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CHAPTER FIVE

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

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V

THE INVIOLEABLE RELATIONSHIP OF MOSES AND ZIPPORAH

EXODUS 4:24-26

INTRODUCTION

וַיְהִי בַדֶּרֶךְ בַּמֶּלֶן וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ יְהוָה וַיִּבְקֹשׁ תְּמִיתוֹ:
וַתִּקַּח צִפּוֹרָה צֹר וַתִּכְרֹת אֶת־עֲרֻלַּת בְּנָהּ וַתַּגַּע לְרַגְלָיו
וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי חֲתָן־דָּמִים אַתָּה לִּי:
וַיַּרְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ אִזְ אָמְרָה חֲתָן דָּמִים לְמוֹלַת:

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)

ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ ἐν τῷ καταλύματι συνήτησεν αὐτῷ ἄγγελος κυρίου καὶ ἐζήτει αὐτὸν ἀποκτεῖναι καὶ λαβοῦσα Σεπφωρα ψῆφον περιέτεμεν τὴν ἀκροβυστίαν τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτῆς καὶ προσέπεσεν πρὸς τοὺς πόδας καὶ εἶπεν ἔστι τὸ αἷμα τῆς περιτομῆς τοῦ παιδίου μου

Then it happened on the way at the inn that the angel of the Lord met him and sought to slay him; and Sepphora having taken a stone cut off the foreskin of her son and fell at his feet and said, "The blood of the circumcision of my son is staunched."

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-schizophrenic behavior of the Deity.”¹

In the Septuagint (cited above) and in Jerahmeel (cited below) Yahweh is replaced by ἄγγελος κυρίου “the angel of the Lord,” before whose feet Zipporah fell and reported, “The blood of the circumcision of my son is staunch.” 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,² 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 מִמֶּנּוּ (“from him”) to the preceding line, (2) re-pointing the verbs הִמִּיתוּ (“to make him die”) and נִיָּרַף (“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 LORD 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 הִמִּיתוּ, at first glance, appears to be the *Hiph^{il}* infinitive of מוּת “to die,” with a 3ms suffix. But הִמִּית (or הִמַּת = *scriptio defectiva*), sans suffix, could be the *Hiph^{il}* infinitive of מַתַּת, given the fact that ע"ע and ע"ו verbs share a number of identical forms (GKC § 77^{a-b}). The proposed stem מַתַּת would be analogous in form to the stem תָּמַם / תָּם (BDB 1070), the *Hiph^{il}* infinitive of which is הִתָּם (*scriptio plene* = הִתִּים). Thus, הִמִּית or הִמַּת could be the *Hiph^{il}* infinitive of מַתַּת, whereas הִמִּית or הִמַּת would be the *Hiph^{il}* infinitive of מוּת “to die.” The consonantal texts would be the same.

The stem מַתַּת 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 (אַמִּיתַי / Αμμιται in Jonah 1:1) and Matthew (Ματθαῖον / מַתִּתִּיה in Matt 9:9) to be derived from this stem.³ Castell cited cognates of this vocable 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 مائة (*mâttat*) 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 مائة بيننا رحم مائة (*baynanâ raḥim mâttat*) “between us is a near/ inviolable 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 مائة (*mâttat*) retains the meaning of “close ties, family ties, kinship.”

In light of this evidence, it seems quite obvious the phrase וַיִּבְקֹשׁ יְהוָה הַמִּיתוֹ could be translated “*Yahweh sought to make inviolable his relationship*” [or “*his marriage*”]. The phrase need not be read as the equivalent of וַיִּבְקֹשׁ הַמֶּלֶךְ הַמִּיתוֹ “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—insuring the marital status of Zipporah once she left her homeland.

The preposition מִמֶּנּוּ “from him,” which in the MT modifies the verb וַיִּרְחֹק, (“he withdrew *from him*”), fits equally as well in the preceding line as the modifier of וַתִּכְרַת “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 מִמֶּנּוּ is removed from being the modifier of וַיִּרְחֹק, it becomes difficult to give וַיִּרְחֹק the nuanced meaning “to withdraw from, to let one alone” instead of its more basic meaning “to sink, to relax” (BDB 951–952, רָפַה). However, וַיִּרְחֹק is probably not from the verb רָפַה, but from רָפָא, stem II—not to be confused with רָפָא, stem I, “to heal” and its cognate رَفَا/رَفُو (rafâ/rafû) “to darn, to mend, to repair” (BDB 950; Lane 1867: 1129). The loss of the final א of the א־ל verb, resulting in וַיִּרְחֹק instead of וַיִּרְפָא, was quite common (see GKC § 74^k).

The Arabic رَفَا (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 (رِفَاء [rifâ’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 رَفَا/رَفُو (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 (*'aḥtân*) “the relations on the side of the wife”; (2) אחماء (*'aḥmâ*) “relations on the side of the husband”; and (3) أصهار (*'aṣḥâr*) “relations on either side” (Lane 1865: 650, 704; 1872: 1737). The חַתָּן of חַתָּן דְּמִים is the cognate of the first of these. Whereas חַתָּן means “bridegroom” or “daughter’s husband,” much like its Syriac cognate سٛٛٛ (ḥātan) “in-law, to marry or to intermarry” (J. Payne Smith 1957: 164), the Arabic cognate ختن (*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 רפה “a withdrawal” of anyone, it was a רפא “a bonding together, a close union, a harmonious marriage,” with shared visions, opinions, and stratagem. Such an understanding makes Zipporah’s exclamation, כִּי חַתָּן־דְּמִים אַתָּה לִי “Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me,” reasonable. The redactor’s

gloss in 4:26, וַיִּרְפוּ אֵץ אִמְרָהּ חָתָן הַיָּמִים לְמוֹלֶת, “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.”⁵

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 of 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 אָמֵיִתַּי “Amitai” from אָמַן “to confirm, to support” (which is related to the exclamatory “Amen!”) and its noun form אֱמִתָּה “truth” (BDB 54); and מַתְּתִיָּה “Mattathiah/Matthew” has been derived from the verb נָתַן “to give” and the noun מַתָּה “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 *h^atan-damim* mean? It is unique in Hebrew usage, it does not occur elsewhere. . . . What, then, is the *h^atan-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.