

What exactly is happening in the passage about the circumcision of Moses' son in Exodus 4:24-26?

Compiled by Bob Young

"24 And it came to pass by the way in the inn, that the LORD met him, and sought to kill him. 25 Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet, and said, Surely a bloody husband art thou to me. 26 So he let him go: then she said, A bloody husband thou art, because of the circumcision." (Ex 4:21-26, KJV)

Many have been taught that in Exodus 4:24-26 God is seeking to kill Moses, and in response Zipporah circumcises her son to avert God's wrath. This is supported by a midrash, a Jewish interpretation, in the Book of Jasher 79:8-12 (not the Book of Jasher mentioned in the Old Testament). The passage includes the term, "bridegroom of blood," in many translations. These verses have perplexed many students of the Bible over the years.

- Why did God seek to kill Moses?
- How did circumcision avert God's wrath?
- Why did Zipporah circumcise her son rather than letting Moses do it?
- What exactly is a "bridegroom of blood"?

These questions address deep cultural, theological and soteriological issues. There have been many attempts to answer these questions, but most explanations are quite speculative. There is no scriptural basis for taking the life of a father who does not circumcise a son. Punishment for failing to be circumcised falls upon the child, not the father (Gen. 17:14). Moreover, the failure to be circumcised is punishable by exclusion from the Abrahamic covenant, not death (Gen. 17:14). If God sought to kill Moses for his sin of murder, as some scholars speculate, there is nothing about circumcision that atones for sin. Circumcision is a covenant, not a sacrifice that atones for sin. These speculative answers depend on misunderstandings and unscriptural principles.

The problem is not with the answers, but with the questions. Most readers are asking the wrong questions because they are reading the passage incorrectly using faulty or inadequate translations. When the passage is read correctly (in this case, the KJV gives an accurate reading), the passage becomes easy to understand. There is no need to ask these difficult questions.

The NIV says from Exodus 4:21-26:

21 The LORD said to Moses, "When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do. But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go. 22 Then say to Pharaoh, 'This is what the LORD says: Israel is my firstborn son, 23 and I told you, "Let my son go, so he may worship me." But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son.'" 24 At a lodging place on the way, the LORD met Moses and was about to kill him. 25 But Zipporah took a flint knife, cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it. "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me," she said. 26 So the LORD let him alone. (At that time, she said "bridegroom of blood," referring to circumcision.) (Ex 4:21-26)

The words that are underlined above are words that were supplied by the NIV translators. The original Hebrew only has the pronouns "he" and "him" in those places (compare KJV text above). These supplied names seem to make it easier for the reader to follow the narrative. But the problem is that these supplied names are incorrect. When we read the passage using the original pronouns, we get the correct understanding of the passage. Once we get the correct understanding of the passage, the hard questions that have plagued theologians for years vanish. Before you read the passage, clear your mind of past understandings. Approach the text as if you are reading it for the first time.

The translated text of Exodus 4:21-26 says:

21 And the LORD said unto Moses, "When you go to return into Egypt, see that you do all those wonders before Pharaoh, which I have put in your hand: but I will harden his heart, that he shall not let the people go."

22 And you shall say unto Pharaoh, "Thus says the LORD, Israel is my son, even my firstborn: 23 And I say unto you, 'Let my son go, that he may serve me: and if you refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay your son, even your firstborn.'"

24 And it came to pass by the way in the inn, that the LORD met him, and sought to kill him.

25 Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet, and said, Surely a bloody husband are you to me. 26 So he let him go: then she said, A bloody husband you are, because of the circumcision. (Exodus 4:21-26)

Let us go through this passage, explaining each section separately.

- In v. 21, "you" refers to Moses, since the Lord is speaking to Moses. "He" refers to Pharaoh.
- In vv. 22-23, the text begins with the "you" referring to Moses, but in the quotation within a quotation (v. 23), "you" refers to Pharaoh as God demands that Israel be freed. "Your son" refers to Pharaoh's son.
- In v. 24, grammatically "him" should refer to the nearest antecedent, which is Pharaoh's firstborn son (at the end of v. 23).

Here is a summary. In v. 23, God makes it clear that he will slay Pharaoh's firstborn son if Pharaoh refuses to let go of Israel. In v. 24, "him" refers not to Moses but to Pharaoh's firstborn son. Again, this explanation makes sense grammatically because the nearest antecedent is "firstborn" in v. 23.

This interpretation also makes sense within the narrative because the previous verse speaks of God promising to kill Pharaoh's firstborn son. Thus v. 24 belongs in the same episode as that of v. 23. Many translations begin a new section after v. 23, obscuring the fact that "him" in v. 24 refers to Pharaoh's firstborn son mentioned in v. 23. The result is that the new section begins with an undefined pronoun "him." Understanding a break between vv. 23 and 24 is not necessarily wrong as there does seem to be a chronological break between the two verses (e.g. "And it came to pass...." [v. 24]), but there is no thematic break nor grammatical break.

Verse 24 says that the LORD met Pharaoh's firstborn son in an inn and determined ("sought") to kill him. God had the foreknowledge of Pharaoh's refusal to let Israel go, so God was already prepared to seek the death of the firstborn son. This truth foreshadows the future narrative.

A new section begins in v. 25. The passage says that Zipporah circumcised her son as Moses held him still. The question arises, "Why is Moses not performing the circumcision?" The answer is that Moses had to hold on to the son so that the son would stay still. Imagine the situation. Here is a grown boy who had to be circumcised. A typical child would not stay still for a scary procedure such as circumcision. Some parents who have taken their children to the dentist or to the doctor for a vaccination will understand. Zipporah, being a woman, probably did not have enough strength to completely keep still a grown boy. Moses had to keep the boy still. Since Moses was holding his son, Zipporah had to perform the circumcision. That is why when the circumcision was over, v. 26 says, "he let him go." This "he" is Moses because the nearest male antecedent is "bloody husband." This phrase is not about God letting Moses go, but about Moses letting his son go after the circumcision was over.

The narrative shifts from God seeking to kill Pharaoh's firstborn to Moses and Zipporah circumcising their son. Consider the context. In v. 23 God pronounces a judgment upon Pharaoh's son. Did Moses understand that God's judgment was not only on the king of Egypt but on all the Egyptians? Moses

rushes to circumcise his son to ensure that God would count his son as part of the people of God, and so that his son would not experience the judgment against the Egyptians.

Some scholars believe that the term "bridegroom of blood" ("bloody husband") signifies Zipporah's religious ideas about blood sacrifice and covenant. These scholars are thinking too hard, intermingling the sign of the covenant (circumcision) with the sacrificial system (which, for the most part, was yet to be revealed). See my comments above.

Zipporah casts the foreskin at Moses' feet and calls him a "bloody husband" simply because she is disgusted by the bloody procedure of circumcision. Many non-Hebrews who have never seen circumcision might find the procedure utterly strange, inhumane, and disgusting. The term "bloody husband" is Zipporah's criticism of a husband who demands an apparently strange and bloody procedure.

Conclusion

Verses 22-26 can be summarized as follows:

In vv. 22-23, God tells Moses that God would kill Pharaoh's firstborn son.

In v. 24, God targets the firstborn son of Pharaoh. Moses fears for the safety of his own son because his son was not part of the covenant relationship with God (had not been circumcised).

In v. 25, Zipporah circumcises her son as Moses holds him still.

In v. 26, the circumcision is finished and Moses lets go of his son.

In vv. 25 and 26, Zipporah calls Moses a "bloody husband" because of the strange and bloody procedure of circumcision. Notice that there is no reference to "killing" or "death" after v. 24 because the episode from v. 25 onward has nothing to do with death.

Read the passage again and see how simple it is. This passage is rather uneventful and straightforward if we read it properly. The difficult questions asked by scholars are easily answered, and some of the common questions simply become irrelevant. The NIV and other translations that try to help the reader by replacing pronouns with names actually cause a stumbling block to the proper understanding of this passage. God was able to write "Moses" or "LORD" if he wanted to. But God did not. God deliver us from translators who feel compelled to "help" God say what God was very capable of saying. Such translations might be easier to read, but they are not always easier to understand.