interpretations

Apart from the historical-critical view there have been a number of other attempts made by scholars of various philosophical and theological positions to interpret and translate this passage.

Jewish Publication Society of America

And it came to pass on the way at the lodging place that the Lord met him and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took a flint, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet; and she said: "Surely a bridegroom

¹Eduard Meyer's (*Die Israeliten und Ihre Nachbarstämme*, p. 59), trans. Morgenstern, in "Bloody Husband Again," p. 44, n. 27.

²Hans Kosmala, "The Bloody Husband," *VT* 12 (1962):14-28.

of blood art thou to me." So He let him alone. Then she said: "A bridegroom of blood in regard of the circumcision."¹

Richter

And on the way in a lodging place Yahweh fell upon him and sought to kill him. Thereupon Zipporah took a flint knife and with it cut off the foreskin of her son and threw it at His feet, while she said, "A bridegroom of blood art thou to me." So He let him alone. On that occasion she invented the expression, "Bridegroom of blood" of the woman circumciser.²

New American Standard

Now it came about at the lodging place on the way that the Lord met him and sought to put him to death. Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and threw it at Moses' feet, and she said, "You are indeed a bridegroom of blood to me." So He let him alone. At that time she said, "You are indeed a bridegroom of blood--because of the circumcision."

The purpose of this introductory chapter has been twofold. First, in view of the preceding differences regarding the translation and interpretation of Exodus 4:24-26, the reader should now be aware of the formidable interpretive challenges that are represented by this passage. Second, the reader should have observed that many of the preceding translations are remarkable for their lack of fidelity to the MT. A fundamental presupposition of this work is that the biblical text stands as it has been transmitted to us. The transmission of the Masoretic Text has been done,

¹Cited in Morgenstern ("Bloody Husband Again," p. 41); no further reference given.

²Richter ("Zwei alttestamentliche Studien, I, Der Blutbrautigam," ZAW 39 [1922]:123-28), trans. Morgenstern, in "Bloody Husband Again," p. 42.

on the whole, with considerable care. If one is to find solutions to the interpretive problems of this passage, one must give full attention to the text itself and must allow himself to be guided by it, taking the text as he finds it instead of altering it in order to impose his own ideas upon it. One would wish that Kosmala would heed his own advice when he writes:

The text is the only thing that is given and it should be sacred to us. But even if we fail to understand its meaning at once, it will be advisable to leave the text untouched so long as we have no definite proof that it is defective or faulty.¹

¹Kosmala, "The Bloody Husband," p. 17.

CHAPTER II

A TEXTUAL EXAMINATION

As was mentioned earlier, because of apparent contextual difficulties, many interpreters have handled the MT of this passage rather loosely at certain points. By adding or altering a word here or there or by resorting to irregular lexical usages, the original meaning of Exodus 4:24-26 has been clouded. This section will examine the important textual diversities and attempt to bring this study into submission to the MT. The Masoretic rendering of this passage is as follows:

24 וַיְהִי בַדֶּרֶךְ בַּמָּלֹךְ וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ יְהוָה
וַיִּבְקֶשׁ תַּמִּיתוֹ : 25 וַתֵּשֶׁח אֶפְרָה אֶל וַתִּכְרֹת
אֶת-עֶרְלָת בְּנָהּ וַתַּצֵּעַ לְרַגְלָיו וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי
חַתָּן-דָּמִים אָתָּה לִי : 26 וַיֵּרָם מִמֶּנּוּ
אִז אָמְרָה חַתָּן-דָּמִים לְמוֹלַח :

Verse 24

וַיְהִי בַדֶּרֶךְ בַּמָּלֹךְ וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ יְהוָה וַיִּבְקֶשׁ תַּמִּיתוֹ

Most of the versions are in substantial agreement with the MT at this point with the following exceptions.

Insertions

The Syriac version of the Old Testament twice inserts "Moses" into this verse. It makes Moses the object of the qal imperfect וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ and the hiphil infinitive תַּמִּיתוֹ.

Similarly, the Targum of Onkelos and the LXX Vaticanus add the equivalent to the Hebrew מִלְאָךְ before יְהוָה. While these insertions may have helped clarify the passage, they are not found in the MT. Textual scholar William Dumbrell suggests that these insertions were ". . . an obvious intrusion designed to clarify a difficult context."¹

Lexical Problems

The double mention of the setting in verse 24 (i.e. בְּמִלְוֹן/בְּדֶרֶךְ) has puzzled some scholars. Morgenstern, for example, prefers to translate בְּמִלְוֹן as a nominal form from the root מלך thus giving the translation: "now upon the journey, at the circumcision, Yahweh attacked him (the child) and sought to kill him."² He reasons:

True, the word, מִלְוֹן, occurs in biblical Hebrew apparently only in the connotation, "lodging place." But etymologically we might also and just as well expect a noun, מִלְוֹן, from the stem, מלך, with the connotation, "circumcision."³

Morgenstern goes on to reveal one of the weaknesses of his view:

Of course it can not be proved definitively that מִלְוֹן in Hebrew ever had this connotation, "circumcision," since no other instance of the word with this connotation occurs in the Bible. . . .⁴

¹Dumbrell, "Textual Re-examination," p. 285.

²Morgenstern, "Bloody Husband Again," p. 68.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., pp. 68-69.

Dumbrell points out another weakness in this particular interpretation by objecting that it:

is admissible philologically but does not suit the context since it was not in the act of circumcision either Moses or the child (whoever was involved) that the difficulty of which the passage speaks was experienced, but rather it was the fact that one or the other had not been circumcised.¹

In another lexical examination of this double setting, de Groot postulates:

מִלֶּנֶן (which word obviously contains a play of words here with מִלֶּנֶן of verse 26) must mean karavanserai, inn, as appears from Gen. XLII 27 and XLIII 21. These useful and even indispensable localities were certainly not lacking in the old time at much used roads like those from Midian to Egypt. The solution of the difficulty is simple: we have here an alternative version before us. Both versions are old and good, and we should not ask, which is the better or the "original" one. Consequently it must be understood:

בְּדֶרֶךְ וַיָּהִי = "It came to pass by the way,"²
בַּמִּלֶּנֶן in the inn

Although one might question de Groot's "alternative version" suggestion, if one is committed to the MT and conventional lexical analysis, de Groot's handling of the text appears more sound than Morgenstern's.

A literal translation of the MT rendering of Exodus 4:24 is as follows: "And it came to pass on the journey at the lodging place that the Lord encountered him and sought to kill him" (Exod 4:24).

¹Dumbrell, "Textual Re-examination," p. 285.

²de Groot, "The Story of the Bloody Husband," p. 12.

Verse 25

וַתִּקַּח אֶפְרָה לֶחֶם

Scholars seem to be agreed concerning the translation of the first clause of this verse. The MT is rendered: "And Zipporah took a stone (or flint)." The fact that Zipporah took a stone with which to do the circumcision seems to coincide with what cultural studies have concluded regarding implements that were used for such religious operations. The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, for example, states: "It is noticeable that flint knives were used for the purpose (of circumcision). This use of an obsolete instrument is one of many proofs of conservatism in religion."¹ de Groot concurs and adds a biblical reference (Josh 5:2) to substantiate this practice.²

וַתִּכְרֹת אֶת־עָרְלָתוֹ בְּכֶסֶף

The translation of this clause is straightforward with little variance among translators. It is generally rendered: "and she cut off the foreskin of her son." It should be noted that the identity of the son cannot be determined on the basis of textual analysis but must await contextual treatment.

¹International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, s.v. "Circumcision," by T. Lewis, 1:656-57.

²de Groot, "The Story of the Bloody Husband," p. 13.

לְנָגַף לְנָגַף

There is some variation in the way translators handle this clause. Most scholars, both Jewish and Christian, render the verb לְנָגַף "to cast" or "to throw": e.g. "she cast the foreskin. . . ." Kosmala objects to this common rendering by pointing out that ". . . there is not a single case in the whole Bible, in which the verb has this meaning."¹ From a lexical standpoint, Kosmala appears to be correct. According to BDB, לְנָגַף always signifies "to touch," "to reach," or "to make touch," "to make reach."² Perhaps a more literal translation would be: "she made it touch (with regard to) his feet," meaning, "she touched with it his legs or feet."

Not all scholars, however, are agreed upon the meaning of לְנָגַף. Some argue that לְנָגַף should be translated as referring to "sexual organs" and not to literal "feet." Plastaras, for example, states:

The text says, "she touched it to his feet," but the word "feet" is often used as a euphemism for the genital organs, as in the description of Isaiah's vision: "Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew." (Isa 6:2)³

Morgenstern cites Gressmann and Meyer as examples of other scholars who interpret לְנָגַף euphemistically to mean sexual

¹ Kosmala, "The Bloody Husband," p. 23.

² BDB, p. 619.

³ James Plastaras, The Theology of the Exodus Narratives (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1966), p. 103.

organs. One is referred again to Gressmann's analysis of Zipporah's action as found on page 6:

with the cut-off foreskin touched the sexual organ of Yahweh, so that it became smeared with blood, quite as if he had just had intercourse with her, and his organ had thereby become covered with her virginal blood.¹

and Meyer's analysis found on page 6:

Clearly, therefore, she cast the foreskin at Yahweh's male organ, so that this became bloody; therefore he is now her חתן דמים, her "bridegroom of blood"; this can mean only that he has acquired her as his bride, and has become bloody in consequence.²

Morgenstern labels the interpretations of Gressmann and Meyer as "arbitrary and utterly without proof. . . ."³ One would seriously have to question the naivety of any god(s) who could be fooled in this manner. As Davis comments: "After all, she already had one son. Can the gods be so easily cheated?"⁴

From a lexical standpoint, although BDB lists six possible references regarding the euphemistic use of לַיָּדָה (Judg 3:24; 1 Sam 24:3; Ezek 16:25; Deut 28:57; 2 Kgs 18:27; Isa 7:20),⁵ none can be dogmatically proved to refer to a

¹Gressmann's ("Mose und seine Zeit," pp. 56-61) analysis is summarized by Morgenstern, "Bloody Husband Again," p. 44, n. 27.

²Meyer ("Die Israeliten"), trans. Morgenstern, "Bloody Husband Again," p. 44, n. 27.

³Morgenstern, "Bloody Husband Again," p. 45, n. 27.

⁴John J. Davis, Moses and the Gods of Egypt (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1971), p. 72.

⁵BDB, p. 920.

sexual organ and furthermore, the Exodus 4:24-26 passage is not listed. The most common rendering of רַגְלֵךְ has to do with the anatomical "foot" or related features or verbal actions pertaining to the foot. Gesenius gives a concise definition of the normative rendering of רַגְלֵךְ:

A FOOT (a primitive noun, but from the primary and bisyllabic stock rag, to move), and specially, the foot strictly, below the legs and ankles.¹

It appears on the basis of lexical study, that if one insists on translating רַגְלֵךְ euphemistically to refer to genitalia, there must be clear contextual reasons for doing so. While one may allow for the possibility of an euphemistic usage of רַגְלֵךְ, there does not appear to be a clear contextual warrant for that possibility in the Exodus 4:24-26 passage. It seems more reasonable to render רַגְלֵךְ by its most prevalent lexical usage, namely, referring to "feet."

וְהָאֵמֶר כִּי חֲתָן-דָּמִים אָמַר לִי

For many scholars, the most challenging aspect of this entire passage is the interpretation of the expression חֲתָן-דָּמִים; particularly in reference to the meaning and identity of חֲתָן. Since from a lexical standpoint חֲתָן regularly connotes "son-in-law" or "bridegroom,"² many scholars have translated חֲתָן-דָּמִים "bridegroom of blood," (e.g. a bridegroom bound to the bride; most frequently in reference to

¹Gesenius, Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures, trans. S. D. Tregelles (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), p. 756.

²BDB, p. 368.

Moses). However, this rendering has not been universally accepted.

The LXX Vaticanus, for example, renders the phrase יִזְכָּר לְךָ הַדָּם לְחֻמַּת בְּרִיתִי with ἔστιν τὸ αἷμα τῆς περιτομῆς τοῦ παιδίου μου.¹ Brenton translates this phrase: "The blood of the circumcision of my son is staunched."²

Kosmala understands לְחֻמַּת בְּרִיתִי to refer to the child³ whom Zipporah has circumcised. He states:

¹J. Hehn (Der Blutsbräutigam, Ex 4:24-26, ZAW 50 [1932], 1-8) is cited by Dumbrell ("A Textual Re-examination," p. 286) as attempting to show that textual variances between the LXX and MT at this point were due to "auditory errors" or some similar misunderstanding on the part of the Greek translator. Dumbrell doubts this hypothesis however, and attributes the variances to the Greek translator's misunderstanding of the intent of the passage. He points out that the Greek translators were sometimes disposed to altering the MT where apparent contextual and interpretive problems existed.

²C. L. Brenton, The Septuagint Version: Greek and English (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), p. 74.

³Kosmala ("The Bloody Husband," pp. 26-27) believes לְחֻמַּת בְּרִיתִי to be a "... ritual formula which must accompany a ritual act." He bases his assumption upon his translation of the phrase לְחֻמַּת בְּרִיתִי לְזִפּוֹרָה (verse 26) which he renders: "at the time she, i.e., Zipporah, used the expression hatan-damim with regard to the circumcised." In other words, according to Kosmala, the phrase לְחֻמַּת בְּרִיתִי as found in the MT, was an expression frequently used by Arab women such as Zipporah in reference to the son being circumcised. He goes on to state that: "It has long been noted by the lexicographers of the Hebrew language, that hatana in Arabic means 'circumcise.' The expression which Zipporah used can only be a connotation for the circumcised. . . . We do not know the vocalisation of the word in Zipporah's language. In the Hebrew text, with Hebrew vocalisation, it became a Hebrew word meaning 'bridegroom.'"

There are two problems with Kosmala's assumptions. First, there is no clear evidence that the phrase לְחֻמַּת בְּרִיתִי was used as part of a ritual formula among the Arabs. This idea is conjecture; based upon translating יִזְכָּר in verse 26 as indicating a frequentive occurrence. While it is grammatically

Zipporah indeed addresses her child and applies the words to him, but she is not really talking to him alone--she is saying them in front of the divinity so that the divinity may hear them.¹

Morgenstern too understands $\gamma\eta\eta$ as referring to the child.² He concludes:

possible to use $\gamma\eta$ as indicating a frequentive sense, the grammatical structure of the adverbial clause in verse 26 makes the "frequentive" idea less plausible (cf. GCK, p. 312, par. 106f. with GCK, p. 315, par. 107e). Furthermore, the phrase does not occur anywhere else in Hebrew. It seems a bit precarious on Kosmala's part to give $\gamma\eta\eta$ a technical definition on the basis of this one isolated occurrence. Second, there is no reason to assume that the Hebrew author of this narrative would have intended $\gamma\eta\eta$ to have been understood apart from its normative Hebraic meaning.

¹Kosmala, "The Bloody Husband," p. 26.

²Morgenstern ("Bloody Husband Again," pp. 35-70 while operating within the theoretical framework of a rationalistic historicism developed by Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918) sometimes referred to as the "J, E, D, P, Hypothesis," bases his understanding of $\gamma\eta\eta$ upon a perceived etymological evolution of the word. According to Morgenstern, $\gamma\eta\eta$ gradually changed in meaning with alleged changes in marital structure among the ancient Semites. According to his theory, the ancient Semites initially practiced what he labels beena or mota'a marital arrangements. A beena marriage "... was seldom permanent, but was as a rule of varying duration. Eventually the man would return to his own clan, i.e., the clan of his mother, probably to associate later with women of other clans. But his permanent affiliation remained with the clan of his mother and sisters. Under such conditions fatherhood was far from a definitely known and stable relationship. In the mota'a marriage, wherein a man contracted a conveniently brief union with a woman of another clan, and generally without the knowledge of her kinsmen, the relationship of fatherhood must have been practically non-existent" (48). From the beena/mota'a marital practices, the ancient Semites were then said to have gradually evolved a baal marital system. In a baal marriage, the clan centered upon the father rather than upon the mother as was the case with beena/mota'a. According to Morgenstern, "... the transition from beena to baal marriage in Israel was slow and gradual, that, at least in the main, it developed after the settlement of the Israelite folk units in Canaan ... the institution of beena marriage was not completely outgrown even as late as the time of David" (54). He then explains that during the

Now in Exod 4:25 f. the expression, מִי־הַיָּחִיד , is obviously applied to the person who was actually circumcised, i.e., then not Moses, as it is usually interpreted, but the child.¹

time of beena marriage, the term יָחִיד ". . . must have designated originally 'the one who was circumcised,' i.e., as we have stated, 'the male child of the sister of the יָחִיד '" (57). He concludes this, of course, because during the beena stage, fatherhood (or bridegroom of the mother) was not a significant relationship. As beena gradually evolved into the paternal baal form of marriage, the meaning of יָחִיד also gradually shifted to what Morgenstern labels a "secondary meaning" designating the husband of the woman, i.e., the bridegroom. He concludes, "Ultimately this (referring to the 'secondary meaning'--'bridegroom') became the most common connotation of the term . . ." (57).

On the basis of the preceding assumptions, Morgenstern suggests that יָחִיד , as used in the Exodus 4:24-26 narrative, must have referred to the child who was just circumcised. He concludes that because, according to his view, Exodus was part of the Priestly Code (P), which was written during or after the exile experience, that the term יָחִיד quite naturally was thought to have meant "bridegroom" seeing that baal marriage was firmly established by this time. However, when one places the narrative into its "proper historical, chronological context, it is evident that this was the period of beena/mota'a marriage and therefore, יָחִיד must refer to the child not the bridegroom.

Morgenstern's theory has at least two serious problems. First, his theory linking the supposed evolution of ancient Semite marriage from the beena/mota'a stage to the baal stage with an etymological evolution of יָחִיד is, by his own admission, based upon "scanty and indirect" evidence (54). In other words, this sociological/etymological evolutionary scheme is conceivable but not provable. Second, and more serious, Morgenstern's entire theory stands or falls on the strength of the "J, E, D, P Hypothesis." Clearly, the normative marital relationship found in the "P documents" is the baal type. According to his own observation, under conditions of baal marriage, יָחִיד most commonly connotes "bridegroom." If the "J, E, P, D Hypothesis" is found not to be true, as a vast bulk of archaeological and linguistic evidence seems to indicate, and the events of Exodus 4:24-26 actually occurred within the framework of baal marriage, then one could seriously question Morgenstern's conclusion that יָחִיד refers to the child being circumcised.

¹Morgenstern, "Bloody Husband Again," p. 61.

After completing an exhaustive study of the noun $\gamma\eta\eta$ in all of its forty-one MT occurrences and its usage in cognate languages, T. C. Mitchell¹ concludes that:

the noun $\gamma\eta\eta$ in the Old Testament and in some related languages is a classificatory kinship term meaning something like "relation by marriage."²

Even more significant to the usage of $\gamma\eta\eta$ in Exodus 4:24-26 is Mitchell's observation that when $\gamma\eta\eta$ is used from the woman's point of view, the word is always in reference to her husband. He states:

For both the masculine and feminine speakers the $\eta\tau\eta\varsigma$ are related to them by marriage, in the case of the feminine speaker the $\eta\tau\eta$ being her most direct relation by marriage; her husband.³

It is also significant that after studying all its OT occurrences, Mitchell did not find one instance where $\gamma\eta\eta$ referred to a parent-child relation.

¹In his study of the meaning of $\gamma\eta\eta$, Mitchell ("The Meaning of the Noun HTN in the Old Testament," VT 19 [1969]: 93-112) found that of the forty-two occurrences of the word in the OT, twenty-two actually designated a genetic relationship between $\gamma\eta\eta$ and the subject, while the other twenty did not. Mitchell focused his study on those twenty-two occurrences that designated a genetic relationship. He found that the twenty-two occurrences could be divided into five subgroups: $\gamma\eta\eta$ = wife's father; $\gamma\eta\eta$ = wife's brother; $\gamma\eta\eta$ = daughter's husband; $\gamma\eta\eta$ = "relation by marriage"; $\gamma\eta\eta$ = "bridegroom." (It is significant to note that he did not find a category where $\gamma\eta\eta$ = son.) Further, he discovered that when $\gamma\eta\eta$ is used from the point of view of the feminine ego, the meaning of the word is "bridegroom." He also examined the eleven occurrences of the verbal forms of $\gamma\eta\eta$ and found that ". . . these references could quite well bear the meaning contract affinity by marriage" (107).

²Mitchell, "The Meaning of HTN," p. 111.

³Ibid., p. 104.

On the basis of what appears to be the more objective textual evidence of Mitchell's study, it seems that the troublesome phrase $\text{וְהָיָה לְךָ זֶמְלָה בְּדָם}$ is best translated "bridegroom of blood"; in reference to Zipporah's husband, Moses.

Concerning the translation of the Hebrew לִי at the end of the clause, Dumbrell cites Talmon's hypothesis that ל is an abbreviation for the Tetragrammaton יהוה , thereby making Moses the $\text{וְהָיָה לְךָ זֶמְלָה בְּדָם}$ to יהוה .¹ Dumbrell dismisses Talmon's hypothesis as "intrinsically improbable" and as having no support from the versions.² לִי is better understood as an inseparable preposition taking a first person singular pronominal suffix translated, "to me."³

A literal translation of Exodus 4:25 might be rendered: "And Zipporah took a flint and cut off the foreskin of her son and made it touch his feet and she said, 'For a bridegroom (or husband) of blood you (are) to me.'"

Verse 26

$\text{וַיִּסָּרֶחַ מִלְּפָנָיו}$

The first clause of verse 26 is consistently translated: "and he desisted from him," or "and he let him go," or "he let him alone." Although there are minor variations

¹S. Talmon's ("Hatan-Damin," Eretz-Izrael 3 [1954]: 93-96) analysis is cited by Dumbrell, "Textual Re-examination," p. 286.

²Dumbrell, "Textual Re-examination," p. 286.

³J. Weingreen, A Practical Grammar for Classical Hebrew (Oxford: Clarendon, 1939), p. 52.

found among these translations, most translators would agree that this clause indicates that the attack by Yahweh on the life of the person ceased.

וְאַחֲרָהּ תִּהְיֶה-דְּמִיָּם לְמוֹתָהּ

A proper understanding of this clause depends upon how one translates the adverb וְאַחֲרָהּ and the preposition לְ.

Concerning the adverb וְאַחֲרָהּ, it can be shown to have a variety of meanings in the Old Testament. It can designate a time in the past or future by relating it to another event in terms of temporal sequence (e.g. Josh 10:33; Judg 8:3). The adverb can also denote a past time which is related to another event in terms of a logical sequence (e.g. 2 Kgs 13:19) or to just a past event without reference to sequence at all. וְאַחֲרָהּ can either refer to definite or indefinite time in the past. For example, in Joshua 14:11 וְאַחֲרָהּ designates specifically "the day Moses sent me," whereas in Exodus 15:14 the adverb refers generally to the conquest of Canaan.¹

As to how וְאַחֲרָהּ functions in this clause, one must subject the possible options to contextual considerations. As was previously mentioned, it is possible to translate the adverb as if it denotes a temporal sequence and render it "after this." However, this translation would imply that Zipporah spoke the words a second time. If this were the case, one would expect וְאַחֲרָהּ. Also it is unlikely that

¹BDB, p. 23.

Zipporah would repeat her words with an explanation "because of circumcision."

The LXX Vaticanus translates וְכִי as if a logical sequence is implied. Thus the sentence is rendered: "He departed from him because ($\delta\iota\omicron\tau\iota$) she said. . . ." But for such a construction Hebrew normally uses the conjunction כִּי .² More problematic for the Vaticanus is making sense of the final clause, "because of circumcision." This manuscript eludes the problem by omitting the final clause which seems to contain the reason for Zipporah's statement in verse 25.

There are two other interpretive options for וְכִי : one is viewing the adverb as designating an indefinite time and the other is viewing it as designating a specific time. The "indefinite" option is possible if one translates the verb in a plural, frequentative sense (e.g. "At that time women used to say . . ."). Ehrlich, for example, in order to prove the hypothesis that $\text{וְכִי-לְמַעַן אֶמְרָה לִי}$ was part of a ritual formula, emended אֶמְרָה to אֶמְרָי so that he could translate the phrase in a frequentative sense.³ But since the verb, in fact, is singular and since the perfect tense is used,⁴ this option does not seem to be as plausible.

¹BDB, p. 23. ²GCK, p. 492, par. 158a, b.

³Ehrlich's (Randglossen zur hebräischen Bibel, I, 271) view is cited by Morgenstern, "Bloody Husband Again," p. 67.

⁴While it is possible to express recurring action with the perfect tense (GCK, p. 312, par. 106k), a frequentative, ritual action would more likely be expressed by the imperfect tense (GCK, p. 315, par. 107e).

It appears that the best option would be to render לְכָּן as referring to a specific time in the past. According to GCK:

The perfect is used after לְכָּן when stress is to be laid on the fact that the action has really taken place, and not upon its gradual accomplishment or duration in the past.¹

Perhaps this final clause was inserted by its author as an editorial reference to Zipporah's statement in verse 25.

Concerning the use of the preposition לְ connected with לְכָּן , the best rendering would be in accord with GCK which states that לְ is used ". . . in loose connexion with some verbal idea in the sense of in reference to, with regard to."²

An acceptable rendering of verse 26 from the Masoretic Text would be: "At that time she said, 'A bridegroom of blood,' with reference to the circumcision."

¹GCK, p. 314, par. 107c.

²GCK, p. 381, par. 119u.

CHAPTER III

A CONTEXTUAL EXAMINATION

In his book Protestant Biblical Interpretation, Bernard Ramm points out the importance of contextual study in order to properly understand any passage of Scripture. He explains:

The material before the passage is the radar which guides the approaching, and the following material is the radar of the leaving. And if we can track the material approaching and leaving the particular passage, we have the framework in which the passage is to be understood.¹

This next section will study the context in which our passage, Exodus 4:24-26, is found from a biblical and a historical/cultural perspective.

Biblical Context

The narrative found in Exodus chapters three and four dealing with Moses' commission to go to Pharaoh is by no means a uniform unit. For example, in Exodus 4:14, 15, God tells Moses that Aaron would be his mouthpiece. One would expect the narrative to proceed by God talking to Aaron and commissioning him to meet Moses, but this particular aspect of the account is not taken up again until verse 27. A whole paragraph (verses 18-26) is interjected by the

¹B. Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), p. 139.

narrator which provides information concerning Moses and his family. We are told that Moses went home, bade his father-in-law farewell and readied his wife and sons for the journey to Egypt. All of this took place after God had appeared to him again and told him to go as all those who sought his life were now dead.

In chapter three, verses 10 and 18, Moses had been told to do certain signs that the people might heed him and go to Pharaoh and announce that they wished to leave Egypt, but what he was to say to the unwilling Pharaoh he had not been told. So God appeared to him once more and gave him further instructions. This is done in 4:21-23. Verse 21 resumes the narrative at the point where verse 17 broke off: Moses is once more told to work the miracles, further that Pharaoh's heart would be hardened and that, if he would not let them go, Moses should tell him that his firstborn would be slain. No mention is made of the other plagues. The two ideas, Moses' interaction with his family and his impending responsibilities as the God ordained leader of Israel are independent ideas, but they appear to be formally connected with each other and inserted into the text purposefully by the narrator. It should be noted that up to verse 24, the narrator is clear as to the identity of the participants: for example, in verse 18, "Moses went . . . to Jethro"; in verse 19, "The Lord said to Moses . . ."; in verse 10, "Moses took his wife . . ."; and in verses 21-23, "The Lord said to Moses. . . ."

Then comes the passage with which this paper is concerned, Exodus 4:24-26. Taken at face value, this passage has no self-evident connection with the development of the narrative, preceding or following; neither in contents, form, or atmosphere. The subject in verse 24 is named, it is the Lord; in verse 25 it is Zipporah, and in verse 26a it is the Lord. The Lord, we are told, is about to kill somebody who is on a journey and is now resting at a resting place. Concerning the participants of this account--this is all that can be said with absolute confidence. In addressing himself to the problem of ascertaining the identities of the characters in this passage, Kosmala summarizes the matter:

In the preceding pieces every person is carefully mentioned by name, sometimes even where the name might have been replaced by the pronoun, or is otherwise clearly distinguished. The extreme care that has been taken in inserting the various pieces is remarkable, and just here, where the person to be killed should have been named or unmistakably indicated, we are left in the dark.¹

The text gives no hint as to the form of the attack only that it was serious enough that it would have killed one of the characters had not Zipporah acted. Of course, one of the keys to understanding this passage is to understand why the Lord is seeking to kill. No reason is given in the passage itself.

The passage portrays Zipporah's action as quick and decisive. She did three things which were related in quick succession. She circumcised the child, she touched either

¹Kosmala, "The Bloody Husband," p. 19.

the child's or Moses' feet with the foreskin, and spoke the words, "You are a blood-bridegroom to me." As was pointed out earlier in the textual discussion, of the three actions, only the first appears to be indisputable. It is not clear as to whose "feet" were touched with the foreskin, what part of the body was intended, or what was the purpose of the action. Whatever the intended purpose, Zipporah's action did serve as a visible demonstration that circumcision had indeed been performed and more importantly, it is clear that Zipporah's action resulted in a cessation of the Lord's intent to kill.

Historical/Cultural Context

Apart from a purely biblical contextual analysis, one must also view this passage from a historical/cultural perspective if one is to gain insight into its meaning. An understanding of Zipporah's Midianite background and Moses' early Hebrew training are essential in answering the contextual questions raised by this thesis.

Zipporah's Midianite Influence

It is important to gain some insight into the cultural background of Zipporah in order to attempt to understand her behavior in this passage. An understanding of cultural influences may provide some clues regarding her view of circumcision, that is, the nature of its symbolism, administration, and purpose. Knowing something of her background not only may provide insight as to why she responded in the

manner she did but it may also reveal what her concept of God may have been. Customs, beliefs, and superstitions do not die easily. The account of Rachel who had taken her father's Teraphim with her into her new homeland is a good example (Gen 31:19, 30, 34).

The major problem that one is confronted with in attempting to learn about Zipporah's background is that very little is actually known about her and her particular clan. Midian is named authentically only in the Bible. It has no history elsewhere.

According to the OT, Midian was a descendent of Abraham by Ketura who had five other sons (Gen 25:1ff.). All of them were sent eastward; none being of the line of promise. Evidently there was a good deal of inter-marriage between the Midianites, Ishmaelites, and Edomites (who lived in the lands south of Canaan) for there are numerous instances of this in the historical books. It seems that they may have eventually merged into one another or disappeared in other ways (Judg 1:16). On one occasion the Midianites are counted among the Ishmaelites (Judg 8:24). Their successors and heirs are the northern Arabs.

"Midian" would correspond very nearly with our modern word "Arab;" limiting, however, the modern word to the Arabs of the northern and Egyptian deserts: all the Ishmaelitish tribes of those deserts would thus be Midianites, as we call them Arabs, the desert being their "land." At least it cannot be doubted that the descendants of Hagar and Keturah intermarried; and thus the Midianites are apparently called Ishmaelites in

Judg. viii, 24, being connected, both by blood and national customs, with the father of the Arabs.¹

The biblical record indicates that Jethro, Zipporah's father, had some kind of belief in the God who revealed Himself to Moses in the land of Midian (Exod 8:1, 9-10; 2:22; 3:1ff.). Later we are told that Jethro gave Moses valuable administrative advice which was well received (Exod 8:19ff.). It should be recognized however, that the Midianites were not Israelites who had a distinct and unique historic relationship with the living God. One is reminded of the account given in Numbers 25 and 31 where the prophet Balaam persuaded the women of Midian and Moab to work upon the passions of the Israelites, and entice them to the licentious festivals of their idols, and thus bring upon them the curse of heaven (Num 31:16).² In commenting on this passage the CBTEL states:

The influence of the Midianites on the Israelites was clearly most evil, and directly tended to lead them from the injunctions of Moses. Much of the dangerous character of their influence may probably be ascribed to the common descent from Abraham. While the Canaanitish tribes were abhorred, Midian might claim consanguinity, and more readily seduce Israel from its allegiance.³

The point is this, while many of Jethro's ideas concerning God and the Abrahamic covenant were handed down to him by

¹Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature, 1969 ed., s.v. "Midianite," 6:236 (hereafter cited as CBTEL).

²See C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch (The Pentateuch, vol. 3, trans. James Martin in Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949], pp. 225-28), for a good synopsis of the account.

³CBTEL, s.v. "Midianite," 6:237.

his ancestral connection to Abraham, it appears safe to assume that by the time of the Exodus 4:24-26 passage, these ideas had become somewhat cruder or at least different from that of the Israelites. It is also reasonable to assume that Zipporah, having been raised under the influence of her Midianite background, most likely would have learned these "different" or "cruder" ideas.

A word of caution must be made at this point. There is no way that one can know for certain what Zipporah's beliefs or knowledge concerning God's covenant with Abraham may have been. As Kosmala states:

We know too little, if anything at all, of Zipporah's background. We can only imagine that her beliefs must have been different from Israelite ideas (as we know them) in many a detail.¹

One can only infer, on the basis of biblical and cultural study, what some of Zipporah's beliefs may have been.

For the purpose of this thesis, the aspect of Zipporah's cultural heritage that is of most interest is what her perception of the significance of circumcision may have been. An understanding of this will help answer the contextual questions that have been raised concerning Exodus 4:24-26.

As was mentioned, it seems probable that during the intervening generations between Abraham and Jethro, the Midianites would have deviated somewhat from the revelation that was given by God to Abraham. On the basis of cultural

¹Kosmala, "The Bloody Husband," p. 21.

research, it appears as though the rite of circumcision may have been one of these areas of deviation.

The fact that the Midianites practiced circumcision seems to be well substantiated by scholars. Barton, for example, states:

Circumcision appears to have been common among the primitive Semites, since it is found perpetuated among all branches of the Semitic race . . . from several sources we learn that it was a custom of the Arabs. . . . A practice which is so nearly co-extensive with the Semitic world probably originated with the common stock from which the Semites are sprung.¹

The CBTEL states that:

We have the distinct testimony of Josephus (Ant. i, 12, 2) that the Ishmaelite Arabs, inhabiting the district of Nabathaea, were circumcised after their 13th year: this must be connected with the tradition, which no doubt existed among them, of the age at which their forefather Ishmael underwent the rite (Gen. xvii, 25).²

This cyclopaedia then argues for circumcision on the basis of inferential evidence:

There is something striking in the fact that the books of Moses, of Joshua, and of Judges never bestow the epithet uncircumcised as a reproach on any of the seven nations of Canaan, any more than on the Moabites or Ammonites, the Amalekites, the Midianites, or other inland tribes with whom they came into conflict. On the contrary, as soon as the Philistines become prominent in the narrative, after the birth of Samson, this epithet is of rather common occurrence.³

The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia states:

¹Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, 5th ed., s.v. "Circumcision," by G. A. Barton, 3:679 (hereafter cited as ERE).

²CBTEL, s.v. "Circumcision," 2:348.

³Ibid.

With the notable exception of the Philistines, nearly all of Israel's neighbors were circumcised. There is no evidence at all that the custom was borrowed by the various Semitic peoples and adopted from the Egyptians; it is more probable, perhaps, that they and the Egyptians inherited it from a common prehistoric source.¹

The question that is of importance to this thesis has to do with the symbolism, administration, and purpose that the Midianite Arabs attached to the rite of circumcision. In other words, do we have reason to suspect that Zipporah's understanding of circumcision may have differed from that of the Hebrew's as explained in Genesis 17?

According to the biblical record, the rite of circumcision was given by God to Abraham and his seed with certain specifications in regard to its symbolism, purpose, and administration. When God announced to Abraham that He would establish a covenant with him, He said, "This is my covenant, which ye shall keep between me and you, and thy seed after thee: Every man-child among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you" (Gen 17:10, 11). It was also ordained that this "token" should be extended to servants belonging to Abraham and his seed as well as to their own children. In the case of their children, the child was to be circumcised on the eighth day after birth. This was appointed as an ordinance of perpetual obligation in the Abrahamic family. Neglect of this rite would

¹Universal Jewish Encyclopedia, 1941 ed., s.v. "Circumcision," by M. Joseph, 3:211 (hereafter cited as UJE).

result in being cut off from the people (12-14). In compliance with God's command, Abraham, though then ninety-nine years of age, was himself circumcised and all his household, including Ishmael who was at that point thirteen years. On the birth of Isaac, Abraham circumcised him on the eighth day according to the command (cf. Gen 17:12, Gen 21:4). The usage thus introduced by Abraham was formally enacted as a legal institution by Moses (Lev 12:3; comp. John 7:23).

How much Zipporah really understood regarding covenantal circumcision is questionable given her cultural background. Perhaps her reaction to the circumcision of her son at the resting place had something to do with a divergent Midianite/Arabic understanding of the rite. Morgenstern, for example, after researching ancient kinship rites among Semites in general, states:

Circumcision was primarily a rite performed upon youths at the attainment of puberty, and was secondarily a rite of initiation into the primary social unit, not, however, the tribe of the wife, but rather the clan of the child's mother, under the conditions of beena or mota marriage, in other words the child's own blood kin. In such case the head of the family or clan, viz., the mother's oldest brother, would still be the natural circumciser of the youth. . . . The act of circumcision would constitute the formal rite by which the youth's kinship with every member of his mother's family or clan was definitely established.¹

CBTEL states regarding circumcision:

The Arabs differ from the Jews as to the time; for they postpone it until the child has teeth.²

¹Morgenstern, "Bloody Husband Again," p. 61.

²CBTEL, s.v. "Circumcision," 2:348.

CBTEL goes on to cite other evidence suggesting that:

The Arabs were accustomed to circumcise between the tenth and fifteenth years. The origin of the custom amongst this large section of those Gentiles who follow it is to be found in the Biblical record of the circumcision of Ishmael (Gen. xvii, 25).¹

Plastaras provides another insight as to what Zipporah may have been taught regarding circumcision:

Circumcision was a rite of initiation into manhood and preparation for marriage. It signified the putting away of all encumbrance in order that the young man might be fit to assume the role of husband and father. In earlier times, the rite of circumcision was carried out either before marriage, or at puberty.²

The ERE makes the following statement concerning circumcision among the early Arabs:

It was, and is, a preparation for sexual life in so far as it is a preparation for the duties and privileges of manhood in general; and the hypothesis receives some support from what was apparently the practice of the Midianites and Sodomites.³

The Encyclopaedia then goes on to summarize its findings and concludes that: first, circumcision among early Arabs was "initiatory in character"; second, theories which suggest that the rite was a preparation for sexual life or an effort to avoid some kind of sexual peril or a test of endurance, or a tribal mark, may have all been a part of early Arabic understanding; and third, although the rite was normally administered at puberty, there is evidence that it did occur long before puberty.⁴

¹Ibid., 2:349.

²Plastaras, Exodus Narratives, p. 104.

³ERE, s.v. "Circumcision," by L. H. Gray, 3:665.

⁴Ibid., 3:666.

While it is impossible to know for sure what Zipporah's understanding of circumcision may have been and while there does seem to be divergent opinions among scholars concerning the exact significance of circumcision among the early Arabs, it does appear reasonable to conjecture on the basis of prior discussion, that Zipporah would have been exposed to beliefs concerning the rite that were not in harmony with the covenantal sign concept as ordained by God in Genesis 17. Perhaps her antagonistic attitude toward the circumcision of her son is evidence of the fact that she did not have a proper knowledge of the significance of the Abrahamic covenant. It may have been possible that after forty years of marriage Moses had not taught or impressed upon his wife the unique significance of circumcision or perhaps Moses had been a compromising leader in his own household allowing the cultural background of his wife to influence him to the point of neglecting the proper administration of this important covenantal sign. These questions will need to be dealt with later in another section of this thesis.

Moses' Cultural Background

Just as an understanding of Zipporah's cultural background is necessary for a proper evaluation of Exodus 4:24-26, Moses too must be studied from a historical/cultural perspective. Specifically, when and where would Moses have received the training that would make him conscious of the covenantal relationship that is described in the Genesis 17

passage? It is unlikely that Moses would have received much instruction regarding the Abrahamic covenant in the pagan Egyptian courts. Unfortunately, little is known of Moses' youth and early manhood in the court of Pharaoh. Most probably Moses' boyhood was typical of children growing up in the Egyptian royal court at that time. Davis provides some insight as to what some of his activities may have been. He states:

Children were generally carefree and played much like children do today. They used sticks and stones and made objects of mud and bits of broken pottery. . . . Swimming, horseback riding, hunting, playing with household pets would all be part of the experiences of a young boy in Egypt.

However, little is known concerning what Moses was actually taught concerning Jehovah and his relationship to Him. He likely would have been educated as a prince, whose right it was to be initiated into the "mysteries" of Egypt. Acts 7:22 states that Moses was ". . . instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians . . . ," which included the concept of one supreme god. But the faith of which the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks (Heb 11:23-28) would necessarily have to be grounded in some kind of formal training concerning his relationship to the God of Israel. Apparently Moses knew who he was and knew something of the uniqueness of his people. So convinced was he of his Israelite heritage, that he greatly imperiled his throne rights and probably his civil rights as well when he refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's

¹Davis, Moses and the Gods of Egypt, p. 55.

daughter (Exod 2:11-14; Acts 7:24). But how would Moses have learned this? Where would have Moses learned about the God of Abraham and the covenant that was made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? These questions are at the very heart of understanding the Exodus 4:24-26 passage, for if Moses had been made aware of his responsibility regarding covenantal circumcision, then his culpability toward God's command would help explain the circumstance of this passage.

Perhaps the answer to these questions lies early in Moses' pre-Egyptian experience. Moses was born in the land of Egypt of Hebrew parents. At the time of his birth the tremendous population growth of Israel became a threat to the Egyptian national security which prompted Pharaoh Thutmose III to decree that all male Hebrew children were to be slain at birth (Exod 1:10). This command was not carried out by the parents of Moses. Instead, they hid him away for three months and then put him afloat in a small vessel to be found providentially by one of Pharaoh's daughters who decided to raise him as her own. A nurse was sought for the young child which turned out to be Jochebed, Moses' natural mother.

The length of time that Moses was in the care of his own mother is crucial to the understanding of the incident narrated in Exodus 4:24-26. Some scholars such as Keil and Delitzsch interpret the word לִנְיָהּ of Exodus 2:10 to mean

that Jochebed gave up her son at the time of weaning,¹ but lexically, in the Qal stem, the word normally refers to the "growing up" or "maturation" of a child² (e.g. Gen 21:20); 25:27; Ruth 1:12; 1 Sam 2:21). Nichol suggests that Moses may have been as much as twelve years old before he was brought back to Pharaoh's daughter to begin his formal princely training.³ The crucial point is that it was entirely possible for Moses to have spent his important formative years under the teaching and influence of his Hebrew parents. Edersheim explains the nature of Hebrew parental influence and training:

It was, indeed, no idle boast that the Jews were from their swaddling-clothes trained to recognize God as their Father . . . that having been taught the knowledge from earliest youth, they bore in their souls the image of the commandments; that from their earliest consciousness they learned the laws, so as to have them, as it were, engraven upon the soul . . . and made acquainted with the acts of their predecessors in order to their imitation of them.⁴

It appears reasonable to assume that Moses' natural parents did have an opportunity to teach him many of the Hebrew distinctives including the covenantal sign of circumcision

¹C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, The Pentateuch, vol. 1, trans. James Martin in Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), p. 429.

²BDB, p. 152.

³Francis D. Nichol, The Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Commentary, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1953), p. 503.

⁴Alfred Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), p. 229.

before he even began his training in the courts of Egypt. Furthermore, it is very probable that he himself had been circumcised on the eighth day according to God's commandment for Joshua 5:5 indicates that circumcision was practiced without exception by the Hebrews while in Egypt.

In conclusion then, it appears probable that at the time of Exodus 4:24-26, Moses would have been well aware of his covenantal responsibility toward his sons and that his negligence regarding this sign would have made him culpable before the commandment of God.

CHAPTER IV

MAJOR INTERPRETIVE PROBLEMS

As was alluded to earlier in this paper, the difficulties that interpreters have with this passage do not stem so much from textual or grammatical considerations as much as from contextual ambiguities. The apparent disconnection from its larger context and the inconclusiveness regarding the identities of antecedents challenge the interpreter to answer three basic questions: first, who was Jehovah seeking to kill; second, who was the uncircumcised one; and third, why was Jehovah seeking to kill.

Who Was Jehovah Seeking to Kill?

On the basis of the prior context, namely 4:19, 20, there would seem to be only three possible answers to this question. Jehovah was either seeking to kill Moses or one of his two sons Gershom or Eliezer. The confusion and widespread difference of opinion regarding the answer to this question stems from the fact that the antecedent of the personal pronouns וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ, הָמָיִתוּ, לְרַגְלֵי and אָמָה is not clearly indicated. Many conservative commentators and scholars (e.g. A. H. Strong, James M. Gray, John P. Lange, Matthew Henry) regard Moses as the antecedent and therefore the one whom Jehovah is seeking to kill. Others have argued that

the last reference to Moses is in verse 21, three full verses earlier, in an altogether different context, possibly coming from some other source. They argue that Exodus 4:24-26 has no primary connection whatever with what immediately precedes or follows in the biblical text and therefore conclude that there is insufficient ground for assuming that the personal pronouns can refer only to Moses.

Theories Suggesting that Jehovah was
Seeking to Kill One of Moses' Sons

Kosmala's "Midianite Theory"

One of the more recent and influential attempts to understand this passage has been written by Hans Kosmala.¹ He maintains that Moses plays no part whatever in the narrative, that Zipporah is a Midianite woman interacting with a Midianite god, not the God of Israel, and that the circumcision of the child by his mother stems from a ceremony that is Midianite and not Israelite in nature. With the severed foreskin of the child, her first born, Zipporah touches the child's legs, and thus provides visible evidence to the Midianite deity that the circumcision had been accomplished thereby saving the child from the deity's hostile intention. Kosmala renders the child חֲתָן-דָּמִים "a blood circumcised one." He believes that Zipporah's repetition in verse 25b was part of a Midianite ritual formula.

¹Kosmala, "The Bloody Husband," pp. 14-28.

Given the data presented in the biblical text it is difficult to ascertain how Kosmala arrives at this particular understanding. There is no textual reason to assert that Zipporah was responding to some Midianite deity when no such deity is even hinted about within the context of this passage. Even if he is allowed to relocate the passage to chapter two,¹ he still has this same problem.

It appears that Kosmala's theory stems from a general perplexity as to why God would commission Moses for a specific service in verse 21 and then seek to kill him in verse 24. He reasons concerning the passage:

Finding it here in a series of Moses stories we quite naturally presume that it is a continuation of the conversations and dealings between JHWH and Moses. Nevertheless there is no intelligible reason in the Moses stories before us why JHWH should all of a sudden kill the man whom he had just entrusted with a most important mission concerning the lives of thousands of people. Nor does the inserted story itself offer any reason why Moses should now lose his life. His name is not mentioned, he is not necessarily one of the *dramatis personae*.²

¹Once Kosmala ("The Bloody Husband," p. 20) has dispensed with the idea that Moses was involved in the Exodus 4:24-26 passage, he feels at liberty to remove the passage from its present context and place it in a context more compatible with this theory. He reasons: "So far as the sequence of events is concerned, the story of the circumcision of her firstborn son is wrongly placed, where we find it now. As regards time it belongs to an earlier period in the life of Moses, and as regards the locality, it belongs to Midian, the homeland of Zipporah. It is a Midianite story and has, therefore, most likely also a Midianite background. The right place for the circumcision story would be fairly immediately after Ex. 2:15-22, where we are told that Moses had fled to Midian, found refuge in the house of Jethro and took his daughter Zipporah to wife who bore him 'a son.'"

²Kosmala, "The Bloody Husband," pp. 21-22.

On the basis of his own statements, it appears clear that Kosmala's objection to the "natural" interpretation, viz. that it was Moses whom God was seeking to kill, is not based upon objective data stemming from the text, but rather, it is based upon the subjective inference that the modus operandi of God does not extend outside the bounds of human rationality. The Scriptures clearly assert the absolute sovereignty of God as He deals with men and the universe according to His good pleasure (e.g. Ezek 18:4; Isa 14:9; Matt 20:15). To say that it is humanly irrational that God would kill one whom He had just commissioned for service, does not in itself negate that possibility. To omit Moses entirely from this passage when he is the "dramatis personae" of the Exodus 2-4 narrative, appears to be an awkward contextual position to hold.

A Rabbinic View

As was stated earlier, the classic medieval Jewish commentators held to the interpretation that Moses had failed to circumcise his son by the eighth day and thereby subjected himself to Jehovah's discipline because of the sin.¹ Most Jewish commentators continue in this same tradition. However, in his research on this passage, Morgenstern points out that while most rabbinic writers believe Jehovah intended to kill Moses, there are a few rabbis who disagree. He states:

¹Dumbrell, "Textual Re-examination," pp. 285-86.

Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel, one of the most authoritative transmitters of ancient traditions and practices, rejected the customary interpretation of this passage and held that it was not Moses, but the child, whom Yahweh sought to kill, and who was redeemed from this danger by the circumcision, and that, therefore, בן-החית refers, not to Moses, but to the child. Ibn Ezra too, commenting upon this biblical passage, says that it was customary for the women of Israel to call a son while he was being circumcised בן-החית.¹

The problem with this view has to do with its assumed specialized or technical usage of בן-החית. One is referred again to the study of Mitchell found on page 20 where after analyzing the forty-two occurrences of the noun בן-החית and the eleven occurrences of the verbal form in the MT, he did not find one clear example of the word referring to "a son."² It seems a bit precarious to give בן-החית a specialized or technical meaning on the basis of this isolated occurrence.

Eliezer as victim

There are some scholars who argue that Jehovah was seeking to kill Moses' youngest son Eliezer because of Moses' disobedience in not having had him circumcised according to the command of God. Most who hold this view argue along the same lines as George Williams who states:

Most people understand that the agent of the Divine wrath sought to kill Moses himself; but the Angel was to slay Pharaoh's son because of Pharaoh's rebellion, and Moses was to learn the terror of this judgment by the Angel being commanded to slay Eliezer his son because of his rebellion.³

¹Morgenstern, "Bloody Husband Again," p. 46.

²Mitchell, "The Meaning of HTN," pp. 93-112.

³George Williams, The Student's Commentary on the Holy Scriptures (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1949), p. 47.

While this view presents a plausible explanation as to why the attack occurred, there is a troublesome problem concerning the selection of Eliezer as victim. If Eliezer's life was in jeopardy because of his uncircumcised state, why did not Moses do the circumcising? Circumcision appears to have been the responsibility of the father within the Hebrew household.¹ There can be found no other account in the Bible

¹ It appears as though it was the normative practice among the ancient Hebrews for the father to be responsible for the circumcision of his sons. Jesus made reference to the norm or standard of the practice when he said that circumcision "... οὐχ ὅτι ἐκ τοῦ Μωϋσέως ἐστὶν ἀλλ' ἐκ τῶν πατέρων" (John 7:22). In other words, the patriarchs established the normative practice of circumcision for the Hebrews, vis. Genesis 17:9-14. In Genesis 17:23-27 Abraham is recorded to have complied with the command of God at that point, that is, Abraham initiated covenantal circumcision without being able to comply with the "eighth day" clause as given in verse 12 (cf. Ishmael was thirteen and Abraham was ninety-nine). The first normative covenantal circumcision recorded is found in Genesis 21:4 where Abraham circumcised his son Isaac at eight days--וַיִּמָּל אֶבְרָהָם אֶת יִצְחָק בְּעֶשְׂרִית יוֹם. If Abraham is used as the pattern of Hebrew circumcision, then it appears that the father would be the normal circumciser of his sons. Possible exceptions to this norm were made when the father was either incapacitated (possibly Exod 4:24-26), a foreigner (Exod 12:43-49), or dead (Josh 5:7). According to the ERE (s.v. "Circumcision," by L. H. Gray, 3:665): "Among the early Hebrews this (the circumciser) was apparently the head of the household or the father, though in case of special necessity it might perhaps be performed even by the mother (cf. possibly Ex. 4:25), while a leader or man of importance might also cause it to be performed (Jos. 5:2)." This Encyclopaedia goes on later to state: "It is probable from Ex 4:25 that in early times circumcision was performed by the mother, but later, in the time of the P document, it was performed by the father (cf. Gn 17:23ff)" (679). (Of course the "Documentary Hypothesis" presupposition inverts O.T. chronology, placing the writing of Genesis and Exodus during the exilic experience.) The CBTEL (s.v. "Circumcision," 2:350) also supports the idea that among the Hebrews it was the father who was usually the circumciser. It concludes that: "The operation might be performed by any Israelite, but usually it was performed by the father of the child. . . ."

where a woman actually performed the rite of circumcision upon a son. If Jehovah was indeed intending to impress upon Moses the importance of covenantal obedience, it would seem that God would have required Moses to perform the act. If Moses was not the one being stricken down, one would expect him to have been the circumciser.

Gershom as victim

Some commentators believe that Gershom, Moses' first born son, was the one Jehovah intended to kill. Most reason along similar lines to that of the prior view, that is, Gershom had not been circumcised according to the law (Gen 17:14), therefore Jehovah was about to have slain the child in order to punish Moses for his negligence in the matter. The reason that Gershom is chosen as the victim and not Eliezer, is because of a perceived link between 4:23 and the 4:24-26 passage. Clarke summarizes this view:

The 23rd verse is not a part of the message to Pharaoh, but was spoken by the Lord to Moses; and that the whole may thus be paraphrased: "And I have said unto thee, (Moses) send forth my son, (Gershom by circumcising him) that he may serve me, (which he cannot do till entered into the covenant by circumcision) but thou hast refused to send him forth; behold, (therefore) I will slay thy son, thy first-born. And it came to pass by the way in the inn, (when he was on his journey to Egypt) that Jehovah met him, and sought (threatened) to kill him (Gershom). . . .¹

Kosmala makes a similar contextual connection between verse 23 and 24-26. He states:

¹Adam Clarke, A Commentary and Critical Notes: Old and New Testaments (New York: Carlton & Phillips, 1854), p. 311.

The two verses preceding our story make two important statements. JHWH says: 'my son, my firstborn is Israel,' and he says: 'I will slay thy son, thy firstborn.' In the first the firstborn is God's: he is to live and to become his personal property and holy people. In the second the firstborn is Pharaoh's and Egypt's, who will lose their life. As Moses does not play any role in the story following immediately afterwards, he cannot be the link which connects verse 24 with verse 23. It is 'the son, the firstborn' that does this. He figures both in our story and in the preceding two verses. . . . The circumcision story deals with the same theme of the killing and the preservation of the firstborn son, not with Moses.¹

This view contains several difficulties. First, it possesses the same problem as the prior view, namely, if Gershom was the victim one would expect Moses to have performed the rite of circumcision not Zipporah. Second, although there may appear to be a conceivable connection between verses 21-23 and 24-26 on the basis of the penal death of a first born son, the contents of both passages are so incongruous that using this "connection" to prove that Gershom was the object of Jehovah's attempt to kill is questionable.² Third, at this point in the narrative Gershom was

¹Kosmala, "The Bloody Husband," pp. 22-23.

²In terms of content, there is little which would require one to view 4:24-26 as a continuation of God's communication to Moses regarding his mission to Pharaoh in 4:21-23. In verses 21-23 the major focus is upon the relationship which Jehovah has with Israel; expressed by God in the words, "Israel is My firstborn son." Moses was to make this relationship known to Pharaoh and thereby impress upon him the solemnity of the divine command to allow Israel to depart. The judgment which is prescribed in verse 23 would serve as a reminder to Pharaoh of this relationship. In verses 24-26, the penal situation has to do with negligence regarding the covenantal sign, an entirely different theme and focus. The thread that holds the independent units of the Exodus 2-4 narrative together is God's interaction with Moses as God prepares him for service. This is the thread that ties verses 21-23 to 24-26. The idea that Gershom is the one Jehovah is seeking to kill in verses 24-26 because Pharaoh's

at least thirty-five years old (cf. Exod 2:21-22 with Acts 7:29-30). Had Gershom not been circumcised according to the Genesis 17:12 mandate, he most probably would have been circumcised before reaching puberty in accordance with early Arabic tradition.¹

The Theory that Jehovah was Seeking to Kill Moses

Having found the theories suggesting that Jehovah was intending to kill one of Moses' sons problematic, an alternative interpretation is to understand that it was Moses who Jehovah was intending to kill.

judgment has to do with the death of his first born in verse 23, is superficial at best. Grammatical parallels do not, by themselves, necessitate contextual ones.

¹There is abundant evidence indicating that circumcision took place among the early Arabic people some time before puberty. ERE (s.v. "Circumcision," 3:662), for example, states: "It is a significant fact that circumcision, whatever explanation may be alleged for it, was almost invariably performed before or at the age of puberty, or at latest before marriage. The sole exceptions to this rule occur among the Hebrews, where peculiar conditions caused such violation of the general principle." CBTEL (s.v. "Circumcision," 2:348) cites the testimony of Josephus stating: "... that the Ishmaelite Arabs, inhabiting the district of Nabathaea, were circumcised at their 13th year: this must be connected with the tradition, which no doubt existed among them, of the age at which their forefather Ishmael underwent the rite (Gen. xvii, 25)." Morgenstern ("Bloody Husband Again," p. 62) states: "... we have found in all our investigation not the slightest positive evidence that circumcision was or is ever performed normally and regularly at the attainment of puberty. Rather we have found that puberty represented the latest possible date, the terminus ad quem, at which circumcision could be performed, and that ordinarily it was and is performed much earlier, generally between the ages of two and seven years."

Circumcision had been commanded of Abraham by Jehovah as a covenant sign for all his descendants; and any neglect of it would be considered a breach of the covenant resulting in being "cut off" from the people¹ (Gen 17:14). Although the Genesis 17 passage refers to the uncircumcised themselves who are threatened with being "cut off," in the case of uncircumcised children, it would seem that the parents, who were from the seed of Abraham and under the Abrahamic Covenant, would be held responsible for the circumcision of their sons. For example, in his commentary on Genesis 17:14, Leupold makes the following observations concerning the penalty:

The mooted question just how this penalty is to be defined is settled most satisfactorily, in view of passages where practically the same expression (being "cut off") occurs--Exod. 12:15, 19; Lev. 7:20, 21, 25; 17:9, 10--as allowing for two possibilities. In some instances, where neglect of the important divine ordinance was marked by a spirit of rebellious defiance, the proper authorities were expected to take the offender in hand, and after a just trial, which might establish his stubborn contempt, to put away such iniquity from Israel. On the other hand, there were cases of less flagrant neglect, which due to modifying circumstances might not call for interference on the part of the authorities; and yet the offender was not to regard his offense lightly. The thing threatened for such a case then appeared to be that God Himself would take it in hand and "cut off" such a person. . . .²

¹In his discussion of the phrase "that soul (that person) shall be cut off from his people" (Gen 17:14), Gesenius (Gesenius, Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon, p. 417) states: "By this phrase is meant the punishment of death in general, without any definition of the manner, never the punishment of exile. . . ."

²H. C. Leupold, Exposition of Genesis, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1942), p. 525.

Obviously, Leupold's comments could not be applied to an eight day old child, but they would apply to parents who might neglect to comply with Jehovah's command to circumcise their sons according to the Genesis 17:12 mandate. This thesis suggests that Moses did not comply with the covenantal instructive (Gen 17:12) and therefore most likely would have been the one whom Jehovah was seeking to kill. Conservative scholars such as Keil and Delitzsch reason similarly. Concerning the Exodus 4:24-26 passage they state:

Now though Moses had probably omitted circumcision simply from regard to his Midianitish wife, who disliked this operation, he had been guilty of a capital crime, which God could not pass over in the case of one whom He had chosen to be His messenger, to establish His covenant with Israel. Hence He threatened him with death, to bring him to a consciousness of his sin, either by the voice of conscience or by some word which accompanied His attack upon Moses; and also to show him with what earnestness God demanded the keeping of His commandments.¹

Who Was the Uncircumcised One?

On the basis of the prior discussion it would appear that Eliezer was the uncircumcised character in the Exodus 4:24-26 passage, but there are scholars who question that conclusion. Perhaps Moses was about to be killed by Jehovah because he himself had never been circumcised or perhaps it was Gershom who Moses failed to circumcise.

Moses as the Uncircumcised One

Wellhausen argued that Moses was to have been circumcised as a preliminary ritual to his marriage with Zipporah,

¹Keil and Delitzsch, The Pentateuch, vol. 1, p. 460.

but had not been. Because of his negligence, an enraged deity (?) sought to kill Moses but was appeased by the substitution of the foreskin of the child for that of Moses.¹

Wellhausen's view has influenced the interpretations held by a number of scholars. S. R. Driver, for example, states:

The reason why Moses had incurred Jehovah's wrath was because he was not a "blood-bridegroom," i.e. because he had not, according to established custom, submitted to circumcision before marriage: Zipporah, seizing a flint, circumcises her son instead of her husband, and so makes the latter symbolically a "blood-bridegroom," and delivers him from the wrath of Jehovah.²

Plastaras, picking up on the vicarious aspect of Wellhausen's interpretation, explains that:

Perhaps Moses was too ill, or more likely, the very nature of circumcision (which was essentially a premarital rite) might have required that the foreskin be cut from a virgin male. Whatever may have been the reason, Zipporah circumcised her son and then touched the corresponding member of her husband's body. . . . By her action, Zipporah hoped to effect a vicarious circumcision on behalf of her dying husband.³

Henry Preserved Smith, also apparently influenced by the Wellhausen vicarious idea, views the passage a bit differently. He states:

The only plausible interpretation of the curious account is that circumcision was the tribal mark which brought a man into right relations with the tribal divinity. Moses was a member of the tribe that owed allegiance to

¹A critique of Wellhausen's interpretation of Exodus 4:24-26 is found in Morgenstern, "Bloody Husband Again," pp. 45-47.

²S. R. Driver, The Book of Exodus (Cambridge: University Press, 1911), p. 33.

³Plastaras, The Exodus Narratives, p. 104.

Yahweh--whether as an Israelite or as adopted by the Kenites or Midianites we are not told--but he had not received the tribal mark. In one of the desert encampments Yahweh meets Moses and threatens to kill him. Zipporah takes a sharp stone and circumcises her infant son, and touches her husband with the blood, whereat the wrath of God is turned away. Hence the anger of the God, which was appeased by the circumcision of the substitute.¹

The views expressed by Driver, Plastaras, and Smith are typical of those scholars who have been influenced by Wellhausen's interpretation of this passage, however, there are some serious problems associated with these views. Morgenstern, in his critique of Wellhausen's "vicarious" idea makes a statement that applies equally to these other derivative interpretations. He states that the view

is altogether gratuitous and fanciful. It is implied nowhere in the story, and every one of its premises is assumed without the slightest basis of fact or evidence.²

Morgenstern's rather strong statement is based upon the fact that nowhere in the Exodus 4:24-26 narrative or in its larger context is any mention made of circumcision being a marriage rite or tribal sign given at puberty. Even if these assumptions are granted, one questions why Moses would not have submitted to the circumcision requirement in the first place. Furthermore, if failure to be circumcised at marriage had forfeited Moses' life to the deity, why did not this deity attempt to take Moses' life at the consummation of the marriage, rather than now upon the journey and after the birth of at least two sons? Nor does there seem to be

¹H. P. Smith, Old Testament History (New York: Scribner's, 1906), p. 67.

²Morgenstern, "Bloody Husband Again," p. 46.

any good reason why if Moses himself was the uncircumcised one, that he should not be circumcised at this point rather than his son; particularly if, according to the interpretations of Smith and Plastaras, Zipporah was able to touch Moses' genitals with the severed foreskin of the child.

In addition to these hypothetical problems, there is reasonable evidence to indicate that Moses would have been circumcised long before the time of Exodus 4:24-26. First, on the basis of the biblical evidence, a fairly strong case for Moses' early circumcision can be made. Joshua 5:5 indicates that the Hebrews conscientiously practiced circumcision during their captivity in Egypt; most probably in accord with the command given by Jehovah to Abraham in Genesis 17:12. It must be remembered that Moses spent at least his first three months in the care of his natural Hebrew parents Amram and Jochebed (Exod 21:1-2) who most likely complied with the commandment of Jehovah concerning the rite of circumcision. Furthermore, the fact that Pharaoh's daughter immediately recognized the three month old baby boy as a Hebrew, suggests that it might have been the circumcision that led to her correct assumption (Exod 2:6).¹

¹According to Sasson ("Circumcision in the Ancient Near East," JBL 85 [1966]:474): "Hebrews, from the time of the first patriarch on, were enjoined to circumcise their male infants at the age of eight days. In Egypt, however, texts, sculptures, and mummies seem to support the conclusion that babies never underwent the operation; it was reserved for either a period of prenuptial ceremonies or, more likely, for initiation into the state of manhood."

Second, scholars have discovered that circumcision was practiced by Egyptians at this time and that Moses, a high ranking person in the royal Egyptian court, would have almost certainly been circumcised as an Egyptian noble if not before.¹

Moses' Sons as the Uncircumcised

Relatively few scholars hold to the view that Moses was the uncircumcised character in this passage. Most agree that it was one of Moses' sons who was uncircumcised, however, there is a difference of opinion as to which one of the two.

Gershom the uncircumcised one

On the basis of the etymology of the name "Eliezer" (my God is a help), William Smith argues that Gershom was the uncircumcised son. He reasons:

¹ Concerning the practice of circumcision in Egypt, the ERE (s.v. "Circumcision," by G. A. Barton, 3:673-75) notes that while in the extensive Pharaonic literature ". . . there is not a single formal mention of the practice in civil or religious papyri, in the inscriptions on the statues, or even in biographies in which the person's story is related all through from birth to maturity," scholars have discovered paintings and bas-reliefs which show that Egyptian sailors and shepherds were clearly circumcised. The Encyclopaedia goes on to conclude: ". . . that circumcision was practiced by the people of the lower classes, though we can prove nothing further with regard to either the generality or the character of the practice." Concerning the practice of circumcision among Egyptian royalty and the priestly class, the encyclopaedia states: ". . . if there are many cases in which proof is impossible or uncertain, nevertheless all the certain cases but one are in favour of the universality of circumcision. . . . Circumcision appears to have been the rule."

Gershom . . . whose circumcision was neglected till enforced by a divine threat on his way back to Egypt. We read afterward of a second son, named Eliezer (my God is a help), in memory of his father's deliverance from Pharaoh.¹

In other words, Smith believes Moses chose the name Eliezer for a son born sometime after the exodus from Egypt, thereby excluding Eliezer's presence from the Exodus 4:24-26 passage.

There are a few problems associated with this view. First, on the basis of Exodus 4:20, it appears as though Moses had more than one son at the time of the 4:24-26 passage (note the use of the plural form בָּנָיו). While it is possible that Moses had more sons other than Gershom and Eliezer, there is no mention of any more in scripture. In Exodus 18:1-4, where Jethro brings Moses' family back to him after the exodus, only Gershom and Eliezer are mentioned as comprising Moses' immediate family. It seems probable therefore, that both sons would have been present at the time of Exodus 4:24-26. Second, according to Semitic research findings, it appears as though Gershom (who was at this time more than thirty-five years old) having been raised in a Midianite cultural context, would have been circumcised, if not according to Hebrew tradition, according to Midianite tradition sometime before puberty.²

¹William Smith, The Old Testament History--from the Creation to the Return of the Jews from Captivity (New York: Harper & Bros, 1881), p. 140.

²See discussion (p. 49, fn. 1) concerning the age at which circumcision took place among the early Arabic people.

Eliezer as the uncircumcised one

Having eliminated Moses and Gershom as the probable uncircumcised characters, Eliezer appears to be the best candidate for being as yet uncircumcised. Concerning the actual age of Eliezer at the time of this passage, one can only conjecture since the biblical data provides no concrete information.¹ If Eliezer had not yet been circumcised, one could guess that on the basis of Arabic tradition, he had not yet reached puberty. Rawlinson offers the following plausible theory concerning the age of Eliezer:

Zipporah had been delivered of her second son, Eliezer, some few days before she set out on the journey to Egypt. Child birth, it must be remembered, in the East does not incapacitate a person from exertion for more than a day or two. On the journey, the eighth day from the birth of the child arrived, and his circumcision ought to have taken place; but Zipporah had a repugnance to the rite, and deferred it, Moses weakly consenting to the illegality.²

¹It should be apparent that the validity of this thesis stands or falls on the conjectural argument concerning Eliezer's age. If Eliezer is past the age of puberty, then on the basis of previously mentioned Arabic custom, he would have already been circumcised. If he is only eight days old at the point of the Exodus 4:24-26 passage, he would still have been uncircumcised by Arabic standards and one could establish Moses' culpability to the Genesis 17:12 mandate; but an eight day old Eliezer would necessitate a fifty year old Zipporah. Although it is problematic to conceive of Zipporah being in her fifties at the birth of Eliezer, it is not impossible. In light of the difficulties mentioned concerning the other alternatives, this thesis suggests that an eight day old Eliezer contains fewer serious problems than the other options.

²George Rawlinson, The Pulpit Commentary, Exodus Exposition and Homiletics, vol. 1 (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1927), p. 109.

If one accepts the proposition that Eliezer was the uncircumcised character, one must be prepared to address two perplexing questions: first, if Gershom had already been circumcised according to Arabic tradition, why would Zipporah appear antagonistic at the circumcision of Eliezer; second, if Moses was being disciplined on account of his negligence toward the covenantal requirement (Gen 17:12), why did not Jehovah deal with him at the birth of his first born (Gershom) some thirty-five years prior.

Concerning Zipporah's apparent antagonism toward her son's circumcision, one can only speculate that it was not so much the circumcision that antagonized her, but the timing of it. Having been raised in the home of a Midianite priest (Exod 3:1), the rite of circumcision would not have been new to her, but having to circumcise her infant son at eight days would have been a significant change from standard Arabic practice and may have repulsed her,¹ especially on the verge of a long hard trip back to Egypt.

¹One is referred again to ERE (s.v. "Circumcision," 3:662, 664) where it states concerning the Arabic practice of circumcision that: "It is a significant fact that circumcision, whatever explanation may be alleged for it, is almost invariably performed before or at the age of puberty, or at latest before marriage. The sole exceptions to this rule occur among the Hebrews, where peculiar conditions (Gen 17:12) caused such violation of the general principle. . . . The fact that even Moses neglected to circumcise his son (on the eighth day) was very probably due to his Midianitish marriage, since the Midianites, like the Sodomites, apparently performed the rite shortly before marriage" (p. 662). The encyclopaedia then comments on Zipporah's reaction in Exodus 4:25, 26 as ". . . the excited, or perhaps angry, exclamation of a Midianitish woman, who was probably familiar with circumcision just before marriage, and had, perhaps induced Moses to postpone the rite for this very reason" (p. 664).

Perhaps the more disturbing question, however, is why Jehovah dealt so sternly with Moses concerning the circumcision of Eliezer, while Gershom's circumcision (most likely in accord with Arabic tradition) was allowed without instructive incident. Part of the answer may have to do with the timing of Moses' commission. Perhaps now that Moses was identified and commissioned as the leader of God's people, he would have to be made to understand the capital importance that Jehovah placed upon the administration of the covenantal sign. While his negligence concerning the administration of Gershom's circumcision may have gone undisciplined some thirty-five years prior, now that Jehovah had unquestionably placed Moses in an important and highly visible leadership position, Moses would have to realize that disobedience and/or negligence concerning the commands of God in general is a serious matter; and that negligence concerning the sign of the covenant in particular would be regarded as a capital offense by God. Furthermore this dramatic lesson would enable Moses to proclaim this dreadful truth with the force of a personal experience.

Why Was Jehovah Seeking to Kill?

The answer to this question has perplexed a number of scholars. The difficulty stems from the fact that Exodus 4:24-26 states no definite reason for Jehovah attempting to kill. Most commentators understand that Jehovah was seeking to kill because of a neglect or failure in performing the

rite of circumcision. They arrive at this conclusion because "Jehovah desisted from him" after Zipporah had taken the flint and circumcised her son. However, there are other scholars who approach the text with a different set of pre-suppositions which lead them to vastly different conclusions.

The Jealousy View

A. J. Reinach argues that Yahweh had become the $\gamma\eta\eta$ of Zipporah, that is, as bride-groom He had the right to her virginal blood. Not having received this, Yahweh intended to kill Moses for taking away his privilege. Zipporah is then thought to have appeased his anger by circumcising her son.¹

Gressman holds a similar view. He understands the events of Exodus 4:24-26 to have transpired upon the marriage night of Moses and Zipporah. He suggests that Yahweh was the god of Zipporah's tribe who was entitled to Zipporah's virginal blood. When he saw himself about to be deprived of this right by Moses, in his anger he sought to take Moses' life. But Zipporah, perceiving this, quickly circumcised Moses, and with the cut-off foreskin touched the sexual organ of Yahweh, so that it became smeared with blood, quite as if

¹A. J. Reinach ("La Lutte de Jahve avec Jacob et avec Moïse et l'Origine de la Circoncision," *RES*, I [1908], 351) is examined in Morgenstern, "Bloody Husband Again," pp. 43-44, n. 27.

he had just had intercourse with her, and his organ had¹ thereby become covered with her virginal blood.

Both of these interpretations are totally lacking in biblical and cultural support.

The Incomprehensible View

James Plastaras suggests that the original author(s) never intended there to be a comprehensible answer to the question "why did Jehovah seek to kill." He states:

But the sacred authors wanted to affirm that Yahweh remained always a God of mystery. Man never fully comprehended God's counsels or his manner of acting, so that there would always be moments when God's action would run counter to all expectations. . . . What is affirmed here, as in the Book of Job, is not that God acts capriciously and without reason, but that there are moments when the reasons for God's action will be hidden from man, and there will be moments when God might appear to man a terrifying adversary rather than the God Who saves.²

In the midst of his complacent perplexity, Plastaras does affirm that:

It is not difficult to discern the original purpose of this story. It was probably told in order to justify the practice of infant circumcision. . . . To anyone who might be inclined to question the validity of infant circumcision, it was always possible to quote the story about Moses and the circumcision of his infant son. Citing this precedent, the Israelites could say, "Ever since then we circumcise in infancy."³

¹H. Gressman ("Mose und seine Zeit," pp. 56-61) is examined in Morgenstern, "Bloody Husband Again," p. 44, n. 27.

²Plastaras, The Exodus Narratives, p. 105.

³Ibid., p. 104.

Plastaras' assertion that the Exodus 4:24-26 passage was intended by its author(s) to be beyond comprehension is in conflict with the Apostle Paul's attitude toward the inspired Law. While it is true that man will never be able to fully comprehend the infinite God, the Law was given as ". . . the embodiment of knowledge and of truth" (Rom 2:20) not for the purpose of making God incomprehensible.

The Judgment View

The traditional Jewish interpretation of Exodus 4:24-26 depicts Moses as falling victim to Jehovah's judgment because of his negligence in the administration of covenantal circumcision within his own family. For example, Hoenig refers to Rabbi Joshua ben Karha's statement in Nedarim 3.II where it is stated: "Great is the precept of circumcision for neglect of which Moses did not have his punishment suspended even for a single hour."¹ In another version, R. Joshua ben Karha's statement is more emphatic: "Great is circumcision for all the meritorious deeds performed by Moses our teacher did not stand him in his stead when he displayed apathy towards circumcision."²

The basis for the judgment view stems from the idea of individual responsibility and imminent retribution as taught in passages such as Exodus 32:33, viz.: "And the

¹ Rabbi Joshua ben Karha's statement is quoted in Hoenig, "Circumcision: The Covenant of Abraham," The Jewish Quarterly Review, 53:1962, p. 327.

² Ibid.

Lord said to Moses 'Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book.'"

It is the view of this thesis that Jehovah sought to slay Moses in Exodus 4:24-26 in judgment of Moses' failure to adhere to the mandate given by Jehovah to Abraham in Genesis 17:12, namely, that ". . . a son of eight days shall be circumcised among you. . . ." Concerning the importance of the "eighth day" clause found in Genesis 17:12, Leupold states:

In so important a rite it is not to be left to man's discretion when it is to be administered. "Eight days" is the proper age. . . . That rule is to hold good "for all generations to come," literally: "according to your generations." Such specific regulations, which divine wisdom stoops to give, must have satisfied those to whom the administration of the rite was entrusted. They knew step for step how to regulate its application.¹

This thesis suggests that although Jehovah may have withheld immediate judgment from Moses because of a possible neglect of Gershom's circumcision at his eighth day some thirty-five years prior, now that Jehovah had identified and commissioned Moses as Israel's leader and lawgiver, Moses must be made to understand the uncompromising nature of Jehovah's commandments, and thus, Moses experienced the terror of divine judgment in regard to the uncircumcised state of his eight day old son Eliezer.

In his commentary on this passage, George Bush delineates four principles that he views stemming from this "judgment view."

¹H. C. Leupold, Genesis, p. 523.

(1) That God takes notice of and is much displeased with the sins of his own people, and that the putting away of their sins is indispensably necessary to the removal of the divine judgments. (2) That no circumstances of prudence or conveniency can ever with propriety be urged as an excuse for neglecting a clearly commanded duty, especially the observance of sacramental ordinances. (3) That he who is to be the interpreter of the law to others ought in all points to be blameless, and in all things conformed to the law himself. (4) That when God has procured the proper respect to his revealed will, the controversy between him and the offender is at an end; the object of his government being not so much to avenge himself as to amend the criminal.¹

¹George Bush, Bush's Notes, vol. 1 (New York: Mark H. Newman, 1846), p. 109.

CONCLUSION

The meaning of this shocking episode lies perhaps below the surface, but very near it. Moses apparently was guilty of neglecting his covenantal responsibility within his own family. Perhaps procrastination, perhaps domestic opposition, perhaps the insidious notion that one who had sacrificed so much might be at ease about slight negligences; some such influence had left the commandment unobserved. And now, at the point at which he found himself the chosen instrument of God for the rebuke of one nation and the making of another, God, hitherto forbearing his neglect, takes him sternly to task.

The application of Exodus 4:24-26 is well summarized by G. A. Chadwick as he writes:

Let young men who dream of a vast career, and meanwhile indulge themselves in small obliquities, let all who cast out demons in the name of Christ, and yet work iniquity, reflect upon this chosen and long-trained, self-sacrificing and ardent servant of the Lord, whom Jehovah seeks to kill because he willfully disobeys even a purely ceremonial precept.¹

¹G. A. Chadwick, The Expositor's Bible: The Book of Exodus (New York: George H. Doran Co., n.d.), p. 207.

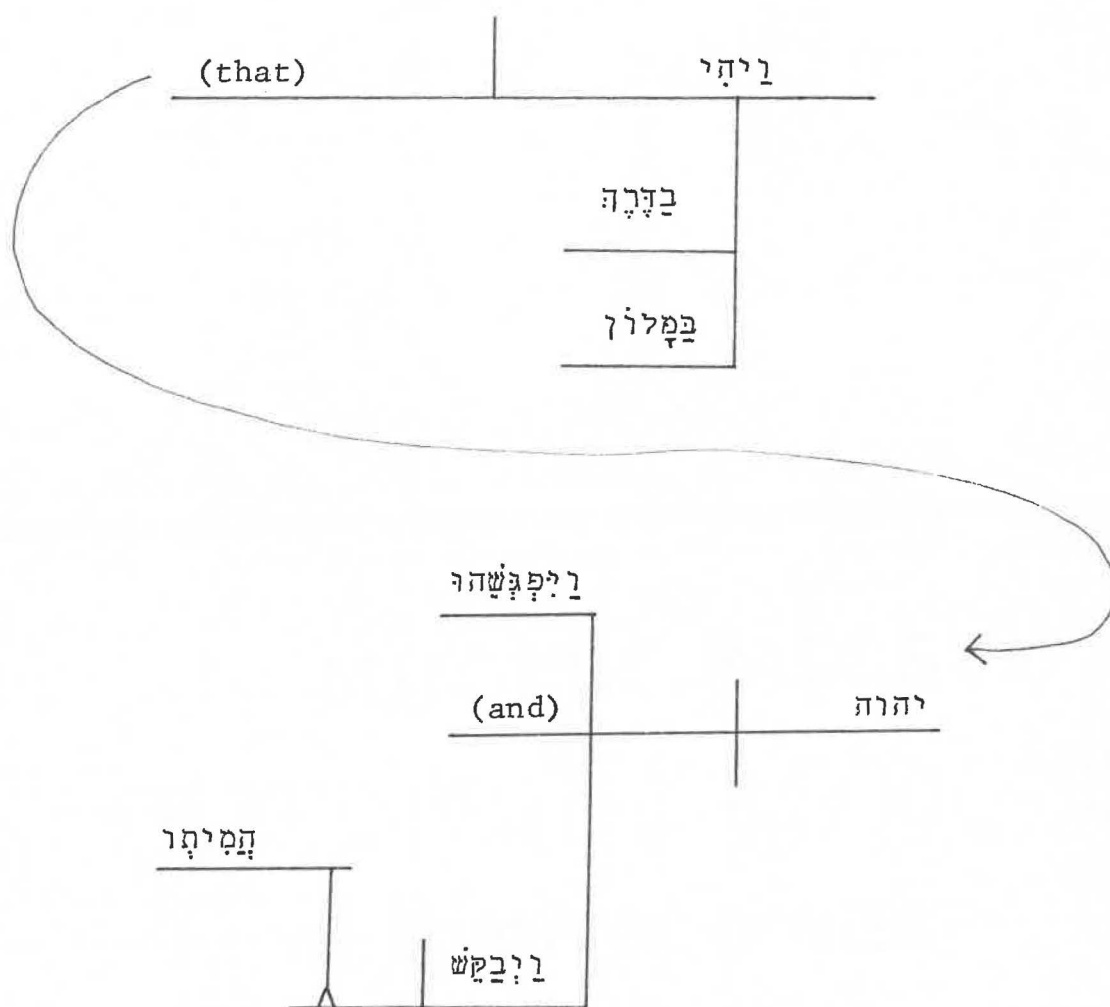
APPENDIX A

	FORM TO BE PARSED	W/C I P	STEM	TENSE	PERSON	SEX	NUM.	VERBAL SF P S M	VOCAB. FORM ספר	TRANSLATION OF VOCAB. ("TO KILL")	TRANSLATION OF FORM IN TEXT
Exodus 4:24	וַיָּהִי	W/C	Qal	Imperf	3	M	S	- - -	הָיָה	to be	And it came to pass -or it now happened
	בְּדֶרֶךְ	-	-	-	-	C	S	- - -	דֶּרֶךְ	journey, way, path	(prep.+article)--state or condition in which an action takes place
	בְּמִלּוֹן	-	-	-	-	M	S	- - -	מִלּוֹן	lodging place, inn, camp	ce, in the lodging place
	וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ	W/C	Qal	Imperf	3	M	S	3 M S	פָּגַע	to meet, encounter	and he encountered him
	יְהוָה	-	-	-	-	M	S	- - -	יְהוָה	Jehovah	Jehovah
	וַיִּבְקֹשׁ	W/C	Piel	Imperf	3	M	S	- - -	בָּקַשׁ	seek to secure, aim at, require	and He sought (with the idea of collecting for a breach of responsibility)
										or exact a payment or penalty	
	וַיִּמָּוֶת	-	Hiph	Infin	-	-	-	3 M S	מָוָה	to kill, put to death	to kill him (esp. in conjunction with capital punishment)

Exodus 4:25	וַתֵּקַח	W/C	Qal	Imperf	3	F	S	- - -	לָקַח	to get, take, appropriate	and she took
	צִפּוֹרָה	-	-	-	-	F	S	- - -	צִפּוֹרָה	Zipporah	Zipporah
	צוּר	-	-	-	-	M	S	- - -	צוּר	flat surfaced rock	a flat rock (probably a sharp flint)
	וַתִּכְרַת	W/C	Qal	Imperf	3	F	S	- - -	כָּרַת	to cut off	and she cut off
	אֶת-	-	-	-	-	-	-	- - -	אֶת	-	(sign of definite or direct object)
	עֲרֻלָּתָהּ	-	-	-	-	F	S	- - -	עֲרֻלָּה	foreskin	foreskin (of circumcision)
	בְּנָהּ	-	-	-	-	M	S	3 F S	בֵּן	son	(B--used with verbs of claying, touching) of her son
	וַתִּגַּע	W/C	Hiph	Imperf	3	F	S	- - -	גָּעַ	touch, reach, strike	and she caused to touch, reach, strike, apply
	לְרֹגְלָיו	-	-	-	-	F	P	3 M S	רֶגֶל	foot	(ל --gives the idea of direction and reference) to his feet
	וַתֹּאמֶר	W/C	Qal	Imperf	3	F	S	- - -	אָמַר	to say	and she said
	כִּי	-	-	-	-	-	-	- - -	-	-	(relative conjunction) that
	וַתִּהְיֶה	-	-	-	-	M	S	- - -	יָמִין	bridegroom spouse	(construct state) bridegroom of
	דָּמָם	-	-	-	-	M	P	- - -	דָּם	blood	blood
	אַתָּה	-	-	-	2	M	S	- - -	אַתָּה	you	(subject pronoun) you
	לִי	-	-	-	-	-	-	1 - S		(prep of reference)	to me
Exodus 4:26	וַיִּבָּרֶךְ	W/C	Qal	Imperf	3	M	S	- - -	בָּרַךְ	relax, sink, rebate, withdraw	and he abated or relaxed
	מִמֶּנּוּ	-	-	-	-	-	-	3 M S	מִן	PREP	separated or removed from him
	אָז	-	-	-	-	-	-	- - -	אָז	ADVERB	then, (or at the time when he abated)
	וַתֹּאמֶר	-	Qal	Perf	3	F	S	- - -	אָמַר	to say	she said
	וַתִּהְיֶה	-	-	-	-	M	S	- - -	יָמִין	bridegroom spouse	(construct state) bridegroom of
	דָּמָם	-	-	-	-	M	P	- - -	דָּם	blood	blood
	לְמִוְלָתוֹ	-	-	-	-	F	P	- - -	מִוְלָה	circumcision	7 --(regard to, with reference to) on account of the circumcision

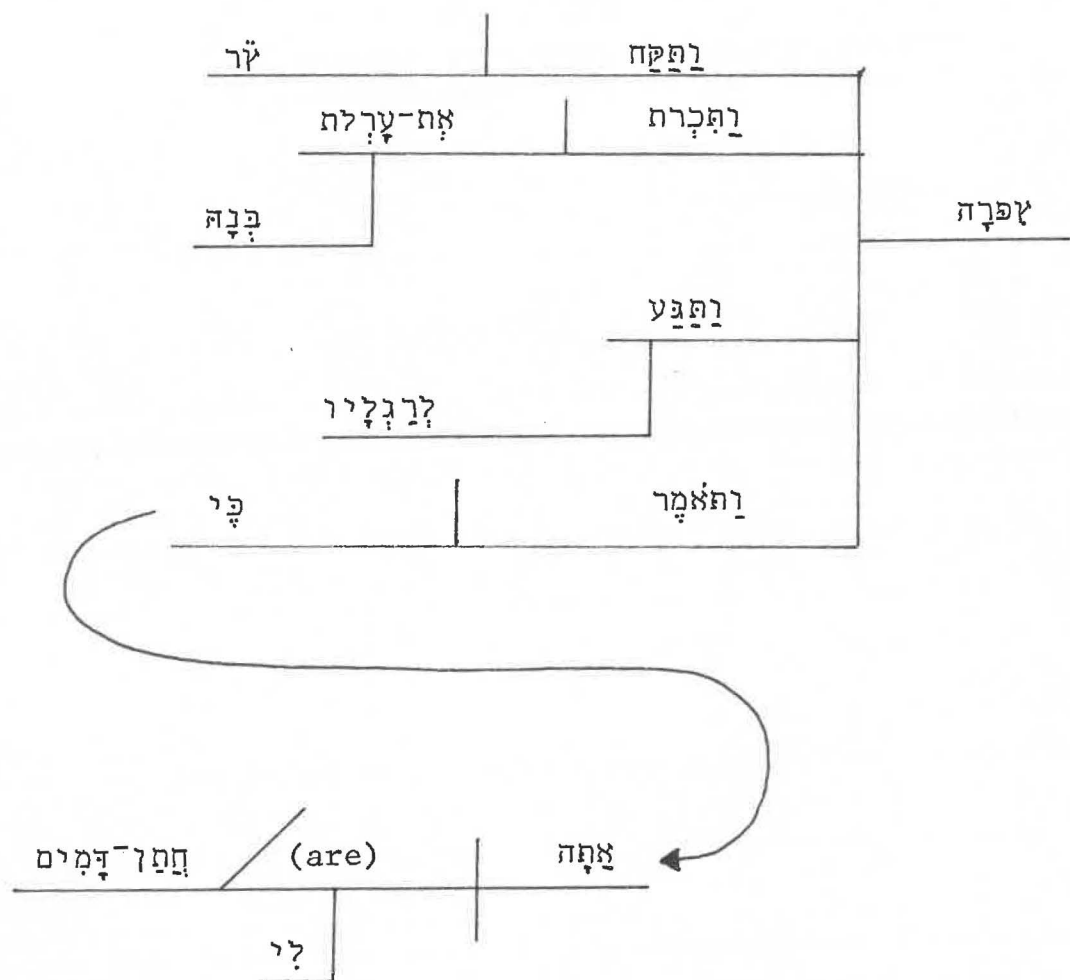
APPENDIX B

EXODUS 4:24



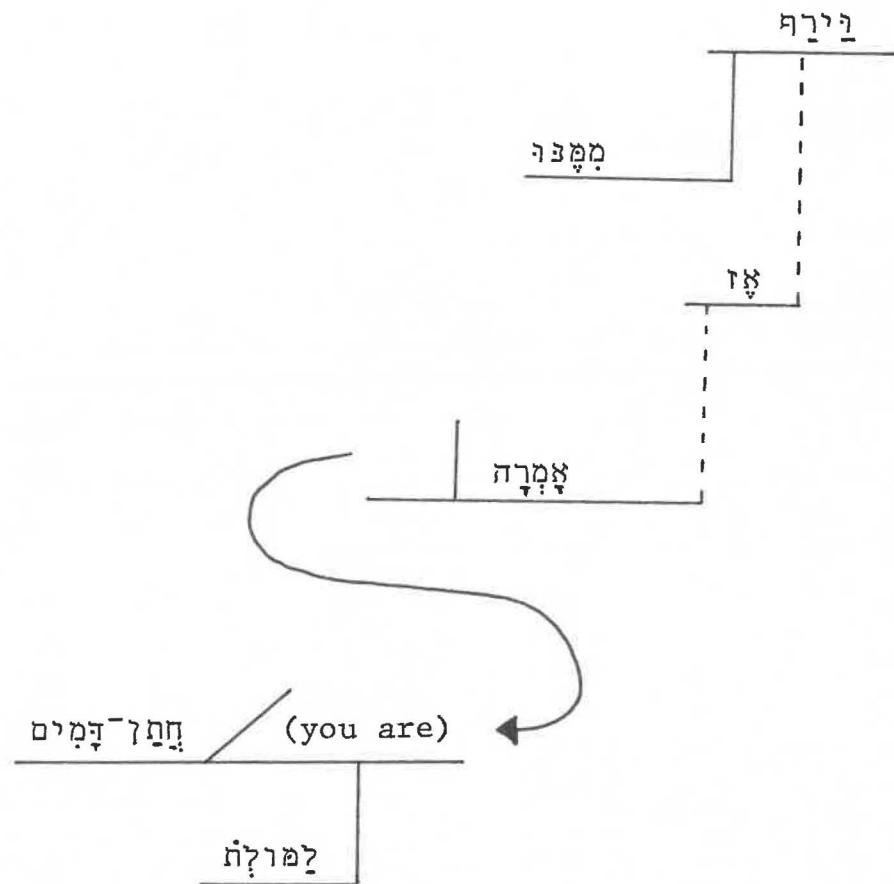
APPENDIX B

EXODUS 4:25



APPENDIX B

EXODUS 4:26



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