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When God Attacks:

Using Mythology and Lament to Understand Exodus 4:24-26

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by

Julia Olson

A Paper

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Method of Approach

One of the most difficult texts in the Pentateuch and, perhaps, even in the entire Hebrew Bible is that of Exodus 4:24-26. YHWH's nighttime attack on Moses and his family continues to be troubling, despite the extensive research that has been done to explain its origin and meaning. Many interpretations tend to pick the story up and take it out of its context within Exodus, perhaps even subconsciously, so as to make the subject matter more palatable in its isolation. Doing so has a negative effect on both the interpretation of the passage itself as well as the larger narrative of the exodus.

Though it may make facing this story more difficult, it is important to approach this text as it is situated, in its own space in the received text. There is a certain extent to which the study of its compositional history is helpful in understanding this vignette, however one must ensure that those studies do not treat it as something completely "other" than the rest of the Exodus narrative. We must look at this story in the place it appears, not in the place we may wish it had appeared.

Regardless of where one chooses to locate this text, close reading and study of the Hebrew phrasing found within it can lead to the conclusion that the passage is insoluble. This paper seeks to explore the possibility that the story of YHWH's attack on Moses *is* insoluble, but only linguistically so. There are tools that lie outside the world of linguistics that can aid one in approaching this story and finding theological *solubility*. With the use of other texts from the Hebrew Bible, as well as Joseph Campbell's theory of archetypal hero stories, a better understanding of God's actions in this passage can be teased out from the brief verses. Yet, the most practical method for interpreting the theological meaning of this passage is not found in hero mythology but in the words of

lament. For, despite any amount of research or textual study, at some point analysis falls short and only by lament can one confront what it mean to struggle with God in this text.

Translation

^{4:24}And it was on the journey, by the campsite, that YHWH met him and sought to kill him. ²⁵So Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and she touched *it* to his feet, saying "For you are a bloody bridegroom to me." ²⁶So he withdrew from him. Then she said, "A bloody bridegroom because of the circumcision."

Textual Notes

4:24. Since YHWH is the only named character in this verse, there can be no mistake when interpreting the subject of וַיִּבְקֹשׁ . YHWH is the one who is doing the attacking. The LXX writers attempted to soften some of the shock of this story by having an ἄγγελος κυρίου stage the attack, rather than YHWH. The biblical writers usually did not hesitate to express when a messenger of YHWH appeared in the story to stage an attack¹, making the reading that YHWH is the one attacking the preferable one.

25. Interesting to note, the verb used for the cutting of the son's foreskin (כרת) is the same that is used when one "cuts" a covenant, or makes a promise.² After this, Zipporah touches the foreskin to his feet. Since נגע appears in the Hiphil stem followed by a ל on *his feet*, Zipporah's actions can be understood as causative, meaning she made the

¹ Cf. Num 22:22-35

² 1 Kgs 8:9; Deut 29:11; 1 Sam 11:2

foreskin to touch the feet in question. It is not, as it reads in LXX, that Zipporah herself falls at *his feet*, but rather that she causes the foreskin to reach the feet. Though רגל is often understood as a euphemism for genitals, in this case the story is no less confusing if interpreted by its other meanings, such as feet or thighs³. Regardless of the translation, it can be understood that it is this action that Zipporah believes will assuage the attack. There is no true consensus on the meaning of דָּמִים except the common denominator of blood, although, even then, understanding of the word in its plural form can range from purely adjectival (*bloody*) to describing a murderer.⁴ The basic understanding of דָּמִים is “son-in-law,”⁵ a term which does not apply to any character in this passage without some stretch in interpretation. The importance of this phrase is crucial to the passage; without it, a full understanding cannot be reached.

26. Whatever happens in the previous verse, it is enough to deter YHWH from the attack. Thus וַיִּרְף is YHWH’s final action in this passage, making the end of the divine attack as abrupt as its beginning. The most plausible explanation for Zipporah’s words is that they are a later addition, serving as an attempt to explain an already ancient term.⁶ If

³ See Hans Kosmala, “The Bloody Husband,” *VT* 12 (1962): 14-28., for a full discussion of the apotropaic function of touching blood to the child’s thighs.

⁴ In 2 Sam 16:7 אִישׁ הַרְמִים can be translated as “murderer.”

⁵ Judg 15:6; 1 Sam 18:18; 2 Kgs 8:27; Neh 6:18; 13:28; Isa 62:5

⁶ See Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 99-100.

this is the case, the ל on לְמוֹלֵת is being used for the function of specification. With the ל, the author connects the ideas of הָתֵן and מוֹלֵה for the audience.⁷ Whether these words were connected before, or elsewhere in the ancient culture, is not specified in Scripture.

Context in Scripture

The nighttime attack takes place not long after Moses has been commissioned to deliver the Israelites from Egyptian slavery. As chapter 4 begins, Moses is expressing his hesitation at accepting the mission YHWH has given him. YHWH performs several miracles with Moses' staff and even Moses' own body, illustrating that the Israelites will have no choice but to believe, if not by the first miracle, then by the others that YHWH will perform.⁸ Moses' protests are repeatedly met with reassurance by God. Each time Moses brings up a new objection, he is told or shown that YHWH will be with him in the trial ahead.

God's reassuring nature sours for a moment, after Moses' next protest.⁹ It may not be a coincidence that this anger erupts just a few verses before the nighttime attack, although the amount of narrative material between the two events does not suggest a strong connection. Despite God's anger, however, God's immediate response is to adapt to the situation and, to an extent, to Moses' needs. His speech impediment would not

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Exod 4:3-9

⁹ Exod 4:14

affect their mission, for now Aaron could be Moses' mouthpiece.¹⁰ This shift in God's nature toward accommodation is also in tension with vv. 24-26, but the apparent contradiction in God's behavior toward a messenger is not as uncommon in the Hebrew Bible as to rule out a connection.¹¹

After Moses' conversation with YHWH, he visits his father-in-law Jethro (Jether), to ask permission to visit his people in Egypt and see if they are still alive.¹² Why Moses is not fully honest with Jethro is unclear, although some speculate that this means that YHWH is not originally a Midianite conception of God,¹³ while others have argued that this passage is a loan story from that culture and based on that particular understanding of God.¹⁴ Regardless of the omission, Moses is allowed to go back to Egypt.

Verse 19 carries on the conflict in God's behavior, as it begins with God's reassurance to Moses that all those who sought his life in Egypt were dead.¹⁵ The reader knows, however, that "the way was not safe at all - from Pharaoh perhaps, but not from God."¹⁶ The following verse illustrates Moses' trust, for he immediately gathers his

¹⁰ Exod 4:15-16

¹¹ Other instances of conflicting reactions towards God's messengers will be discussed in a later section.

¹² Exod 4:18

¹³ J. Philip Hyatt, *Commentary on Exodus* (London: Oliphants, 1971), 85.

¹⁴ Kosmala, "Bloody Husband"

¹⁵ Exod 4:19

¹⁶ Terence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 78.

family and sets off for Egypt. YHWH follows up the departure with another brief description of the goal in Egypt, as well as YHWH's plans for Pharaoh.¹⁷

The discussion of the first-born that follows may lend some insight into the nighttime attack, as one possible interpretation is that Moses' first-born son is the one attacked, rather than Moses. It is also no small matter that God describes Israel as God's first-born.¹⁸ This establishes the deep connection God has forged with Israel, so that the reader is aware of the importance of Israel to God. God has chosen Moses to deliver God's very own first-born child from the hands of the Egyptians. The importance of that mission resonates within the familial metaphor. God then describes the retaliation that will follow the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. In response to the king's oppression of God's first-born, his own first-born must die.¹⁹

The Attack on the Road

This threat to Pharaoh is followed by the strange vignette at the lodging place. Verse 24 is alarmingly abrupt in its delivery of the facts. The family is at a campsite for the night when YHWH meets [him] and attempts to kill [him]. The only named subject in the verse is YHWH. Moreover, that the family is encamped for the evening relays a sense of vulnerability, making the assault even more discomfoting to the reader. The biblical author was scant with details in a moment when they are desperately needed. Not only is no motivation given for the attack, the identity of the intended victim is shrouded in

¹⁷ Exod 4:21

¹⁸ Exod 4:22

¹⁹ Exod 4:23

textual ambiguity as well. The only details given to the reader are that YHWH meets or encounters him and then seeks to kill him. Zipporah is the only person who cannot be the intended victim, as the recipient of the attack is described by masculine singular pronouns.

The following verses shed no light on the nighttime attack. Zipporah, the only other character named in this vignette beside YHWH, takes a flint and cuts off the foreskin of her son. Further confusion follows in 25b, as the reader is only told that Zipporah touches the foreskin to his feet saying, quite cryptically, “for a bridegroom of blood you are to me.”²⁰

Astonishingly, this is all it takes for the attack to cease. The reader is told that “he withdrew from him,” and, as quickly as the attack began, it ends. One can only assume that the subject who is doing the withdrawing is the one who is doing the attacking, making this is one of the rare cases in this passage where the pronoun is easily understood to mean YHWH. Difficulty again arises when Zipporah sums up this experience by saying “a bloody bridegroom because of the circumcision.”²¹ Could this be directed to Moses? Or, if it is her son who has been circumcised, who is the bridegroom of blood? Is it the person whose feet she touched with the foreskin? Is it the one circumcised? There is no shortage of interpretations of this strange statement, and not many of them shed much light on the meaning of Zipporah’s words or the story as a whole.

²⁰ Exod 4:25b. The importance of the many translations of this phrase here and in v. 26 will be addressed later in this work.

²¹ Exod 4:26b

The translational issue of *הַמִּי יִתֶּן* alone moves this text toward the category of ‘insoluble.’ Without some creative flourish in interpretation, it is impossible to understand the most important elements of the story and, by extension, the importance or purpose of this story within the larger Exodus narrative. Perhaps even more daunting than that, however, is the potential theological insolubility of this text. If we cannot understand who is attacked or, especially, why, then what happens to our understanding of God in this story?

Survey of Scholarship

The difficulty in answering these questions has generated many varying interpretations, all of which bear important considerations for any reader attempting to wrestle with this text. In order to best survey these many interpretations in a relatively brief manner, viewpoints will be explored by means of the questions they seek to answer: the identity of the victim, YHWH’s motivation for the attack, and the overall purpose of this passage in the larger biblical narrative.

Victim

Despite the difficulty with the translation of the pronoun in v. 24, most scholars choose to understand Moses as the victim of YHWH’s nighttime attack. Brevard Childs suggests that, because Zipporah takes action, Moses must have been “under attack and incapable of responding.”²² This can be challenged, however, when one argues that Zipporah is the only other named character and the only one able to ward off the attack

²² Childs, *Exodus*, 103.

from YHWH. She is not the replacement for Moses, but rather a key element of the story.²³

Moses' guilt from some offence may also be the reason he is the victim of the attack. Given his actions in Exodus 2:11-14,²⁴ his stark refusal to take YHWH's mission²⁵ and, in more than one interpretation of this passage, his failure to circumcise his son,²⁶ there is no shortage of reasons for Moses' being subject to the death penalty. Another understanding is that it is the action of Zipporah which proves that Moses is the victim, for her role as "a rescuer suggests that Moses is the object of the divine attack, since his salvation by women is a central theme in the opening chapters of Exodus."²⁷

It is important, however, to recognize that the object of the attack is unclear in the text and, as such, Moses' son Gershom cannot be ruled out as a potential victim. Though it renders a much more difficult interpretation (for what God attacks an infant?), it is not absurd to consider such an interpretation. Both Greenberg and Fretheim arrive at the same conclusion in regard to the attack: it is impossible to tell. According to Fretheim, "in the absence of any unequivocal indication as to who it is that God tries to kill,

²³ Kosmala, "Bloody Husband;" cf. Moshe Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus* (New York: Behrman, 1969).

²⁴ See William H. Propp, "That Bloody Bridegroom," *VT* 43 (1993).

²⁵ See Yitzhak Avishur, *Studies in Biblical Narrative: Style, Structure, and the Ancient Near Eastern Literary Background* (Tel Aviv: Archaeological Center Publication, 1999).

²⁶ See Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, and Thomas Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009).

²⁷ Dozeman, *Exodus*, 155.

interpretation should leave the matter open, moving with both possibilities.”²⁸ Following this, then, one must move through the possible scenarios and attempt to find a suitable, *convincing* interpretation in the midst of the ambiguity. Fretheim and Greenberg come to the same conclusion; regardless of the victim, the importance lies not in the attack but rather in what follows it. The story then becomes one of the saving, albeit mysterious, power of circumcision.²⁹

If one does consider the son to be the victim of YHWH’s attack, then what almost necessarily follows is an attempt to interpret the passage in light of the final plague. God has just given a statement about firstborns, ending it with a very clear threat to Pharaoh’s son. For Kosmala, it is this discussion of firstborns that forms a link between our vignette and the rest of the exodus narrative. Thus, for the attack to make sense the victim must be the son, for “the circumcision story deals with the same theme of the killing and the preservation of the firstborn son, not with Moses.”³⁰ In light of the final plague, then, one can understand the victim to be Moses’ son, rather than Moses himself.

Divine Motivation

YHWH’s motivation for the attack is perhaps the most elusive of the elements of the passage. Unlike the discussion of the victim, who is at least described with a pronoun, the biblical author gives no reason for the assault. As the passage begins, it simply

²⁸ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 78-79.

²⁹ Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 115.

³⁰ Kosmala, “Bloody Husband,” 23.

happens. Despite this lack of detail, there are many understandings of the possible motivations behind the attack on Moses and his family.

The most common understanding of God's reason for attacking Moses is Moses' failure in regard to circumcision. Whether it is Moses or his son who is uncircumcised, some failure to take part in this covenantal action is what provokes YHWH. Although he does not commit his argument to a particular victim, Brevard Childs argues that one of the few things one *can* understand about the passage is that "it serves to dramatize the tremendous importance of circumcision."³¹ For Childs, it is the son who is uncircumcised and "Moses [who] was held responsible for its omission. Indeed so serious was the offense as to have nearly cost him his life."³² Dozeman also uses the argument that it was a possible omission of circumcision (of either Moses or his son) that prompted YHWH's attack, but with that he includes YHWH's claim on the firstborn as a potential dual motivation.³³

Such ambiguity in motivation suggests some theological insolubility, yet there are some passages that *do* help to root YHWH's nighttime attack within a larger, scriptural framework. This is not the first time an important character in the history of Israel had an altercation with God. Here, scholars use the similarities between Exodus 4:24-26 and the story of Jacob's attacker at the Jabbok to better understand YHWH's motivation. Among others, Plastaras has suggested that this attack and the attack on Jacob are divine tests for

³¹ Childs, *Exodus*, 104.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Dozeman, *Exodus*, 155.

the heroes before they undergo their true mission.³⁴ As Plastaras describes it, both Jacob and Moses are on journeys to meet with men that pose a threat to them. Each one is met not by the human threat that they fear, but rather a far more terrifying divine threat. Thus,

before entering into the decisive stage of their ministry, God's chosen servants first pass through a period of testing, a 'dark night of the soul,' where the adversary appears to be God himself.³⁵ When this test is over, they are quite unafraid to face the human adversaries of God's plan to save, for the issue has really already been decided³⁶

With this understanding, then, God's motivation for the attack on Moses almost seems to be a preparative one; God is testing and preparing Moses for the trial ahead.

Cassuto uses another divine confrontation to better understand the motivation for the attack, in this case, the warning to Balaam in Numbers 22. In that story, "the appearance of the angel can only be understood as a final warning to Balaam, when he set forth on his journey, and as a new reminder of the injunction that only the word that the Lord would speak unto him should be spoken."³⁷ Thus, YHWH's attack on Moses "also comes to tell us of a last warning of this kind, intended to supplement the final directives that had been given to Moses prior to his departure from Midian."³⁸

³⁴ James Plastaras, *The God of Exodus: The Theology of the Exodus Narratives* (Milwaukee: Bruce Pub. Co., 1966), 106-107.

³⁵ All gender identifiers are carried over from the sources cited. Original writing will maintain the gender neutrality of God.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

³⁷ Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997), 58-59.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

The most unique interpretation of YHWH's motivation for the attack comes from Marvin Propp. For Propp, it is not a test or a failure that provokes the attack, but rather it is the guilt attached to Moses for his murder of the Egyptian in Exodus 2:11-14. Given the Israelite understanding of murder and asylum, "an Israelite reader would have understood Moses' flight to Midian . . . as a murderer's quest for asylum."³⁹ Since Moses had not properly atoned for that murder, "the logical inference is that it is Moses' attempt to return home with unexpiated blood-guilt upon him that elicits Yahweh's attack."⁴⁰

Propp further supports this claim exploring the phrase "sought to kill" as it appears in the early chapters of Exodus. The word occurs when Pharaoh is seeking to kill Moses in 2:15, when some unspecified persons are said to have been seeking Moses' life in 4:19, and when YHWH attacks in 4:24. To Propp, the similarity in phrasing suggests that each person/group/entity is seeking to kill Moses for only one reason: Moses' murder of the Egyptian.⁴¹ If this is the case, then, "the surprise lies not in the Deity's attack in verse 24, but rather in his reassurance in verse 19: 'Go, return to Egypt, for all the men who seek your life have died.'⁴²

This brief study of YHWH's motivation will conclude with Terence Fretheim's analysis of the attack. For Fretheim, actually killing Moses is never YHWH's plan. Despite Propp's convincing argument on the repetition of *שָׁקַט* Fretheim argues that

³⁹ Propp, "That Bloody Bridegroom," 504-505.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 505.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

YHWH only *tries* to kill Moses, but is not actually aiming to do so. For Fretheim, “God ‘tries’ to kill; this softens the divine action.”⁴³ In other words, because Zipporah could intercede for Moses, God was not completely set on Moses’ undoing. In fact, Fretheim goes as far as to claim that “God leaves room for mediation, allows time for Zipporah to act, even implicitly invites it.”⁴⁴ The attack, then, is “a threat, not an attempt to kill that God fails to pull off.”⁴⁵

Overall Purpose

Regardless of how one interprets the attack, one *must* interpret it within the larger scope of Exodus. There is, of course, no shortage of explanations as to how this text fits into the surrounding narrative. Some argue that the text is not even located in its “original” place in the story, and as such must be interpreted either in connection to its original context or as a *sui generis* event. This study will briefly survey some scholars who argue for a different placement of the text, although more attention will be given to those who discuss the purpose of the passage as it stands in the received text.

Avishur suggests that this passage belongs after v.20a, just after Moses’ “flat refusal” of God’s mission.⁴⁶ Thus, the motivation of the attack is God’s wrath, which is kindled against Moses in v.14. According to Avishur, in the received text,

God’s anger is not evident in what is related immediately after. God’s proposal that Aaron speak instead of Moses expresses no wrath. And even after God’s proposal there is no positive response from Moses regarding the mission! It thus

⁴³ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 79.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Avishur, *Studies in Biblical Narrative*, 152-153.

seems that in its early formulation the story told how God attacked Moses and wished to kill him because of his refusal to undertake the mission.⁴⁷

Given this argument, it is obvious that Avishur wishes to interpret the text in relation to a different context than the one in which we find it.

Hans Kosmala also argues that this is not the original placement of the passage. He suggests that “the circumcision story . . . has no connection with the original narrative or with the insertions which it follows, neither in contents, nor in form, nor in atmosphere.”⁴⁸ Kosmala leans toward interpreting this story as a *sui generis* event, recognizing that, since it appears detached from the surrounding material, it “must come from a different stock of traditions.”⁴⁹ He uses this argument to emphasize the overall Midianite quality of the story, where Zipporah is actually the star and Moses plays no part whatsoever. For Kosmala, then, the purpose of this story is the importance of ritual, here a Midianite ritual.

Despite these arguments for the dislocation of the passage, most scholars argue that it belongs exactly where it is found. For Dozeman, the notion of familial ties is the current running throughout the first few chapters of Exodus, including this passage. Thus, this particular leg of Moses’ journey is “a rite of passage from Moses’ Midianite family to his Israelite family.”⁵⁰ Contrary to Kosmala’s assumption of the pure Midianite

⁴⁷ Ibid., 153

⁴⁸ Kosmala, “The Bloody Husband,” 19.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Dozeman, *Exodus*, 149-150.

background of this story, Dozeman sees it as an intertwining of cultures that influenced a particular etiology for the Israelites. Thus,

in the process [of the circumcision] she passes on the ritual knowledge to Moses and hence to the Israelites. The closing verse (4:26) indicates that the story functioned at one time as an etiology for infant circumcision. As a cultic legend the story tells of a transfer of circumcision from the religious practice of the Midianites to the Israelites through Zipporah, the Midianite wife of Moses.⁵¹

Both Hyatt and Noth agree that this passage serves as an etiology either for the phrase

מִיִּצְּרָה אוֹתוֹן דְּמִים or for infant circumcision.⁵²

Terence Fretheim argues that the passage functions as a sign to Moses. He agrees that, in some ways, it is similar to the “test” theory that Plastaras and Cassuto use⁵³, however that theory is “not in isolation from . . . the value as a sign.”⁵⁴ For Fretheim, the most important interpretation of the passage is that it is a “divine demonstration of the seriousness of the matter upon which God and Moses are about to embark: a life-and-death struggle in which Israel’s very life will be imperiled. That Israel and Moses will emerge unscathed is not a foregone conclusion.”⁵⁵ So, God’s attack on Moses and Zipporah’s saving action of circumcision links back to the discussion of the firstborn in the preceding verses and serves to illustrate that “just as Moses was saved by the blood of

⁵¹ Ibid., 154.

⁵² See Hyatt, *Commentary on Exodus*, 85-88; Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 49-50; Propp, “That Bloody Bridegroom,” 507.

⁵³ See above, under *Motivation*

⁵⁴ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 81.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

his firstborn, so Israel would be saved by the blood of the Egyptian firstborn.”⁵⁶ For Fretheim the attack on Moses can be interpreted in the wider Exodus narrative as another sign/wonder that God will perform in order to carry out God’s mission.

This brief survey illustrates the struggle to interpret the attack on Moses (or his son) in Exodus 4:24-26. There are always exceptions to the widely accepted theories, however, making the notion of a “consensus” of interpretation impossible. What every scholar recognizes is the bizarre, almost surreal nature of the passage, and the difficulty one faces when interpreting it, both linguistically and theologically. The lack of scholarly consensus demonstrates that no one translation, no single interpretation is wholly convincing.

Linguistic Insolubility

In truth, the most important element in a fully cohesive interpretation of this passage is the one that is the most remote. Essentially the root of the passage, הַתּוֹן הַזֶּה is a key factor in the linguistic insolubility of the text. The best possible understanding of the phrase that the phrase was most likely outdated by the time the author used it. Is this because the story is a loan story from another culture? Or because it is an ancient Israelite tale reused in the new framework of circumcision? That much is impossible to determine. Brevard Childs presents the best means to understand it, however, when he states that v. 26b “is an editorial reference by the story’s narrator to [Zipporah’s] words in 25b.”⁵⁷ The narrator felt the need to add the second half of v.26 to ensure that the audience would

⁵⁶ Ibid., 80.

⁵⁷ Childs, *Exodus*, 99

understand that, in this particular case, the phrase *דָּמַיִם* is directly related to the circumcision that Zipporah has just performed. It is not possible to determine whether the phrase would have been used in regard to circumcision in other stories in the culture, only that this particular author related the two in this passage.

Childs writes that

When the story was being edited, the phrase ‘blood-bridegroom’ already presented problems. The comment does not attempt to paraphrase the terms in order to illuminate its meaning. Nor does it offer any explanation as to whom the phrase was addressed. Rather, it serves only to relate the enigmatic expression to the rite of circumcision. It is not at all clear that the redactor understood any longer what the phrase meant. His comment simply set it in relationship to the institution of circumcision.⁵⁸

Given the ancient nature of the phrase and the editorial nature of 26b, truly understanding what *דָּמַיִם* means in a larger historical context is likely impossible. All one can know for sure is that the author intended to relate the phrase with circumcision. Since v.26 seems to be the verse that seeks to explain either the reason for the attack or the reason the attack stopped, and since the true meaning of the phrase *דָּמַיִם* is unknown to us, this passage is linguistically insoluble. There are too many “x-factors” that the interpreter cannot know, meaning that, in terms of the language, we will never fully understand what Zipporah meant by “bloody bridegroom.”

Theological Uncertainty

The question that follows, then, is whether linguistic insolubility leads to theological insolubility. Regardless of how one wishes to interpret the more difficult

⁵⁸ Ibid., 100

characteristics of the passage, the fact still remains that God attacked Moses along the road for reasons that appear to be unknown. If we cannot understand the language, are we then unable to understand God? It is here that one can turn to other places in the Pentateuch for a better understanding, for God's attack on the hero is *not without precedent* in Scripture. This is not the first or last time that God will seemingly attempt to foil God's newly commissioned hero.

The story of Jacob's wrestling match at the Jabbok is very similar to Exodus 4.24-26.⁵⁹ As with Moses, God *tells* Jacob to depart, even assuring him God's presence along the way.⁶⁰ And, like Moses, Jacob is traveling with his family until he is left alone,⁶¹ making him immensely vulnerable. This sense of vulnerability is a key aspect in each story of a hero's encounter with YHWH. Jacob knows he must confront a very powerful man, his brother Esau, and his success in this encounter is not guaranteed. It appears that "the very future of the promises made to the Fathers seemed to hang in the balance as Jacob prepared to meet Esau."⁶² It is not Esau whom Jacob should fear, however, but YHWH, who presents a much greater threat than Esau. At the peak of Jacob's vulnerability, YHWH attacks. After an intense fight, in which Jacob is permanently injured, YHWH lets the hero alone, just as Moses is left alone, and the hero is then permitted to continue on his mission.

⁵⁹ See Plastaras, *The God of Exodus*, 106-107.

⁶⁰ Gen. 31:3

⁶¹ Gen 32:25

⁶² Plastaras, *The God of Exodus*, 106.

Another instance of a divine attack occurs in Numbers 22.⁶³ Balaam has been chosen by the king of Moab to curse the Israelites, for they are too numerous and the king wishes to have them cursed so that he may be better able to wage war on them. God, however, has another mission for Balaam. Instead of cursing the Israelites, he is to speak only the words that God tells him. Like the story of Moses, God tells Balaam to accompany the chieftains of Moab only to become angry when Balaam carries out this task. Thus, God sends a messenger to block the way. Although it is not a direct attack, the messenger stands in the road, “his sword unsheathed,”⁶⁴ a clear threat to Balaam. Had Balaam’s donkey not prevented the attack, the messenger tells him, “It is you I would have killed.”⁶⁵ The purpose of the messenger is not to discourage Balaam from his journey, but rather to reiterate the importance of Balaam speaking only the words God will give him. Like Moses, Balaam seems to be complying with God’s command, only to be faced with a terrifying and inexplicable divine threat. Jacob, Balaam, and Moses each comply with the Lord’s command, and yet despite that compliance they are attacked. Given the similar nature of each of the hero’s stories, these attacks may serve as a sort of “rite of passage,” which “frequently have elements of danger, acted out or real, and feature symbolic death or rebirth into adulthood.”⁶⁶

The idea that each hero must pass through a sort of test or ritual ceremony in order to be prepared for the mission is not unique to the Pentateuch. In his book *The Hero*

⁶³ See Cassuto, *A Commentary on Exodus*, 58-59.

⁶⁴ Num 22:31

⁶⁵ Num 22:34

⁶⁶ Propp, “That Bloody Bridegroom,” 514.

With a Thousand Faces, Joseph Campbell explores the monomyth, or the idea that, in every culture, there occur the same elements in all hero myths. Every hero, regardless of cultural setting, passes through the same series of events in his or her journey. Like Jung's archetypes, these elements of myth are something that exist in the very subconscious of human beings, meaning that the Israelite authors of Exodus 4:24-26 would not have been immune to their influences. In order to better understand the divine attack as a step in the process of hero-making, we will explore Campbell's monomyth as it applies to Moses. This is, by no means, an attempt to offer a definitive explanation of the attack on Moses, but rather it is one of many tools that can be used to better understand why God would attack a hero when there is so much at stake.

Moses and the Monomyth

Campbell breaks down the monomyth into three stages: separation, initiation, and return.⁶⁷ Though much of Moses' journey from the basket in the Nile to the shores of the Jordan can be understood as part of the heroic myth, this section will focus only on the parts of the monomyth that apply to the divine attack on the hero. With that, the third unit, that of return, will not apply here, for the divine attack is at the outset of Moses' hero journey, and cannot in any way be understood as a final stage in his hero-making. Because of the ambiguous nature of the divine attack, the story can be fitted into several different stages in the hero-making process.

⁶⁷ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008),

Separation

A major aspect of the separation unit is the refusal of call. Avishur suggests that the motivation for YHWH's attack is "Moses' outrageous reply concerning the mission, namely flat refusal, [which] sparked God's anger."⁶⁸ Here, then, we see Moses refusing the call and suffering the consequences of a choice that "is essentially a refusal to give up what one takes to be one's own interest."⁶⁹ When this happens, one acts as one's own god, rather than as God's servant. The outcome, then, is that "the divinity itself [becomes] his terror; for, obviously, if one is oneself one's god, then God himself, the will of God, the power that would destroy one's egocentric system, becomes a monster."⁷⁰ If this is the case with Moses, then there is hope in the attack, for "not all who hesitate are lost."⁷¹ Rather, "so it is that sometimes the predicament following an obstinate refusal of the call proves to be the occasion of a providential revelation of some unsuspected principle of release."⁷² Perhaps, then, the attack on Moses is a liberation of Moses so that he is free to move on to the next course of his journey where he will truly be tested and where hesitation is not an option: a meeting with Pharaoh.

There is another stage in the separation unit that may be helpful in understanding the passage. Once the hero has set out on his journey, he must cross the first threshold.⁷³

⁶⁸ Avishur, *Studies in Biblical Narratives*, 153.

⁶⁹ Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, 49.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 64

There, the hero encounters the “threshold guardian.”⁷⁴ Past this guardian “is darkness, the unknown, and danger.”⁷⁵ Moses is leaving his home in Midian, entering into an unknown territory. Some biblical scholars have speculated that, if this is a Midianite loan story⁷⁶, the role played by YHWH was actually meant to be some sort of desert guardian, to whom one must “pay a toll,” so to speak, before passing. Thus, “the original story may have concerned a demon or deity of the boundary between Midianite territory and Egypt whom Moses failed to properly appease.”⁷⁷ Therefore,

the story of the young man who goes alone into the desert, who meets a dangerous spirit that reveals to him his life’s mission, who is symbolically injured and returns to his tribe forever changed by his ordeal . . . is familiar terrain to ethnographers, some of whom attribute the pattern’s ubiquity to universal psychological impulses.⁷⁸

In this sense, then, the attack on Moses is God’s preparation of the hero so that he may face the unknown future. For Campbell, this is an essential step in the path of the hero because “it is only by advancing beyond those bounds, provoking the other, destructive aspect of that same power, that the individual passes, either alive or in death, into a new zone of experience.”⁷⁹ In this case, the power to which Campbell refers would be

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ See Kosmala, “The Bloody Husband,” 20.

⁷⁷ Hyatt, *Commentary on Exodus*, 87.

⁷⁸ Propp, “That Bloody Bridegroom,” 514.

⁷⁹ Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, 67.

YHWH, who usually acts as protector but, in this moment, functions as destroyer so that Moses may pass the first threshold.

Initiation

The next unit in the monomyth is initiation. If Moses' journey has already begun at the burning bush in Exodus 3, then the divine attack can be understood as part of the second stage of the process in which the hero begins the road of trials.⁸⁰ It is not uncommon for the divine attack on Moses to be interpreted as a test, "in which Moses is prepared by God for the hard tasks ahead. He can now face any foe, no matter how hostile."⁸¹ Moses' road of trials consists of only one trial, however it is a major one. He is not asked to complete seemingly impossible tasks, as Psyche was in her pursuit of Cupid,⁸² but rather he "undertakes for himself the perilous journey into the darkness by descending, either intentionally or unintentionally, into the crooked lanes of his own spiritual labyrinth, [finding] himself in a landscape of symbolical figures (any one of which may swallow him)."⁸³ In Exodus 4:24-26, YHWH functions as the "symbolical figure" of Moses' coming trials, demonstrating to the hero that triumph in the confrontation with Pharaoh is not a given and that Moses himself may very well be swallowed up. In this understanding of the divine attack as an initiation on the road of trials, Moses is being shown that "he and his opposite are not of differing species, but one

⁸⁰ Ibid., 28; 81.

⁸¹ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 81.

⁸² Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, 81.

⁸³ Ibid., 84.

flesh.”⁸⁴ Moses’ opposite is Pharaoh, perceived as a demigod by his own people, and here, on the road to Egypt, God reveals to the hero that he and Pharaoh are the same: Pharaoh can indeed be conquered.

Each of these phases in the hero’s journey helps the reader to understand the possible motivations for YHWH’s attack on Moses. As noted before, the Israelite authors would have been aware of this archetypal journey, either consciously or subconsciously, and vestiges of it may well appear in biblical literature. That said, even the understanding of Moses as the hero in the larger framework of the monomyth does not remove the theological difficulties of the divine attack on Moses and his family. Although the stages in the hero’s journey may very well help one to understand why God chose to attack God’s hero, the fact still remains that the attack occurred. Here it is important to stress that, despite the potential negative repercussions, it is necessary that one does not interpret *in favor* of God just because it is God who is staging the attack. The comparison of Moses’ attack with others like it in the Pentateuch is a helpful tool for the interpretation of the passage in question, but it certainly does not offer a full theological understanding. The reader is still left to wonder why God would compromise such an important mission, even if it is for the sake of preparing the hero.

The conclusion one comes to is that there is, at times, a conflict between what God says and what God does. Why bless a hero on his journey one moment and attack him the next? Why assure the hero safe passage and then compromise it? Regardless of the hero, God’s conflicting behavior is a recurring theme. The question of why God says one thing and does another is asked again and again in the psalms of lament. In these

⁸⁴ Ibid., 89.

texts, readers of passages like Exodus 4:24-26 can find words to wrestle with the common denominator in each of the stories: the gap between God's word and God's action.

Solubility Through Lament

Just as God's attack on a hero is not without precedent in the Hebrew Bible, neither is the struggle to cope with what seems like unpredictable divine nature. It is in the lament psalms that the reader is given the text to wrestle with the difficult depictions of God. This wrestling, however, takes form in the shape of a prayer or conversation, for the lament "form of the psalm is rooted in this exchange between God and man."⁸⁵

In lament, the psalmist often cries out to God in anger and desperation. In Psalm 13, the psalmist asks "How long will you forget me, YHWH?"⁸⁶ The Psalmist feels abandoned, left alone by God to suffer in an unfair world, *God's* unfair world. God seems to have forgotten God's people and God's promises to them, and the lamenter yearns to know how long this torment shall go on, for,

in the blow that he has suffered, the lamenter has experienced God's denial. The experience is utterly unnerving and incomprehensible. The question 'Why?' is like the feeble groping of one who has lost the way in the dark. It has a sense of finding one's own way; it assumes that what has been suffered has its origin in God's alienation.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Claus Westermann, *The Living Psalms* (trans. J.R. Porter; Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1989), 2.

⁸⁶ Ps 13:2

⁸⁷ Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (trans. K.R. Crim; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 176-177.

This feeling of incomprehensible loneliness is not unlike the feeling one has when interpreting Exodus 4:24-26. The darkness that Westermann describes in the above paragraph, the darkness in which one gropes desperately for God, is not unlike the vulnerability in darkness which Moses experiences before God's attack. That vulnerability and sense of "feeble groping" is just as palpable for modern readers as it was for the Psalmist, for the fear he felt in his alienation from God so the reader of Exodus 4:24-26 feels when God attacks Moses. It becomes more than an attack on Moses. It is an attack on the reader's understanding of God.

Readers of theologically troublesome texts such as Exodus 4:24-26 as well as the attacks on Jacob and Balaam can relate to the repeated "cry for help of a tormented people whose own sacred perceptions have also been offended"⁸⁸ that occurs so often throughout the lament psalms. The confusing nature of God can be approached not with answers, but rather with indignant cries to God.

The key element of lament is its *direction*. In Psalm 13, "the question 'How long?' is addressed to God. . . . The question does not die away into infinity; there is One who hears it."⁸⁹ With that, then, the words of lament are not just empty words meant to complain about the general state of things. They are words that acknowledge spiritual conflict and a lack of understanding of divine behavior. It is true that "the one who is praying does not think that he has been granted knowledge that would permit him to comprehend how God governs the world or to grasp how God's justice works. He sees

⁸⁸ Hermann Gunkel, *An Introduction to the Psalms* (trans. J. Nogalski; Macon, GA.: Mercer University Press, 1998), 87.

⁸⁹ Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, 71.

himself once more a prey to the hopeless torment of that which he cannot understand.”⁹⁰
 But in the recognition that he fails to understand, the lamenter does something amazing. Despite the doubt about God’s nature, the “complainant cannot cease from calling on Him as ‘his’ God; in spite of the complaint, the address shows that a relationship with ‘his’ God continues to exist.”⁹¹

Lament is “the language of suffering; in it suffering is given the dignity of language. It will not stay silent.”⁹² When that language is turned to God, “doubt about God, even the kind of despair that can no longer understand God, receives in the lament a language that binds it to God, even as it accuses him.”⁹³ The words of lament “tread that thin line between reproach and judgment. But never do they condemn God, for the utterances are never objective statements. They always remain personal address.”⁹⁴

At the heart of every lament there is a miraculous trust. Because the words are a “personal address,” they bear in the core of them the belief that they will be heard. If they didn’t, why bother to lament at all? Inherent in the cries of loneliness and abandonment is the very trust that there is still a God who will listen. What remains in words of lament is the belief that “even those who despair of God are within range of God’s ear.”⁹⁵

⁹⁰ Hans Joachim Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms* (trans. K. Crim; Minneapolis, MN.:Augustburg Publishing House, 1986), 173.

⁹¹ Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, 83.

⁹² Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, 272.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 273

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 271.

To approach the story of the divine attack on Moses fairly, one must begin with this notion in mind. There is no denying that this story and those of other attacks will cause the reader to embody the feelings of the lamenters in the Hebrew Bible. What cannot be forgotten is the trust that God is a God who *will* hear, and so the conversation that lament begins with God is a conversation that exists in a relationship; it is not one-sided.

Linguistic insolubility does not mean theological insolubility, because a human relationship with God goes far beyond linguistics. However, a text such as this can prove to be theologically troublesome, and the reader benefits by supplementing it with an understanding of ancient mythological archetypes as well as other parts of the Hebrew Bible. The tools most useful for this method of identifying theological solubility are the lament psalms, in which we are given language to express the frustration of loving something we cannot fully understand. For, to approach this text on an even plane, we must love *both* sides of what we perceive as conflicting divine nature. And when the struggle to love images such as the divine attack on Moses becomes overwhelming, then interpretive responsibility requires one to recall the other side of the conflict, by means of lament. With that, then, we can read “and he sought to kill him”⁹⁶ simultaneously with God’s words, “you are valued in my sight, and honored, and I love you,”⁹⁷ and approach the conflict without hesitation.

⁹⁶ Exod 4:24

⁹⁷ Isa 43:4

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