

Ambiguous Antecedents and Conceptions of YHWH: A Fresh Look at Exodus 4:24-26

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Perhaps since the first copy of Exodus began to circulate, people have struggled with what is recognized as 4:24-26. Among early Christians, it did not escape the watchful eyes of Augustine of Hippo, Gregory of Nyssa, or Ephrem of Syria.¹ Early and medieval Jewish writers also struggled with the passage.² Currently, there is no dearth of scholarship on the pericope.³

The reason for the attention garnered by Exodus 4:24-26 is simple: it is extremely difficult (if not impossible) to understand. There is no consensus about this passage among scholars.⁴ The problems in 4:24-26 seem endless. There are theological problems. Why would YHWH seek to kill Moses, or anyone for that matter? (Especially

¹ See Augustine of Hippo, "Letter XXIII (to Maximin)," in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* vol. 1, ed. Philip Schaff, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), 243. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 35. St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on Exodus*, in *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Prose Works*, trans. Edward Matthews and Joseph Amar, (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 234-237.

² See for example, *Targum Onkelos to Exodus*, trans. Israel Drazin, (Denver: Ktav Publishing House, 1990), 70-74. Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* vol. 2, trans. Henrietta Szold, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1913), 25. Also see vol. 5.

³ Commentators of the 20th century include Martin Noth, Julius Wellhausen, Hugo Gressman, Hans Kosmala, Brevard Childs, Walter Brueggemann, William Propp, Bernard Robinson, Terence Fretheim, and Donald Gowan (to name a few). More specific use will be made of these thinkers later in the paper.

⁴ See the comments of William Propp, "That Bloody Bridegroom (Exodus IV 24-6)," VT 43, 4 (1993): 495.

after YHWH has assured Moses just verses before that it is safe to return to Egypt?!).⁵ There are practical (or legal) problems. Why does Zipporah act as circumciser? Should she not be disallowed?⁶ There are problems of tradition. Should we attempt to understand the deity in this passage as [originally] other than YHWH?⁷ Finally, there are syntactical problems. The respective antecedents of at least four pronominal suffixes are ambiguous at best.

This project takes its cue from the last set of problems—problems of syntax. Who is the “him” that YHWH seeks to kill and whose ‘feet’ does Zipporah touch with the foreskin? Stated more technically, to whom do the respective pronominal suffixes (*waws*) of *הַמִּיתוּ* and *לְרַגְלָיו* refer? These are ambiguous antecedents. There are no explicit referents. Many plausible answers have been formulated over the years and each changes (some slightly, some enormously) the concept of the deity in the passage. To whom the ambiguous antecedents of Exodus 4:24-26 refer bears direct correspondence to the demeanor, motivations, and very character of the deity in question. While this project will not attempt to offer definitive and singular answers for each of the two antecedents, we will seek to offer a two-fold proposal for interpreting them. The first part of our proposal offers an interpretive device for the final form of the text.⁸ The second is a

⁵ 4:19

⁶ See Seth Kunin, “The Bridegroom of Blood: A Structuralist Analysis,” *JSOT* 70 (J 1996): 9. No other biblical texts feature a woman performing circumcision. Kunin points out that b. ‘Abod. Zar. 27a changes the story and reports that while Zipporah began the procedure, she had to ask Moses to finish. See also, Hans Kosmala, “The Bloody Husband,” *VT* 12 (1962): 15.

⁷ See the comments of Hugo Gressman, *Mose und Seine Zeit*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913), 57. Also, Jubilees 48:1-4 and Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, 35.

⁸ In this case, the ‘final form’ of the text refers to the Masoretic Text or the text accepted by Jews and Christians in their respective canons of scripture. Thus, the first part of my proposal speaks most

historical reconstruction. The key to both of our proposals, however, is an embracing of the ambiguity that confronts us.

There is little trouble demarcating our pericope. While it does fit into the larger narrative framework of moving Moses back to Egypt from Midian⁹, 4:24-26 forms quite a separate episode. Direct discourse between YHWH and Moses ends after v. 23. Our pericope is set off by the resumption of historical narration in v. 24 with the introductory וַיְהִי. The scene¹⁰ changes not only syntactically, but spatially within the text. Moses and his family are now in a different place (though we are not altogether sure where that is). They are at a lodging place – no longer in Midian, not yet in Egypt. We may recognize demarcation on the other end of the pericope because of the remarks in v. 26 that many consider to be editorial.¹¹ They give an explanation, albeit an unsatisfactory one, for the term וַתִּתְּרֵם-דְּמִים. Even if not editorial, 26 seems to seal 24-25 epexegetically. The Masoretes perceived a break between 26 and 27 and signified it with the פ.

As we have previously seen, there is no lack of problems with regards to our text. In order to highlight the particular need for more discussion of our “ambiguous antecedents” we need only to offer a selection of major translations of those antecedents.

specifically (though not exclusively) to those who regard this text as Holy Scripture. This part of the proposal will be held together with the second part which speaks specifically (though not exclusively) to the historian. The reasons for this bifurcation will be made plain later in the paper.

⁹ For Further discussion of this narrative of transition, i.e., 4:18-31, see Walter Brueggemann, *The Book of Exodus*, NIB vol I, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 717.

¹⁰ This term is not used in a technical sense.

¹¹ See Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1974), 98-99.

KJV

Him . . . his feet

RSV

Him. Moses' feet

NIV

Moses¹² . . . Moses' feet

JPS

Him . . . his legs

NRSV

Him . . . Moses' feet¹³

NAS

Him . . . Moses' feet

NAB

Moses . . . his person

The uses of Moses in the first or second position does not necessarily reflect that Moses is also meant in the opposite position. In fact, it seems clear that there is a wide range of credible opinions as to whom our antecedents are. Can any of these opinions claim precedence?

In order to properly set up our fresh proposal for understanding the 'ambiguous antecedents,' it will be necessary to review some of the scholarship that has posited various solutions. However, rather than proceeding in a linear manner and simply surveying scholarship from the oldest thought to the most recent, we shall take another tack. We shall first chart possible antecedents and then move to explain why scholars

¹² The NIV also footnotes the possibility of 'Moses' son' as the first antecedent and that the Hebrew text literally means reads 'him.' Their choice is nevertheless 'Moses' for the body of the text.

¹³ NRSV footnotes 'his'

and/or ancient recensions have favored particular combinations.¹⁴ In doing so, we shall examine not only our ambiguous antecedents, but a vast array of conceptions of YHWH / other deity. As will be evident some of these conceptions are taken from exegesis of the text and others are taken from circumstances or preferences quite foreign to the text. We shall offer only sparse critical comments about these opinions before moving on to our proposal.¹⁵ The benefit of doing so will be made evident later.

Antecedent #1 (הַמִּיתוֹ)

1. Moses
2. Gershom (Moses' son)
3. Eliezer (Moses' 2nd son)
4. Pharaoh's son

Antecedent #2 (לְרִגְלָיו)

1. Moses
2. Gershom
3. Eliezer
4. YHWH / Angel /
Angel of YHWH /
Satan / Desert Demon /
Prince Mastema

Moses . . . Moses

Let us begin with the largest group: those who understand Moses to be the antecedent of both suffixes. A Talmudic recension of the story recorded by Ginzberg clearly understands Moses to serve as both antecedents. In the account given by Ginzberg, the writer apparently finds the idea of Moses being attacked by YHWH (or even an angel as Gregory of Nyssa records it) unpalatable. The deity in this story is

¹⁴ Some pre-critical thinkers and ancient recensions do not give explicit explanations for their choice of antecedents. However, the ways in which some recensions emend the earlier text often provides us with an implicit understanding of whom the pronominal suffixes referred to. Furthermore, it is profitable in my judgment to place their voices alongside critical voices.

¹⁵ Each of the possibilities has been mentioned by at least one scholar, however, not *all* combinations have been argued for.

Satan, not YHWH, who meets Moses in the guise of a serpent. He swallows Moses head-first all the way down to his extremities. Zipporah then circumcises her *second* son (i.e., not Gershom) and sprinkles the blood of what is left of Moses (his feet). Zipporah cries, “Spew him out!” and Satan complies.¹⁶

At the end of the 19th century, Julius Wellhausen added his voice to the conversation. He found the story to be most likely explained as an etiology for infant circumcision. In his own words, “The circumcision of male infants is here explained as a milder substitute for the original circumcision of young men before marriage.”¹⁷ For Wellhausen, YHWH was angry at Moses for not being circumcised before marriage and thus attacked. Zipporah then facilitates a “milder substitute” on Moses’ behalf. Wellhausen considers this to be typical of other primitive stories incorporated into the biblical text. “The law of worship has taken the place of the legend of worship. In the legend the sacred usages and customs arise, as it were, spontaneously, in connection with any occasion, placed in the early sacred time, which may now serve to account for them.”¹⁸ For Wellhausen, the antecedents are determined by the sensibilities of the etiology. The etiology also explains, more or less, the demeanor of YHWH – jealous guard of the law.

Four much more recent thinkers share the opinion that Moses is the antecedent to both pronominal suffixes. Ronald Clements argues, “The implied reason for the attack is

¹⁶ Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* vol. 2, trans. Henrietta Szold, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1913), 25. Also see vol. 5.

¹⁷ Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1994), 340.

¹⁸ Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 340.

Moses' neglect of circumcision, apparently on himself, but possibly on his son."¹⁹ He goes on to say of the second antecedent, "The literal rendering is 'his feet,' which in reality refers to the private parts (cp. Isa. 6:2). It must here relate to Moses so that by touching Moses with the foreskin of his son's circumcision Zipporah made her action count for the circumcision of Moses himself."²⁰

Bernard Robinson favors Moses for different reasons. He is inclined to think that 24-26 should not be read as a separate unit, for he is convinced that verses 20 and 23 help solve the mystery. Robinson states:

YHWH is angry with Moses for weakly trying to evade the duty of confronting Pharaoh which has been placed on his shoulders, and although the men who meditated Moses' death are now dead, YHWH himself has begun to regret his choice of Moses; after telling of his intention to slay the Pharaoh's son because of the King's resistance to his wishes, YHWH now bethinks himself to dispatch Moses too, for there is little to choose between Moses and Pharaoh.²¹

Robinson uses this "evidence" to make his decision about the next antecedent. He finds that if it is Moses' life at risk, it is also quite likely Moses whose feet (or genitals) are touched by Zipporah with the bloody foreskin. Robinson expands this line of thought by writing, "Moses stands for Israel. Moses deserves to die, as the Pharaoh's son deserves to die; Israel deserves to die as the Egyptians deserve to die. The Israelites will, however, be spared because of the blood of the Passover Lamb, and this is symbolized by the smearing of the blood of Gershom."²² I do think Robinson's theory could be very fruitful

¹⁹ Ronald Clements, *Exodus*, The Cambridge Bible Commentary, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 31.

²⁰ Ronald Clements, *Exodus*, 31.

²¹ Bernard Robinson, "Zipporah to the Rescue: A Contextual Study of Exodus 4:24-6," VT 36 n.4 (1986): 456.

²² Bernard Robinson, "Zipporah to the Rescue," 457.

if used for Jewish and/or Christian reflection. However, as a historical reconstruction, it may be a bit far fetched to understand the text to be, more or less, only a midrash on Exodus 12.

The next argument, and in my judgment, the most convincing one of this first group, is proffered by William Propp. Propp actually offers two arguments: one provisional and another more complicated. He argues (and he is not the first)²³ that if the pericope is understood as part of the J source, Moses is an obvious choice. He suggests how the story fits into J:

19Yahweh said to Moses in Midian, "Go return to Egypt, for all the men who seek your life have died."
 20Moses took his wife and his son(s) and mounted them on the ass, and he returned to the land of Egypt.
 24On the way, at the night stop, Yahweh met him and sought to put him to death.²⁴

After positing his J version, Propp asks, "Who could "him" be but Moses?"²⁵ Apparently, however, Propp is not willing to let the identity of the antecedent hang on whether or not we are reading the J source. He insists on another reason: bloodguilt.

I suggest that an Israelite reader would have understood Moses' flight to Midian, in or near which is "holy ground" (Exod. iii 5), as a murderer's quest for asylum. Moses eventually outlives his victim's avengers, be they kin or civil authorities (iv 19). But is he free to go home? Not according to the principles we have outlined [Num. 35:25, 28; Josh 20:6] which would still require atonement for the murder.²⁶

²³ See William H. Propp, "That Bloody Bridegroom," 498-499.

²⁴ William H. Propp, "That Bloody Bridegroom," 498.

²⁵ William H. Propp, "That Bloody Bridegroom," 499.

²⁶ William H. Propp, "That Bloody Bridegroom," 504-5. Propp strengthens his point by highlighting that the form of מוֹת used here -- הִמִּיתוּ -- is often rendered with the sense of "to put to death" or "to execute."

Propp then, like other commentators, assumes that if it is Moses' sin being atoned for, then it must be Moses to whom the bloody foreskin is applied.²⁷

Finally, the most recent voice to offer up Moses as both antecedents is Richard E. Friedman. Friedman, however, renders the pericope much differently than the rest of those taking this position. He contends that YHWH does not seek to kill Moses, but that Moses entreats YHWH to kill him! He translates the MT, "And he was on the way, at a lodging place, and YHWH met him, and he asked to kill him."²⁸ Friedman offers up a similar statement by Moses in Numbers 11:15 to support this theory. However, the passages are not exact parallels and the situation in Exodus does not begin to rival the one in Numbers as backdrop for a death-wish. Rather, most commentators (every one in this study) have found YHWH (or other deity) to be the subject of *וַיִּבְקֶשׁ*, *וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ*, and *הִמְיִיתוּ*. Friedman's position, while possible, does not seem particularly probable.

Gershom . . . Gershom

Another group of thinkers holds that it is not Moses, but Gershom who is the target of the Deity's attack and the recipient of the "bloody touch" as it were. Likely the first person to articulate this position (and publish it) was Augustine of Hippo. Augustine writes in a letter to Maximin, "That 'seal of the righteous which is by faith' was of so great importance in that dispensation before it was abrogated by the Lord's coming, that

²⁷ A very intriguing side-note to this point is the new meaning that Propp now wants to assign to *הַתְּנִיחַ*. "When Yahweh attacks Moses, Zipporah for the first time realizes that the violent stranger she married is a felon. Had she known, she might have hesitated to marry a "bridegroom of blood-guilt" with both a price and a curse on his head." "That Bloody Bridegroom," 505-506. I find Propp's proposal to be very stimulating and without other attractive options, I am basically convinced that he is right.

²⁸ Richard Elliot Friedman, *Commentary on the TORAH*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 184.

the angel would have strangled the infant-child of Moses, had not the child's mother, seizing a stone, circumcised the child, and by this sacrament averted impending death."²⁹

This theory is a bit strange in that, as we shall later see, the text that Augustine would have had would have most likely designated Moses as antecedent 1 and YHWH and antecedent 2. However, we have no way of knowing what Augustine's text said. It may be that his text indicated Gershom, or it could be that he simply found it unpalatable that YHWH seek to "strangle" Moses.

Augustine's theory was later picked up by Hans Kosmala. He holds as key the understanding of the association of ideas within Exodus. "The culminating events in the preparation for the exodus are, as we have seen, the preservation of the firstborn of Israel and the slaying of the firstborn of Egypt. The decisive sign on which the execution of the divine plan is made dependant, is a visible sign of blood."³⁰ Thus, Kosmala claims, The circumcision story deals with the same theme of the killing and the preservation of the firstborn son, not with Moses." He believes that the life of Gershom is threatened, Gershom is circumcised, and is finally smeared with his own blood. This foreshadows Exodus 12:13 (and 23), "The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt."

Eliezer . . . Eliezer

²⁹ Augustine of Hippo, "Letter XXIII (to Maximin)," 243.

³⁰ Hans Kosmala, "The Bloody Husband," 23.

A view similar to the last group of proposals is that of Julius Morgenstern.³¹ He also holds that Moses' son should be understood as both antecedents. However, he argues for a different son – Eliezer. Key to Morgenstern's argument is the idea of *beena* marriage (which stands in contrast to *baal* marriage in Morgenstern's appraisal). According to Morgenstern, Moses entered into a *beena* marriage with Jethro which meant, in effect, that Moses rented Zipporah rather than buying her. Thus, when Moses left Midian, Zipporah was to stay behind. However, she went with Moses and on the way had her second son, whom they did not circumcise. The local deity, angry that the boy had been taken unlawfully from Midian (by Moses the renter), came to collect. This view is incredibly imaginative, however his reconstruction is at times mere guessing or even invention. It cannot likely stand.

Pharaoh's Son . . . Gershom

There is one scholar who understands the first antecedent to be Pharaoh's son and the second antecedent to be Gershom. His position requires a bit of linguistic and structural acrobatics. Julius Coppens understands verse 24 to be the conclusion of YHWH's speech to Moses (giving instructions about what to say to Pharaoh). Thus, 24 becomes a prediction rather than an actual event. Coppens puts together YHWH's speech as such:

Et Jahvé dit à Moïse : Lorsque tu te mettras en route pour retourner en Egypte ; veille à accomplir devant le Pharaon tous les prodiges que j'ai placés entre tes mains. Moi j'endurcirai son cœur et il ne renverra pas le peuple. Et tu diras au Pharaon : Ainsi parle Jahvé : Israël est mon fils mon premier-né, et je te dis : Renvoie mon fils pour qu'il, e serve. Si tu t'obstines à ne pas le renvoyer, voici je tuerai ton fils, ton premier-

³¹ See Julius Morgenstern, "The Bloody Husband (?) (Exod 4:24-26) Once Again," HUCA 34 (1963): 35-70.

né ; qu'il soit en route, qu'il soit à la maison, Jahvé ira à sa rencontre et il cherchera à le tuer.³²

In order to accomplish this, Coppens must render the verbs in 24 (which are normally rendered in English in the past tense) in the future. Coppens rightly points out that one may not simply assume that “past tense” is an acceptable way to translate the verbs (or in his case *passé composé* and *passé infinitif*).³³ However, he also faces the problem of YHWH’s voice changing abruptly from first person to third person. Finally he understands Zipporah’s circumcision of Gershom to be a sort of insurance policy (given the nature of things about to happen with regards to other first-born sons; i.e., Pharaoh’s).

Moses . . . YHWH

A much more largely held combination is: Moses . . . YHWH (or if not YHWH, then some deity). This view is particularly well represented in early Jewish and Christian texts. For many of these, we shall do little more than report their position. A much more thorough study has already been done by Geza Vermes.³⁴ Vermes writes:

The principal elements of the earliest pre-Christian tradition upon which the Septuagint and all of the Targums – *Targum Onkelos* and the Palestinian versions – agree, are as follows: 1. Moses was the object of the threatened attack. 2. The attacker was an Angel of God – the Destroyer, the Angel of Death, but not Satan.³⁵

³² Julius Coppens, “La Pretendue Agression Nocturne de Jahve contre Moïse, Sephorah et leur fils (Exod. IV 24-26, ETL 18 (1941): 71.

³³ For a discussion of the range of ‘tense’ in Hebrew verbs, see Bruce K. Walkte and M. O’Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 343-447.

³⁴ Geza Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1961), 178-192.

³⁵ Geza Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*, 183.

The fact that many of these texts replaced YHWH with another being³⁶ only seems to emphasize the fact that they understood Moses to be at least the first antecedent. For YHWH to seek the life of Gershom or Eliezer would have probably been acceptable (Cf. Genesis 22). The fact that YHWH might seek to kill Moses, one of his most faithful servants, was not acceptable. A lower deity had to be enlisted. Even more explicit interpretation is given in the Ethiopic version of the LXX. Vermes translates: “May the blood of the circumcision of my son be in his place.”³⁷ “His place” is undoubtedly Moses’ place.

Slightly later, St. Ephrem the Syrian takes up the story and adds an interesting twist. In Ephrem’s version, it is Zipporah who has made a mess of things and Moses who almost pays the price for it. Zipporah disallows the circumcision of their son and thus offends YHWH. Ephrem’s text is slightly contradictory saying that both YHWH and an angel come to kill Moses. However, it is clear both times that *Moses’* life is sought. His text reads, “When Moses’ wife saw that he was about to die because she had stood in the way of circumcision, about which and on account of which he had argued with her that evening . . . [she] circumcised her son . . . The she held the angel’s feet and said: “I have a husband of blood.”³⁸

³⁶ Targum Onkelos, Pseudo-Jonathan, LXX: Angel of the Lord; Fragmentary Targum: the Destroyer.

³⁷ Geza Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*, 180.

³⁸ St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on Exodus*, 235. For an interesting comment on Jewish influence on early Christian thought—particularly Ephrem—see Antoine Guillaumont, “Un Midrash D’Exode 4, 24-26: Chez Aphraate et Ephrem de Nisibe,” in *A Tribute to Arthur Voobus: Studies in Early Christian Literature and its Environment, Primarily in the Syrian East*, ed. Robert H. Fischer, (Chicago: Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 1977), 89-95.

One of the most interesting commentators of the modern era that has espoused this combination of antecedents is Hugo Gressmann. Gressmann understands the original setting of the story to be different than the one in the MT. He imagines it to be Moses' wedding night. Gressmann also claims:

Der primitive Mensch glaubt, das *jus primae noctis* sei ein Vorrecht der Götter; daher auch die Vorsichtsmaßregeln (Tabus), mit denen die Neuoermahlten umgeben werden, weil sie besonders den Angriffen übermenschlicher Wesen ausgesetzt sind; daher auch bei uns noch die Sitte des Polterabends, dessen Lärm die bösen Geister verscheuchen soll.³⁹

Therefore, for Gressmann, when the deity comes calling, Zipporah circumcises Moses (not her son) and touches the genitals of the deity with the blood (convincing the deity that he has gotten what he came for). This story functions as an etiology for the origins of circumcision (i.e., a way to protect the bride-groom from demonic powers on the wedding night, *à la* the first seven husbands of Tobit's daughter). This theory is perhaps one of the most inventive, however, I find I must agree with William Propp's judgment, "We may be sure that Yahweh is no more a concupiscent demon-god than Zipporah is a virgin mother."⁴⁰ Even if there was a story such as the one Gressmann imagines, it makes no sense to put it into a context in which Zipporah cannot be a virgin.

Moses . . . Gershom

Brevard Childs gives the nod to Moses as antecedent #1 in his commentary on Exodus.⁴¹ He is, though, the first to admit that this is nothing more than a probability. The choice of Moses by scholars (as we have seen) often has to do with why it was they think God

³⁹ Hugo Gressmann, *Mose und Seine Zeit*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913), 57.

⁴⁰ William Propp, "That Bloody Bridegroom," 501.

⁴¹ Brevard Childs, *Exodus*, 103.

wanted to kill Moses.⁴² Childs shows humility in his judgment by commenting, “Whatever one decides finally to be the author’s understanding of this enigma, at this point in the story no reason whatsoever is offered.” Childs then finds the child (Gershom?) most likely to be antecedent #2. He offers, “The smearing of the blood serves as a visible demonstration that circumcision had indeed been performed.” Childs implies that YHWH was angry at Moses for not circumcising his son and thus sought his life. Upon Zipporah righting the omission, Moses is let alone. This view is relatively close to that of Augustine of Hippo. In either case, the problem is an uncircumcised son. Who exactly must pay the price for it is the matter of contention. Child’s opinion may be the better one since it is hard to imagine Gershom (whom we are to suppose is young) being held responsible for his lack of circumcision.

Moses . . . ?

The earliest writer taking this position seems to be Gregory of Nyssa. While it is clear that he understands Moses to be the first antecedent. He actually does not even report the second “foot-touching” incident. He tells only of a circumcision. Gregory reports:

Moses went down to Egypt and he took with him his foreign wife and the children she had borne him. Scripture says that an angel encountered him and threatened death. His wife appeased the angel by the blood of the child’s circumcision. Then he met Aaron, who had himself been brought by God to this meeting.⁴³

It is also of interest that in Gregory’s version, it is not YHWH who encounters Moses, but an angel. It is noteworthy that Gregory does not even say “angel of the Lord,” but simply “angel.” Whether or not Gregory had access to them, we now know of ancient

⁴² Similarly, the choice of Gershom, for example, often has to do with the fact that scholars have found reasons (supposedly) that God would want to kill Gershom.

⁴³ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, 35.

manuscripts that predate Gregory by at least five hundred years and designate YHWH as attacker. Could Gregory have found it unpalatable that YHWH do so and simply changed the identity of the attacker? It is, of course, possible that the text and/or tradition passed to Gregory involved an angel and not YHWH. However, Gregory seems to betray his own hand when he recounts, “Aaron, who had himself (i.e., just like Moses) been brought by God to this meeting.” This phrase implies that God was the acting supernatural power in the first part of the story and that Gregory made the changes.

The next interpreter we will examine finds Moses to be the antecedent of הַמִּיתוֹ , however, is unwilling to make a definitive judgment regarding the antecedent לְרִגְלָיו.⁴⁴ Walter Brueggemann holds that Moses is the first antecedent. However, unlike many others who feel compelled to adopt a scenario (imagined or otherwise) which justifies why YHWH would seek to kill Moses, Brueggemann bids the reader to be content without such scenarios. He writes:

The best we can do is to let the narrative witness to the deep, untamed holiness of God. In vv. 22-23, that wildness is aimed at the well-being of Israel, but here it is unleashed in all its destructiveness. There is no hint that God is testing or measuring Moses, but only that Yahweh operates in inexplicable, undisciplined freedom. To be present at all in Yahweh’s history is a high risk venture, for Moses as well as for Pharaoh.⁴⁵

To simply say that YHWH wants to kill Moses and that there is no rationally obvious reason why is difficult. It is also courageous. Brueggemann offers that Moses

⁴⁴ We should footnote *Jubilees* in this section. It designates Moses as the object of the attack (though by prince Mastema, not YHWH) and does not designate whose ‘feet’ were touched. It cannot, however, for no one’s feet are touched in *Jubilees*. YHWH delivers Moses away from Mastema. See *Jubilees* 48:1-4, trans. O.S. Wintermute, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* vol. 2, ed. James H. Charlesworth, (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 139.

⁴⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Exodus*, 718.

could be the antecedent of our second pronominal suffix, but seems very wary of it. Brueggemann is unhappy with all alternatives.⁴⁶

? . . . ?

Thus far I have reviewed a large amount of interpretation, only sporadically offering critiques. I have done so intentionally. I shall not need to be particularly contentious in order to defend my proposal.

One last commentator will lead us to my proposal. Terrence Fretheim comments, “I make one textual decision: in the absence of any unequivocal indication as to who it is that God tries to kill, interpretation should leave the matter open, moving with both possibilities, Moses and his (presumably firstborn) son.”⁴⁷ Neither does Fretheim designate the antecedent of our second pronominal suffix.

My proposal is two-fold. The first part is an interpretation of the MT as the final form of the story. The second is a historical reconstruction. In the wake of significant erosion of confidence concerning the validity of the traditional source theory of the Pentateuch (i.e., the Documentary Hypothesis), some scholars have become increasingly interested in according the MT a reading which considers it a literary whole (fully aware of and in spite of the fact that the text has a history of corrupt transmission).⁴⁸ Thus, this mode of interpretation does not argue that the Pentateuch was written as a literary whole and preserved as such, but that significant benefits may be derived by reading the MT as the final, fixed text. This hermeneutic has been especially endorsed by confessional

⁴⁶ See Walter Brueggemann, *Exodus*, 718.

⁴⁷ Terrence Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 78.

⁴⁸ See Gerald T. Shepphard, “Canonical Criticism,” ABD (New York: Doubleday, 1997) CD-ROM Version.

communities. However, most scholars also recognize that without history (and unfortunately the closest we can often come to history is reconstruction), anachronism and isegesis is not only possible, but likely. Thus, it is also desirable, for example, to keep current historical reconstructions of the formation of the Pentateuch alongside reader-response or “canonical” treatments.

As I approach the first part of my proposal, Fretheim’s position is helpful. I will basically agree with him, however, I shall not necessarily come to his position for the same reasons that he does. Fretheim assumes that there is (or rather was / was intended) a singular correct answer for each antecedent (and I would agree with him to a certain extent). However, since a piece of our puzzle is undoubtedly missing, he finds it imprudent to make judgments about what those singular answers are. What Fretheim does not mention is the possibility of reading the text under the presumption that it may be accorded multiple plausible interpretations. I suggest that the ambiguity of the story as it now stands lends credence to the argument of David Steinmetz’s 1980 article, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis.”⁴⁹ Steinmetz suggests that the tendency in modern scholarship has been to understand biblical texts in much the same way that Oxford University professor Benjamin Jowett did in 1859, “Scripture has one meaning – the meaning which it had in the mind of the prophet or Evangelist who first uttered or wrote, to the hearers or readers who first received it.”⁵⁰ Against the monopoly that historical criticism has enjoyed in the academy for most of the last two centuries, Steinmetz argues:

⁴⁹ David C. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” *Theology Today* 37 (1980): 27-38.

⁵⁰ Benjamin Jowett, “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” *Essays and Reviews*, 7th ed. (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861), 330-433.

The defenders of the single meaning theory usually concede that the medieval approach to the Bible met the religious needs of the Christian community, but that it did so at the unacceptable price of doing violence to the biblical text. The fact that the historical-critical method after two hundred years is still struggling for more than a precarious foothold in that same religious community is generally blamed on the ignorance and conservatism of the Christian laity and the sloth or moral cowardice of its pastors. I should like to suggest an alternative hypothesis. The medieval theory of levels of meaning in the biblical text, with all its undoubted defects, flourished because it is true, while the modern theory of single meaning, with all its demonstrable virtues, is false. Until the historical-critical method becomes critical of its own theoretical foundations and develops a hermeneutical theory adequate to the nature of the text which it is interpreting, it will remain restricted—as it deserves to be—to the guild and the academy, where the question of truth can endlessly be deferred.⁵¹

In the 20th century, Benjamin Jowett's philosophy has certainly been representative of scriptural interpretation in two arenas. Many of the more conservative interpreters of the Bible begin their work with the premise that the Bible is the (verbally) inspired word of God and consequently does not contain ambiguities, falsities, or other information that is misleading.⁵² For these interpreters, it is anathema to think that God would issue a “supreme standard by which all human activity should be tried” that is ambiguous or multivalent.

A similar situation is found with many modern historians. Rather than positing God as the author of the one, unambiguous meaning of a text, they posit a particular

⁵¹ David C. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” 38.

⁵² See for example the statement of faith of the largest protestant denomination in the United States, “The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God's revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.” *The Baptist Faith and Message*, section I – Scripture. Adopted June 14, 2000 by the Southern Baptist Convention. (www.sbc.net).

human (or humans) who is/are responsible for the specific and singular meaning of the text. Isolating the author and the cultural, historical, and ideological context(s) of that author allow the text to be very simply “figured out.”⁵³ Following the fashion of the last two centuries of Old Testament scholarship (largely following the brilliant, yet flawed lead of Julius Wellhausen), these interpreters find any evidence of ambiguity in a text as pointing to textual corruption which obscures the one “true” meaning.

Both of these understandings of scripture seem to discount the idea that an early writer might use sophisticated literary techniques such as puns or riddles or *double entendre* to convey ambiguity or that it may be understood to do so now regardless of the author’s intentions.⁵⁴ Attempting to make a distinction regarding what the author “intended” is good and desirable as long as it does not leave the text “figured out.” Bernard Robinson reports that because of its peculiar difficulties, scholars are agreed thusly about our text, “Its original point has been played down, or even eliminated from, the text as it has reached us.”⁵⁵ I disagree that the problems of Exodus 4:24-26 so obviously provide evidence of *significant* textual corruption. Yet, given the survey we have taken, even if significant textual corruption is a historical reality, I believe Steinmetz’s suggestion is commended by our text.

⁵³ On the pun intended by this phrase, see Christopher R. Seitz, *Figured Out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

⁵⁴ Work in the last half of this century by scholars such as Frank Moore Cross, David Noel Freedman, James L. Crenshaw, Ronald Clements, Jon D. Levenson, and Walter Bruegemann (to name a few) brings to mind the word “exquisite” rather than primitive. Of course, this is not to say that source and form criticisms are chasing after the wind or that the documentary hypothesis is not ingenious. However, Brevard Childs may be right about our particular case, “The speculative elements in the reconstruction run far beyond the historical evidence. Again, the dominant concern with the ‘original’ meaning has obscured the present function of the passage in the Exodus narrative.” Brevard Childs, *Exodus*, 98.

⁵⁵ Bernard Robinson, “Zipporah to the Rescue,” 447.

Even within the context of the single “historical” reading, I contend that biblical literature is rich with a literary sophistication that could lead one to adopt Steinmetz’s proposal. For the sake of parallels, let us briefly peer outside of Exodus. There are many puns in the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament. We may look, for example, at Jeremiah 1:11-12. In דָּבַר Jeremiah sees דָּבַר . Only a slight change in vocalization separates the words. They would likely have been visibly indistinguishable when first put to paper. Rather than clumsy writing (poor word choice) or editing, many scholars label these two verses as fine literary technique.⁵⁶ They intend to communicate on multiple levels.

Biblical texts also demonstrate literary prowess on more sustained levels. In his monograph on Judges 13:1-16:31, James Crenshaw gives discussion of the following stylistic features: large semantic field, rhetoric, anticipation, repetition, retardation, assonance, contrast, ‘pregnant’ terminology, humor, hyperbole, dialogue and monologue, and suspense.⁵⁷ Crenshaw also gives a significant discussion to riddles, their function in general literature as well as in the book of Judges. He states, “Riddles depend upon the language’s ambiguity. They communicate at two levels at the same time.”⁵⁸ That an ancient Hebrew writer may have crafted complex stories which function on more than one level and, in fact, depend on ambiguity is quite the case.

What clues, then, may we find that point to the multivalency of Exodus 4:24-26 within the Masoretic Text? Perhaps better stated, what license do we have to read the

⁵⁶ For the particular beauty of how this word play works within Jeremiah’s message, see Peter Craigie, Page Kelley, and Joel Drinkard, *Jeremiah 1-25 WBC*, (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), 16. Henri Cazelles, “La Vie de Jérémie,” in *Le Livre de Jérémie*, ed. P.M. Bogaert, (Leuven : Leuven University Press, 1997), 28. Ronald Clements, *Jeremiah, Interpretation*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 20.

⁵⁷ James Crenshaw, *Samson: A Secret Betrayed, A Vow Ignored*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1978), 50-59.

⁵⁸ James Crenshaw, *Samson*, 99.

Masoretic Text in such a way? The first thing we should point to is the collection of scholarship we have reviewed. People have pondered this pericope for more than 2000 years and yet scholars have not even gotten in the vicinity of a consensus. In fact, the *major* competing solutions are often wildly different and at odds. If there were a singular answer for each of the many questions in our short pericope, it stands to chance that scholars would have found some consensus on just one of those questions. They have not. Could it be then, that a multiplicity of the interpretations which we have reviewed can be considered appropriate? In my judgment, yes. Thus we have kept critique of those interpretations to a relative minimum. The first part of our proposal does not depend on ousting all other proposals – quite the opposite.

The pericope as a whole (without even regarding our two ambiguous antecedents) begs not to be given a singular interpretation. It screams ambiguity. Throughout much of the rest of Exodus there is lush detail. Careful attention is paid to location. “Tell the children of Israel to turn and camp before Pi-Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, before Baal Zephon, opposite it, they shall camp by the sea.” (14:2) “The whole congregation of the children of Israel marched from Elim and entered into the desert of Sin which (is) between Elim and Sinai on the 15th day of the second month after they had gone out from the land of Egypt.” (16:1)⁵⁹ However, in 4:24-26 there is almost no detail

⁵⁹ Admittedly a large number of scholars would assign the bulk of 14 and 16 to the P source (4:24-26 likely being J). Yet, as I am currently discussing the final form of the text, it is important to highlight the great specificity which appears elsewhere in the canonical context of our pericope. Less this reading be understood as merely synthetic, see Brevard Childs, *Exodus*, 218-224, 274-276. Childs is not particularly happy with the divisions of 14 and 16, however, he finds that no suitable alternative has been cogently argued for. Furthermore, cf. the rather detailed narrative from chaps. 3-6 normally assigned to J. (3:16-22 and chunks from 4:1-6:1). “Go and assemble the elders of Israel, and say to them, “The Lord, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying: I have given heed to you and to what has

paid to location. As Walter Brueggemann has commented, “The episode is not framed in time or space, nor does it seem to be related to its context. Moses is “on the way,” but to where we do not know.”⁶⁰ Moses is simply “on the way.” No points of reference are given. The “resting place” at which Moses stops, however, is not only ambiguous spatially and temporally, but according to Seth Kunin, also dimensionally:

It is likely that this location, especially in regard to the events that occur, can be regarded as liminal space. The ambiguity and liminality of the place is emphasized (and in fact created) by the fact that it is unnamed – the biblical text is replete with names of places, and often uses significant events as etiologies of place names.⁶¹

Furthermore, the text does not explicitly say whether the meeting takes place during the day or at night. We are not even sure who is present. YHWH, Moses, and Zipporah we are sure of. However, are both sons present or only one? If only one, which one?

Other questions abound. What precisely did Zipporah do with the foreskin, throw or touch (וּתַצֵּעַ)? What is a הַתְּנִידִמִים? Then there is our question. To whom do the respective pronominal suffixes (waws) of הַמִּיתוֹ and לְרַגְלָיו refer? The fact is that the text itself provides no help whatsoever in identifying the antecedents. They are ambiguous antecedents in an ambiguous pericope. Put another way, there are endless opportunities for fruitful interpretation by communities who understand this passage to be part of Holy Scripture. There is even precedence for such a venture.

been done to you in Egypt. I declare that I will bring you up out of the misery of Egypt, to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.” (3:16-17) At this point in our discussion it is not highly relevant whether the author was J or P or whether the text was seriously edited between one of those tradents and the form that it reached in the MT. That is relevant for the second part of our proposal.

⁶⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Exodus*, 718.

⁶¹ Seth Kunin, “The Bridegroom of Blood,” 6.

Long ago a great thinker and a shaper of the early Christian movement wrote of the Bible, “Then there is the doctrine that the scriptures were composed through the Spirit of God and that they have not only that meaning which is obvious, but also another which is hidden from the majority of readers. For the contents of scripture are the outward forms of certain mysteries and the images of divine things.”⁶² Our text may very well have been welcomed as ambiguous and multivalent by an interpreter like Origen over 1700 years ago. Certainly, as Steinmetz points out, “From the time of John Cassian, the church subscribed to a theory of the fourfold sense of Scripture.”⁶³ In my judgment, the vast array of viable antecedents we have discussed provides *many* rich opportunities for Christian and Jewish reflection, sermons, and *midrashim*. In light of the ambiguity of Exodus 4:24-26, those modes of interpretation could take the text seriously and at the same time entertain multiple possibilities with regards to the ambiguous antecedents – without the necessity of privileging one. What we are left with in our many interpretive possibilities is a variety of ways we may try to come to grips with the God of Israel.

The second part of my proposal -- the historical reconstruction – is still needful. The wholesale return to pre-critical exegesis is the intention of neither David Steinmetz nor myself. It would be an unnecessarily costly move. The key is to approach the biblical text with a historical hermeneutic that does not rule out multiple readings (or look on them with disdain) even when a particular “single reading” can be more or less agreed to by a majority of scholars. Oddly enough, even in the search of the singular historical

⁶² Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. G.W. Butterworth, (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 8.

⁶³ David C. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” 30. On this point Steinmetz points to a survey of medieval hermeneutical theory: James Preuss, *From Shadow to Promise* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969). On the different “senses” in which scripture could be interpreted in the medieval Christian tradition, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (article 10, part 1, question1).

interpretation of our text, ambiguity plays a role. If I am to offer a historical reconstruction of our text that is rigidly defensible on historical grounds, I must likely offer a position close to that of Brueggemann, which is to say that the writer's/redactor's intentional crafting of an ambiguous story about Moses probably had less to do with providing endless opportunities for interpretation as it did highlighting the mysterious, wild character of God.⁶⁴ As much as we have been interested in Moses' figure in this text, it seems that the ambiguity surrounding Moses points to the fact that it is the deity who is being pushed into the forefront of the action. The text is about God. Thus, the search for "outsiders" to the story to be represented by the antecedents is likely unnecessary as it would provide reason to call attention away from the main character of the pericope (God).

In this way we must probably understand the first antecedent as Moses and the second as whoever's feet would have been appropriate to the task. If Propp is correct in his understanding of what *קָהַן מִיָּמִים* means,⁶⁵ then Moses is probably the one appropriate to the task. In a way, however, this provisional historical reconstruction of Walter Brueggemann / William Propp (and provisional is probably the best we can hope for) also brings us back to the first part of our interpretive proposal. While the "single meaning" of our text likely means that our ambiguous antecedents refer to Moses as the object of both the attempted homicide as well as the applied foreskin, it also reminds us that in the end, no matter how many characters (antecedents) we try to insert into the passage to

⁶⁴ I would like to thank to Steven B. Chapman for helping me see this through remarks on an earlier version of this essay.

⁶⁵ Cf. Propp's very stimulating proposal in note 27.

make it work, the passage defies being about any of them. It is quite decidedly about God: the wild mysterious one who refuses to be figured out.