

“AND THE LORD SOUGHT TO KILL HIM” (EXOD 4:24): YET ONCE AGAIN

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ABSTRACT: The central question regarding the strange and mysterious incident of the encounter at the lodging place (Exod 4:24–26), the resolution of which determines our interpretation of the passage as a whole, is: who was subject to the deadly attack of God, Moses or Moses’ (and Zipporah’s) son? This paper argues that the redactor has structured the present narrative in which Exod 4:24–26 is embedded so as to allow for and indeed compel *both* readings, this despite the fact that they are mutually exclusive. The redactor has strung together three narrative units: vv. 18–20; 21–23; 24–26. If the second unit is bracketed and the first and third units are linked, then it emerges that it is Moses who was subject to God’s attack. If, on the contrary, the first unit is put aside and the second and third units read as a whole it becomes equally clear that it was Moses’ son who was subject to the attack.

The paper concludes by offering some tentative suggestions as to the literary function of this built-in, double, mutually contradictory meaning.

The strange and mysterious incident of the encounter at the lodging place (Exod 4:24–26) is certainly one of the most obscure and most discussed texts in the entire Bible. Its problems, difficulties and ambiguities are well-known, as are the wide variety of solutions that scholars have offered, none fully satisfactory, and it would seem that at this late date there is little that can be added.¹

Most modern scholars, however, have focused on a presumed “original meaning” of the text. Moreover, some have gone so far as to argue that to attempt to interpret the text within its present context is to distort this primary meaning and significance (Kosmala, 1962, p. 14; Morgenstern, 1963, p. 43). As a result, as Brevard Childs (1974, p. 98) has noted, most scholars failed to pay sufficient attention to “the redactor’s intention with

1. For bibliographical guidance, see Talmon (1954, p. 93 note 1) and Childs (1974, p. 90).

the text The dominant concern with the 'original' meaning has obscured the present function of the passage in the Exodus narrative."²

This essay, in accordance with Childs' warning, will put to the side the question of an alleged "original meaning" and will focus on the meaning of the passage in its present context, i.e. the meaning of the passage that the redactor wished to convey to us. From that perspective, I believe I can shed some light on one central issue. Rather than intending to resolve any ambiguities, I wish to show that at least one ambiguity cannot *in principle* be resolved, for the redactor has deliberately built the ambiguity into the present narrative.

The central question, the resolution of which determines our interpretation of the passage as a whole, is: who was subject to the deadly attack of God, Moses or Moses' (and Zipporah's) son? From rabbinic times³ down to the present,⁴ scholars have divided on this question, a majority favoring Moses but a substantial minority opting for the son, generally identified as Gershom, the first born.⁵ In accordance with what I said above, I shall not attempt to resolve this dispute. Rather, I wish to show how the redactor has structured the present narrative in which Exod 4:24–26 is embedded so as to allow for, and indeed to compel, *both* readings, this despite the fact that they are mutually exclusive.⁶

The arguments for Moses as the object of God's assault, as well as those for the son as the one attacked, have proceeded both from an analysis

2. Ironically, Childs (p. 98), mistakenly in my view, argues that "the passage is only loosely joined with what has preceded." In referring to "the present function of the passage in the Exodus narrative" and the "redactor's intention with the text," he has in mind the redactional comment in v. 26b.

3. For rabbinic and medieval sources, see the references cited in Kasher (1954, pp. 197–198, note 143).

4. Thus the two most recent major English language commentaries on Exodus—that of Brevard Childs (1974) and that of Moshe Greenberg (1969)—(Greenberg only covers the first eleven chapters of Exodus)—have split on this issue, Childs (p. 98) favoring Moses as the victim, Greenberg (pp. 113–114, 116) favoring the son.

5. However, those rabbinic figures, as well as most of the medieval Jewish exegetes who argue that the son was the victim, feel that the victim was Eliezer, not Gershom (see Kasher, 1954, p. 199, note 143).

6. The literary phenomenon of dual, mutually exclusive readings built into a text by the author is fully discussed and analyzed in the seminal essay of Perry and Sternberg (1968, pp. 261–292). As Perry and Sternberg point out (I am quoting from the English abstract, pp. 452–449), "The literary work leaves, in fact, a *system of gaps* which have to be filled by the reader in the process of reading. This is done through the construction of hypotheses, in the light of which various elements in the work are explained or fall into pattern The co-existence of incompatible systems of gap filling that are simultaneously constructed is not rare in literature (although most critics overlook this important fact) The authors suggest to call this phenomenon *multiple systems of gap filling* Ambiguity on the level of *events, of the field of reality represented* in the work [is] one of the distinctive marks of literature."

of the passage itself as well as from an examination of the context as a whole.

Confining themselves to the passage itself, those who argue for Moses as the victim point out that, "The initial '*Wayyehi*' sets [the passage] off as a separate incident, but the antecedent to the pronoun 'him' in V. 24 is left unspecified. It would seem most probable that Moses is to be understood as the one under attack, because the son is specified in the following verse, which otherwise would not have been necessary." Moving to the context as a whole, this view contends that, since Moses is the central figure in the narrative, it stands to reason that he is the antecedent referent of the pronoun "him" (Childs, 1974, p. 98). Indeed this assumption seems to be taken for granted by most commentators (Cassuto, 1965, p. 38) and generally is not even explicitly argued for.

Those who argue for the son as the victim, when focusing upon the passage *per se*, note that Moses is not mentioned at all by name in this incident. The only parties clearly identified are (in order of appearance) God, Zipporah and her son. This would indicate that Moses does not figure at all in the incident but that the son is both victim and circumcised (Kosmala, 1962, p. 16).

However, in moving to the context as a whole, those who argue for the son as the victim, and who rely upon the general impression left by the narrative, offer a closely reasoned argument based upon the verses (22–23) immediately preceding the incident. In vv. 22–23 God tells Moses:

You shall say to Pharaoh: "Thus says the Lord, Israel is my first born son, and I say to you, Let my son go that he may worship me. If you refuse to let him go, then I will slay your first born son."

J. Blau (1956, pp. 1–3), pointing to these verses, has argued that, "The central point in these verses is that Pharaoh oppressed Israel, the first born son of God; therefore God will punish him measure for measure: God will kill his first born son. We are therefore compelled to say that the pericope of the "*Hātan Dāmîm*" (vv. 24–26) which these verses (22–23) were intended to clarify speaks about the slaying of a first born; the pronoun in "The Lord met him and sought to kill *him*" (v. 24) must refer then to Gershom, Moses' first born The son is both the victim and the one circumcized The destroyer who will strike the first born of Egypt is, as it were, already on his way and he is endangering the first born son of Moses himself!"

This argument of Blau's is taken up and strengthened by Moshe Greenberg. Greenberg (1969, p. 113), like Blau, agrees that "the context, particularly the juxtaposition with the preceding recommends the . . . view that [the victim] was Moses' first born, Gershom." He notes (p. 116) that

“the movement of threat from Pharaoh’s first born to Moses’ is strikingly dramatic.” Most important, he clarifies the problem raised by this view, viz. why “did the destroyer fall upon the first born of Moses even before he struck the first born of Egypt,” by comparing this incident to Jacob’s desperate night encounter with a divine being at Jabbok (Gen 32:25ff). After pointing out a number of common denominators between these two incidents, Greenberg notes (p. 111): “Some of the language of Jacob’s encounter with Esau in Gen 33 is so like that of the prior nocturnal encounter of Gen 32 (cf. 32:31 with 33:10b; and the correspondence of the *bərākōt* [32:37, 30; 33:11]) that one is led to think that the night event was a premonition of the morrow’s confrontation from which the patriarch emerged tempered. Here too it may be supposed that the nocturnal attack on Moses’ family presaged something similar, from which there would be deliverance, but with bloodshed.”⁷ While Greenberg’s description of the victim is deliberately nondescript here, and can refer either to Moses or his son, it should be clear that the analogy he draws works only if the son is the victim. Just as in the case of Jacob, a future encounter with an adversary is anticipated in a mysterious night encounter, so here the future deadly encounter of God and the first born of Pharaoh is anticipated by the mysterious deadly encounter between God and the first born of Moses. The difference between the two incidents ought to be noted, however. While in the incident at Jabbok it is Jacob himself who mysteriously anticipates his future encounter with Esau, here the future deadly encounter between God and the first born of Egypt is mysteriously anticipated by a deadly encounter between God and the first born, not of Pharaoh, but of Moses! As Blau (1956, p. 2) aptly points out, the rabbinic principle “once the destroyer has been given permission to destroy he no longer distinguishes between the righteous and wicked” (*Baba Qama* 60a; cf. Rashi on Exod 12:22), stated with reference to the danger confronting Israel on the night the first born were slain is equally, if not more, applicable here. There exists here a profound confusion between Moses and Pharaoh or rather Moses’ son and Pharaoh’s son and only the act of circumcision sets it right.

Blau’s and Greenberg’s argument from context appears, to me at least, to be convincing. But I would argue that if the context points to Moses’ son as the victim, in equal measure and in a similar manner, it points to Moses as the victim. And this is so, not just from the general impression left by virtue of the fact that Moses is the main figure in the narrative as a whole. But, rather, just as the future threat of death directed against Pharaoh’s son (v. 23) points to Moses’ son as the one attacked at the

7. Greenberg here, as he notes, is developing a comparison first suggested by the Rashbam on Exod 4:14.

lodging place, as a result of a profound confusion of identities, so the apparently past threat directed against Moses in v. 19 points to Moses himself as the one attacked at the lodging place, again as a result of an equally profound, if different confusion of identities.

In v. 19 God tells Moses: "Go back to Egypt for all the men who sought (*bqš*) your life are dead." This, as most commentators and modern scholars argue, refers to the Pharaoh of the oppression and his servants who sought (*wayyabaqqēs*) to slay Moses (2:15).⁸

This reason offered by God to Moses why he should return to Egypt points to Moses as being the one attacked at the lodging place. If we bracket vv. 21–23 and read vv. 24–26 as immediately following upon vv. 18–20, the sequence becomes clear. The Pharaoh of the oppression has died and therefore is no longer a source of danger to Moses. He who sought to slay (*wayyabaqqēs laḥārōg* 2:15) Moses no longer seeks his life (*hambaqšim 'et napšekā*). Moses therefore starts to return to Egypt. But suddenly it turns out that the threat to Moses' life is no longer past. True, the original source of the threat, the Pharaoh of the oppression is dead; but now there is a new, even more deadly threat to Moses' life from a new, even more deadly source, God Himself. Whereas before it was Pharaoh who sought to slay (*biqqēs laḥārōg*) Moses, now it is God who seeks (*wayyabaqqēs ḥāmītō*) to kill him.⁹ Once again there is a profound confusion of identities, this time between God and Pharaoh—Who is Moses' enemy?—a confusion, that, again, can only be set aright by the act of circumcision. Our analysis of v. 19 (which echoes 2:15) as pointing to Moses being the victim of God's attack at the lodging place (v. 24) can be clinched by noting that in the Pentateuch the verb "*bqš*" is used in

8. *Contra* Rashi who, following the rabbis, argues that it refers to the two quarrelling Hebrews, who in his view (see his comments on Exod 2:15) informed on Moses to Pharaoh. Of course, since Rashi (see his comments on Exod 2:23) adopts the midrashic view that the Pharaoh who sought to slay Moses had not really died but "merely" became leprous he, like the rabbis, could not interpret Exod 4:19 as referring to Pharaoh. For certainly a Pharaoh who, after he became leprous, "used to slaughter the infants of Israel and bathe in their blood" would not, on account of his leprosy, have become less of a threat to Moses!

9. Cassuto (1965, p. 38), who assumes that Moses is the victim of God's attack, notes that *wayyabaqqēs ḥāmītō* in 4:24 echoes *hambaqšim 'et napšekā* in 4:19 but draws no conclusions from this observation. (It should be noted that Childs' translation of *hambaqšim 'et napšekā* as 'wanted to kill' and *wayyabaqqēs ḥāmītō* as 'sought to kill' misses the significant repetition of the word *bqš* and, even worse, conceals its existence from the reader. On the other hand, Childs translates *laḥārōg* (2:15), *mabaqšim 'et napšekā* (4:19), and *ḥāmītō* (4:24) all as 'kill,' thus leveling the diversity of the text). Greenberg, who argues that Gershom is the object of God's attack, notes (p. 116) that "the three brief passages (18–20; 21–23; 24–26) are permeated with allusions to death" but also does not draw the proper conclusions.

connection with killing in these three verses and only these three verses.¹⁰ This cluster of the word "bqš" is clearly intended to establish a thematic unity. Pharaoh has sought to slay Moses in 2:15. In 4:19 God assures Moses that the Pharaoh who had sought his life is dead and the threat is past. In 4:24 it is now, surprisingly, God Himself, who seeks to kill Moses.

In the light of our analysis it is no wonder that the dispute as to whether it was Moses or Moses' son who was the victim of God's attack has gone on interminably and is no closer to resolution now than it was in rabbinic times. For it is a mistake in *principle* to attempt to resolve this narrative ambiguity since, as we have seen, the narrative ambiguity, at least in its present context, is in *principle* irresolvable. Or to be more precise, the redactor has so structured the text, has so linked the narrative units as to point in both contradictory directions, to allow for and to compel both interpretations, despite their being mutually exclusive.¹¹

We have here three narrative units loosely strung together: vv. 18–20; 21–23; 24–26. All three units speak of threats of death. In the first unit the threat of death is already past, in the second unit it is still in the future, in the third unit it is present in all its deadliness. If we bracket the second unit and link the first and third units, it is clear that the threat of death to Moses is no longer past but now, emanating from a new source—not Pharaoh but God Himself—is still very much present and threatens to strike Moses down. If, on the contrary, we put to the side the first unit and read the second and third units as a whole, it becomes equally clear that the future threat of death directed against Pharaoh's first born son is no longer still in the future but very much present, except that it now mysteriously strikes Moses' first-born son, not Pharaoh's first-born son.

10. One other possible instance is Num 35:23. However, it does not seem that the phrase there (*mābaqqēš rā'atō*) refers to an attempt on someone's life. Even if it did it would be a much weaker usage than the three instances in Exodus. In any event, even if there were a clear fourth instance in the Pentateuch of "bqš" being used in connection with death, my argument would not be materially affected, though some of its dramatic force might be lost.

11. Greenberg, at one point (p. 115), seems to realize that the redactor has "[left] open the identity of the attacked person." However, in general, he opts for Gershom as being the victim, influenced by the universal tendency to attempt to resolve the question of identity in favor of one candidate. See Perry and Sternberg (1968, p. 450) on the conflict between the apparitionist hypothesis and non-apparitionist hypothesis that have been put forward in the criticism of Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*. "The implicit ideal of English criticism to establish a *single* correct hypothesis [for *The Turn of the Screw*] is shown to be absurd. This ideal has led to interminable controversy about what really happens in this nouvelle . . . The central compositional principle of James' story is the principle of the inability to decide between the two central hypotheses. The controversy on this story is and will be interminable as long as critics endeavour to justify one, and only one of these hypotheses, for one can adduce a number of arguments both for and against each of the hypotheses. . . . In fact, neither of the hypotheses can be accepted by itself—we must accept *both*."

That the redactor so structured the narrative that it can and indeed must be read in both ways, is, I think, indisputable. Why he so structured the narrative that way, i.e. what is the function of this double, mutually contradictory meaning,¹² is less certain.

Brevard Childs (1974, p. 100) commenting on the phrase “at that time she said ‘*hātan dāmîm*’ in reference to circumcision” argues that “the effect of this [redactional comment] is . . . [to] focus the whole emphasis of the passage on circumcision. Whatever Zipporah had done—she had cut off the foreskin, touched his ‘feet’, pronounced the words—comprised the act of circumcision, and this is what saved [the victim].”¹³ Arguing along similar lines, Greenberg (1969, p. 115) suggests “[Leaving] open the identity of the attacked person allows the focus of the story to remain where the narrator evidently wished it; on the saving power of the blood of circumcision.”¹⁴

I agree with this view but believe it can be developed further. As I have indicated, both readings of the text indicate that the attack at the lodging place resulted from a profound confusion of identities. This confusion, this lack of clarity, present in *both* readings, reflects and is part of the moral opaqueness, the non-rational quality and mysterious atmosphere of the incident as a whole. In the Exodus narrative in general there is a narrative clarity corresponding to a moral and religious clarity. It is perfectly understandable that the wicked Egyptians should oppress the Israelites and that God should hear their cry, remember His covenant with the fathers and come to their aid, all the while executing judgements upon the oppressors. More particularly it is perfectly understandable that the wicked Pharaoh should seek to kill the righteous Moses and that God should come to his aid. Thus the picture in Exodus, generally speaking, is clear. God is the enemy of Pharaoh and the Egyptians, Pharaoh and the Egyptians are the enemies of Moses and Israel, God is the redeemer and protector of Moses and Israel.

This perspective is maintained in 4:18–20 and 21–23. In 4:18–20 it is the wicked Pharaoh of the oppression who was Moses’ enemy; in 4:21–23 it is God who will be Pharaoh’s enemy. But in vv. 24–26 the whole order breaks down and everything is reversed. If we take the first and third units together there is a confusion between God and Pharaoh as to who is Moses’ enemy. If we read the second and third units as a whole, it turns out that God is no longer Pharaoh’s enemy and it is not Pharaoh’s first born he

12. As Perry and Sternberg (1968, p. 449) note, “Multiple systems of gap-filling . . . in *themselves* do not ensure literary merit or value. They become valuable and interesting only if they serve definite functions and are part and parcel of the overall composition of the work.”

13. Of course, for Childs, the victim is Moses.

14. See above, note 11.

is about to strike; rather he is Moses' enemy and it is Moses' first born who is stricken. Here the confusion of identities is between Moses and Pharaoh. According to the first reading, the confusion of identities concerns the source of one death threat; according to the second reading, the confusion of identities concerns the object of another death threat. These two readings, then, though mutually exclusive, join together to compound and heighten¹⁵ the mysterious, non-rational, almost demonic (see Buber, 1946, pp. 55–59) atmosphere surrounding the entire incident. Whether it is the distinction between the righteous and the wicked or the human oppressor and the divine savior which is in danger of being lost here, whether it is Moses or his son who is the victim, the basic thrust is the same. The moral and religious order has mysteriously collapsed. And the dual reading only serves to intensify the dread and darkness of the night at the lodging place.

In this respect I believe it is an error to seek a reason for the divine attack, whether on Moses or on the son. As Greenberg (1969, p. 111) correctly observes, "That no motive for the attack is given is part of the non-rationality of [this story]." And indeed what is precisely so terrifying about this incident is that the clear religious order prevailing previously has mysteriously broken down for no apparent reason. The attack by God, whether on Moses or on his son, does not flow from some presumed misdeed of Moses, does not serve any moral or religious purpose, but results from the inexplicable confusion of identities that is indicative of the strangeness or irrationality permeating the incident as a whole.¹⁶

The function of Zipporah's act of circumcision, then, as the redactor understands it, is to dispell the deadly confusion, the demonic gloom and restore the previously existing religious order, re-instate once again the distinction between righteous and wicked, between human oppressor and divine savior. Just as on the night of the Exodus the blood of the Paschal lamb served an apotropaic function and distinguished between the Israelites and the Egyptians—thus preventing the religious order from break-

15. See Perry and Sternberg (1968, p. 450) for how the use of two systems of gap-filling in the story of David and Bathsheba serves to throw ironic light on David in different ways.

16. The classic explanation of Rashi (following the rabbis) that God assailed Moses because he failed to circumcise his son seems, in this context, to be overly rationalistic. Nor can I agree with Childs (p. 101) that such a "pre-critical" approach "reflects, to a large extent, the redactor's perspective." It is interesting to note that both Blau, who argues that Gershom was the victim of the divine attack, and Cassuto who argues that Moses was the victim, follow the Rashbam on 4:14 in arguing that the reason for the attack was Moses' reluctance to accept the divine mission and that the attack whether on himself or his son was a means of compelling him to accept that mission—though neither gives credit to the Rashbam for this observation. (The resemblance between the Rashbam and Blau is particularly striking). However, the question of Moses' reluctance to accept the divine mission does not seem to be an issue in this section.

ing down as a result of the death which was abroad—so too at the night encounter at the lodging place, the blood of circumcision served an apotropaic function. It thereby averted an ultimate breakdown of this order—though a partial breakdown did occur as a result of the threats of death hovering over the narrative as a whole—and restored the religious order that had prevailed just a moment before (Blau, 1956, p. 2; Greenberg, 1969, p. 117 note 1).¹⁷

The restoration of this order is signified by Aaron's meeting with Moses (4:27) where the term *wayyipgāšehû* 'and he met him' is used echoing the use of this term in 4:24. But while in 4:24 the meeting took place in a religious no-man's land (probably at a border) and had nearly fatal results, in 4:27 the encounter takes place at the mountain of God is one of love and harmony (Cassuto, 1965, p. 40).

Then it happened at an encampment on the way, the Lord met him and sought to kill him (v. 24).

So (Aaron) went and met him at the Mountain of God and kissed him (v. 27).

Could there be a greater contrast than this?! What has happened to enable this radical transformation to come to pass? What has intervened

17. Note that when I speak about God's attack at the lodging place, I distinguish in my argument between reason and cause. I claim that there was no reason for God's attack, whether it was directed against Moses or his son, in the sense that the attack was not motivated by anything that Moses did or failed to do. On the other hand, the cause of God's attack is the previous threats of death that permeate and hang over the unit as a whole. In this respect one ought to say, to be precise, that while the attack was unmotivated and thus nonrational, it was caused and thus not wholly inexplicable.

This perspective, as I indicate in the text, is supported by the analogy, certainly intended by the biblical redactor (see Fishbane, 1979, pp. 70–71, 76), between the threat of death directed against Moses or his son at the lodging place and the threat of death directed at the Israelites on Passover night, and the respective apotropaic roles of the blood of circumcision and the blood of the Paschal lamb in averting those threats. No one would argue that on Passover night the Israelites were threatened with death because they had committed the ritual sin of failing to offer the Paschal lamb. Rather they were threatened with death because death was abroad striking down the Egyptians and threatening indiscriminately to strike them down as well, and the blood of the Paschal lamb performed an apotropaic function *vis-à-vis* that threat. In the light of the analogy, then, to argue that Moses or his son was in danger of death at the lodging place because of the ritual sin of noncircumcision (even if one wishes to argue as does one reader that the "noncircumcision poses a threat to the Divine promise of liberation"—an argument, incidentally, which lacks any basis in the Exodus narrative), or because Moses had refused to accept his mission would be placing the cart before the horse. Rather the threat against Moses or his son was precipitated, as stated above, by the previous threats of death that hang over the unit as a whole and the act of circumcision is not intended to correct a previous ritual omission or to indicate acceptance of the divine mission, but rather serves a purely apotropaic function.

between these two verses?— Zipporah's saving act of circumcision. That order which had broken down simply by virtue of the presence of death is now restored. The mission of Moses may now proceed. The road to redemption is once again open.

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