CLARIFYING BAFFLING BIBLICAL PASSAGES

CHAPTER FIVE

THE INVIOLABLE RELATIONSHIP OF MOSES AND ZIPPORAH
EXODUS 4:24-26

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INTRODUCTION

At a lodging place on the way the LORD met him and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin, and touched Moses’ feet with it, and said, “Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!” So he let him alone. Then it was that she said, “You are a bridegroom of blood,” because of the circumcision. (RSV)

Childs (1974: 95) rightly noted that “Few texts contain more problems for the interpreter than these few verses [4:24–26] which have continued to baffle throughout the centuries.
The difficulties cover the entire spectrum of possible problems.” Although the name Moses appears in the translations, it is not in the Hebrew text. After noting the ambiguity of the pronominal elements in the verses, Childs raised the question, “How is one to account for the irrational, almost demonic atmosphere in which blood seems to play an apotropaic role?”

Hyatt (1980: 87) responded to this question by simply affirming, “It is a very ancient primitive story that pictures a ‘demonic’ Yahweh.” He suggested, “The original story may have concerned a demon or deity of the boundary between Midianite territory and Egypt whom Moses failed to appease.” If this were the case, although the name Yahweh appears in the Hebrew text, it may not have been in the original account.

Propp (1993: 505) theorized a bit more bluntly, “Yahweh’s problem is that he has two irreconcilable plans for Moses: he wants both to dispatch him to Egypt to liberate Israel and to punish him for his old transgression [his killing the Egyptian]. . . . The result of this impasse is the quasi-psychopathic behavior of the Deity.”

In the Septuagint (cited above) and in Jerahmeel (cited below) Yahweh is replace by ἄγγελος κυρίον “the angel of the Lord,” before whose feet Zipporah fell and reported, “The blood of the circumcision of my son is staunched.” By contrast, the ‘demonic’ Yahweh is replaced by Satan (Mastema) in Jubilees 48: 2–3, which reads:

And thou [Moses] thyself knowest what He [God] spake unto thee on Mount Sinai, and what prince Mastema desired to do with thee when thou wast returning into Egypt (on the way when thou didst meet him in the lodging place). Did he [Mastema] not with all his power seek to slay thee and deliver the Egyptians out of thy hand?” (Charles, II: 78–79).

One alleged reason for Yahweh’s attempt on Moses’ life is given in the Book of Jerahmeel 47:1–2,
They lodged at a certain place, and an angel came down and attacked him for his transgression of the covenant which God had made with Abraham His servant, in that he did not circumcise his eldest son, and he wanted to slay him. Zipporah then immediately took one of the sharp flint stones which she found there and circumcised her son, and she rescued her husband from the power of the angel (Gaster, 1971: 122).

In this tradition, as well as in the Targumin, the blood flow from circumcision served as atoning sacrificial blood. With variations, this interpretation satisfied many Christian and Jewish interpreters over the centuries.

Jacob (1992: 109), called attention to an alternative interpretation which he found more convincing. He stated:

The best explanation which we have yet found was given by Ibn Ezra [1089–1164] and Luzatto [Commentary on the Pentateuch, 1849], who stated that God was angry because Moses had taken his wife and children along when he should have devoted himself completely to his mission (compare Deut 33.8 f.) . . . [Zipporah] wishes to remain united with her husband during the long period of separation through the blood of her son whom she has circumcised.

The long term effect of this story, according to Jacob (1992: 110), is that “each b’rit mi-lah [covenant of circumcision] renews and reaffirms the marriage bond. In fulfilling this command, the couple again celebrates their wedding . . .”

Although Jacob made this claim for the close tie between circumcision and marriage without supporting evidence, he pointed the interpreter in the right direction. A fresh look at Exodus 4:24–26, free from all the traditional speculation—as though the text had just been excavated—permits a radically different translation.
AN ALTERNATIVE TRANSLATION

Simply by (1) relocating the MT הֵמָא ("from him") to the preceding line, (2) repointing the verbs הָיוֹר ("to make him die") and יַרְבָּא ("he sank, he withdrew"), (3) identifying these two verbs with Arabic cognates which have gone unnoticed in current Hebrew lexicons, and (4) adding one vowel letter, the verses can be translated

At a lodging place on the way, the L ORD met him and he sought to make inviolable his relationship, whereupon Zipporah took a flint and cut off the prepuce of her son, touching it to Moses' groin while saying "Indeed, you are a blood relative to me!" (They became irrevocably bonded when she said "You are a blood relative by circumcision!")

The MT הָיוֹר, at first glance, appears to be the Hiph'îl infinitive of הָיוֹר "to die," with a 3ms suffix. But הָיוֹר (or מֵיָּה = scriptio defectiva), sans suffix, could be the Hiph'îl infinitive of מֵיָּה, given the fact that יַרְבָּא and יַרְבָּא verbs share a number of identical forms (GKC § 77a-b). The proposed stem מֵיָּה would be analogous in form to the stem מֵיָּה/ְּיָּה (BDB 1070), the Hiph'îl infinitive of which is מֵיָּה (scriptio plene = מֵיָּה). Thus, הָיוֹר or מֵיָּה could be the Hiph'îl infinitive of מֵיָּה, whereas הָיוֹר or מֵיָּה would be the Hiph'îl infinitive of מֵיָּה "to die." The consonant al texts would be the same.

The stem מֵיָּה is not cited in the current standard Hebrew lexicons, but it was cited in the two folio volumes of Lexicon Heptaglotton by Edmund Castell (1669) in column 2166. He considered the names Ammitai (יַרְבָּא/אָמַצ in Jonah 1:1) and Matthew (Maythai/יוֹר מֵיָּה in Matt 9:9) to be derived from this stem. Castell cited cognates of this vocabulary in Ethiopic and Arabic. The semantic range of these cognates
includes “husband (maritus), fiancé / bride-groom (sponsus), fiancée / bride (sponsa), i.e., the betrothed (as in Matt 1:19), a mixed marriage (miscuit), an extended household (familiam saturavit), and a blood relative whom one cannot marry (gradus consanguinitatis, ob quem connubium non potest iniri). The Arabic cognate مت (matta), according to Lane (1885: 2687c–2688a) means “he sought to bring himself near [to another], or to approach [to him], or to gain access [to him], or to advance himself in [his] favour by relationship . . . by affection, or by love.” The noun مَاتَة (mattat) means “anything that is sacred or inviolable . . . that which renders one entitled to respect and reverence . . . a thing whereby one seeks to bring himself near.” The example Lane cited was بيننا رحم مائة (baynanā rahim mätat) “between us is a near/inviable relationship.”

These definitions survive down to the present in modern literary Arabic, as noted by Wehr (1979: 1045) who rendered مت (matta) as “to seek to establish a link to someone by marriage, become related by marriage, . . . to be associated, to be connected with, . . . to be most intimately connected with someone.” Similarly, the noun مَاتَة (mattat) retains the meaning of “close ties, family ties, kinship.”

In light of this evidence, it seems quite obvious the phrase يَبَسَّرُ يَوْهَهُ مَاتَة could be translated “Yahweh sought to make inviolable his relationship” [or “his marriage”]. The phrase need not be read as the equivalent of يَبَسَّرُ يَوْهَهُ ْمَاتَة “the king sought to kill him” (in Jer 26:21). Given the fact that the Midianite Zipporah would be an outsider in Egypt—among the Hebrews as well as among the Egyptians—her relationship to Moses could have become very tenuous, like that of Moses’ Ethiopian wife (see Num 12:1). Thus, far
from being a “primitive story that pictures a ‘demonic’ Yahweh” (see above), Yahweh was “angelic”—so to speak—in insure the marital status of Zipporah once she left her homeland.

The preposition מֵאִם “from him,” which in the MT modifies the verb יָרָא (“he withdrew from him”), fits equally as well in the preceding line as the modifier of התִּלְנָה “she cut,” i.e., “she cut off from him.” This relocation of the modifier makes it clear that Zipporah performed a preputiectomy rather than a preputiotomy; i.e., it was more than just an incision.

Once the מֵאִם is removed from being the modifier of יָרָא, it becomes difficult to give יָרָא the nuanced meaning “to withdraw from, to let one alone” instead of its more basic meaning “to sink, to relax” (BDB 951–952, יָרָא). However, יָרָא is probably not from the verb יָפַה, but from יָפָה, stem II—not to be confused with יָפָה, stem I, “to heal” and its cognate רָפָא/רָפָע (rafâ /rafû) “to darn, to mend, to repair” (BDB 950; Lane 1867: 1129). The loss of the final ס of the יָרָא verb, resulting in יָרָא instead of יָפָה, was quite common (see GKC § 74k).

The Arabic رَفَع (rafâ) also means “he effected a reconciliation, or made peace between them,” and “he married, or took a wife.” It is used in extending a felicitous greeting to those getting married, as in the expression “may the marriage be with close union (רָפָא ‘un), etc., and constancy and the begetting of sons not daughters” (Lane 1867: 1117–1118, 1129). Wehr (1979: 403) renders the felicitation to newlyweds as “live in harmony and beget sons!” Lane also noted that the reflexive form VI of רָפָא/רָפָע (rafâ /rafû) means “they agreed together to do the thing, they aided or assisted one another, they were of one mind and opinion, . . . their stratagem and their affair being one.”
Arabic has three words for in-laws: (1) أختان (‘aḥṭân) “the relations on the side of the wife”; (2) أحماء (‘ahmā’) “relations on the side of the husband”; and أصَابَار (‘ashār) “relations on either side” (Lane 1865: 650, 704; 1872: 1737). The أَخْمَيْشُ of أَخْمَيْشُ is the cognate of the first of these. Whereas أَخْمَيْشُ means “bridegroom” or “daughter’s husband,” much like its Syriac cognate سَمِّي (ḥātan) “in-law, to marry or to intermarry” (J. Payne Smith 1957: 164), the Arabic cognate أَخْمَيْشُ (ḥatana) also means “to circumcise,” suggesting that the bride’s father circumcised the prospective bridegroom.

Zipporah’s circumcision of her son guaranteed that her son would be recognized as a Hebrew when they (mother and son) joined their new Hebrew relatives in Moses’ family in Egypt. At the same time, by touching the severed prepuce to Moses’ groin, Zipporah vicariously circumcised her husband. This act was significant not only as a religious exercise on Moses’ behalf, it was an act which also elevated her to being vicariously a “blood” relative to Moses as she ventured into Moses’ Hebrew clan. Though Midianite, she was now symbolically a blood relative, perhaps in a way that Moses’ Cushite wife was not. The circumcision provided her and her son with immunity from isolation, as well as bonding her relationship with Moses as a blood relative. Instead of interpreting Zipporah’s actions as an effort to save Moses’ life, her actions were aimed at saving her marriage and her family.

In light of the Arabic form VI, noted above, Moses and Zipporah were on a joint mission. Far from there being a رَفَد “a withdrawal” of anyone, it was a رَفَد “a bonding together, a close union, a harmonious marriage,” with shared visions, opinions, and stratagem. Such an understanding makes Zipporah’s exclamation، أَخْمَيْشُ أَخْمَيْشُ أَخْمَيْشُ أَخْمَيْشُ “Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me,” reasonable. The redactor’s
gloss in 4:26, “they became irrevocably bonded when she said ‘You are a blood relative by circumcision,’” likewise, becomes intelligible. The shift to the plural “they” for the singular “he” in the MT and the versions (be it for the deity, or an angel, or for Mastema) is a simple case of *scriptio defectiva*, suggesting perhaps an early date for this tradition since final vowel letters were customarily omitted in the oldest orthography.

**CONCLUSION**

Childs (1974: 98), in a critique of the proposal of Kosmala (1962: 14–28), asked the question, “What circle within Israel would have treasured a ‘Zipporah cycle’?” with “its original Midianite—that is Arabic—meaning.” The answer seems very obvious: the children and grandchildren of Moses by Zipporah, namely, Gershom, Eliezer, and Jonathan ben Gershom ben Mosheh. It is noted in Judges that “Jonathan and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the day of the captivity of the land” (Exo 2:22; 18:3; Judges 18:30–31). A priest with the stature of Jonathan ben Gershom ben Mosheh could easily have introduced a tradition about his grandmother’s inviolable relationship with his grandfather—even in the dialect of his grandmother!4

One need not anticipate that a tradition perpetuated at Shiloh and Dan would have been in the Judean / Jerusalem Hebrew dialect, which has provided the base for standard Hebrew lexicons. Dialectal fragments survive in the Hebrew Scriptures, with the *Song of Deborah* in Judges 5 (in a Kenite dialect) being a lengthy one, and the *Words of Agur* in Pro 30: 1–5 (in the dialect of Massa, a tribe in Arabia) being a shorter one. This writer would add Exodus 4:24–26 to the list of dialectal fragments, necessitating a careful examination and application of Arabic cognates in the interpretation and translation of the text—as offered in this study.
“Why did Yahweh want to cause Moses to die?” and “How could Zipporah’s actions have saved Moses?” are not the first questions to be asked. Prior to those questions must be this question: “What are the options for identifying all the roots/stems in this narrative?” When the standard lexicons offer very limited options resulting in incredulous statements and interpretations which strain the imagination (such as those briefly summarized and critiqued by Childs [1974: 96–98]), comparative philology may provide more reasonable solutions. Such is the case, I believe, in the interpretation of Exodus 4:24–26, resulting in this translation, repeated here by way of summary:

At a lodging place on the way, Yahweh met him and he sought to make inviolable his relationship, whereupon Zipporah took a flint and cut off the prepuce of her son, touching it to Moses’ groin while saying “Indeed, you are a blood relative to me!” (They became irrevocably bonded when she said “You are a blood relative by circumcision!”)

This interpretation of Exo 4:24–26 provides the requisite support for Jacob’s contention (1992: 110, noted above) that the long term effect of this story is that “each b’rit mi-lah renews and reaffirms the marriage bond. In fulfilling this command, the couple again celebrates their wedding . . . .” As Propp noted, “In its current context, Exod. iv 24–6 describes an awesome rite of family solidarity performed on the eve of the Exodus. It simultaneously marks a boy’s initiation into the people of Israel and his parents’ passage into the state of parenthood.”

NOTES

1. Propp further noted (1993: 505), “The logical inference is that Moses’ attempt to return home [to Egypt] with un-expiated blood-guilt upon him elicits Yahweh’s attack.” But it seems a bit illogical
for the Deity to hold Moses’ under a death penalty for slaying one Egyptian in the past when Moses’ mission to free the Israelites will eventuate shortly in the death of every firstborn in Egypt (Exo 12:30), not to mention the destruction of Pharaoh’s army at the Sea of Reeds.

2. Targum Neophyti (Macho 1970), for example, reads as follows:

And it happened on the way, in the resting-house, that an angel from before the Lord overtook him and sought to kill him. And Zipporah took a flint and cut off the foreskin of her son and brought it near the feet (Margin = “and cast it beneath the feet of”) the Destroyer and said: ‘In truth the bridegroom sought to circumcise but the father-in-law did not permit him, and now may the blood of this circumcision atone for the sins of this (his? her? its?) bridegroom.’ And the angel (Margin = the destroying angel; behold then [s]he gave praise) let him alone. Then Zipporah gave praise and said: ‘How beloved is the blood of this (circumcision) that delivered this (his?) bridegroom from the hand(s) of the angel of death.

3. Other lexicographers have generally derived יתמי “Amitai” from ימ “to confirm, to support” (which is related to the exclamatory “Amen!”) and its noun form יתמה “truth” (BDB 54); and ית<Pair> “Mattathiah/Matthew” has been derived from the verb ית “to give” and the noun יר “gift” (BDB 682).

4. Kosmala (1962:14), like most other scholars, never challenged the traditional meaning of the text. He commented

However, it must be pointed out the Hebrew of the three verses appears grammatically simple and clear, nothing is wrong with it, nothing is wanting. The actual difficulties come from the context in which the verses are embedded.

But he is forced to recognize the difficulty of the Hebrew, when (on page 26) he raised the questions:
What does the expression ḫan-damim mean? It is unique in Hebrew usage, it does not occur elsewhere. . . . What, then, is the ḫan-damim? Is he a bridegroom after all, or, if not, how shall we understand that double expression?

5. See Propp’s article (1993: 515–516) for examples of the blending of circumcision and marriage rites and festivities in Arab lands and in Islam. I cannot concur with Propp’s final conclusion that “. . . Zipporah performs an act that implicitly equates father and child, binding the generations through the bloodied organ of generation.” This is unnecessary speculation.