

THE BLOODY BRIDEGROOM AND THE BLOODY LAMB:  
AN EXEGESIS OF EXODUS 4:19-26

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## I. INTRODUCTION

There is a general principle in Biblical scholarship that the less one can know about a particular passage, the more ink scholars spill in hypothesis over that passage. Exodus 4:24-26 handily demonstrates this principle, for it has occasioned significant debate over the years by scholars due to key ambiguities both inside and outside the text. As several commentators note, the issue is not linguistic – the grammar of the text is rather straightforward.<sup>1</sup> However, several immediate interpretive problems emerge from a cursory glance of the text. First, there is the question of how we see this passage in context. The writer of Exodus seems to abruptly change scenes at verse 24, and at first glance there seems to be no continuity in this transition.<sup>2</sup> The ambiguous third person masculine pronoun in verse 24 does not clearly establish who is being acted upon by YHWH - who YHWH is seeking to kill. The most immediate antecedent would appear to be Moses, but this instantly raises its own set of interpretive questions: Why is YHWH displeased with Moses and seeking to kill him, having just sent him on a mission to Pharaoh? Beneath this central question are a set of equally confusing questions, namely, why a woman (Zipporah) performs the circumcision, which is outside the established pattern of Scripture. Furthermore, there is the problem of this enigmatic saying of Zipporah's, the *ḥātan-dāmîm* (הַתָּן דָמִים), or “bridegroom of blood.” Complicating the picture is the varied ancient textual tradition that accompanies this passage.

After offering a translation and justification, this essay will cover these issues of context and interpretation, and will do so in a variety of ways. First, I will recount prominent ancient and

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<sup>1</sup> Noel D. Osborn and Howard Hatton, *A Handbook on Exodus*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1999), 97.

<sup>2</sup> This poses no real problem to liberal scholars, who see Exodus as a patchwork of various textual traditions. See Durham, *Exodus*, 54. Also,

modern interpretive approaches that have sought to make sense of the ambiguities of this passage, and evaluate them for their strengths and weaknesses. Second, this paper will focus in on the *ḥātan-dāmīm*, and hypothesize on the meaning and implications of this phrase. Third, this paper will briefly reflect on some of the theological implications of this passage.

## II. TRANSLATION

- (19) Now<sup>a</sup> YHWH had said<sup>b</sup> to<sup>c</sup> Moses in<sup>d</sup> Midian, “Go, return<sup>e</sup> to Egypt, for<sup>f</sup> all the men seeking your life<sup>g</sup> are dead.
- (20) Moses took<sup>a</sup> his wife and his sons<sup>b</sup> and had them ride<sup>c</sup> on<sup>d</sup> a<sup>e</sup> donkey and he returned towards<sup>f</sup> the land of Egypt. And Moses took the staff of God<sup>g</sup> in his hand.
- (21) And YHWH said to Moses, “When<sup>a</sup> you go to return<sup>b</sup> to Egypt, see<sup>c</sup> that you do<sup>d</sup> all the terrible signs<sup>d</sup> which I have put<sup>e</sup> in<sup>f</sup> your hand<sup>g</sup> before<sup>h</sup> the face of Pharaoh, and I will harden<sup>i</sup> his heart.
- (22) And you will say to Pharaoh, “Thus says YHWH, <sup>a</sup>‘Israel is my son, my firstborn.<sup>b</sup>
- (23) And I say to you, release my son<sup>a</sup> that he may serve me.’ And he will refuse to release him. Behold, I will kill your son, your firstborn.
- (24) And it<sup>a</sup> happened on the way, in the lodging place, YHWH encountered<sup>b</sup> him and sought<sup>c</sup> to put him to death.<sup>d</sup>
- (25) And Zipporah took a flint and cut off the foreskin of her son and touched<sup>a</sup> it to his foot and said, “You<sup>b</sup> are a bridegroom of blood to me!”
- (26) And he left him alone, because<sup>a</sup> she said, “Bridgroom of blood,” because of the circumcisions.<sup>b</sup>

## III. JUSTIFICATION

- 19a) The γ indicates simple conjunction, expanding the unfolding narrative surrounding Moses return.<sup>3</sup>
- 19b) Putnam, along with Waltke and O’Connor, sees this γ as a past perfect, or pluperfect form of the *Wayyiqtol*, making “had spoken” a more appropriate translation of this completed action.<sup>4</sup> Keil & Delitzsch agree.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, Second edition. (Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 157.

<sup>4</sup> Frederic Clarke Putnam, *Hebrew Bible Insert: A Student’s Guide to the Syntax of Biblical Hebrew* (Quakertown, PA: Stylus Publishing, 2002), 33; Bruce K. Waltke and Michael Patrick O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona, Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 552.

<sup>5</sup> Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 294.

19c) As Arnold & Choi indicate, the preposition **לְ** is here used in a declarative, terminative sense.<sup>6</sup>

19d) The preceding narrative and context renders this a simple locative sense to the **בְּ** preposition, capturing the location of this exchange: “in Midian.”<sup>7</sup>

19e) This double imperative construction (**לְקַנֵּ**) is common to the use of the word *hālak*. It appears elsewhere in Gen 27:13, Ho 1:2, Gen 29:7, among other places. As Brown-Driver-Briggs notes, this construction can sometimes make this a simple introductory term,<sup>8</sup> but here it functions as a point of emphatic command.

19f) **כִּי** often has a meaning connected to recognition of an existing causal reality that has come to light.<sup>9</sup>

19g) My translation *Hamēbaqšîm 'et-napšekā* is quite literal here, and is perhaps reflective of older English convention, but is a common Hebrew idiom (e.g. 1 Sam 20:1; Pr 29:10) that simply indicates a desire to kill.

20a) This sense of **לְקַהּ** is simply to “take along with.”<sup>10</sup>

20b) Some see the plural here as a problem, since only Gershom has been mentioned thus far (Ex. 2:22). As Sarna notes, many ancient versions amend this to the singular.<sup>11</sup> Thus far the text has not indicated the presence of more than one son, but it seems more likely that Moses by this time in his life has multiple sons, as Keil and Delitzsch testify.<sup>12</sup>

20c) The Hiphil 3ms here indicates causative action.

20d) This preposition **לְ** has spatial connotations here, indicating a vertical relationship.<sup>13</sup>

20e) While there is a definite article prefixed to **קָנָה**, this is an example of imperfect determination, where “a thing which is not perceived as determinate by the writer or by

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<sup>6</sup> Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 112.

<sup>7</sup> **בְּ**, *BDB*, 88

<sup>8</sup> **לְקַנֵּ**, *BDB*, 230.

<sup>9</sup> William L Holladay and Ludwig Kohler, “**כִּי**,” *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 155.

<sup>10</sup> Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, “**לְקַהּ**,” *BDB*, 542.

<sup>11</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, JPS (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 23.

<sup>12</sup> Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 294.

<sup>13</sup> Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 133.

the person who is addressed is sometimes specifically determinate by itself.”<sup>14</sup> This makes the indefinite article more fitting at this particular juncture.

- 20f) The directional נֶּסֶת appended to יְמִינֶךָ indicates this as the proper translation, as Gesenius notes.<sup>15</sup> Joüon and Muraoka translate this, “towards,” in this construct,<sup>16</sup> which captures the general directionality, but preserves the reality that they have not yet arrived. This alleviates the tension of the conundrum raised by Sarna<sup>17</sup> where this verse appears to contradict verse 21.
- 20g) This is a simple possessive genitive.<sup>18</sup>
- 21a) There are a myriad of uses of the בְּ preposition, but the one most fitting of the context is a temporal usage, reflected in the forward looking “when.”<sup>19</sup>
- 21b) The NET Bible translation note here hypothesizes a *hendiadys* using the two infinitive forms: “when you go to return.”<sup>20</sup> This seems the clearest possibility, and translates well into English idiom.
- 21c) The semantic range of רָאָה extends from the simple act of seeing to a more internalized understanding. However, the signs and wonders that God is concerned with don’t seem to be immediately about extensive comprehension. Keil and Delitzsch renders this word, “beholding.”<sup>21</sup> I think the simpler “see” fits with the imperative force of the word, and renders this emphasis better.
- 21d) The imperative נְשַׁׁרְתָּ creates a *casus pendens* where the predicate is introduced by the *waw apodosis* (מְנֻשָּׁרְתָּ) in the next clause of this compound sentence, which establishes the grammatical and semantic emphasis of this sentence upon the command to Moses to *do the signs*.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the ESV rearranges this clause to reflect both better English and the

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Joüon and Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2011), 478–79. They also agree with Friedrich Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, ed. E. Kautzsch and Sir Arthur Ernest Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), 407.

<sup>15</sup> Gesenius, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, 249.

<sup>16</sup> Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 257.

<sup>17</sup> Sarna, *Exodus*, 23.

<sup>18</sup> Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 13.

<sup>19</sup> Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 117–18.

<sup>20</sup> Exodus 4:21, *The NET Bible First Edition Notes* (Biblical Studies Press, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 294.

<sup>22</sup> Gesenius, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, 458.

semantic imperatival force of the sentence. I have chosen to similarly assemble the clauses to maintain this emphasis.

- 21d) Many translations and commentators<sup>23</sup> prefer the rendering, “wonders”, to the other English gloss of this word. Lange refers to these as “terrible signs,”<sup>24</sup> which I think captures the force of what is happening here, and is preferable to the older English “wonders.” These are signs, in that they have symbolic force, i.e. YHWH is symbolically killing the firstborn son of Pharaoh, in order to save His firstborn son Israel (cf. Ex 4:23).
- 21e) פִּשְׁׁ has a large lexical range and extensive usage in the MT, ranging from the idea of “making” (Gen 27:37) to “setting” (Ex 1:11). For this context the idea of “put” seems most fitting.
- 21f) A simple בְּ preposition indicates spatial relationship, best translated “in.”<sup>25</sup>
- 21g) The ESV, NASB, and other translations render this יָדָ as “power” instead of “hand,” but I think there is exegetical significance to the continuity of this term referencing the body part. It creates the parallel between the earlier mention of taking the staff of God “běyādō” (in hand). The connection of the staff to the eventual wonders (cf Ex 7:9; 7:17; 8:5) provides for a symbolic significance to these words. YHWH has put his wonders “into Moses’ hand” tangibly, in the form of the staff that represents God’s power, and so Moses is a vicar of YHWH.<sup>26</sup> Note that the LXX and Syriac have the plural “hands.”<sup>27</sup>
- 21h) This is a locative usage the בְּ preposition, which can also be translated “at.”<sup>28</sup> Before makes better English sense and fits with the idiom, “before the face.”
- 21i) This fits a larger pattern that unfolds in the story subsequently (cf Ex 9:12; 10:20, 27; 11:10; 14:8) the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. This word קָרַע means “to be or grow firm, strong, strengthen,”<sup>29</sup> and is one amongst other words used to described this action.
- 22a) This is the first use of this prophetic formula, בְּפֶה אַמְּרָ יְהֹוָה, in the Torah.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 294.

<sup>24</sup> John Peter Lange, Philip Schaff, and Charles M. Meed, *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Exodus* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 2:13.

<sup>25</sup> Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 116.

<sup>26</sup> For discussion of YHWH’s rod and its significance, see William Henry Propp, ed., *Exodus 1-18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 227–29.

<sup>27</sup> Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 189.

<sup>28</sup> Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 124.

<sup>29</sup> בְּרִאָה, *BDB*, 304.

<sup>30</sup> Sarna, *Exodus*, 24.

- 22b) This is an appositional phrase (בֶּן בְּנֵי), where one noun is used to specify another more specifically and emphatically,<sup>31</sup> as opposed to simple adjectival modification.
- 23a) The LXX renders this *τὸν λαόν μου*, undoubtedly breaking from the symbolic reference to Israel as “son”, and moves here to reflect the wording of Ex 5:1.
- 24a) The Syriac tradition inserts Moses’ here, clarifying the ambiguity of the 2ms pronoun that follows in this verse.
- 24b) Durham makes the point that this is not a simple meeting, but an encounter of consequence.<sup>32</sup> One can see this in its usage elsewhere (cf. Ho 13:8; Pr 17:12).
- 24c) This is a verbal complement, having distinctly adverbial force.<sup>33</sup>
- 24d) Propp makes the excellent point that there are judicial connotations to this use of *hāmitōw*, the Hi’fil infinitive being used elsewhere (e.g. Deut 13:10; 17:7) to indicate something comparable to the English “execute,” or “put to death.”<sup>34</sup>
- 25a) Some versions (KJV, NASB) translated this as “throw”, but the word never means that in Scripture. Rather, it means to touch, even to “touch violently” or “strike,”<sup>35</sup>
- 25b) This יְיָ often has syndetic or conjunctive force,<sup>36</sup> which introduces direct speech, as in this case.<sup>37</sup>
- 26a) Childs argues that this word וְ indicates logical sequence rather than temporal, which seems to fit best with the text. To indicate that, I have used the word “because,” following the LXX *διοτι*.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Waltke and O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 227.

<sup>32</sup> John I. Durham, *Exodus* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 53.

<sup>33</sup> Waltke and O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 602.

<sup>34</sup> Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 218–19.

<sup>35</sup> “עִנָּנָה”, *BDB*, 619.

<sup>36</sup> Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 555.

<sup>37</sup> “יְיָ”, *BDB*, 471.

<sup>38</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 99.

26b) This plural is difficult to understand here, since the word לְמִלּוּת is a hapax legomena and perhaps this is merely conventional writing of the term. Keil and Delitzsch argue that this plural indicates a general reference to circumcision, not a specific account of this circumcision.<sup>39</sup>

## IV. COMMENTARY

### a. Textual Traditions

Any analysis of this passage must deal with the varied textual tradition that accompanies it. At the outset of verse 24, the Syriac tradition adds *mwsh'q*, the name for Moses, clearly identifying him as the figure in view and the object of God's wrath. The actor in the MT is YHWH, but this also comes under some scrutiny through the tradition. The LXX renders this as the ἄγγελος κυρίου<sup>40</sup>, while others have just ἄγγελος (cf. Ex 3:2), and Aquila has ὁ θεός.<sup>41</sup> Targums *Onqelos*, *Pseudo-Jonathan*, and *Neofiti* indicate a similar understanding to the LXX, calling this figure the מֶלֶךְ־דָּיוֹן (Angel of YHWH). This does not make a good deal of difference, for regardless, this is a theophany and YHWH, through his messenger or otherwise, is seeking to put someone to death.<sup>42</sup> The LXX also has a minor variant, rendering לְתַגֵּעַ לְרַגְלֵי (“touched to his feet”) to προσέπεσεν πρὸς τοὺς πόδας (“fell down upon his feet”), presumably

<sup>39</sup> Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 1:299.

<sup>40</sup> Sarna sees this as reflective of Rabbinical sensibilities, as they attempted to soften the anthropomorphism of YHWH. Sarna, *Exodus*, 25.

<sup>41</sup> The pseudepigraphal work *The Book of Jubilees* 48:2 takes a different angle, attesting that this is false lesser deity, the prince Mastêmâ, who was intent on foiling YHWH's plan and protecting the Egyptians from Moses. Robert Henry Charles, ed., *Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), 2:78. Cf. Prop, *Exodus 1-18*, 189. Noth argues that this passage could be a redaction of such a tradition, where YHWH is simply inserted where the source material originally indicated a desert demon. He cites YHWH's appearing in a “demonic” fashion in support of this, and attempts to argue that this is an aetiological narrative intended to source where this practice of circumcision comes from, citing “very old customs and ideas associate with circumcision [that] appear in the story”; see Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary*, trans. J.S. Bowden, OTL (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959), 49. This argument is highly speculative and unprovable.

<sup>42</sup> Further derivative textual variants muddy the waters even further, with the Samaritan Pentateuch replacing מִמְּנָה (“from him”) with מִמְּנָה (“from her”).

speaking of the *ἄγγελος κυρίου* within the exchange. This is a relatively paraphrastic rendering, and represents one possible tradition and interpretation.

The targums assemble further paraphrastic traditions around this passage as well, proposing some answers to the ambiguities. *Pseudo-Jonathan* names Gershom as the subject of the circumcision and the son in question, although it includes an extended account of why Moses had not yet circumcised Gershom. According to this tradition, Eliezer was already circumcised, but Jethro, Moses father-in-law, prevented Moses from circumcising Gershom. These represent some of the varied traditions that have attempted to explain or smooth the text. To a greater or lesser extent, they deviate from the MT in an attempt to bring greater clarity, but it ought to be remembered that these are largely paraphrastic renderings. However, as commentaries and interpretive attempts, they provide the historical backdrop to contemporary interpretations of this passage.

### **b. Modern Interpreters**

Unfortunately, the closer one gets to the present scholarship of this passage, the more dramatic are the interpretive leaps that speculatively break from the text. This tendency is exacerbated by liberal scholarship, which sees the text as a patchwork quilt of varied traditions and not as a coherent whole, composed by a single author. With background assumptions like these, contextual interpretations of this passage lose traction, as scholars intentionally look to find the breaks within the text that would indicate the editor's stitching together of the tradition. In what follows, this paper will attempt to capture a cross-section of contemporary scholarship on this passage, gleaning it for pertinent insights that standout against the noise of speculative verbiage.

Dozemann attempts to read the entire situation, beginning with Moses' departure from

Jethro in Ex 4:18, as an attempt to extract Israel's history from the cultic tradition of the Midianites.<sup>43</sup> This passage, for Dozemann, functions as an etiology, an indication of how circumcision began in Midian and became inherited by Israelite practice.<sup>44</sup> He's not alone amongst scholars; Noth similarly sees this passage as indicating a much older tradition that would have been common parlance for the audience of Exodus.<sup>45</sup> Propp points to the story as fitting the tradition of ancient rites of male initiation, where a young man goes into the desert and meets with a dangerous spirit.<sup>46</sup> This conclusion operates off an assumption of prior textual traditions to the Exodus account that the author simply spliced together. As such, it remains exactly that – an assumption – and is unprovable and unnecessarily speculative. Dozemann is still helpful on this passage, for he is not without merit in several of his exegetical observations. For instance, he notes that Zipporah's intercession in the situation, which assuages YHWH's wrath, functions as a larger pattern of women playing salvific roles early in Exodus, pointing to the midwives, Moses' mother and sister, and the daughter of Pharaoh as examples of this theme.<sup>47</sup>

With regards to the reason for YHWH's wrath, Propp argues that there is a potential bloodguilt on Moses for the death of the Egyptian in Ex 2:12.<sup>48</sup> Moses fled the city, and though the cities of refuge were not yet established, Moses is following the principle of Num 35:9-15

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<sup>43</sup> Thomas B. Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, ECC (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2009), 150–52.

<sup>44</sup> Dozeman, *Exodus*, 155–56.

<sup>45</sup> Noth, *Exodus*, 49.

<sup>46</sup> William Henry Propp, "That Bloody Bridegroom (Exodus Iv 24-6)," *Vetus Testamentum* 43.4 (1993): 514.

<sup>47</sup> Dozeman, *Exodus*, 155.

<sup>48</sup> Propp, "That Bloody Bridegroom (Exodus Iv 24-6)," 503–5.

and has escaped the blood-avenger. Several things encourage this hypothesis, one of which is YHWH’s mention of the death of those who **קַח־נִפְשָׁתִים אַחֲבָקָשִׁים** (“seek his life”). This could be a reference to Num 35:28, with the death of the high priest allowing for the guilty man to return to the land of his possession. However, there is no reason to think that this is a prototype of that principle, for the high priest is not in view in any way in this passage. More likely, the immediate cause of YHWH’s wrath is the failure of Moses to circumcise his son, therefore violating God’s expressed law in Gen 17:10-14.

Where numerous modern scholars have proposed these unlikely and tendentious readings of this passage, Umberto Cassuto appeals for the “simple sense” of the text, against the backdrop of these “fanciful expositions.”<sup>49</sup> This is a remarkably reasonable appeal, and urges a hermeneutically conservative approach – one that is most fruitful and remains close to textual clues and indicators. One of Cassuto’s key insights is linguistic connection of this passage to its immediate context. He argues this from the linguistic cues and links that can be observed in the text.<sup>50</sup> Cassuto observes this connection in the repetition of **שָׁקַד** in vs 19 and 24 (“who sought your life” vs “YHWH *sought* to put him to death”), as well as the repetition of **שָׁאַת** (to meet) in verse 25 and 27. There is also the thematic link between the firstborn son mentioned twice, once of YHWH in verse 22 and once of Pharaoh in verse 23; there is no surprise when suddenly Moses’ firstborn son is at the heart of this episode.<sup>51</sup> Where many interpreters see this passage as heavily redacted and constructed by spliced sources, Cassuto convincingly places this passage in

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<sup>49</sup> Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, Publications of the Perry Foundation for Biblical Research in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997), 58.

<sup>50</sup> Cassuto, *Exodus*, 58–59.

<sup>51</sup> Cassuto, *Exodus*, 59.

context,<sup>52</sup> and allows it to function as a type of commentary on the preceding moments where YHWH sets forth the threats that Moses is to bring to Pharoah. Furthermore, Cassuto argues that it is Moses who YHWH encounters and seeks to kill. He sees this as a textual parallel, set up between Moses and Pharoah. Where Pharoah's disobedience will lead to the death of his firstborn (a dying of the firstborn for the father), the blood of Gershom shed and touched to Moses' feet will also mark a type of substitution.<sup>53</sup>

The most immediate question of the passage is the subject of verse 24-26 is the identity of the one YHWH seeks to kill. The immediate antecedent is Moses, but as Alexander notes, there are several things that potentially work against this reading. First, Moses isn't named specifically, and second, having just called Moses, it seems mercurial of YHWH to suddenly seek his harm.<sup>54</sup> John Currid proposes a solution, taking the position that the object of YHWH's wrath is not Moses at all, and is in fact Gershom, by citing that Gershom is the one that Zipporah immediately acts upon, and that Moses is not mentioned in these verses at all.<sup>55</sup> Gershom, then, is the one YHWH seeks to kill, the one Zipporah circumcises, and the one to whom Zipporah declares that he is a "bridegroom of blood." James Jordan agrees with Currid, and sees the closest logical antecedent to the ambiguous 3ms pronoun in verse 24 as the "firstborn" in verse 23. He indicates a close tie to this antecedent, suggesting that YHWH goes seamlessly from threatening the firstborn of Pharoah to threatening Moses' firstborn.<sup>56</sup> However, Jordan also

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<sup>52</sup> Cassuto, *Exodus*, 60.

<sup>53</sup> Cassuto, *Exodus*, 60. See also T. Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, AOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 107.

<sup>54</sup> Alexander, *Exodus*, 106–7.

<sup>55</sup> John D. Currid, *A Study Commentary on Exodus* (Auburn, MA: Evangelical Press, 2000), 115–16.

<sup>56</sup> James B Jordan, *The Law of the Covenant: An Exposition of Exodus 21-23* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1984), 251–52.

slightly tempers his position, saying that “...theologically, Moses and son are in the same position, under the threat of death...”<sup>57</sup>

Jordan and Currid are also inclined to read the text typologically and theologically, as reflective of YHWH’s general anger towards the firstborn of the unfaithful. Currid and Jordan see this as a theological proleptic to the Passover event.<sup>58</sup> They argue the typological link at the point of Zipporah’s “touching the blood to the feet”, as a signal of the later placing of the blood on the doorpost. Jordan notes that in both cases, both here and in the Passover, the appearance of blood has the same affect: YHWH ceases to seek the life of the person.<sup>59</sup> I think that this link between this event and Passover is almost entirely convincing, and takes into account the context of the Passover event that YHWH has just foretold Moses in the preceding verses.

However, while this reading of the situation takes the preceding context very seriously and is commendable on many levels, several problems remain. First, while the antecedent to the ambiguous pronoun *could* be the “firstborn” of verse 23, that particular firstborn is clearly referring to Pharoah’s firstborn, not Moses’. Claiming the firstborn as the antecedent does not overcome the problem of the transition from Pharoah’s son to Moses’ son that occurs in the passage. Furthermore, this would move the firstborn from the place of being merely talked about to a participant of the action. Obviously the son enters the stage when he is circumcised, but this occurs *after* the reality of YHWH’s wrath is introduced. Thus far, the actors in the scene have been Moses and YHWH, and for the firstborn to suddenly move from being a subject of discussion to an actor in the scene without introduction makes for a rather jarring and unintuitive

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<sup>57</sup> Jordan, *The Law of the Covenant*, 252.

<sup>58</sup> Jordan, *The Law of the Covenant*, 254; Currid, *A Study Commentary on Exodus*, 116.

<sup>59</sup> Jordan, *The Law of the Covenant*, 254.

reading. Alongside this, a change in the scene of the episode would seem to create *some* break in the narrative, although not one of the variety source critics posit. In other words, the antecedent remains unclear.

Secondly, in Jordan and Currid's effort to read typologically and theologically, I think they transgress a simpler reading of the event, and move the text to greater obscurity rather than clarifying its sense. In other words, while they are correct that this passage is a proleptic to Passover, I do not think this necessitates seeing Gershom as the main recipient of wrath in this episode. In fact, several things work directly against this reading. First, if Gershom is the one YHWH seeks to kill, where is Moses in the remainder of the episode? Zipporah performs the circumcision, which is highly unusual for the woman to do. In fact, this is the only account in Scripture of such a thing. Why would she be in such a position, if Moses were there and able-bodied? The most likely conclusion is that Moses was present, but incapacitated, which would be the case if YHWH had stricken him in some fashion in His "seeking his life." As certain commentators have noted, this is an expression of God's wrath that emphasizes YHWH's restraint;<sup>60</sup> YHWH's purposes are not foiled, and He is gracious in limiting the hand of His judgment and providing opportunity for the situation to be redeemed.

The most important contribution of Currid and Jordan can and ought to be preserved, namely that this event is a proleptic to Passover. I argue that this can still be the case, even if Moses is the one who YHWH seeks to kill in the immediate moments of this episode. For one, even within the Passover account, there was a direct attack against Pharaoh. The killing of the firstborn was a direct attack against the future of Pharaoh and his throne,<sup>61</sup> an attack against an

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<sup>60</sup> Victor P Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 82.

<sup>61</sup> Currid, *A Study Commentary on Exodus*, 115.

extension of Pharaoh himself. In this, the substitutionary element of Passover ought not be forgotten. The son was killed for the guilt of the house, even as the lamb was slain as a sacrifice for the houses of the Israelites. Thus, the attack of the angel of death was not just a targeted attack against individuals, it was an attack against households, represented by the blood being smeared on the doorpost of the house. Not all died, but a blood sacrifice was demanded and expected by the angel of death – and thus the firstborn played that role. The sacrifice of Egyptian sons was atoning, in that sense, and most directly atoning for the sins of the father. Thus, it is evident that Moses has sinned, and the anger of God is coming against him and his house. This does not solve the ambiguity of the pronoun, but here I submit to the caveats Jordan offers, and urge interpretive restraint. The pronoun is intentionally vague, and I would urge caution in over-interpreting its reference.<sup>62</sup> However, YHWH's wrath is against Moses, presumably for the failure to circumcise his son, and thus it makes clearest and most immediate sense that Moses is gripped by the judgement of God. The wrath of God demands an atoning sacrifice, and thus Zipporah fittingly sheds the blood of the firstborn son and touches it to Moses' legs, assuaging the wrath of God against Moses and his household.

Several other textual clues hint at Moses being the object of wrath here. First, there is the established theme in Exodus of women interceding for Moses life, which is carried on here.<sup>63</sup> There is also the textual parallel observed by Cassuto in the “seeking of the life” that appears in verse 19 and 24.<sup>64</sup> Moses life was once sought by his enemies who sought justice, but now it is

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<sup>62</sup> Jordan, *The Law of the Covenant*, 252.

<sup>63</sup> I already discussed this before in this paper, but Ryken hints at this; see Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2016), 117. Also see again Dozeman, *Exodus*, 155.

<sup>64</sup> Cassuto, *Exodus*, 59. Propp identifies וְפָזָן as a *Leitwort* that ties together 4:19 and 4:24, see Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 235.

sought in divine justice. Adding to this the argument from continuity, that this is an exchange between Moses and YHWH in 19-23 that persists forward into 24-26, most indicators seem to point to Moses being the object of wrath. This seems to maintain the best and simplest account of the text, and does not unnecessarily insert peripheral characters to the center of the narrative.

### c. The Bridegroom of Blood

One rather thorny textual question remains under consideration, then, and it has plagued exegetes throughout history: what is this obscure reference to the “bridegroom of blood?” The questions proceed along similar lines as other issues in the text: who is being referred to, and what does this phrase mean? Scholars propose every manner of conclusion about this reference, ranging the bizarre to the incredible, from inferences about a demoniac YHWH to speculation about an ancient practice of “first night.”<sup>65</sup> These are not worth the time of evaluation, but the main question remains: who is Zipporah addressing? The conclusion of this question will naturally inform the meaning of this phrase. The options of who Zipporah is speaking to are fairly straightforward. It is either Moses, Gershom, or YHWH who Zipporah addresses by this enigmatic phrase. I will consider each of these options in sequence.

First, the option that this is Moses is worth considering. After all, this makes some intuitive sense. Though he is a husband and father, he is the closest thing to a bridegroom in this situation. Many commentators operate on this assumption.<sup>66</sup> Motyer sees this exclamation as a tearful reuniting with her husband.<sup>67</sup> Johnstone sees Zipporah’s words containing several possible meanings. One could be that Zipporah is pointing to Moses’ bloodguilt, his failure to

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<sup>65</sup> For a summary of some of the more bizarre conclusions available, see Propp, “That Bloody Bridegroom (Exodus Iv 24-6),” 501–2.

<sup>66</sup> Hamilton, *Exodus*, 82–83. Eugene E Carpenter, *Exodus* (Bellingham WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 297.

<sup>67</sup> J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, TBST (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 93.

circumcise as a capital offense; the other is that she is simply recognizing that her marriage is to a people of circumcision, making sense of that last qualifying phrase in verse 26: “because of the circumcision.”<sup>68</sup>

Several things work against the idea of this being Moses. Brevard Childs cites Greenberg in attesting that this word translated “bridegroom,” נָשָׁה, usually indicates in-laws and never refers to a husband.<sup>69</sup> This has led many interpreters to see this as Gershom. James Jordan takes this view that this phrase is more appropriately addressed to Gershom than to Moses. The word נָשָׁה can simply mean “relative by marriage,” but he goes beyond this to indicate that Gershom pictures the wedding imagery associated with Passover.<sup>70</sup> As this episode is understood as a proleptic to Passover, then, Jordan understands Gershom to be a type of bloody bridegroom for YHWH through this ritual.<sup>71</sup> This seems to transgress the simple sense of the text, and draws tenuous conclusions about this passage. Currid also sees Gershom as the proper addressee of these words, but he is much more conservative than Jordan. He sees this phrase properly translated, “covenant-relation of blood,” with the point being that the relationship is more broadly defined, one of covenant relationship rather than specifically marriage.<sup>72</sup>

However, this does not solve every issue, for the MT includes the particulars of how Zipporah understands this covenant-relationship. Specifically, this covenant relationship is one that is ‘לִי (“to me”), Zipporah says, speaking of herself. However, Gershom is not a נָשָׁה to

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<sup>68</sup> William Johnstone, *Exodus 1-19* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2014), 116.

<sup>69</sup> Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 97. See also Kutsch, נָשָׁה, *TDOT*, 5:270-277.

<sup>70</sup> Jordan, *The Law of the Covenant*, 256–59. Jordan argues that Passover is the scene of the marriage supper of the lamb, and thus all of these images are collapsed into this passage.

<sup>71</sup> Jordan, *The Law of the Covenant*, 259.

<sup>72</sup> Currid, *A Study Commentary on Exodus*, 116.

Zipporah, but her son. It is strange for her say that Gershom is a bridegroom, or covenant-relation *to her*, rather than simply a blood-son. One possible answer to this issue is that Zipporah could be highlighting their newly minted covenant connection, but why the specific use of זָבֵן to capture this relationship, when זָבֵן specifically indicates a relative by marriage? This is not an easy objection to overcome.

The third option is that YHWH is the one that Zipporah is addressing.<sup>73</sup> This is an intriguing option, and has several things working in its favor. First, the author is clear: it is after she touches the blood to the feet and speaks these words that YHWH lets Moses alone. He links these two actions by logical sequence introduced by the word וְ in verse 26. This would seem to make these words particularly pertinent, not to Moses nor Gershom, who are strange recipients, but to YHWH. YHWH could be understood to be the “bridegroom,” whose covenantal relationship with his people is established on the sign of the blood. The context bears this up; YHWH’s firstborn son is Israel, a relationship established through the sign of circumcision. Here, the lack of circumcision brings Moses’ household into danger, and YHWH seeks to put Moses to Death. Zipporah rectifies the problem, and declares to YHWH that He is a “bridegroom of blood” to her and her son.

This third option would resolve several tensions. It solves the strangeness of this address if it were levelled towards Moses or Gershom, and it also captures the relationship YHWH has to His people. He is the “bridegroom of blood,” in that the covenantal relationship with Him is only entered through the shedding of blood. The rites of blood, be they circumcision or Passover, are what mark entrance and acceptance in His presence. With the rite of blood accomplished and

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<sup>73</sup> Liberal scholars who advocate for this idea hint that YHWH could also be the one to whom Zipporah touches the blood, but this is an unnecessary inclusion. The LXX does put the angel of the Lord as the recipient of Zipporah’s smearing of the blood, but this is likely paraphrastic. See Dozeman, *Exodus*, 135.

Zipporah's words of institution uttered, YHWH's wrath is assuaged and covenant-relationship between YHWH and His people is reestablished.

Liberal scholars have puzzled for a long time about the meaning of this phrase, "bridegroom of blood." Osborn and Hatton see this as some ancient formula, a religious saying that would have been contextually understood but is now lost to history.<sup>74</sup> Childs sees phrase as a redactional comment that should not be seen as original to the story.<sup>75</sup> Where Noth sees this as an etiology,<sup>76</sup> Childs sees this as the opposite – circumcision is the explanation of the practice, not the other way around.<sup>77</sup> Propp sees the possibility that the "blood" mentioned is in reference not to the circumcision, but the blood that is on Moses' hands for the murder of the Egyptian in Ex 2:12.<sup>78</sup> On the opposite side, Childs fields and dismisses the scholarly claim that instead of "bridegroom of blood," this phrase can be translated "blood of the circumcision," based on the similarity between the Hebrew and Arabic roots.<sup>79</sup>

However, if YHWH is the addressee of Zipporah's exclamation, then the meaning seems much simpler, and relieves us of these contradictory views. YHWH is Israel's bridegroom, and that marriage is sealed and maintained by the rites of blood. The blood of the males in circumcision mark this inclusion in YHWH's bride, and symbolize the fitting sacrifice that is necessary for guilt to be assuaged. The proposed source-critical answers suffer from a dearth of

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<sup>74</sup> Osborn and Hatton, *A Handbook on Exodus*, 99–100.

<sup>75</sup> Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 100.

<sup>76</sup> Noth, *Exodus*, 49.

<sup>77</sup> Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 100.

<sup>78</sup> Propp, "That Bloody Bridegroom (Exodus Iv 24-6)," 509.

<sup>79</sup> Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 103–4.

evidence, and etymological answers raise more questions than answers. Instead, this proposes a more elegant and theologically consistent reading of this passage.

#### **d. Theological Implications of the Passage**

Accepting this passage as proleptically indicating the Passover event opens up new avenues for theological reflection. First, it connects circumcision to the atonement. At the theological heart of the Passover is the reality of the atonement, the killing of the lamb for life of the household. The household would be spared the wrath of God, but it would be by the shedding of sacrificial blood, either of the lamb or of the firstborn.<sup>80</sup> Zipporah sees the judgement of God descend and knows that blood must be shed. She both rights the wrong that Moses had allowed, and sheds the blood that spares him from the wrath of God, the blood of the firstborn. This blood is then smeared on presumably Moses' feet, that the wrath of God might leave the house of Moses.

Further details emerge from this passage theologically. Exegetically, J.A. Motyer and Philip Ryken each read this text uncontroversially in their respective commentaries. Their contribution is most helpful in seeing the larger theological themes implicit within this story, themes that primarily indicate the reality of a Holy God. Ryken notes that the most logical inference of God's anger is the disobedience of Moses in circumcising his son.<sup>81</sup> God had given a command (Gen 17:10), and as a Holy God, His commands are not to be trifled with. The disobedience of Moses results in immediate threat to his life, a reflection of the seriousness of YHWH's holiness.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> The typology connects to the story of Abraham in Genesis 22, where the same options are presented: the lamb or the firstborn.

<sup>81</sup> Ryken, *Exodus*, 117.

<sup>82</sup> Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, 93–94.

## V. CONCLUSION

Moses has come into the presence of the living and true God, and in this passage he learns the hard way what that entails. The I AM who encountered him earlier in this passage is not offering the petty patronage of a desert jinn, but covenantal relationship to a Holy and perfect God, a God commands are not to be ignored. As a Holy God, Moses respect the manner in which His grace manifests to us, in the particular institutions of that grace – including circumcision. Flaunting those institutions of grace, as Motyer notes, is nothing less than a functional act of atheism.<sup>83</sup> Ryken properly notes that it is not merely disobedience that establishes the seriousness of this situation; it is the particular significance of circumcision that makes this particularly heinous. For the old covenant circumcision is the distinguishing mark of God's people, a proof of their spiritual sonship of YHWH. It points to the significance of receiving the signs of the covenant, which God has established for his people.<sup>84</sup>

Circumcision itself points to a larger implication of this passage. In order to be the bride of YHWH, blood must be shed. This passage is a proleptic to Passover, which is clearly a proleptic itself, pointing towards the true Passover lamb. The blood of circumcision, where the flesh is cut off and separated from the body, is perfectly fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Without that blood, YHWH meets us, to put us to death. But Jesus is our Bridegroom of Blood, the firstborn son, the one who meets us as “a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain.” (Rev. 5:6). By his blood, dipped and placed upon us, the wrath of YHWH is turned away.

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<sup>83</sup> Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, 94.

<sup>84</sup> Ryken, *Exodus*, 118.

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