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# From Bridegroom of Blood to Son-in-Law: Zipporah & Son in Exodus 4

Philippe Guillaume

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## FROM BRIDEGROOM OF BLOOD TO SON-IN-LAW: ZIPPORAH & SON IN EXODUS 4

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### RÉSUMÉ

#### DE « L'ÉPOUX DE SANG » AU GENDRE : SÉPHORA ET SON FILS DANS EXODE 4

Plusieurs études de la péricope d'Exode 4, 24–26 ont déjà suggéré que « l'époux de sang » mentionné par Séphora n'est pas Moïse mais son fils, qu'elle vient de circoncire d'urgence. Un rite pratiqué par une tribu du Zimbabwe permet d'affiner cette hypothèse en soulignant le rôle que joue la circoncision dans l'inscription du fils dans la lignée paternelle qui devient en quelque sorte le gendre de sa propre mère. Le but de ce récit de circoncision irrégulière justifierait l'exclusion de la lignée de Moïse pour la prêtrise.

#### MOTS-CLÉS

Exode 4,  
Moïse,  
Séphora,  
Zimbabwe,  
circoncision,  
sang,  
Karanga,  
prêtrise.

The words Zipporah pronounces after circumcising her son are commonly rendered as “you are a bridegroom of blood to me” (Exodus 4:25). Several studies of that puzzling scene have argued that these words are not addressed to Moses but to her son. A ritual of symbolic circumcision attested in Zimbabwe in the 1970s illustrates the potential attributed to blood in the transfer of a son from his maternal to his paternal lineage. In this light, Zipporah's son becomes her son-in-law. Yet, the circumcision of Moses' son by his Midianite mother served to disqualify Moses' line from the priesthood.

#### KEYWORDS

Exodus 4,  
Moses,  
Zipporah,  
Zimbabwe,  
circumcision,  
blood,  
Karanga,  
priesthood.

*Article accepté après évaluation par deux experts selon le principe du double anonymat*

The second book of the Bible tells how Moses led Israel out of Egypt. First adopted by Pharaoh's daughter, Moses then flees to Midian to escape punishment for the murder of an Egyptian taskmaster who mistreated Hebrews. YHWH, the Israelite god, then calls Moses back to Egypt to accomplish his mission. Moses leaves Midian with his wife Zipporah and their sons (Exod 4:20). As they spend the night at a stopover, they are attacked by YHWH himself. Zipporah wards off the attack by severing her son's foreskin. She then touches his feet, declaring "You are a *hatan* of bloods for me". As a result, YHWH let him alone because she had said "You are a *hatan* of bloods by circumcision" (Exod 4:24-26).

The brevity of the scene—three terse verses—leaves much unexplained. It is unclear whom it is that YHWH attacks, whose feet Zipporah touches, and who is let alone. The object of the attack and the owner of the feet in question are only designated by a string of third masculine pronouns: YHWH met *him* (ויפגשהו); he tried to kill *him* (המיתו); she touched *his* feet (רגליו); he let *him* alone (וירף ממנו). The word "son" occurs three times in the previous verses [1]; the antecedent of the third person singular pronouns in verses 24-26 should logically be the son rather than Moses. "This is undeniably the simplest reading" [2]. As Moses is the central figure of Exodus, he is often considered the object of the divine attack: it is "hardly reasonable to claim that anyone except Moses is the object of Yahweh's encountering action" [3].

The sole undisputable element is that it is her son (בנה) whom Zipporah circumcises. Apart from that, the answers to the other points at issue can only be inferred, and this short passage has been fertile ground for speculation [4]. Each set of proposed explanations raises, however, new complications of its own [5]. For instance, if YHWH attacks Moses because he was uncircumcised, why was he still uncircumcised at this point of his career [6]? Could a few drops from the blood of his son solve the issue? Did the great hero of the Exodus remain merely symbolically circumcised for the rest of his life? If it is YHWH's feet or the feet of a Midianite deity that Zipporah touches with her son's foreskin, was there a divine effigy at the scene? Is the blood of circumcision endowed with particular apotropaic virtues? Or if Zipporah simply daubs her son's legs with the blood, what did this gesture add to the circumcision itself?

Since Wellhausen, this passage is often viewed as the memory of an archaic form of circumcision, either as a sacrifice to the deity, the protection of the bridegroom on the wedding night (see Tobit 8) [7], or an etiological story explaining the transition of the rite from puberty to adulthood [8]. Brevard Childs challenged these etiological readings with the claim that the Zipporah episode "does not explain the origin of circumcision, but rather circumcision explains the meaning of Zipporah's action" [9]. This raises a fundamental methodological question. Are we to read these verses in light of other biblical passages dealing with circumcision or does this passage reflect the oldest recorded form of Hebrew circumcision?

[1] "Israel my first-born son" in verse 22; "let my son go" and "I will slay your first-born son" in verse 23.

[2] PROPP 1993, p. 501. Tertullian already argued that it was the son who came under attack. LE BOULLUEC 1987, p. 83.

[3] DURHAM 1987, p. 58.

[4] RICHTER 1996, p. 440-441. For the relevant bibliography up to 1992, see HOUTMAN 1993.

[5] PETTIT 2015, p. 164.

[6] That YHWH should attack Moses' family while on their way to liberate Israel is a puzzle solved in the most

radical way in the Book of Jubilees (48:1-3) where it is Mastema who attacks Moses in the hope of preventing him from killing the Egyptians.

[7] HERMISSON 1965, p. 66; HÜLLSTRUNG 2003, p. 186.

[8] See WELLHAUSEN 1897, p. 174; HOLZINGER 1909, p. 92; GUNKEL 1903; MEYER 1906; GRESSMANN 1913, p. 56-61; KUTSCH 1977; SCHMID 1965; BELTZ 1975; DURHAM 1987, p. 58; PROPP 1993, p. 507. For further bibliography, see HOUTMAN 1993.

[9] CHILDS 1974, p. 100.

A minority view focuses on the son rather than on the father, insisting that Moses plays no role whatsoever in this short episode [10]. David Pettit recently argued that the text is purposefully ambiguous and that ambiguity is part of the rhetorical strategy of Exodus 1-14 as a whole. "The text holds both readings open, enlarging the reach of the passage rather than specifying and thereby reducing its reach" [11]. Nevertheless, Pettit concludes that the "ambiguities which have frustrated scholars prove not to be the obstacle but the mechanism for extending the meaning and significance of God's attack on Moses within the larger drama" [12]. Ambiguity is a difficult balancing act and Pettit reverts back to Moses as the central figure even in the three verses in question.

This short discussion will not provide the ultimate solution to the all issues arising out of "the most obscure passage in the Book of Exodus" [13]. Whereas much attention has been devoted to the purpose of the attack, and whether Zipporah touches the feet or the genitals of her son, those of Moses, of YHWH or those the Midianite deity, the aim here is to test the validity of the views that foreground Moses' unnamed son rather than his father. To do so, an African ritual is introduced in the discussion. This ritual is mentioned almost incidentally in a volume that is unlikely to reach the desks of exegetes dealing with Exodus 4, despite the translation of the German original into English. Before presenting this ritual, the first step is to review the text itself.

There are substantial differences between its Hebrew and Greek versions. In short, the Greek text focuses on the endangered firstborn while the Hebrew portrays Moses as the endangered ancestor.

## THE ENDANGERED ANCESTOR IN THE HEBREW TEXT: MOSES AS THE *HATAN*

In most modern translations, Moses takes centre stage. He is the victim of the attack, Zipporah touches his feet, she addresses him as her *hatan* (fig. 1).

To clarify the referent of the three singular masculine pronouns, "Moses" was added as the subject of the first verb in verse 24 in the Syriac ("As Moses was on the way...") or as the one whose foot Zipporah touches in the NRSV ("she touched Moses' feet"). In pre-Standard Biblical Hebrew, בנה in verse 25 could be read either as "her son" or "his son", so it would be possible to translate "she cut off the foreskin of his son", though Moses is entirely passive.

Moses is thus portrayed as the endangered ancestor. Zipporah supposedly wards off a divine onslaught caused by the blood-guilt incurred by Moses, either due to the murder of an Egyptian taskmaster (Exod 2:12) [14], for disobeying the command to circumcise his son on the eighth day (Gen 17:12; Lev 12:3) [15], or simply because he has undertaken this journey [16].

	4 שמות	New Revised Standard Version
24	ויהי בדרך במלון ויגשהו יהוה ויבקש המיתו	On the way, at a place where they spent the night, the Lord met him and tried to kill him.
25a	ותקה צפרה צר	But Zipporah took a flint
25b	ותכרת את ערלת בנה	and cut off her son's foreskin,
25c	ותגע לרגליו	and touched <i>Moses' feet with it</i> ,
25d	ותאמר כי חתן דמים אתה לי	and said, "Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me!"
26a	וירף ממנו	So he let him alone.
26b	אז אמרה חתן דמים למולת	It was then that she said, "A bridegroom of blood by circumcision."

Fig. 1 : Exodus 4:25-26 in the Hebrew and the NRSV with italicized words not found in the Hebrew

[10] KOSMALA 1962; MORGENSTEIN 1963; BELTZ 1975; HOWELL 2010.

[11] PETTIT 2015, p. 171.

[12] PETTIT 2015, p. 177. The emphasis is mine.

[13] HYATT 1971, p. 86.

[14] MIDDLEKOOP 1967, p. 34-38; PROPP 1993, p. 510.

[15] KESSLER 2001, p. 35; VERMES 1957-1958, p. 308-319.

[16] EMBRY 2010, p. 177-196.

Or the divine attack is a mere literary parallel to Gen 32:26 where Jacob wrestles with a divine entity at the Jabbok ford on his return from Paddan-Aram [17]. In this sense, Moses prevails as much as Jacob, confirming the advantage Hos 12:12-13 grants to Moses over Jacob [18]. Of course, there is no wrestling on Moses' part. Moses could have slept throughout the entire scene [19]. If anyone prevails, it is Zipporah. Nevertheless, the figure of Moses is so central to the Exodus narrative that it is hard for readers to imagine that Zipporah's cryptic words are not addressed to him, which leads readers to assume that Moses must be the *hatan* of blood. At the last moment, Zipporah saves her husband by dubbing his feet or penis with the blood of the foreskin she has just severed from her son, which symbolically somehow turns Moses into Zipporah's bridegroom of blood.

## THE ENDANGERED SON IN THE SEPTUAGINT

The Septuagint presents major differences from the received Hebrew text (fig. 2).

Using a pebble (ψηφος) rather than a flint (רצ) to cut off her son's foreskin, Zipporah does not touch, strike or reach out for any feet. She falls at the feet (προσέπεσεν πρὸς τοὺς πόδας) with no pronoun, thus leaving in limbo the person to whom the feet belonged. Then the cryptic Hebrew expression reveals Zipporah's relief: "The blood of my son's circumcision has ceased" [21] or "is staunched" (NETS). The *hatan* of blood formula is either an entreaty begging the attacker to spare her child or a cry of relief. Instead of dying from a haemorrhage, the child survives the ordeal.

The next phrase ἀπῆλθεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ signals either the departure of the divine attacker, or the healing of the wound. The Greek translators may have read רי from the root רפא with final *aleph* "to heal" rather than from רפה with final *heh*, because they rendered the *hatan* of blood formula with the verb ἵστημι attested in medical treatises in the sense of stopping a flux—diarrhoea or haemorrhage, as is also the case in Luke 8:44 [22]. In this case, Zipporah falls in prostration at YHWH's feet, begging that the blood may stop flowing—or, as in the Armenian version, "Behold the blood of the circumcision of my son", an echo of Moses sprinkling of the blood of the covenant on the people in Exod 24:8 [23].

	ΕΞΟΔΟΣ 4	NETS
24	ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ ἐν τῷ καταλύματι συνήντησεν αὐτῷ ἄγγελος κυρίου καὶ ἐζήτει αὐτὸν ἀποκτεῖναι.	Now it happened on the way at the lodging, an angel of the Lord met him and was seeking to kill him.
25a	καὶ λαβοῦσα Σεπφωρα ψηφον	And Sephora took a pebble
25b	περιέτεμεν τὴν ἀκροβυστίαν τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτῆς	and circumcised the foreskin of her son,
25c	καὶ προσέπεσεν [20] πρὸς τοὺς πόδας	and she fell at <i>his</i> feet,
25d	καὶ εἶπεν Ἔσθη τὸ αἷμα τῆς περιτομῆς τοῦ παιδίου μου.	and said, "The blood of the circumcision of my child is staunched."
26a	καὶ ἀπῆλθεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ	And he went away from him,
26b	Διότι εἶπεν Ἔσθη τὸ αἷμα τῆς περιτομῆς τοῦ παιδίου μου.	because she said, "the blood of the circumcision of my child is staunched."

Fig. 2 : Exodus 4:25-26 in the Septuagint and the New English Translation of the Septuagint

[17] TALMON 1954, p. 93-96.

[18] On the rivalry between Moses and Jacob as ancestor figures in Hosea 12, see de PURY 1994.

[19] TALBOT 2017.

[20] Or ἦψατο in Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion.

[21] JACOBS 2008, p. 316.

[22] MONTANARI 2015, p. 990 quoting first century ce phar-

macologist Dioscorides, II, 1, 20 (ed. Wellmann 1907-1914) and fourth century ce medical writer Oribiasus, IV, 10, 1 (ed. Raeder 1908). KOSMALA 1962, p. 28 favours a magical approach whereas the mere sight of the blood is enough to placate the attack. See also VERMES 1973, p. 179-192; WINSLOW 2005, p. 45-55, 127-145, 227-257, 305-367.

[23] VERMES 1973, p. 180

In either case, the Alexandrian translators left Moses out, but at the price of the elimination of the *hatan* of blood, though it must be the key to the passage because it is pronounced twice by Zipporah in the Hebrew text.

## MODERN SCHOLARS IN FAVOUR OF THE ENDANGERED SON

Given the obscurity of the text, either reading option—the endangered father and the endangered son—has its pros and cons. Yet, if Moses had been uncircumcised up to that point and that YHWH sought to kill him for that reason, a few drops of blood fooled or satisfied the divine attacker and Moses remained uncircumcised for the rest of his life. These assumptions are reasonable, but the motivations of whoever created this episode or inserted an earlier tradition at this point of the career of Moses are hard to fathom. What was there to gain by depicting the great hero of the Pentateuch undergoing a fake circumcision performed by a woman, and moreover a foreign one [24]? Therefore, it is worth taking a fresh look to the approaches that focused on Zipporah’s son rather than her husband.

Hans Kosmala rejects the traditional view that the *hatan damim* is Moses and argues that it is the son [25]. Zipporah smears the thighs of her son with the blood of the circumcision to make it clearly visible to the divinity in the same way as the blood of the paschal lamb is smeared on the door posts and lintel (Exod 12:13) [26]. Kosmala thus rendered verse 26 as “at that time she, i.e., Zipporah, used the expression *hatan-damim* with regard to the circumcised” a ritual expression used in Zipporah’s homeland where, as is the case with Arabic *hatan*, means “to circumcise” [27]. Arabic and Samaritan rites that use blood as a prophylactic sign are evoked as supporting evidence. The impact of the postulated archaic foreign expression on the relation between Zipporah and her son is minimal. Zipporah simply testifies that her son is now circumcised, which makes short shrift of verse 25d that Zipporah would address her son: “you are (now) a *hatan* of blood to me” (אתה לי, see fig. 1).

Julian Morgenstern views Kosmala’s approach as a decisive advance, though he objects that “it is certainly far from correct in all its details; nor does it

by any means solve all the problem inherent in the passage” [28]. In the sequel to the article, however, Morgenstern does not deal with Kosmala’s arguments. Instead, he embarks on a twenty-page reconstruction of the etymological evolution of the Arabic term *htn* against Wellhausen’s hypothesis of circumcision as a marriage rite. According to Morgenstern, circumcision was a pre-puberty rite accomplished generally between the ages of two and seven years, which means that a young man was of necessity “one who was circumcised” before he could marry [29]. As is the case among Arabs and others, the father plays no role in circumcision ceremonies other than paying for a meal. Morgenstern concludes that there is no reason to imply that Moses was uncircumcised. The *hatan-damim* is the son whose circumcision “redeemed from possession by the spirit which threatened it from birth onward... Secondly circumcision was a rite of initiation into ordinary, profane life and into the clan” [30].

Morgenstern essentially agrees with Kosmala, whose article seems to have prompted him to lift a section from an unpublished study he completed forty years earlier on the difference between Arabic *beena* and *ba'al* marriage, drawing parallels from the position of Jacob’s children who remained the possession of Laban and Rebecca’s willingness to renounce the advantageous conditions of *beena* marriage and marry Isaac under the conditions of *ba'al* marriage [31]. Based on his understanding of *beena* marriage, under which terms a man “remained ever a member of his own clan, the clan of his mother” [32], Morgenstern argued that the circumcision of the son should have been performed by Zipporah’s eldest brother, which did not happen, either because the child was born shortly before his parents set out or during the journey. Zipporah’s departure with her son to follow Moses to Egypt deprived the clan deity of its property, hence the attack. Consequently, Zipporah acted in dire emergency in the capacity of circumciser.

In the end, Morgenstern explains that Zipporah’s words mean that her son has become one related to her by blood; in other words, “Verily thou art now a full member of my clan” [33]. In this case, the circumcision did not fundamentally alter the status of the son, and it would seem that becoming a full member of Zipporah’s clan would worsen the offence of his departure from Midian.

[24] See RÖMER 1994, p. 10.

[25] KOSMALA 1962, p. 22.

[26] HOWELL 2010, p. 63-76. See also JUNIOR & SCHIPPER 2008, p. 436 quoting SASSON 1966, p. 474.

[27] KOSMALA 1962, p. 27.

[28] MORGENSTERN 1963, p. 43.

[29] MORGENSTERN 1963, p. 62.

[30] MORGENSTERN 1963, p. 67.

[31] MORGENSTERN 1963, p. 50.

[32] MORGENSTERN 1963, p. 37.

[33] MORGENSTERN 1963, p. 67.

Terence Mitchell is in basic agreement with Kosmala's and Morgenstern's understanding that the *ḥatan-damim* refers to the son, though he considers Morgenstern's connection of the Zipporah episode with *beena* marriage hypothetical. Compiling the forty-two occurrences of חתן in the Old Testament, Mitchell identifies the most basic definition of the term as a relationship established by marriage. Depending on the context, it can refer to a wife's father (father-in-law), a bridegroom and a daughter's husband (son-in-law). The "son-in-law" in 2 Kings 8:27 is peculiar [34]. It is King Ahaziah, son of Queen Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab. Though deemed the *ḥatan* of the house of Ahab (חתן בית אהאב), Ahaziah is not Ahab's son-in-law but his grandson by his daughter. As "*ḥatan* of the house of Ahab" Ahaziah is related to Ahab's dynasty through his mother.

A short note by Walter Beltz confirms the momentum initiated in the nineteen-sixties. Though Beltz makes no reference to English language studies, he understands that Zipporah touches the feet of YHWH's cultic statue with the blood of her son in order to bring her son into the marriage, her marriage with YHWH, who becomes the adoptive father of her child. The blood of circumcision has no apotropaic function. It signifies adoption. "Die Mutter als »Mutter Israels« führt die Beschneidung aus, und durch ihre heilige Ehe mit dem Stammesgott wird der Sohn in den Clan incorporiert, dessen Haupt der Gott ist" [35]. The blood of circumcision thus changes Zipporah's son into YHWH's son. Beltz shows more interest in Zipporah than her son, though the "Mutter Israels" is a somewhat undeserved title for Moses' wife who, when the reader encounters her again, is back in Midian where Moses had sent her back (Exod 18:2). Nevertheless, the view that the *ḥatan-damim* is the son rather than the father is gaining traction, though it is not clear how the adoption of the son by YHWH turns the son into the *ḥatan* of his mother.

A year earlier, Kutsch had argued that the term *ḥatan* refers to a relationship based on affinity in contrast to a relation based on consanguinity, a view later accepted by Otto Kaiser who distinguishes between marital and biological relationships [36]. Building upon Kutsch's view, Adam Howell identifies the *ḥatan* as Gershom, Moses' firstborn whose birth is mentioned already in Exod 2:22. Though verses 24-26 leave the son unnamed and do not indicate that he is the firstborn, verse 23 closes with the words "your son your firstborn"

in reference to Pharaoh's. Hence, Howell considers it reasonable that Zipporah would say to her son "You are a relative by means of blood to me" [37]. As is the case with the previous studies, the transformation effected by circumcision remains unclear. Unless Zipporah was *not* her son's biological mother, he would seem to be her blood-relative from birth. Considering Gershom's change of affiliation from Israel's vantage point allows Howell to dodge the issue. Gershom is "now a relative of affinity because of his circumcision. He is still not a blood relative, but ironically, by the shedding and sign of blood, he has become a member of the covenant community of Israel" [38]. Uncircumcised, Gershom was a foreigner and alien to Israel; circumcised, he became "one related to Yahweh and his people by the social covenant of circumcision" [39]. This may be correct for verse 26 where the words "to me" from Zipporah's first statement in verse 25 are missing, but when Zipporah cries out "you are a *ḥatan-damim* to me" she refers to her relationship with her son. If in verse 26 *ḥatan-damim* means that Gershom now belongs to Moses' people—not by blood-line but by affinity—can the same words mean in verse 25 that Gershom now belongs to Zipporah—not by blood-line but by adoption (see Beltz above)—though he is her biological son?

Pettit's recent article represents another advance in the discussion when he recognises that the primary issue is not guilt but identity: "the quintessential act of circumcision forensically answers the question of identity" [40]. Pettit broadens Gershom's change of identity to Zipporah. Circumcision "marks Moses, Gershom, and Zipporah as Moses' wife, as Israelite" [41]. Does he mean that neither were Israelites before Zipporah's saving act, not even Moses? Did the circumcision of the son modify the marital relation of his parents? Pettit does not tackle these issues. He uses the reasonable claim that ambiguity belongs to the rhetorical strategy of the passage to conclude that from "amidst the shrouded text, one unambiguous reality emerges: Moses' family is marked and sealed as the LORD's. There is no more ambiguity when it comes to who Moses is and to whom his service and allegiance is due, and who it is that he should fear" [42]. This is indeed the case regarding Moses, but it would have been equally true without these three ambiguous verses that cast a shadow of doubt over the circumcision of father, or son, or both. That the son becomes

[34] MITCHELL 1969, p. 97-98.

[35] BELTZ 1975, p. 210.

[36] KUTSCH 1974, p. 270; KAISER 2000, p. 84.

[37] HOWELL 2010, p. 74.

[38] HOWELL 2010, p. 74.

[39] HOWELL 2010, p. 76.

[40] PETTIT 2015, p. 174.

[41] PETTIT 2015, p. 174.

[42] PETTIT 2015, p. 174.



an Israelite by virtue of his circumcision is not difficult to accept. That Moses' wife becomes an Israelite would require demonstrating that it is by circumcising her son that she attains Israelite status. There is no hint of this in Exod 24-26, albeit all the ambiguity. At this point, the African ritual mentioned in the introduction can help refocus the discussion on the relationship between mother and son.

## A SYMBOLIC CIRCUMCISION FROM ZIMBABWE

A volume on the oral traditions of the Karanga, a people once living in what was then the Ndanga Reservation south-east of Masvingo (formerly Fort Victoria), the capital of this province of Zimbabwe, has a section on circumcision [43]. The author was in charge of the former Musito Hospital between 1965 and 1971 and collected most of the data from a group of nurses from a religious order who assisted him in the hospital.

The temporal and geographical distance with the biblical text limits the relevance of the Karanga ritual. Yet, even further ethnological parallels from Australia have been adduced previously [44]. Moreover, Karanga heritage has recently been applied to the story of Hannah's bareness [45]. Therefore, there is no reason to discount the relevance of the practice mentioned by these nurses as illustration of a more fundamental issue in Exodus 4.

The nurses reported an old rite which, in their days, was still performed in the most remote areas. In short, "Within a few days, a new-born baby has to be circumcised symbolically, by his mother." A first obvious parallel with the biblical story is the mother who circumcises her son:

Holding the child on her lap, she collects some of the bloody discharge which since the baby's birth exudes from her vagina. With the other hand she pushes back the foreskin of the boy's penis as far as possible and then smears the liquid over the exposed penis. She then gently moves the foreskin back and forth a few times, trying to loosen the physiological adhesion between foreskin and the glans penis [46].

The manipulation of the son's foreskin presents no parallel with Zipporah's touch of "his foot" (her son's, Moses' or YHWH's). The Karanga mother manipulates the foreskin instead of removing it. The main bearings of the Karanga symbolic circumcision on Zipporah's circumcision is the kind of fluid used to lubricate the glans.

The Karanga elders argued that this symbolic circumcision is a substitute for surgical circumcision, which had been given up altogether long before "because too many children die as a result of the operation" [47]. The report does not state when circumcision was abandoned and there is no evidence that the Karanga ever practised surgical circumcision, which is why "neighbouring tribes scornfully called them 'the dirty ones'. By dirty they mean the collection of glandular discharge under the foreskin" [48]. The parallel with the biblical uncircumcised is obvious (Gen 34:14; Exod 12:48; Judg 14:3; 15:18; 1 Sam 14:6; 17:26.36; 2 Sam 1:20; 1 Chron 10:4).

This figurative circumcision is more than mere symbolism. It involves the manipulation of the foreskin to avert phimosis and infertility, a common condition among the Karanga, while avoiding the hazards of circumcision. Lubricating the glans makes sense even from a modern medical point of view, but why use blood and why the mother's?

In fact, it is not the mother's blood that is used. On this point, the Karanga were adamant. Only the blood from the vaginal discharges of the mother could do. Blood from the mother's finger or from any other part of her body would be tantamount to adultery [49]. In adultery, a mother "mixes different blood"—semen from her husband and from her paramour. Smearing the glans of her child with blood other than that which is flowing from her uterus after parturition would be mixing bloods. Puerperal blood is the only safe lubricant for the child's glans because, in Karanga thinking, it is of a different nature from the mother's blood [50]. The mother's puerperal blood is a mixture of the father's and mother's blood, exactly like the child himself.

The mother is allowed to touch this mixed blood only to use it on her child's penis in order to safeguard his fertility because both his hereditary sides are present as witnesses [51]. Using blood flowing from the mother's veins to accomplish the symbolic circumcision is taboo.

[43] ASCHWANDEN 1982.

[44] SMITH 1906; GASTER 1969, p. 234.

[45] MOYO 2006.

[46] ASCHWANDEN 1982, p. 35.

[47] ASCHWANDEN 1982, p. 35-36.

[48] ASCHWANDEN 1982, p. 36.

[49] ASCHWANDEN 1982, p. 37.

[50] ASCHWANDEN 1982, p. 37. In the same vein, FROLOV 1996, p. 520, notes that the plural of bloods in *h̄tn dm̄ym* "could have different meanings, describing, inter alia, the blood of childbirth and menstruation".

[51] ASCHWANDEN 1982, p. 38. The belief that circumcision fosters fertility is also attested among modern-day Filipinos. See GOROSPE 2007, p. 118.

It would do exactly the opposite of what the ritual is supposed to accomplish. It would tie the son back to his mother's lineage and annihilate the first stage of separation effected by birthing. This son would literally become a mummy's boy, a bond even modern thinking would consider a threat to his future virility. Why it is not the father who symbolically circumcises his son is moot.

Blood is an indicator of lineage. Puerperal blood is irrelevant in Exod 4:25-26 because Zipporah performs an actual circumcision, not a symbolic one. Whether or not Zipporah's circumcision of her son closes "the mother's initial period of impurity" [52] is moot. What is fundamental is that once circumcised, the son is not her son anymore. In English parlance, he becomes his mother's son-in-law, Zipporah's *hatan* by the virtue of the blood of circumcision.

Applied to the Zipporah episode, the Karanga symbolic circumcision illustrates the contrived aspect of lineage ascription and the relation between parturition and circumcision in the framework of lineage.

## THE *HATAN* AS SON-IN-LAW

The different meanings of the word *hatan*—father-in-law, bridegroom and son-in-law can now be reconsidered [53]. "Bridegroom" is the least likely as Moses cannot be termed Zipporah's bridegroom because they have been married long enough to have at least one child [54]. This might have been different in an earlier version of the story, but not in its present narrative setting. This leaves "father-in-law" and "son-in-law". Which applies to Zipporah once she circumcised her son?

If she addresses her son in verse 25, Zipporah's son becomes her son-in-law—her *hatan* of blood. Though her own biological son by virtue of the shedding of blood at birth (puerperal blood), Zipporah's son becomes her son-in-law by virtue of the shedding of blood at circumcision [55]. The blood of circumcision transferred the son from his maternal Midianite clan to his father's lineage and thus to Israel [56].

Can the *hatan* of blood also apply to the father if Zipporah addressed Moses in verse 25? Forced to circumcise her son herself to save him from YHWH's attack, Zipporah usurps the role of whichever of her own blood

relatives would have circumcised her son, had he been present on the fateful night [57]. Moses would become Zipporah's surrogate father, his own bride's father, if he had performed the circumcision. He did not. Could he and should he have done it is irrelevant at this point. That it is Zipporah who severs the foreskin, prevents Moses from being Zipporah's *hatan* of blood. At most, she is the *hatan* herself and thus cannot cry out to Moses "*hatan* of blood you are for me". Only Moses could have pronounced those words. The common rendering "bridegroom of blood" is erroneous.

## WHY REMEMBER ZIPPORAH'S CIRCUMCISION OF HER SON?

The final issue is to explain the presence of these three verses at this point of Moses' career. Why would anyone invent out of whole cloth or insert here such a troubling episode that does little to enhance Moses stature?

A clue is found in the verses immediately following the Zipporah episode (Exod 4:27-31). The arrival of Aaron on the scene is literally a godsend. It solves the obstacles Moses had envisaged in verses 1-17. The two brothers arrive with no mishap in Egypt and immediately convince the Israelites. Aaron is the man for the job, the solution to seconding Moses who so far had displayed little enthusiasm for his mission [58]. The episode of the Golden Calf does cast a dark shadow over Aaron (Exod 32:21-22), but less so in Exodus than is the case in Deut 9:20.

Yet, it is Aaron's sons who assume priestly roles in the Torah (Exodus 28). Moses' firstborn, Gershom, is met again in Judg 18:30 as the father of the idolatrous priesthood of the Danites (Judg 18:30). Whereas Hosea 12:12-13 oppose Moses the prophet to Jacob the patriarch, Exodus 4 paves the way to the eclipse of Moses' seed. Only the Chronicler saves Moses' seed for oblivion by listing Gershom and Eliezer as sons of Levi, though after stating that "Aaron was set apart to consecrate the most holy things, so that he and his sons forever should make offerings to the Lord, and minister to him and pronounce blessings in his name forever" (1 Chron 23:12-15).

The first phrase of verse 26, "So he let him alone", may thus signify more than simply the end of the nightly attack. In other passages, the same verb (רפה) parsed too in the *qal*, have negative connotations such as "to grow slack, to wither, to collapse" [59]. While YHWH's departure saves

[52] GOROSPE 2007, p. 221.

[53] MITCHELL 1969, p. 112.

[54] SARNA 1991, p. 26.

[55] ROBINSON 1986, p. 458.

[56] On the binding role ascribed to circumcision, see

KARKOV 2003; SITHOLE 2012.

[57] MORGENSTERN 1963, p. 47-58.

[58] KESSLER 2001, p. 32.

[59] KOEHLER, BAUMGARTNER & STAMM 2001, vol. 3, p. 1277.

the life of father or son, or both, neither escapes unscathed from the attack. The father is deprived of a priestly seed, as his son is replaced by his cousins. Cui bono? Obviously, priests claiming Aaronite descent had every interest in making sure that the episode of the hasty circumcision of Moses' son was remembered. Whether they invented it out of whole cloth or simply inserted it there need not be considered here.

Though Zipporah's intervention saves the life of her son and YHWH departs from him, this hasty circumcision is a taint on Moses' seed. Performed by a foreign woman, it deviates from the standard set by Abraham in Genesis 17 where he circumcises himself and his two sons. Having the biological mother of the child perform the circumcision annihilates the *raison d'être* of circumcision. As the Karanga explained, it ties back the son to his mother's line when in fact it should have transferred him to his father's lineage. Therefore, Zipporah and her sons find themselves back in Midian with Jethro (Exod 18:1-6). They are excluded from "the great work of liberation" [60]. The exclusion of her sons clears the way for Aaron's line as the sole legitimate holders of the priesthood. The position of the Zipporah episode immediately before Aaron is ordered to meet Moses at the Mountain of God (Exod 4:27) could hardly be more fitting. ■

[60] KOSMALA 1962, p. 21; BLUM & BLUM 1990, p. 47-48; ALBERTZ 2012, p. 96-98; BAUKS 2016, p. 254.

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