Zipporah and the Brit Milah: A Woman Circumciser

Moshe Reiss, Katholik University of Leuven, Belgium

Abstract

What is the relationship between God, Moses, Zipporah, and Jethro her Pagan Priest father and the demonic attack on Moses or his son/sons in the immediate aftermath of the mission to liberate the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt? Why would God want to kill him? Is an identity crisis (Egyptian/Hebrew, Hebrew/Arabic, monotheistic God/Paganism) involved and if so how does the violence of blood correct the problem. What is the real role of Zipporah and who is the Bridegroom of Blood?

Introduction

Moses, raised as a Prince in the Egyptian palace, departs fearing for his life and settles in Midian where he lived for decades with his wife Zipporah and his father-in-law, the pagan Priest Jethro. At the Burning Bush, God gives Moses a life-long mission: to liberate the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt and bring them to the Promised Land.

The Incident at the Inn

After God commissions Moses as the emissary to lead the people into freedom, God almost immediately decides to kill him. The attack is absurdly bizarre and seemingly inexplicable. The story begins with three introductory verses (Ex. 4:21-23). In the first verse God speaks to Moses uses the word ‘be’lechte’cha (as you go)’ a variant of 'lech l'cha’ (go to yourself). This is a phrase used by God on two occasions as a command to Abraham (Gen. 12:1, 22:1); the first when Abraham, the Patriarch was to leave his home and go to Canaan, and the second occasion when he was commanded to go to Mt. Moriah and sacrifice his son Isaac. Both Abraham and Moses are told by God to re-identify themselves, and dedicate themselves to God.

In the two following verses (Ex. 22-23), Moses is informed that Pharaoh will reject the demand to release the children of Israel. He must then reply: 'Thus says the Lord: Israel is My firstborn son. I have said to you, Let My son go, that He may worship Me, but you refuse to let him go. Now I will slay your firstborn son'. The earlier reference to Israel as a nation is when Pharaoh complained about their fecundity (Ex. 1:9). Subsequently, when God refers to Israel as God’s first-born son, this is the second time Israel is called a nation in the Bible:
"And on the way, at a lodging place, God encountered him and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took up a flint and cut off the foreskin of her son and cast it at his legs and said 'You are my bridegroom of blood'. So it withdrew from him, and she said 'a bridegroom of blood for circumcisions'". (Ex. 4:24-26).

The ambiguities implicit in the text include the use of pronouns (him, his) instead of proper names and the understanding of the Hebrew ‘chatan damim’ - this twice used term is noted nowhere else in the Bible – ‘chatan itself means bride groom in Hebrew and circumcision in Arabic (see more later). In verse 24, the word ‘him’ (twice) appears too. Many Jewish commentators such as Targum Neophiti, Targum Onkelos, Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchak 1040 – 1105), Rashba (Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir 1085-1158) understand these pronouns as referring to Moses.

But then why would God choose to kill the man he has just appointed to lead His people? As a result of this apparent paradox, some of the Sages in the Talmud (TB Ned. 31B-32A and TJ Ned. 3:9-11) and some commentators [Targum Yonatan, and Ibn Ezra (1089-1167)] suggest the death penalty was directed not against Moses but one of his children; Targum Yonatan states that it was the oldest Gershom, while Rashi and Ibn Ezra claim that it was the second child Eliezer. Why would failing to circumcise a child or being an uncircumcised child be a death sentence for either Moses or the son? (Certainly an uncircumcised son cannot be blamed; his father perhaps?) Should Moses being God’s emissary be held to a higher standard? God did not explicitly tell Moses at the burning bush to circumcise his son. More importantly, if God decrees death upon a person they die! There is no other instance in the Bible that God rules death upon a person and rescinds that penalty.

**The First-Born**

Perhaps the death sentence is related to the immediate previous verse, where God says to Moses: ‘Now I will slay your firstborn son' (4:23); this may in fact be the theme of the entire incident. The traditional interpretation is that God is referring to the Pharaoh; could God be referring to the sons of both Pharaoh and Moses. Pharaoh will suffer for having mistreated God’s first-born son, Israel, and Moses will suffer for having ‘mistreated’ his first-born by not having him circumcised.

Moses in fact explicitly did not tell Pharaoh that God would destroy his and all Egyptian firstborns; only that he, Moses would not see him again (Ex.10:29).
Likewise, God did not inform Moses at the burning bush that he would die if his son were not circumcised. Moses finally tells the people of Israel of the tenth plague – killing all Egyptian firstborns (Ex. 11:4-5), God never reveals this directly to Pharaoh.

If Gershom, the firstborn son of the Israelite/Egyptian Moses and a non-Israelite mother is uncircumcised, he might be considered Egyptian, and therefore be killed as a first-born male Egyptian. Jethro, a Midianite, appears to have been a descendant of Abraham and Keturah (Gen. 25:2,4). Zipporah would be a descendant of Abraham and would therefore seem to be an acceptable marriage partner to Moses.

**The Egyptian - The Hebrew**

Several commentators suggest this represents God’s anger at Moses rejection of his role as the Hebrew liberator against the Egyptians (Ex. 3:11-4:17). Moses is introduced to Zipporah, her sisters and Jethro as an Egyptian – his very name is Egyptian - who rescued the daughters; ‘an Egyptian saved us’ (Ex. 2:19). Does he consider himself an Egyptian? Moses grew up in the royal house of Pharaoh as a Prince with their religious ideals and culture. Moses then joined the culture and polytheistic religion of Jethro and his family until the age of eighty. The influences of his father-in-law and wife in Midian must have been overwhelming. To expect that his Midianite or Egyptian identity would vanish overnight seems highly unlikely. During the incident at the inn, is Moses having an identity crisis?

Moses is about to meet his brother Aaron who certainly knows he is a Hebrew, but did Moses? Moses’ confidence may well have been shaken; did he fear death at the hand of the Pharaoh? Bernard Robinson suggests that Moses repeatedly told God that he feared he would fail in the mission; even after God demonstrated the miracles He could perform: ‘The wrath of God burned against Moses’ (4:14) — a very strong repute indeed. In threatening to kill Moses, God was warning him that he should be more concerned about God than about confronting the Egyptians or convincing the Israelites to follow him.

While talking to his wife at the inn, Moses discussed his great fear. Zipporah recognized the problem, understood that she and her child/children needed to join the covenant in order to rescue her husband’s life. Moses appears paralyzed and unable to act. Thus with extraordinary power and foresight, she circumcises the child and touches
Moses’ genitals with the blood. She then states ‘you are a bridegroom of blood to me’. Moses is thus endowed with the power to continue his God ordained mission, which has now been additionally blessed. Zipporah’s foresight in the above incident seems prophetic.

Saadya Gaon (882-942) and Abraham the son of Maimonides (1186-1237) suggest that Moses was in fact at the burning bush when the entire bridegroom of blood episode took place. They are clarifying the confusing chronological order before and after the incident at the inn. After the burning bush incident, Moses returns to Jethro to receive his blessing and permission to proceed to Egypt. He then takes Zipporah and the children to travel with him to Egypt (4:20) and on the way they stay at the inn. Moses leaves them at the inn and goes back to the burning bush to meet his brother Aaron (4:27). Thus, Moses is not available during the entire incident.

**Blood as Protection**

Prior to the tenth plague and the deaths of the Egyptian firstborns sons, God tells the Israelites to slaughter a lamb (the paschal lamb) and smear its blood on the doorposts of their houses to protect them from the angel of death: ‘When I see the blood, I will pass over you’ (Ex. 12:13,23). Likewise, by taking the foreskin of her son and placing the blood on ‘Moses’ legs/genitals’, Zipporah may be making a sign of protection similar to the sign on the doorposts. As the blood of the lamb will protect the Hebrews so will the blood of the circumcision protect Moses. ‘Zipporah transforms the violence into an expression of safety, turning blood from a signifier of death into a substance that wards off danger.’

Blood symbolizes birth and as noted by the Rashbam, the power of sacrifice can be prophylactic. Umberto Cassuto (1883-1951) interprets Zipporah’s words to Moses as: ‘I am restoring you to life by means of our son’s blood. Our son’s blood restored your life.’

In the Hebrew text, the word ‘damim’ is the plural "bloods" (4:25,26), perhaps metaphorically connecting the blood of circumcision to the blood of the lamb. In some Jewish midrashic traditions, the blood smeared on the doorposts was a mingling of the Passover lamb and blood from recent circumcisions (Midrash Rabbah Exodus XIX:5 and Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer chap. 29). Zipporah is making a sign of protection similar to the sign on the doorposts. No uncircumcised man may eat from the Paschal lamb. It was
essential that Gershom be circumcised to be part of the covenant and to partake in the Passover ritual that was about to begin.

**Why Would Moses Not Have Circumcised His Son?**

The attempt by God to kill Moses was curtailed when Zipporah circumcised their son. Consequently, the ancient Midrashim (Mekhita de R. Ishmael, Jethro, Amalek) attempted to find reasons for the child not having been circumcised. One suggests a 'prenuptial agreement' between Jethro and Moses that the first-born son of Moses and Zipporah would be dedicated to the idolatrous gods of Jethro – a Priest of Midian - and remain uncircumcised; or perhaps not circumcised until his 13th year, as was Ishmael. According to the Midrash, Moses accepted the condition: ‘My husband wished to circumcise, but his father-in-law prevented him. Now may the blood of this circumcision atone for my husband. . .’ Then Zipporah gave thanks, and said ‘How beloved is the blood of this circumcision that has saved my husband from the hand of the Destroying Angel.’ These suggestions from the Midrash and the Targum were rejected by the Talmud (BT Sotah 11a, and San. 103b-104a).

Some sources, such as Rashi and ibn Ezra say that the child was ill or just born with his mother still recovering from the delivery or that Moses was concerned with the safety of performing an operation on the road – all are legitimate reasons for delaying a circumcision. Perhaps Moses believed he should delay the circumcision in order to rush off to Egypt to begin his new mission. Others, as noted above, held that Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, had demanded as a condition of marriage that the first male be ‘his.’ The idea that a first-born belonged to the Priest is a prevailing ancient Mid-east custom. Even today, first-born Jewish males are ritually assigned to a Priest and redeemed by the father for a ritual payment on the thirtieth day following the birth (Pidyon Haben).

Was Moses himself circumcised after his birth? Moses lived with his birth parents for three months (Ex. 2:2) so it may be reasonable to assume that he had been circumcised on the eighth day. Alternatively, the Talmud suggests that Moses was born circumcised (BT Sotah 12a). Did Moses not circumcise his son because he had himself never experienced it? Is it conceivable that Zipporah metaphorically circumcised the already circumcised Moses by touching his genitals with the child’s foreskin? Some have asked how Zipporah knew that circumcision was required to save Moses or the
child? The Midrash states that the angel of death was a snake that swallowed Moses up to his genitals (or perhaps two snakes swallowing Moses from both ends); only his genitals remained exposed[xxi] and Zipporah then realized that circumcision was required to save Moses or their child. The last word in this incident ‘la’mulot’ is grammatically plural perhaps denoting both the child and Moses.

**Chatan Damim**

In Hebrew, the word is ‘chttn’ can be read as ‘choten’ or ‘chatan.’ The original biblical text and any Torah scroll are not vocalized; therefore, either reading can be correct.[xvii] The word means in various contexts ‘bridegroom,’ ‘father-in-law,’ sometimes brother-in-law or son-in-law or even simply a blood relation.[xviii] The word ‘chatuna’ means ‘marriage’ and also sometimes the familiar choten for ‘father-in-law.’ The Arabic word ‘chatana’ means ‘circumcise,’ Arab males cannot marry before being circumcised.[xix] For Arabs the rite of circumcision is usually performed when a boy reaches the age of 13, as was Ishmael.

In the Hebrew phrase ‘ki chatan damim attah li’ (ibid., 4:25) there may have been a word play on the word ‘chatan’ [bridegroom] and the Arabic word ‘chatana’ [circumcision]: ‘You are my bridegroom of blood' could be read 'You are mine, circumcised with blood'.[xx] The word ‘chatan’ in this case may be based on the Arabic circumcise and not the Hebrew for bridegroom. The ‘you’ could refer to either Moses or the son. Zipporah may be referring to her newly circumcised son. The word ‘chatan’ in Arabic is sometimes colloquially used for a young male ‘child’ (as is true in Yiddish). In ancient Hebrew, a wife would almost never refer to her husband directly as a ‘chatan.’ (If Zipporah were alone as suggested by two commentators, she could be referring to her absent husband.) Could Zipporah, a Midianite be speaking a version of ancient Arabic?

The Arabic word ‘chatana' also translates as faith in God. Accordingly, the Arabic recognizes that the circumcision is a key religious ritual. While this is equally true for Jews, the original dual meaning of the word 'chatan' was probably lost. Jethro is rarely mentioned without the qualification ‘chatan Moshe.’[xxi] Perhaps Zipporah is appropriating her father’s role as Priest and then the chatan – father-in-law – is symbolically circumcising his grandson.[xxii] Zipporah then combines chatan with the Hebrew la’mulot [circumcisions]: not 'a bridegroom of blood for all circumcisions', but
'circumcised with my blood relation for all future circumcisions.' This may confirm the protective significance of blood from a circumcision. Aramaic Targums suggest the same: ‘May my husband be given to us by the blood of this circumcision.’ By dripping the child’s blood on Moses genitals, Zipporah may be saying: You cannot escape from me, Moses because we are now blood related! ‘You are a bridegroom of blood, because of the circumcision of our son.’

**Conclusion**

Abraham, who received the first covenant between God and the people of Israel, circumcised himself and then his thirteen-year-old son Ishmael. This circumcision became the symbol of the Abrahamic covenant. Abraham was told of the forthcoming exile that would begin with the descent of Jacob and his family into Egypt (Gen. 15:13-16). Moses liberated them and Joshua led the people across the Jordan River back into the land that God had promised to Abraham. Joshua then circumcised all the Israelites males (Josh. 5:2). It is not clear how fully Jewish circumcision was followed in Egypt. Some Midrashim claim that the Israelites had forgotten the rite or even refused to follow it (Midrash Rabbah Exodus, 19:5).

It then follows that upon Moses departing from Jethro’s house on his way to Egypt, it became incumbent upon Moses to immediately circumcise his son. However, the penalty for failure to circumcise his son is not death. Nonetheless, Moses had just been chosen by God to lead the Israelite people out of Egypt and into the land God promised to their forefathers. It is unthinkable to assume that his eldest son – reminiscent of the tenth plague – might not be circumcised. The traditional view in the Mishnah (Ned. 3:11) and Talmud (BT Ned. 31b-32a) states that the purpose of the incident is to emphasize the importance of circumcision, based on the introductory verses (4:22-23).

An alternative reading depicts Zipporah, as the savior, and the main protagonist in this incident. She recognizes her husband’s confusion as to his identity and his fear of returning to Egypt. She recognizes the authority of his God (in contrast to the Pharaoh who does not) and the need to both appease this God and reassure Moses in order for him to accomplish his objective. She also recognizes the danger to herself and her child. Zipporah accomplishes both of these objectives by using the blood of the
circumcision, transforming it into a form of protection, reminiscent of the blood of the paschal lamb on the Passover night as the Hebrews left Egypt.

It is worth noting that Zipporah is the only woman in biblical history known to have circumcised a son. The *Shulhan Aruch*, (composed by Joseph Caro – 1488-1575) states that the father is obligated to circumcise his son. If he is unavailable, he can appoint an agent: ‘all are fit to perform a brit, even a minor, a slave or a women.’ Maimonides (1135-1204) stated that women can act as mohalot. Currently, a group of feminists are performing the *brit milah* based on Zipporah’s original act. Jewish Ethiopians have a tradition, which is dated to the first Temple period, where a mother circumcises her male son. While this tradition is not acceptable under Israeli law, it is still performed unofficially within that community.

**Bibliography:**

Greenberg, Moshe, ‘Understanding Exodus’ (N.Y., Behrman House, 1969)
Talmon, Sh., ‘Hatan Damin’, Eretz Yisrael, Vol. 3 (Hebrew)

Endnotes:

[iii] In Exodus 4:20 just before the introductory verses the text refers to Moses’ children, in the plural.
[iii] Which son is referred to is debated among the commentators. Eliezer, the second son was named to thank God for destroying Pharaoh which suggests (despite the plural ‘bnai’ in 4:20) his birth occurred after this incident.
[iv] There is also a Midrash that suggests that Jethro was a descendant of Abraham and Keturah, Kugel, James, ‘Tradition of the Bible’ (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1998) pg. 534.
[viii] The Hebrew ‘raglaim’ normally means legs, but in the context of a circumcision, many commentators consider it means genitals.
[x] Rashbam on Ex. 4:26.
Inn Ezra also suggested the angel had come to bless the child, but given his not being circumcised attempted to kill him.


Egyptians did circumcise their male children but used a different procedure than the Hebrew one.


Due to the lack of written vowels as well as cantillation marks (meter and pronunciation guides) both Hebrew and Arabic have had conflicts in interpretations throughout the middle ages as to the correct meanings of words. Both now have accepted traditional readings, but the problems remain.


Jethro is mentioned fifteen times in the Torah as chatan Moshe.


One extant of the Septuagint has been translated as Zipporah saying ‘for you are a relative of blood to me’ and ‘the blood of the circumcision of my child stands,’ Winslow, pg. 132.

Winslow, pg. 136.


We should note that one Rabbi in BT Abod. Zar. 27a states that Zipporah began the circumcision and Moses completed it because a woman is forbidden.

From archival videos of elder Ethiopians, documented and directed by Ariel Krause, an M.A. in Neuropsychology at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem (2010).