

The Bridegroom of Blood – A Possible Interpretation of Ex. 4:24-26

By Ashby L. Camp

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Moses fled from Egypt to Midian because Pharaoh intended to execute him for killing an Egyptian (Ex. 2:11-15; Acts 7:23-29). In that foreign land, Moses married Zipporah, the daughter of Jethro, the priest of Midian, who is also called Reuel, which is probably his clan name (Ex. 2:15-21, 3:1, 4:18, 18:1-5; Num. 10:29).¹ Moses had two sons by Zipporah, Gershom and Eliezer (Ex. 18:2-4; 1 Chron. 23:15; Acts 7:29), and lived in Midian for forty years (Acts 7:30). Pursuant to the Lord's command, he headed back to Egypt with his wife and sons (Ex. 3:9-10, 4:12, 19-20).

On the way, Moses and his family stopped at a lodging place (Ex. 4:24a). Exodus 4:24b states that Yahweh (or "the angel of the Lord" per LXX and Targum) "met him and sought to put him to death." In the context, "him" seems to refer to Moses. The statement that God sought to put him to death does not mean he attempted to kill him but was unable to do so; the God who spoke creation into existence certainly is capable of killing Moses if that were his intention. Rather, it probably means that God made Moses so ill that he would have died had the desired corrective action not been taken. In other words, God was attacking him in a way that allowed time to rectify the circumstance that had caused the judgment.

With Moses presumably incapacitated, Zipporah either deduced or was told that his condition was related to his failure to have circumcised one of his sons, no doubt the younger son, Eliezer. We do not know how old Eliezer was at the time or why Moses had neglected this duty of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 17:9-14), but Zipporah circumcised the son and then touched the bloody foreskin to Moses' ("his") feet, presumably to associate him with the act since he was incapacitated (Ex. 4:25). God then relented, and Moses recovered (Ex. 4:26-27). Perhaps God took such dramatic action to drive home to Moses in a special way the necessity of covenant faithfulness as he was on the brink of returning to lead God's people.

Zipporah's declaration that Moses was a "bridegroom of blood" to her "because of the circumcision" (Ex. 4:25-26) indicated that he had been spared from certain death by her bloody act of circumcising their son. He had been restored to her as one who had been figuratively raised from the dead (cf. Heb. 11:17-19), so in that sense, he was joining her in marriage as a new man, and thus she refers to him as her "bridegroom" despite their many years of marriage. In the words of Umberto Cassuto, Zipporah was saying, "I have delivered you from death, and your return to life makes you my bridegroom a second time, this time my blood bridegroom, a bridegroom acquired through blood."²

¹ Hobab is Jethro/Reuel's son (Num. 10:29) and thus is Moses' brother-in-law (Judg. 4:11). הָוִי in Judg. 4:11 is rendered "brother-in-law" in ERV, ASV, NEB, REB, and NIV. Timothy R. Ashley observes in *The Book of Numbers*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 196, that a "whole range of scholars have translated *hōtēn*" as brother-in-law. He adds, "T. C. Mitchell has attempted to show that the root *hṭn* (regardless of the vowels) meant something like 'a relative by marriage'; hence 'father-in-law,' 'brother-in-law,' or 'son-in-law' would be possible, as the context required" (citing T. C. Mitchell, "The meaning of the noun *hṭn* in the Old Testament," *VT* 19 [1969] 93-112).

² Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, 3rd ed. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), 60.