

WHY DID GOD WANT TO KILL MOSES? THE IMAGE OF THE DANGEROUS GOD IN EXODUS 4:24-26*

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Abstract. The strange pericope of Ex 4:24–26 is discussed in numerous studies, mainly from the perspective of religious history or rhetorical criticism. Building on the results of previous research, this study confirms earlier suggestions that this passage cannot be connected well with its direct context, specifically with the larger call narrative of Ex 3:1–4:18, or with the smaller preceding unit in vv. 20–23. The observations regarding rhetorical and logical problems around Ex 4:19.24–27 are corroborated by independent text-historical arguments, derived mainly from the Old Greek version. It is also unlikely though that Ex 4:24–26 would be an entirely independent segment in the Moses-tradition. The narrative in its earliest form (reconstructed here as consisting of vv. 19.24–26) was the original follow-up of Ex 2, specifically 2:23a. It is this particular context which unveils YHWH's stance towards Moses. The intention of this alternative Moses-story differs from the better-known Ex 3:1–4:18.

Keywords: Ex 4:24–27, Moses, Moses-tradition, circumcision, murder, YHWH, compositional history.

Exodus 4:24–26 is one of those Old Testament stories that evoke a series of questions in today's Bible readers. This short episode presents a fearsome God who, apparently without reason, attacks Moses with the intention of killing him – the same person who just a few lines earlier had been given the demanding task to free his people from Egypt. Neither this episode, nor its immediate context seem to explain the unusual manifestation of the divinity. The New Revised Standard Version translates the story as follows:

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|------|---|
| 4:24 | On the way, at a place where they spent the night, the LORD met him and tried to kill him. |
| 4:25 | But Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched Moses' feet with it, and said, "Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me!" |
| 4:26 | So he let him alone. It was then she said, "A bridegroom of blood by circumcision." |

It is not only the destructive image of God in general that disturbs the reader. The meaning of most phrases in this short episode also causes problems. The possessive pronouns and suffixes in the Hebrew text make the narrative ambiguous. In the verses preceding this episode, on his way back to Egypt, Moses is joined by two of his sons (4:20). It is not entirely clear why only one son of Moses is mentioned here, and which one YHWH intends to kill in verse 24.¹ Further, the exact intent of the rite of circumcising the son as a means to avert the deadly danger lurking around the father also remains unclear. Moreover, the pericope contains another ritual act and a related statements that add to the bewilderment of modern Bible readers. The substantially different roads taken in current Bible translations illustrate well the hermeneutical problems. Translations have different opinions about the ritual act of Zipporah, oscillating between “she threw it at his feet” and “she touched him at his thighs / feet / groin”. Modern Bible translations also often insert personal names (not present in the original text), seeking to clarify the cloudy identity of the subjects and verbal objects.

The immediate context does not provide sufficient explanation, but rather complicates the attempt to understand this strange episode. The wider context is heavily confused by Ex 4:24–26. In the preceding narrative of Ex 3:1–4:17, YHWH tries to persuade Moses by all means to return and lead Israel out of Egypt, the land of slavery. Moses refuses to take on this task, and it is only after repeated attempts of persuasion that he is convinced to undertake this extraordinary commission. In this context, the story of YHWH’s attempt to kill Moses on his way to Egypt, is certainly an unexpected and bizarre scene.

1. The ancient translations of Exodus 4:24–26

It is not only the modern reader who faces interpretive problems in Ex 4:24–26. This passage has posed serious challenges to translators from the very beginning.²

* This study is an adapted version of an article published originally in Hungarian: “Miért akarta megölni Isten Mózes? A veszélyes Isten képze az Exodus 4,24–26-ban”, *Studia Doctorum Theologiae Protestantis* 11 (2020), 7–37.

¹ Moreover, the preceding verse abruptly ends with the notion that unless the pharaoh permits Israel, God’s son to leave, God will kill the pharaoh’s son.

² In what follows, I will focus mainly on the early translations of the Hebrew text. For a more elaborate overview of the exegetical history of this passage, see especially John T. WILLIS, *Yahweh and Moses in Conflict: The Role of Exodus 4:24-26 in the Book of Exodus* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010); Matthieu ARNOLD *et al.* (eds), *Exodus 4, 24-26: La Rencontre Nocturne* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2017).

Septuagint

4:24	a	And it happened on the way, in the lodging	ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ ἐν τῷ καταλύματι
	b	that the angel of the Lord met him	συνήντησεν αὐτῷ ἄγγελος κυρίου
	c	and sought to kill him.	καὶ ἐζήτει αὐτὸν ἀποκτεῖναι
4:25	a	And Zipporah took a (sharp) stone,	καὶ λαβοῦσα Σεπφωρα ψῆφον
	b	and circumcised the foreskin of her son.	περιέτεμεν τὴν ἀκροβυστίαν τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτῆς
	c	And she fell at the feet,	καὶ προσέπεσεν πρὸς τοὺς πόδας
	d	and she said:	καὶ εἶπεν
	e	The blood of the circumcision of my child has stopped.	ἔστη τὸ αἷμα τῆς περιτομῆς τοῦ παιδίου μου
4:26	a	And he went away from him	καὶ ἀπῆλθεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ
	b	because she said:	διότι εἶπεν
	c	“The blood of the circumcision of my child has stopped.”	ἔστη τὸ αἷμα τῆς περιτομῆς τοῦ παιδίου μου

The Septuagint provides a peculiar interpretation of the story on at least three points. (1) First, according to the Old Greek text, the subject of the action is not the Lord (YHWH), but the angel of the Lord. From a text-historical point of view, the question is whether this is merely a theological modification – i.e., the Greek translator transfers the negative role of YHWH to a heavenly being –, or whether we are dealing here with a textual tradition different from the one recorded in the Masoretic Text. The latter might be suggested by the fact that in some Septuagint verses ἄγγελος κυρίου ‘angel of the Lord’ is replaced by ἄγγελος ‘angel’.³ The Greek translation of Aquila, ὁ θεὸς ‘the god’, would also point in the same direction.⁴ This variation of ἄγγελος / ὁ θεὸς could be interpreted in the sense that there was a textual tradition, used by the quoted translators, in which the word מַלְאָכַי rather than יְהוָה appeared, and which was subsequently interpreted by the translators as ἄγγελος or θεὸς.⁵ The fact that the angel tradition also appears in other ancient traditions, independent of the Septuagint (see below the Targums), might support this assumption. Nevertheless, we cannot rule out the possibility that the “angel”-reading is not an indication of an actual

³ This variation appears also in the Arabic translation and in the Syro-Hexapla, both based on the Greek text.

⁴ See Frederick FIELD, *Origenis Hexaplorum quae supersunt*, vol. 1. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1875), 87.

⁵ For translating מַלְאָכַי as ἄγγελος, see, e.g., Ps 8:6. The above suggestion was also formulated by J. HEHN, “Der ‘Blutsbräutigam’”. It is worth mentioning here that the Septuagint of Exodus uses ὁ θεὸς in several places where the Hebrew text has YHWH (cf. Ex 4:30.31; 5:3.21). It is also possible, however, that instead of a different base text, we are dealing with an exegetical phenomenon. For it is only in chapter 6 that the name YHWH would be actually revealed to Moses. The Greek translator might have reasoned therefore that Moses was unfamiliar with the name YHWH before Ex 6.

Hebrew, non-Masoretic textual tradition, but the result of a deliberate modification of the text geared by theological motivations.⁶ M. Rösel pointed out that there is a tendency in the Septuagint to replace κύριος with θεός in cases where YHWH appears in a destructive role,⁷ while others have noted similar tendencies in other Jewish circles as well.⁸ This means that independent, genetically unrelated textual traditions can arrive at similar translations by following common theological and hermeneutical principles.

Another striking difference in the Septuagint is that the ritual of Zipporah, the “touching the foot”-act in the Hebrew text, is understood as an act of prayer. The Greek verb προσπίπτω ‘to fall down’ (without object in the Greek) has nothing to do with the verb ענג ‘to touch’. προσπίπτω sometimes renders Heb. נפל,⁹ Since paleographically ערַכ is arguably close to ענג used in Ex 4:25, it cannot be excluded that in a theologically problematic context the Greek translator preferred the reading ענג to ערַכ.¹⁰

Finally, the phrase “the blood of the circumcision of my child has stopped” is also very different from the Hebrew text. It is highly probable that the translator here too resorts to an exegetical solution similar to the above, by rendering מַחַה ‘to seal, close’ instead of the Hebrew term נָתַח ‘bridegroom’ (eventually ‘father-in-law’, with a different vocalisation).¹¹ The Old Greek text is therefore not the evidence of another Hebrew manuscript tradition, but a deliberate modification, highlighting an ancient interpretative translation.

⁶ Cf. William DUMBRELL, “Exodus 4:24–26: A Textual Re-Examination”, *Harvard Theological Review* 65 (1972), 288–90.

⁷ Martin RÖSEL, “The Reading and Translation of the Divine Name in the Masoretic Tradition and the Greek Pentateuch”, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 31 (2007), 420–421.

⁸ See N. A. DAHL and Alan F. SEGAL, “Philo and the Rabbis on the Names of God”, *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 9 (1978), 1–28; RÖSEL, “Divine Name”, 423. Attempts to diminish YHWH’s destructive role is already found within the Old Testament tradition in the late Persian period. In its reinterpretation of 2 Sam 24:1, the later 1 Chr 21:1 points to the Satan – rather than YHWH – as the one inciting King David to act foolishly.

⁹ See further 2 Chr 7:3; Pss 22:30 (LXX 21:30); 72:9 (LXX 71:9); Isa 10:4; 46:1; 65:12.

¹⁰ This is not to say that the Septuagint was aware of any manuscript containing ערַכ. The phenomenon of inserting a different, *assumed* (not actually existing) reading by the translator to have been more correct, is not unknown to the Septuagint.

¹¹ Cf. חַתָּם / σφύρα in Lev 15:3.

Peshitta

4:24	a	And Moses was underway, in the lodge,	ܡܡܪܝܢ ܡܘܨܝܐ ܕܡܘܨܝܐ ܕܡܘܨܝܐ
	b	and the Lord met him,	ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ
	c	and sought to kill Moses.	ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ
4:25	a	And Zipporah took a stone,	ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ
	b	and she circumcised the foreskin of her son.	ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ
	c	And she grasped his foot	ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ
	c'	[And she approached his foot,]	ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ
	d	and she said:	ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ
4:26	e	“You are ¹² a bridegroom of blood to me.”	ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ
	a	And he withdrew from her.	ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ
	b	Then she said:	ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ
	c	A bridegroom of blood ¹³ because of ² the circumcision.	ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ
			ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ

In general, the Syriac translation follows the Masoretic Text. It differs only in verse 24, where, for the sake of clarity, the Peshitta identifies the subject and object of the verbs. Verse 25, on the other hand, remains vague. Two different traditions have been preserved here. The second variation, ‘and she approached / drew near to his feet’ ,ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ uses the verb *qrb* ‘draw near’, as also known from the Targum (see below, especially Targum Neofiti). The verb *qrb* can also allude to a gesture of prayer. If this latter is the case, Zipporah’s action must have been directed to the Lord. The prayer-interpretation of the ritual gesture is similar to what we find in the Septuagint.

Targum Onqelos

4:24	a	And it happened on the way, in the lodge,	ܘܚܝܬܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ
	b	and the angel of the LORD met him,	ܘܚܝܬܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ
	c	and he sought to kill him.	ܘܚܝܬܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ
4:25	a	And Zipporah took a stone,	ܘܚܝܬܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ
	b	and she circumcised the foreskin of her son.	ܘܚܝܬܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ
	c	And she approached him,	ܘܚܝܬܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ
	d	and she said:	ܘܚܝܬܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ
	e	“In the blood of this circumcision	ܘܚܝܬܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ
	f	may the bridegroom be given back to me.”	ܘܚܝܬܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ

¹² The verb ܡܠܟܐ ‘you are’ is graphically very close to the personal pronoun ܡܠܟܐ ‘you’. Both variants appear in the Syriac manuscript traditions. ܡܠܟܐ could be the result of a copyist’s error. Cf. DUMBRELL, “Re-examination”, 288.

¹³ The word ‘circumcision’ derives from the same verb *gwr* ‘to cut’, used in verse 25b.

4:26	a	And he let her alone. ¹⁴	וְנָח מִנֶּיהָ
	b	Then she said:	בְּכֵין אָמְרָת
	c	“Were it not the blood of this circumcision	אֵלּוּלִי דָמָא דְּמִקּוּלְתָּא הָדִין
	d	the bridegroom would have been found guilty of murder”. ¹⁵	אֲתַחְיִיב חֲתָנָא קְטוּל:

The Targum explicitly identifies the offending party as an angel of YHWH, as in the Septuagint. The object of the phrase ‘she approached him’ in the Aramaic text is the angel rather than Moses. The Aramaic version also departs from the Masoretic Text in its statement on Zipporah. The Targum seems to regard circumcision as a kind of sacrifice. The term ‘bridegroom of blood’ in the Hebrew text is interpreted as referring to a bridegroom redeemed (i.e. saved from death) at the cost of the blood of circumcision. Verse 26, which in the Masoretic Text is close to verse 25, contains here a further paraphrase-like interpretation of the “bridegroom of blood” motif.

Targum Neofiti¹⁶

4:24	a	And it happened on the way, in the lodge,	וְהוּוּ בְּאוּרְחָא בְּבֵית אֲבֹתוֹתָהּ
	b	and the angel from before the LORD met him,	וְאַרְעָא יְתִיה מִלֵּאכָא מִן קִדְמָא יְיָ
	c	and he sought to kill him.	וּבְעָה לְמַקְטֵל יְתִיה:
4:25	a	And Zipporah took ¹⁷ a stone,	וּנְסַבְתָּ צִפְרָה טִנְרָא
	b	and she circumcised the foreskin of her son.	וּגְזַרְתָּ יֵת עֶרְלָתָא דְּבָרָא
	c	And she approached the foot of the destroyer, ¹⁸	וּקְרַבְתָּ לְרִגְלוֹי דְּמַחְבֵּלָהּ
	c'	[And she cast herself down under his foot], ¹⁹	וּתְטַלְקַת תַּחוֹת רִגְלוֹי
	d	and she said:	וְאַמְרָת
	e	“Because the bridegroom wanted to circumcise,	אֲרוּם חֲתָנָא בְּעָא לְמַגְזֹר
	f	but the father-in-law did not permit it,	וְחִמּוּי לֹא שִׁבַּק יְתִיה
	g	may now the blood of this circumcision atone	וּכְפַר כְּעֵן אֲדָם גְּזִירָתָהּ הָדָא
	h	for the guilt of this bridegroom. ²⁰ ”	עַל חֻבּוּי דְּחֲתָנִיה הָדִין:

¹⁴ For מָן + נִוַּח, see 1 Sam 6:3; 27:1; Hos 5:13; Jon 1:11.12.

¹⁵ Cf. also the participial form חֻבּוּי קְטוּל ‘guilty of murder’ in Ezek 9:9. The phrase אֲתַחְיִיב חֲתָנָא can eventually also be rendered in the sense of ‘my bridegroom would have committed a mortal sin’, or even ‘my bridegroom would have been condemned to be killed’. This latter would yield a different sense to the story. For this interpretation, see Ps 17:13: רְשִׁיעָא דֶּאֱתַחְיִיב ‘the wicked one who was condemned to be killed by your sword’ (cf. Ps 55:16; 94:21). For אֲתַחְיִיב ‘to be condemned’, see Num 35:19.21.

¹⁶ A Palestinian targum of unclear date and origin. Alejandro Díez Macho dates it to the A.D. 1st century, while according to McNamara it was composed in the A.D. 4th century.

¹⁷ The text includes the Hebrew phrase וְתָקָה צִפְרָה ‘and Zipporah took’.

¹⁸ See the Peshitta.

¹⁹ Marginal gloss in Targum Neofiti.

²⁰ The phrase דְּחֲתָנִיה הָדִין ‘for this her bridegroom’ is most likely erroneous. In the manuscript one finds this correction above the line: דְּדִין חֲתָנָה (the guilt) ‘of this bridegroom’. The idea of

4:26	a	And the angel dismissed her. ²¹	וארפי מיניה מלאכא
	b	Then Zipporah gave praise,	בכדן שבחת צפרה
	c	and she said:	ואמרת
	d	“How dear is this blood ²²	מה חביב דם הדא
	e	which saved this bridegroom ²³ from the hand ²⁴ of the angel of death. ²⁵	דשיזב לחתניה הדין מידא דמלאך מותא:

Targum Neofiti identifies the attacker even more precisely: he is the angel from before the Lord. Verse 26 calls the same person the “angel of death”. Again, Zipporah’s ritual act is interpreted as a prayer-gesture. A new element in comparison with the previous interpretations is the attempt of the interpreter to absolve Moses of any responsibility for the current situation. Although the Hebrew text avoids value judgements, the contemporary Jewish reader of the Bible could have wondered how it happened that Moses’ son was not circumcised, when in line with Gen 17 this should have been accomplished on the eighth day after birth. Targum Neofiti addresses this uncomfortable question and explains Moses’ failure to circumcise his son as the consequence of a prohibitive act of his father-in-law, Jethro. Although the Onqelos Targum is much more restrained in this respect, it cannot be excluded that the idea that “my bridegroom would have committed a mortal sin” (if that interpretation is followed) had a similar background. Moses’ mortal sin was thought to be his failure to circumcise his son. The expression ‘bridegroom of blood’ is interpreted in the Aramaic text in the sense of ‘a bridegroom regained by means of blood(shed)’. Circumcision in this reading is a kind of atoning sacrifice.

Targum Yerushalmi

4:24	a	And it happened on the way, in the lodge,	והוה באורחא בבית אבתותא
	b	and the angel of the LORD met him,	וארע ביה מלאכא דיי
	c	and he sought to kill him.	ובעא למיקטליה
	d	Because of Gershom, his son,	מן בגלל גרשום בריה
	e	who had not been circumcised,	דלא הוה גזיר
	f	because of Jethro, his father-in-law,	על עיסק יתרו חמוי

becoming guilty is already implied by Targum Onqelos (see אַתְּחַיִּיב). See further the Fragmentary Targums (version V).

²¹ Marginal note: מלאכא מחבלה הא בכך שבח ‘the destroying angel; look then he praised’.

²² The demonstrative pronoun is explained in a supralinear note as: גזירתא, i.e. (blood) ‘of the circumcision’.

²³ Marginal note: די חתנה ‘which saved the bridegroom’.

²⁴ Without genitive suffix in the main text. Reading above the line: מן ידוי ‘from his hand’.

²⁵ Marginal interpretation: מחבלא ‘the destroyer’ (= destroying angel).

	g	who did not permit him to circumcise him.	דלא שבקיה למגזריה
	h	But Eliezer was circumcised according to the contract	ברם אליעזר הוה גזר בתנאה
	i	that was made between the two.	דאתניין תרוויהון
4:25	a	And Zipporah took a stone,	ונסיבת צפורה טינרא
	b	and she circumcised the foreskin of Gershom, her son.	וגזרת ית ערלת גרשום ברה
	c	And she approached the circumcised foreskin to the	ואקריבת ית גזירת מהולתא
		foot of the destroying angel,	לריגלוי דמלאך חבלא
	d	and she said:	ואמרת
	e	“The bridegroom wanted to circumcise (him)	חתנא בעא למגזור
	f	but the father-in-law held him back.	וחמוי עכיב עלוי
	g	And now the blood of this circumcision	וכדון אדם גזרתא הדין
	h	may serve as atonement for the guilt of my	יכפר על חתנא דיילי
		bridegroom.”	
4:26	a	And the destroying angel desisted from him.	ופסק מלאך חבלא מיניה
	b	Then Zipporah gave praise,	בכן שבחת צפורה
	c	and she said:	ואמרת
	d	“How dear is the blood of this circumcision	מה חביב הוא אדם גזרתא הדין
	e	which saved the bridegroom from the hand of the	דשיזב ית חתנא מן ידוי
		destroying angel.”	דמלאך חבלא

From the Aramaic translations the Jerusalem Targum holds the most elaborate interpretations. The person encountering Moses is again a destroying angel. Like Targum Neofiti, this translation also seeks to answer the question why the son of Moses was not circumcised beforehand. A new element compared to the previous versions is the appearance of a second son of Moses, as also presupposed by Ex 4:20 (see also Ex 18:4; 1 Chr 23:15).²⁶ The Jerusalem Targum also speaks of the responsibility of Moses' father-in-law, while exonerating Moses even more emphatically by claiming that Moses did perform his obligations when he circumcised his younger son. Circumcision in this case is also a rite of atonement. The bridegroom of blood is none other than the bridegroom saved by the blood of circumcision. As regards the gesture of Zipporah, we find here the explanation of the Neofiti Targum: Zipporah gives praise for the blood of circumcision.

The Fragmentary Targums

4:24 [...] ... [...]

²⁶ A similar note appears in the commentary of Ephrem the Syrian, although he emphasises the responsibility of Zipporah rather than the father-in-law in Moses' failure to circumcise his son. See András KÖVÉR, “Szent Ephrem: Exodus-kommentár (I–IV.)”, in PESTHY-SIMON Monika (ed.): *Tanulmányok a 75 Éves Simon Róbert Tiszteletére*. Budapest: Corvina 2014, 106–133.

4:25	a	And Zipporah took a stone,	ונסיבת צפורה טינרא
	b	and she circumcised the foreskin of her son.	וגזרת ית עורלתא דברה
	c	And she approached it ²⁷ to the foot of the destroyer,	ואקרית יתה קדם ריגלי דמחבלא
	d	and she said:	ואמרת
	e	“The bridegroom wanted to circumcise (him),	חתנא בעא למיגזר
	f	but the father-in-law did not permit it.	וחמוי לא שבק יתיה
	g	May now atone (for him) the blood of this circumcision	וכדון יכפר אדם גזירתיה הדא
	h	which ²⁸ saved the bridegroom from the hand of the angel of death.”	די ישיזיב לחתנא מן ידוי דמלאך מותא
4:26	a	And then the destroyer ²⁹ dismissed him.	וכד ארפי מחבלא מיניה
	b	Then Zipporah gave praise,	בכדין שבחת צפורה
	c	and she said:	ואמרת
	d	How strong ³⁰ is the blood of this circumcision,	מא תקוף הוא אדם גזירתא הדא
	e	which saved this bridegroom from the hand of the angel of death. ³¹	די ישיזיב לחתנא הדין מן ידוי דמלאך מותא

The Fragmentary Targums are similar to Targum Neofiti. The destructive agent is the destroyer or the angel of death. The Fragmentary Targums do not seem to deal with the other son of Moses either. They consider circumcision an atoning sacrifice and the gesture of Zipporah an act of thanksgiving.³²

Targum of the Samaritan Pentateuch³³

4:24	a	And it happened on the way, in the lodge,	והוה באורעה בהבתותה
	b	that YHWH encountered him,	ופגעה יהוה
	c	and he sought to frighten her.	ובעו למרתתנה

²⁷ Fragmentary Targum version V: דמלאכא (foot) ‘of the angel’.

²⁸ Or: ‘because’. Fragmentary Targums V and GT FF render line h as follows: על חובי [ד]חתנא ‘for the guilt of this bridegroom’. See Targum Neofiti.

²⁹ According to GT FF: מלאך מחבל[ה] ‘destroying angel’.

³⁰ FT V and GT FF have: מה חביב ‘how dear’.

³¹ GT FF has: מחבלא ‘destroyer’.

³² The Book of Jubilees from the mid-2nd century B.C maintains that Moses was about to be killed by Prince Mastema (identified later with Satan) when he was underway to Egypt (Jubilees 48:1-4). Mastema’s purpose was to prevent Moses from performing the miracles known from Exodus. In the Book of Jubilees, it is YHWH who rescues Moses from the hand of Prince Mastema. Cf. Orval S. WINTERMUTE, “Jubilees”, in James H. CHARLESWORTH (ed.): *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (New York: Doubleday, 1985)

³³ The Aramaic translation of the Samaritan Pentateuch. Cf. Avraham TAL, “The Samaritan Targum of the Pentateuch”, in Martin J. MULDER (ed.): *Mikra. Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*. Vol. 1. (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1988), 189-216. The Samaritan Pentateuch itself deviates from the Masoretic Text only in verse 26 using (unlike in the Sam. Targum) the feminine suffixed form ממנה.

4:25	a	And Zipporah took a stone, ³⁴	ונסבת צפורה [ט]נאר
	b	and she cut ³⁵ the foreskin of her son.	וקטעת ית ערלת בנה
	c	And she approached his foot,	וקרבת לרגליו
	d	and she said:	ואמרת
	e	“Are you not a father-in-law of blood to me?”	הלא חמיו דמים אתה לי
4:26	a	And he dismissed him. ³⁶	וארף מנה
	b	Then she said:	טטה אמרת
	c	“Father-in-law of blood concerning the circumcision.”	חמיו דמים לגזרתה

The Samaritan Targum contains far fewer paraphrases than the Jewish Targums. This Aramaic version does not refer to destructive angels, but like the Masoretic Text, it is YHWH himself who threatens the family on the road. Unlike in the Masoretic Text, however, the object of the verb in verse 24 is Zipporah. Another significant change from the Hebrew tradition is that here YHWH does not want to kill but merely frighten Zipporah. This interpretation was also present in the reading tradition of the Samaritan Pentateuch. The Samaritan Hebrew המיתו can also be read as *hāmītu*, which is a derivative of המה ‘to frighten’.³⁷ This variation, by which the author solved questions of theological nature, was also recorded in the Samaritan Targum. In this context, the act of circumcision has no ritual role. Compared to the Jewish traditions, the reading ‘father-in-law of blood’ is striking, which presupposes a different vocalization of the Masoretic Text (see below).

³⁴ The word נאר is probably a mistake for טנאר.

³⁵ The Samaritan oral tradition is also acquainted with the reading *binnāh* ‘her heart’. This means that Zipporah circumcises not the foreskin of his son, but the “foreskin” of her heart (cf. Jer 4:4 for a biblical parallel to this idea). See Benyamim TSEDAKA and Sharon SULLIVAN, *The Israelite Samaritan Version of the Torah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2013), 132–133; ZSENGELLÉR, “Orális hagyomány”, 61.

³⁶ The Samaritan oral tradition has here: *uyarrēp mimmennāh*, i.e. a hiph. masc. form with a fem. suffix. This phrase is interpreted in the sense that Moses (!) dismissed his wife to go back to her father (cf. TSEDAKA and SULLIVAN, *Samaritan Version*, 133, 137; ZSENGELLÉR, “Orális hagyomány”, 61–62). This episode serves as an explanation to the later Ex 18:2, according to which, later Jethro visited Moses taking his wife and sons back to him, after having dismissed them earlier together with their mother. The Hebrew text provides no information when this incident happened (Jerusalem Targum adds: “after he left for Egypt”). The Samaritan tradition fills this hiatus.

³⁷ See TSEDAKA and SULLIVAN, *Samaritan Version*, 132–137; ZSENGELLÉR, “Orális hagyomány”, 61.

2. Exodus 4:24–26 in the Masoretic Text

4:24	a	And it happened on the road, in the lodging, ³⁸	וַיְהִי בַדֶּרֶךְ בַּמִּלּוֹן
	b	that YHWH encountered him,	וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ יְהוָה
	c	and sought to kill him.	וַיִּבְקֹשׁ הָמִיתוֹ:
4:25	a	And Zipporah took a stone,	וַתִּקַּח צִפּוֹרָה צֶרֶד
	b	and she cut off the foreskin of her son.	וַתִּכְרֹת אֶת־עֲרֻלַּת בְּנָהּ
	c	And she touched his “foot”,	וַתִּגַּע לְרֵגְלֹו
	d	and she said:	וַתֹּאמֶר
	e	“Truly, you are a bridegroom of blood to me!”	כִּי חָתָן דָּמִים אַתָּה לִי:
4:26	a	And he let him alone. ³⁹	וַיֵּרָם מִמֶּנּוּ
	b	It was then that she said	אָז אָמְרָה
	c	“a bridegroom of blood”, because of (?) the circumcision. ⁴⁰	חָתָן דָּמִים לְמִילָה:

The Hebrew text of Ex 4:24–26 does not pose any particular grammatical problems. For the most part, the differences between the ancient and modern translations are not due to grammatical or semantic difficulties, but rather related to theological problems. A literal reading of the text was a source of confusion and consternation for the readers. Therefore, in what follows, I will confine myself to a brief discussion of the most important phrases in this pericope.

וַיִּבְקֹשׁ הָמִיתוֹ ‘he sought to kill him’

The subject of the phrase ‘he sought to kill him’ is clearly YHWH. As we will see below, this phrase is crucial to the theological interpretation of the pericope, therefore, I prefer the literal translation.⁴¹ In the wider context of the narrative, there is an important connection between Ex 4:24, on the one hand, and Ex 2:15 and 4:19 on the other. According to Ex 2:15, the reason for Moses’ flight from Egypt was that the pharaoh “was seeking to murder Moses” (וַיִּבְקֹשׁ לְהָרֹג (אֶת־מֹשֶׁה). Even though the two stories use synonymous verbs, they both share a common idea of “seeking to kill / murder Moses”. In Ex 4:19, the author undoubtedly refers back to Ex 2:15 when Moses is instructed to return to Egypt with the following words: “Go back to Egypt, for dead are all those who have

³⁸ Jer 9:1 uses מִלּוֹן in the sense of a lodging place in the desert.

³⁹ The Masoretic Text has a masc. suffix that obviously refers to Moses rather than Zipporah. See also the LXX and Targum Onqelos.

⁴⁰ The word מִילָה ‘circumcision’ appears here in the plural.

⁴¹ For the construction בִּקֵּשׁ + inf., see 2 Sam 20:19; Ps 77:32; Zech 12:9. Cf. also 1 Sam 20:1; 22:23; 2 Sam 16:11; etc.

been seeking your soul” (הַמְבַקְשִׁים אֶת־נַפְשְׁךָ). In these texts, the idea of “seeking to kill Moses” is backed by the subject’s strong commitment, in other words, there is some *prior* reason explaining this zealous endeavor. I will return to the significance of these intertextual connections below.

וַתַּגַּע לְרַגְלֵי ‘she touched his “foot”’

As already mentioned, ancient translations considered the meaning of וַתַּגַּע לְרַגְלֵי ‘she touched his “foot” (masc suff.)’ problematic. The exact connotation of this gesture has continued to perplex modern interpreters as well. For the verb גַּע one occasionally encounters the rendering ‘to throw’, supposed to have the foreskin as the implicit object of the verb. This interpretation, however, hardly corresponds to the semantics of גַּע, which means ‘to touch’ (especially in a ritual context), or ‘to reach’ (somewhere or something).⁴² The text does not presuppose that the cut off foreskin is involved in the act of touching. It merely states that after having cut of the foreskin, Zipporah touches his (masc.) “foot”.⁴³

The meaning of רַגֶּל here is most likely a euphemism for male genitalia.⁴⁴ The cultic / ritualistic character of this act of touching the genitalia is also indicated by the formulation used in relation to Zipporah’s utterance. Her act of touching is accompanied by a solemn, formulaic phrase introduced by the particle כִּי. This particle would be otherwise rhetorically unjustified in the current phrase.⁴⁵ The gesture of touching the genitalia in the context of an oath-taking ceremony appears on various occasions in the Old Testament. So Gen 24:2 and 47:29 use the phrase שִׁים־נָא יָדְךָ תַּחַת יְרֵכִי ‘put your hand on the place of my groin’ in such contexts.⁴⁶ A similar thought may lie behind Gen 32:26.33, where the enigmatic person wrestling with Jacob touches Jacob’s pelvic bone

⁴² In a figurative sense, גַּע can also signify the idea of touching someone as an act of aggressive behaviour (2 Sam 14:10; Ruth 2:9), as this is also known in English and other modern languages.

⁴³ For the prep. לְ attached to an accusative, see Paul JOÜON and Takamitsu MURAOKA, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*. Subsidia Biblica 14 (Roma: Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1991), vol. 1, 440–441, 447–48 (§ 125b, k, l).

⁴⁴ Biblical Hebrew is familiar with the euphemistic meaning of רַגֶּל. So Judg 3:24 and 1 Sam 24:4 speak about the ‘pouring out’ [סָךְ II] of the “foot”, i.e. urination. Even more clear are 2 Kgs 18:27; Isa 36:12. Cf. possibly also Isa 7:20.

⁴⁵ In other words, כִּי cannot function here as the classical subordinating conjunction ‘because, that’. Cf. JOÜON and MURAOKA, *Grammar*, 618–619 (§ 165a, b, e).

⁴⁶ Hebrew תַּחַת can denote the place of something as in Gen 4:25; 22:13; 2 Sam 17:25; Isa 3,24; 10:16). Cf. HALOT *ad locum*.

(וַיִּנָּע בְּכַף־יָרְכוֹ) while also uttering a solemn formula, a blessing.⁴⁷ The ritual act of Zipporah is thus documented in the context of oath-taking practices of the biblical world. The act of touching the male genitalia symbolised an oath uttered in relation to one's life, materialised in his successors.⁴⁸

הַתֵּן־דָּמִים 'bridegroom of blood', 'father-in-law of blood'?

In biblical Hebrew, הָתֵן means 'bridegroom, brother-in-law, son-in-law'.⁴⁹ In a different vocalisation, הָתֵן means 'father-in-law'.⁵⁰ The combination of the rite of circumcision and the root הָתֵן often leads commentators of Ex 4:25-26 to argue for an aetiological link between circumcision and marriage. Religious historians believe that the rite of circumcision was initially associated with puberty, more specifically with preparation for marriage, and only later became part of a religious ritual associated with infants.⁵¹ The phrase הַתֵּן־דָּמִים אֵתָהּ לִי 'you are a bridegroom of blood to me' may then be supposed to have been uttered by the bride to the groom on the occasion of the marriage. The author of the story in Ex 4 might have been familiar with this proverb and gives an aetiological explanation for the phrase. In this context, the word דָּמִים refers to the blood shed during the circumcision rite. The bridegroom is reclaimed from the jaws of death by shedding the blood of circumcision.

⁴⁷ Cf. related ideas that "sons were born to Manasseh on the 'knees' of Joseph (עַל־בְּרָכִי)" (Gen 50:23); or children came forth from the loins of someone (הֵלְצִים) (Gen 35:11; 1 Kgs 8:19; 2 Chr 6:9). Cf. also the synonymous term מָעָה used in such contexts (Gen 15:4; 2 Sam 7:12; 16:11).

⁴⁸ In the ancient world of Mesopotamia, another symbolic oath-related gesture was also known, namely putting one's hand on the throat. This symbolism can also be interpreted in the light of the Semitic language. The word נָפֶשׁ (or its cognates) mean both 'throat' and 'life' (even the human 'person'). When one puts one's hand on the נָפֶשׁ, on the throat, one swears by the נָפֶשׁ, i.e., by one's life and by oneself.

⁴⁹ Gen 19:14; Judg 19:5; 1 Sam 18:18; 22:14; Jer 7:34; Joel 2:16; etc. The vocalization 'father-in-law' in Num 10:29; Judg 1:16; 4:11 is probably a mistake for 'brother-in-law'. The identity of the Hebrew terms 'bridegroom' and 'brother-in-law' might eventually explain the institution of levirate marriage in the tribal society of ancient Israel.

⁵⁰ See Ex 3:1; 4:18; 18:1; Num 10:29; Judg 19:4.7.9. This reading is followed by the Samaritan Pentateuch Targum (see above). In this latter case, the text spoken by Zipporah would refer to Moses' father, which is unlikely to have been the original sense. Metaphorically, one could think of YHWH, the deity who attacked Moses, as a father. However, although the relationship between YHWH and Israel is portrayed in Ex 4:23 as a father-son relationship, this is never used in relation to Moses. Therefore, it is unlikely that YHWH would have been presented here as Moses' father, and the father-in-law of Zipporah.

⁵¹ See in this connection Julius WELLHAUSEN, *Reste arabischen Heidentums*. Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1897, 175–176. In addition to Ex 4:24–26, historians often refer in this context to the story of Gen 34.

This interpretation is hardly tenable, however. The current text refers to the circumcision of the *son* and not Moses, which means that there is no indication that the rite here would have had any connection with the marriage ceremony, let alone a preparation for marriage which is long overdue. The link between the name “bridegroom of blood” and the circumcision (לְמוֹלֶת) is only established in verse 26. However, verse 26 appears as a *later interpretation* to verse 25. This is underlined by אָז אָמְרָה ‘it was then that she said’, or ‘therefore she said’.⁵² In other words, the author of verse 26 tells a story in which the phrase ‘bridegroom of blood’ appears. This *he believes* is to be understood in the context of the act of circumcision of Zipporah. As we have seen above, the very same exegesis, namely that the idea of the bridegroom of blood should be related to the blood of circumcision, is followed by later Jewish interpretations (see the Targums). Nevertheless, one can clearly delineate here an original saying אַתָּה לִי הַתְּנִידָמִים in verse 25 and a secondary contextualisation, interpretation of this saying in verse 26. It is not certain that the original meaning of the saying “bridegroom of blood” and its later interpretation in verse 26 must overlap.

What (else) could the expression הַתְּנִידָמִים originally refer to? Schneemann and Propp point out that in biblical Hebrew, the plural form דָּמִים does not simply mean ‘blood’ (for which Hebrew uses the singular form), but ‘bloodshed, murder’.⁵³ So אִישֵׁי-דָמִים designates the ‘murderer’, the man who sheds blood (2 Sam 16:8; Ps 5:7). This in turn suggests that according to Ex 4:24–25 Moses was not called ‘the bridegroom of blood’ on account of the blood of circumcision, but because of bloodshed, i.e. because of a murder committed by him. The phrase אַתָּה לִי הַתְּנִידָמִים is therefore more correctly rendered as ‘you are a murderous bridegroom to me’.⁵⁴ The later explanation in verse 26 overrides the earlier meaning of this saying by stating that Moses was called a bridegroom of blood(shed) on account of the circumcision.⁵⁵ By saying

⁵² אָז appears several times with a similar function as an introduction to an aetiological interpretation. See Gen 4:26; Ex 15:1; Num 21:17; Jos 10:12; 1 Kgs 8:12.

⁵³ Cf. e.g. Deut 19:10; 2 Sam 16:8; Pss 5:7; 9:13; 26:9; 55:24; 59:3; 139:19; Prov 29:10; Isa 1:5; 33:15; Ezek 9:9. The importance of the plural form דָּמִים ‘murder’ was first emphasized by Gisela Schneemann in her 1979 dissertation, but her interpretation of the motif was limited to verses 24–26. She therefore considered that הַתְּנִידָמִים refers here to YHWH (See Gisella SCHNEEMANN, *Die Deutung und Bedeutung der Beschneidung nach Exodus 4,24-26*). The interpretation of הַתְּנִידָמִים as referring to Moses, or more precisely to the murder of Moses, was first put forward by William H. PROPP, “That Bloody Bridegroom (Exodus IV 24-6)”, *Vetus Testamentum* 43 (1993), 501–502 (495–518). Propp translates הַתְּנִידָמִים as ‘*hatan* of blood guilt’, i.e., ‘bridegroom of blood-guilt’.

⁵⁴ The contextual meaning of this phrase will be examined below.

⁵⁵ For linking דָּמִים and לְמוֹלֶת, see Johannes DE GROOT, “The Story of the Bloody Husband (Exodus iv 24–26)”, *Oudtestamentische Studiën* 2 (1943), 13–14. With respect to the problems related to the plural form לְמוֹלֶת, see DUMBRELL, “Re-examination”, 289.

this I do not imply that the story would have contained originally only verses 24–25, but that the author, while authentically recording an ancient narrative, attached to it an interpretation that most likely differed from its original meaning.⁵⁶ At any rate, there is no evidence that the author would have been attempting to explain an existing proverb (“you are a bridegroom of blood to me”) in the context of an ancient marriage rite.

The masc. suffix *וַיַּרְףּ מִןּוֹ* ‘and he let him alone’ must refer to the same male person as in verse 24b (Moses or his son). This suggests that circumcision is understood as an apotropaic ritual.

The above suggested interpretation of *וַיַּרְףּ מִןּוֹ* gives this story a completely different meaning and prompts us to search for the original context of the narrative. To this end, I will examine Ex 4:24–26 in its wider context.

3. The current context of Ex 4:24–26

3.1. Signs concerning Ex 4:18–31 as a composite text

Ex 4:18–31 is often treated as one textual block.⁵⁷ Obviously 4:18 is linked to the preceding verses, so we do not talk about an independent literary unit. At the same time, it is often argued that, from a literary-historical point of view, Ex 4:18–31 is not a single layered, but a complex, multi-layered text, as evidenced by numerous signs within the pericope.⁵⁸ This complexity, however, is interpreted in very different ways, as illustrated in the table below:

Beer ⁵⁹	J1:	4:18b–26
	J2:	4:18a.29.31b
	E:	4:27.28.30a
Hyatt	J:	4:19–20a.22–26.29–31
	E:	4:18.20b.21.27–28

⁵⁶ For an analysis of the discrepancy between verses 26 and 25, see Serge FROLOV, “The Hero as Bloody Bridegroom: On the Meaning and Origin of Exodus 4:26”, *Biblica* 77 (1996), 520–523. According to him, *וַיַּרְףּ מִןּוֹ*, containing the plural form for circumcision, was originally associated with the David-narrative (1 Sam 18:20–27). According to him, the current proverb was placed in the context of the Moses-narrative only secondarily. Therefore, in his opinion, the tradition of verse 26 is the earlier one, and Ex 4:24–25 was adapted to it at a later date. In my view, there is no sufficient support for Frolov’s hypothesis.

⁵⁷ Some exegetes would like to start the new pericope at v. 19. Cf. Thomas B. DOZEMAN, *Commentary on Exodus*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2009), 145.

⁵⁸ Modern translations solve the transitional irregularities within these compositional layers by freely inserting conjunctions and logical connectors which are otherwise missing from the Masoretic Text.

⁵⁹ DURHAM, *Exodus*, 54.

Fohrer	J:	4:18–19.31b
	E:	4:20b–23.27–28.30a
	N:	4:19–20a.24–26.30b–31a
Noth ⁶⁰	J:	4:19–20a.24–26.29
	E:	4:18.20b
	suppl.:	4:21–23.27–28.30
Schmidt ⁶¹	J:	4:19–20a.24–26.29.31b
	E:	4:18.20b
	JE:	4:27–28.30–31a
	suppl.:	4:21–23

While such a variety of opinions on textual stratification calls for caution, the agnostic approach taken by some commentators, who acknowledge the complexity of the text but refuse to deal with its compositional history, is not justified.⁶² The inadequacy of this latter approach is illustrated by the very fact that it is impossible to read the text without looking for explanations in the area of compositional history.⁶³ Within the larger context, we encounter the following problems:

(a) Ex 4:24–26 and 4:21–23

In the verses immediately preceding Ex 4:24–26, YHWH gives a message to Moses, which he will have to deliver to the pharaoh at the right moment: “(v. 22b) Thus says YHWH: Israel is my first-born son. (v. 23) Therefore I have said to you, ‘Let my son go, that he may worship me! If you refuse to let him go, I will slay your first-born son.’” In this sequence of thoughts, the story of the attack of YHWH on Moses in the next verse is

⁶⁰ Cf. Zoltán KUSTÁR (ed.), *A Pentateuchos forrásművei. Elkülönített szövegállományuk, valamint azonosításuk a Pentateuchos kanonikus formájában - M. Noth munkássága alapján* (A Debreceni Református Hittudományi Egyetem Ószövetségi Tanszékének Tanulmányi Füzetek 5), Debreceni Református Hittudományi Egyetem, Debrecen 2005, 49, 88, 209.

⁶¹ Werner H. SCHMIDT, *Exodus. 1,1-6,30* (Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament 2/1; Neukirchener Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1988), 209, 211, 236–237.

⁶² Cf. DURHAM, *Exodus*, 54.

⁶³ Thus, for example, Durham also voices the assumption that Ex 4:19 in its present place is not logically connected to verse 18. He believes that verse 19 may have originally been part of a series of commands uttered by YHWH (3:10.16–18; 4:8–9.12.15–17). Likewise, he considers the two sons of Moses mentioned in 4:20 to be a premature reflection of the later 18:2–4. Ex 4:20 is, in his view, the oldest element in the story of Moses’ return to Egypt (Durham believes that originally only Moses went to Egypt, without Zipporah and the children; cf. DURHAM, *Exodus*, 54–55) These conclusions clearly reflect another effort to reconstruct the textual history.

completely unexpected. On the one hand, the previous dialogue is ended abruptly. On the other hand, any transitional marker between verses 23 and 24 is missing. Nevertheless, from a *thematic* point of view, there are overlaps between the two pericopes: in one text, YHWH is about to take the life of the pharaoh's first-born son, in the other, YHWH is about to take the life of Moses, or his son. The story of 4:21–23 echoes the sequence of events of the Passover night.⁶⁴ The reader who is familiar with this later narrative, also knows that blood plays an apotropaic role during the Passover night. In the following 4:24–25, the blood of atonement through circumcision plays a similar role, at least according to the interpretation of the ritual by the author of Ex 4:26 (and in the later traditions discussed above). One may conclude therefore that, although there is a thematic link between the two narratives of Ex 4:21–23 and 24–26, logically we are dealing with two independent, genetically unrelated narratives.⁶⁵ The break between Ex 4:23 and 4:24 and the thematic linkage between them hints at later redactional activity.

(b) Ex 4:18 and 4:19

One of the central messages of the call narrative of 3:1–4:17 is the mandate for Moses to go down to Egypt. Ex 4:18 concludes the discussion by stating that Moses went back to his father-in-law and announced his intention to leave. Strikingly verse 19 sounds as if Moses is encountering the idea of going down to Egypt for the first time. Moreover, it is also strange that the author provides the geographical location of the meeting between Moses and YHWH: Moses is told to go to Egypt in the land of Midian. Ex 3:10 and 4:18 give different reasons for the journey to Egypt,⁶⁶ but this difference can be explained at the rhetorical level of the text.⁶⁷ More significant is the logical dissimilarity between Ex 4:18 (or 3:10) and 4:19. According to the two verses, YHWH sends Moses to

⁶⁴ For an analysis of the relationship between verses 21–23 and 24–26, see David PETTIT, “When the LORD Seeks to Kill Moses: Reading Exodus 4.24–26 in its Literary Context”, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 40 (2015), 169–172 (163–177). According to Pettit, the two stories are linked in the spirit of the authority disputes of Ex 1–14: who is the true ruler of Israel? This, he considers, is the rationale for the connection between the two episodes. In his interpretation, the endangerment of the pharaoh's son is here paralleled by the endangerment of Moses' son.

⁶⁵ As the table above illustrates, verses 4:21–23 are in most cases assigned to a different stratum than 4:24–26.

⁶⁶ Cf. Ex 3:10: lead out my people from Egypt; Ex 4:18: I will return to my brothers in Egypt to see whether they are alive; Ex 4:19: Return to Egypt, for all those who have searched you to kill you have died.

⁶⁷ One could argue, for instance, that Moses wished to hide his real intent from his father-in-law.

Egypt for different reasons. These observations imply that Ex 4:19 was not originally a continuation of 4:18 (or more precisely of the pericope Ex 3:1–4:18), but 4:19 belongs to a different story.⁶⁸

(c) Ex 4:20

Scholarly literature often divides verse 20 into two parts, assigning them to two editorial layers. Verse 20a is regarded as the original continuation of verse 19 (cf. Fohrer, Noth, Schmidt). In Schmidt's view verses 18–20b, which speak only of Moses' journey to Egypt without the family members, are related to Ex 18 (also attributed to the Elohist; here it is also assumed that Moses' wife and children did not go to Egypt). For Schmidt, this is a decisive argument for separating verses 20a and 20b. However, this argument is hardly strong enough. For while verses 18 and 20b explicitly speak of Moses alone, they do not exclude the possibility that the rest of the family also travelled to Egypt. Moreover, the fact that Moses had two sons is only stated in Ex 18 and 4:20a, which Schmidt attributed to two separate layers. Finally, the linking of verses 19–20a and 24–26, as proposed by Schmidt (and similarly by Noth and Fohrer), poses a problem in that verses 24–26 mention only one son and not two as verse 20a.⁶⁹

3.2. Ex 4:19 + 4:24–26 – the original pericope

The rhetorical and logical problems mentioned above can be solved by connecting 4:24–26 with 4:19, reading the current story as the immediate follow-up of verse 19. In such context, it is not necessary to explain why verse 25 speaks of only one son. Moreover, this linking solves another important rhetorical problem. As I mentioned at the beginning of this study, in the Hebrew text of Ex 4:24–26, besides the anonymously referenced “son of Zipporah”, the mysterious “bridegroom of blood” also remains unidentified. A direct connection of verse 23 to verse 19 would solve the lack of the name of Moses in the segment 4:24–26.⁷⁰ In the aftermath of verse 19 it is perfectly clear whose identity is covered

⁶⁸ Cf. Erhard BLUM, *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch* (Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 189; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1990), 20.

⁶⁹ As we have seen above, this incongruence is also addressed by the Jerusalem Targum.

⁷⁰ Some people explain the absence of Moses' name in 4:24–26 by the foreign origin of this text which had originally nothing to do with Moses. Some scholars suspect that an original Midianite or Kenite story was inserted into the Moses narrative. Cf. Hans KOSMALA, “The ‘Bloody Husband’”, *Vetus Testamentum* 12 (1962), 14–28. In this earlier tradition, another deity may have been mentioned instead of YHWH, and ultimately it may have been this demonic character who was referenced as the “blood husband” (Hans-Christoph GOßMANN, “Metamorphosen Eines Dämons: Ein Beitrag zur Rezeptionsgeschichte von Ex 4,24–26”, in Dietrich-Alex KOCH et al. (eds.), *Begegnungen zwischen Christentum und Judentum*)

by the personal pronouns, whom YHWH is confronting on the road, and why this episode is taking place underway.⁷¹

In the light of the above, I suggest that in Ex 4 we find basically two parallel traditions, which came to be connected subsequently by an editor. The two parallel – originally probably separate – traditions can be delimited as follows:

Narrative A	Narrative B
[...]	[...]
4:18 Moses went back to his father-in-law, Jethro, and said to him: “I will return to my brothers in Egypt, to see if they are still alive.” And Jethro said to Moses: “Go in peace”.	
4:19	YHWH said to Moses in Midian: “Return to Egypt, for all those who were seeking your soul are dead.”
4:20 Then Moses took his wife and his sons and put them on a donkey and returned to the land of Egypt. Moses also took the rod of God in his hand. ⁷²	

in *Antike und Mittelalter. Festschrift for Heinz Schreckenberg* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1993), 123–132. Thus, the subsequent linking of Ex 4:24–27 with the Moses tradition would justify the uncertainty surrounding the personal references (cf. by Martin NOTH, *Das zweite Buch Mose (Exodus)*. Das Alte Testament Deutsch 34 [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1959], 36). However, it is unlikely that the foreign origin of the story sufficiently accounts to the lack of the name of Moses. One could ask for why a later editor, who presumably adapted the narrative by inserting the name of YHWH, have also not clarified the ambiguities regarding the “bridegroom of blood”? Moreover, insofar as the text speaks about the “son” of Zipporah, this fits well into the Mosaic tradition, so there is no reason to assume a foreign origin. (Noth’s additional assumption that the tradition of the son of Zipporah is also a later adaptation, goes too far – cf. NOTH, *Book of Moses*, 36). Finally, the phrase “sought to kill him” is again intertextually well-embedded into the biblical context, which also calls into question whether this story originated in a context independent of the Mosaic tradition.

⁷¹ The verses 21–23 immediately preceding do not help us to uncover the identity of the unnamed person as Moses. The uneven transition between verses 23 and 24 also indirectly confirms the secondary origin of verses 21–23 vis-à-vis 24–26.

⁷² As noted, verses 21–23 are probably to be regarded as a different, third layer of text, originally independent of the narratives A and B. One cannot exclude that Ex 4:21–23 was

- 4:24 And it happened on the road, in the lodging, that YHWH encountered him, and sought to kill him.
- 4:25 And Zipporah took a stone, and she cut off the foreskin of her son. And she touched his “foot”, and she said: “Truly, you are a bridegroom of blood to me!”
- 4:26 And he let him alone. It was then that she said “a bridegroom of blood”, because of the circumcision (?).
- 4:27 And YHWH said to Aaron: “Go into the wilderness to meet Moses.” He went and met him at the mountain of God and kissed him.
- 4:28 Moses told Aaron all the words of YHWH with which he had sent him, and all the signs with which he had charged him.
- 4:29 Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled all the elders of the sons of Israel.
- 4:30 Aaron spoke all the words that YHWH had spoken to Moses, and performed the signs in the sight of all the people.
- 4:31 And the people believed and they heard that YHWH had visited the sons of Israel and that he had noted their affliction. So they they bowed down and worshipped him.

already connected with 4:19+24–26 when an editor combined the narratives A and B+. This may be suggested by the fact that 4:21–23 does not mention Aaron either: here it is Moses who performs the miracles, and it is Moses and not Aaron, who has to address the pharaoh, contrary to the message of narrative A.

4. The original context of Ex 4:24-26 as a hermeneutical key

The wider context of Ex 4:19.24–26 still leaves an important question unanswered: why did YHWH want to kill Moses? Research on the compositional history of the narrative outlined above provides the answer to this question.⁷³ The formulation in Ex 4:19 (i.e., narrative version B) suggests that this is the very first place where Moses is commanded to return to Egypt. According to this version of the divine commission, there is no mention of any deliverance from Egypt yet, merely the return to the country from where Moses had fled to Midian. In other words, it appears that the author of narrative B is not familiar with Ex 3:1–4:17 (or the related Story A) and was created independently of it.

Accordingly, if we eliminate the 3:1ff pericope from the Moses story, narrative version B becomes clear. The missing information can be gleaned from the remaining context. For Ex 4:19.24–26 is not an independent episode, but part of a larger narrative sequence that actually begins in Ex 2. It is this particular context that provides the answers to the questions raised in relation to the pericope 4:19.24–26. According to Ex 2, Moses tries to help the members of his suffering people by smiting (Ex 2:11: נכה) and killing (Ex 2:14: הרג) an Egyptian slave driver who had abused an Israelite. The act of Moses would have serious legal consequences, of which Moses himself is well-aware. That is why he wants to conceal his action. Moses' authority as a conciliator in the quarrel of the two Israelites is not accepted by the sons of his people: "Who made you a leader and a judge (שַׁר וְשֹׁפֵט) over us?" – is the rhetorical question in Ex 2:14. Of course, the text implicitly presupposes that leadership and authority must come from elsewhere. When the rumour of Moses' murderous act becomes public information, the pharaoh "seeks to kill him" (Ex 2:15: וַיִּבְקֹשׁ לְהָרֹג). That is the reason why Moses is forced to flee, and so he reaches the land of *Midian* (Ex 2:15), where he marries Zipporah, daughter of Reuel, who gives birth to his only (!) son, Gershon.⁷⁴ All events of Ex 2 fit in perfectly with Ex 4:19.24–26.⁷⁵

2:21 Moses agreed to stay with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah

⁷³ PETTIT, "Moses", 171–172, argues that the ambiguity of the text is intentional, and that the author deliberately leaves his narrative open to multiple interpretations. Without disputing the literary character of Old Testament texts, which may include the use of ambiguous language, I believe that greater restraint is needed here to prevent modern readers from imposing modern ideas on biblical texts.

⁷⁴ Note that in narrative version A, including Ex 4:18, the name of the father-in-law is Jethro.

⁷⁵ For a similar opinion, see BLUM, *Studien*, 20; Jaeyoung JEON, *The Call of Moses and the Exodus Story: A Redactional-Critical Study in Exodus 3-4 and 5-13* (Forschungen zum Alten Testament 2. Reihe 60; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 151.

in marriage.

- 2:22 She bore a son, and he named him Gershom, for he said, “I have been an alien in a foreign land.”
- 2:23 After a long time the king of Egypt died.⁷⁶ *[The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. And their cry for help out of the slavery rose up to God.]*
- 2:24 *God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.*
- 2:25 *God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.]*
- 4:19 YHWH said to Moses in Midian: “Return to Egypt, for all those who were seeking your soul are dead.”
- 4:24 And it happened on the road, in the lodging, that YHWH encountered him, and sought to kill him.
- 4:25 And Zipporah took a stone (...)

There are important connections between Ex 2:1–23a and narrative version B (4:19.24–26):

- In both pericopes, the story is located specifically in the land of Midian (there is no mention of Sinai).
- Similarly to Ex 4:25, the text of Ex 2:22 speaks also only of a single son of Moses, born to him in the land of Midian from a marriage with Zipporah. The tradition that Moses had two sons (Ex 4:20 and Ex 16) belongs to a different tradition.
- As of the logical sequence of thoughts, Ex 4:19 fits well after 2,23a, which connects the commission of Moses to return with the death of the pharaoh who sentenced him to death.
- Finally, from a theological point of view, the most relevant link is the three occurrences of the idea “seek to kill him” in verses 2:15; 4:19 and 4:24.

The above conclusion, namely that Ex 4:19 was a direct continuation of Ex 2:23a, is supported not only by the rhetorical-logical aspects mentioned above, but also by more concrete, textual evidence. Interestingly, in the text of the Septuagint, after the Masoretic variant of Ex 4:18, i.e. exactly where I

⁷⁶ The pericope in 2:23b–26, the reference to the covenant with the ancestors is often regarded as a later redactional layer in the narrative (cf. BLUM). Although the clarification of this aspect does not directly influence the outcome of this study, I consent with this view, and style the text accordingly.

assume that 2:23a and 4:19 were connected, we find the very same verse line as in 2:23a: μετὰ δὲ τὰς ἡμέρας τὰς πολλὰς ἐκεῖνας ἐτελεύτησεν ὁ βασιλεὺς Αἰγύπτου ‘And after many days the king of Egypt died’ (I will reference this line as LXX Ex 4:18c). In other words, the Old Greek text contains the above phrase both in 2:23a and between 4:18 and 19, whereas in the Masoretic Text it appears only in 2:23a.⁷⁷ Without delving into the intricacies of the textual history of the Book of Exodus, it is reasonable to assume that this phrase in Ex 4:18c is not simply a plus of the Septuagint text (which is correctly omitted from the Masoretic Text), but is to be explained otherwise. The duplicate of 2:23a in 4:18c suggests that the Old Greek was familiar with a Hebrew base text in which Ex 4:19 was still preceded by this phrase: “And after a long time the king of Egypt died.” More precisely, in its more ancient form, Ex 4:19 may indeed have been directly preceded by Ex 2:23a, which contains the above sentence. This, in turn, confirms from the text-historical point of view the assumption made above on the basis of rhetorical criteria: it was during the rearrangement and relocalisation of the texts, or more precisely the interpolation of 3:1–4:18.20, that the original link between Ex 2:23a and 4:19 was broken.⁷⁸

Thus the original meaning of Ex 4:19.24–26 must be sought not in its immediate textual setting, but in the context of Ex 2. In contrary to early assumptions, Ex 4:24–25 is not an independent text, a biblical adaptation of an ancient tradition concerning a destructive demon and a related apotropaic ritual.⁷⁹ Furthermore, it is also insufficient to assign meaning to this text from the perspective of genre by placing it into the context of other biblical commissioning narratives.⁸⁰ Likewise, the presupposition of another authority contest in a more general sense leaves the principal question without answer.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Although this line is missing from some ancient Greek manuscripts of Ex 4, the manuscripts that do contain this line are demonstrably more reliable. Cf. Alan E. BROOKE and Norman McLEAN (eds.), *Old Testament Greek*, vol. 1/2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909, 166.

⁷⁸ The relocalisation of biblical texts in general is evidenced by empirical data. Cf., e.g., the two versions of Isa 38 and 2 Kgs 20.

⁷⁹ Cf. GOßMANN, “Metamorphosen”, 126–129.

⁸⁰ So B. EMBRY, “The Endangerment of Moses: Towards a New Reading of Exodus 4:24–26”, *Vetus Testamentum* 60 (2010), 177–196, who connects the current narrative together with Num 22, regarding both as a description of a rite of passage: Moses is the archetype of the endangered hero. Although there are undoubtedly similar motifs in these travel narratives, in looking for the meaning of a particular aspect of the narrative (namely the intent of YHWH to kill Moses) I find this broader context of genre less relevant than the specific context of Ex 2. Note also that Embry does not take into account the problems regarding the compositional history as outlined above.

⁸¹ PETTIT, “Moses”, 63–77.

While not contesting similarities in genre with other narratives, Ex 4:19.24–26 still retains unique accents which relate it strongly to the larger narrative beginning in Ex 2. This concrete context helps us to understand why Moses' life was in danger: his murderous act in Egypt (Ex 2) was not solved when he fled the scene of the crime spending a few years in the wilderness of Midian. The blood of the slain Egyptian cries out from the sand.⁸² Moreover, the intricacy related to the murder of Moses is not solved by the death of the judge-king who was supposed to bring this case to the court. In harmony with the so-called *talio*-law, or proportional punishment, well-known in antiquity (including the Old Testament), Moses would have to pay for the murder he committed with his life. When YHWH "seeks to kill" Moses, he is in fact doing the same thing as the Egyptian pharaoh, who was in charge of justice, but has died in the meantime without having the opportunity to solve this case. In an Old Testament theological context, this means that YHWH is legally holding Moses accountable for a murder case that has not yet been settled.⁸³ Thus the manifestation of YHWH in Ex 4:24–25 fits well into the original context of the Moses narrative.

Nonetheless, in line with previous suggestions, I do not wish to contend that this story is also an aetiology of the rite of circumcision.⁸⁴ Not in the sense in which it is was often argued, namely as still preserving the ancient memory of the link between circumcision and marriage. The fact that it is Moses' son who is circumcised here, excludes, in my opinion, this plane of interpretation. But the idea of aetiological narrative is valid in the sense that circumcision is presented as a rite to avert danger and one providing atonement and protection

⁸² On this place, one may remark the interesting connections between the stories of Moses and Cain. Both commit murder, both flee into the wilderness, "to the East", both survive the murder, both become wanderers in a strange land, and both are in danger of being killed if found. Moses is saved by the "sign" of circumcision, and Cain is saved from the avenger by an unidentified divine "sign" (Gen 4:15). The well-known Midianite-Kenite hypothesis often related to Moses and the YHWH-worship (cf. e.g. Judges 4:11) makes these parallels even more intriguing.

⁸³ Propp, as we have seen, also connects the stories of Ex 4 and 2, and understands מִתְּדָמִים 'bridegroom of blood' in the context of the murder of Moses. According to him, Moses was staying in Midian as a city of refuge. The attack of YHWH upon Moses is to be understood as the act of a blood avenger (PROPP, "Bridegroom", 504–505, 510). Propp argues that 4:26 indicates the involvement of a family member in the institution of blood vengeance (509). However, this portrayal of the role of YHWH is questionable (see FROLOV, "The Hero", 520). In Propp's thesis the compositional aspects suggested above do not play any role. He therefore concludes that YHWH's problem was that he had two incompatible plans for Moses ("Bridegroom", 505).

⁸⁴ Gen 32 similarly has a double function by providing an aetiology of the name Israel, while also clarifying the origin of certain eating habits. Obviously, Ex 4:24–26 differs from what the aetiological narrative of Gen 17.

for the *father* (a quasi-sacrificial rite, similar to the Passover sacrifice).⁸⁵ In this sense, it is not at all inconsequential that while the life of Moses is in danger, Zipporah circumcises his son, nor is it illogical that the solemn utterance of Zipporah is made by touching the “foot” of the father. The circumcision of the son absolves the father (and not for the child). Circumcising the child was a parental, paternal duty, and failure to do so was considered a failure to fulfil parental duty.⁸⁶

Concluding, Ex 4:24–26 is an integral part of the Moses narrative (excepting Ex 3:1–4:18.20, as well as 4:21–23). Scenes from Moses’ early life foreshadows in some form the later Israel-story: just as Moses was delivered from the water (Ex 2), Israel will be delivered through the water (Ex 14). As Moses was saved through the touch of blood, the children of Israel will later be delivered in a similar way from the hand of YHWH’s slaying angel.⁸⁷

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⁸⁵ We have seen in the Targums that the special sacrificial nature of circumcision is already known in the ancient Jewish interpretive tradition. For a similar interpretation, see PROPP, “Bridegroom”, 506. For the connection between Passover and circumcision, see also Josh 5:10–11. See further DE GROOT, “Story”, 14; Jaap DEKKER, “Is de God van het Oude Testament gevaarlijk?” *Theologia Reformata* 57 (2014), 331–342. Ex 4:24–26 undoubtedly anticipates the story of the death of the firstborn. This is true even if verses 4:21–23 cannot be regarded as the original antecedent of Ex 4:24–26 in the present context, but the result of redactional relocation or insertion.

⁸⁶ From a theological perspective, the intent of the text is similar to the idea reflected in the well-known phrase of Ex 20:5: “visiting the children for the iniquity of the fathers”. While talking about the sons, the text in fact addresses the fathers, not the sons, highlighting their responsibility, which cannot be neglected without long-term consequences.

⁸⁷ Cf. DE GROOT, “Story”, 15–17.

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