

*Bible in  
History*

*John T. Willis*

*Yahweh and Moses in Conflict*

*The Role of Exodus 4:24–26 in the Book of Exodus*

*Peter Lang*

The interpretation of Exodus 4:24-26 is very controversial. Scholars have treated this text from various viewpoints on the basis of divergent methods or approaches. Two fundamental problems cause uncertainty about the origin and meaning of this text. One problem has to do with the nature of Exod 4:24-26. Another problem is the identity of the persons mentioned in Exod 4:24-26. This book arranges forty-two documented interpretations under each approach or approaches, presenting the view of each scholar proposing his/her interpretation of Exodus 4:24-26 in chronological order. The author presents his own view in the concluding chapter, essentially adopting a redactional, canonical, narrative, rhetorical methodology.

John T. Willis received his BA in Greek in 1955 and MA in Old Testament (1956) at Abilene Christian University. He received his Ph.D. at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee (1966). He taught Hebrew Bible at David Lipscomb University in Nashville, Tennessee (1956-1971), and at Abilene Christian University in Abilene, Texas (1971 to the present time). The author has written approximately 30 books and 100 scholarly articles in Old Testament studies. He has been Associated Editor of *Old Testament Abstracts* for many years.

## *Yahweh and Moses in Conflict*

# *Bible in History*

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Hochfeldstrasse 32, CH-3012 Bern, Switzerland

[info@peterlang.com](mailto:info@peterlang.com), [www.peterlang.com](http://www.peterlang.com), [www.peterlang.net](http://www.peterlang.net)

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## Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ABC	The Abingdon Bible Commentary
ABD	D. N. Freedman et al. (eds.), Anchor Bible Dictionary
ACEBT	Amsterdamse Cahiers voor Exegese en Bijbelse Theologie
AfP	Archiv für Papyrusforschung
ANF	The Ante-Nicene Fathers
Anth	Anthropos
BBB	Bonner Biblische Beiträge
BCBC	Believers Church Bible Commentary
BETL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium
Bib	Biblica
BIS	Biblical Interpretation Series
BK	Bibel und Kirche
BKAT	Biblischer Kommentar, Altes Testament
BN	Biblische Notizen
BOT	De Boeken van het Oude Testament
BPl	Bibliothèque de la Pléiade
BRev	Bible Review
BSac	Bibliotheca Sacra
BSC	Bible Student's Commentary
BWANT	Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CAT	Commentaire de l'Ancien Testament
CB	The Century Bible
CBC	Cambridge Bible Commentary
CBiPa	Cahiers de Biblia Patristica
Cent	Centaurus
col(s).	column(s)

ConsJ	Conservative Judaism
CrCur	Cross Currents
CV	Communio Viatorum
DB	Dictionnaire de la Bible
DBAT	Dielheimer Blätter zum Alten Testament
diss.	dissertation
DSD	Dead Sea Discoveries
EBC	The Eerdmans Bible Commentary
EC	Epworth Commentaries
EI	Eretz Israel
Enc	Encounter
ERE	The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics
EsBib	Essais Bibliques
ETL	Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses
ETR	Études théologiques et religieuses
EvT	Evangelische Theologie
Exod. Rab.	Exodus Rabbah
ExpTim	Expository Times
Frg. Tg.	Fragmentary Targum
FOTL	Forms of the Old Testament Literature
FRLANT	Forschung zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
GBSOT	Guides to Biblical Scholarship, Old Testament
GDBL	Gads Danske Bibel Leksikon
HAR	Hebrew Annual Review
HAT	Handbuch zum Alten Testament
HCOT	Historical Commentary on the Old Testament
HKAT	Handkommentar zum Alten Testament
HS	Hebrew Studies
HSAT	Die Heilige Schrift des Alten Testamentes
HUCA	Hebrew Union College Annual
IB	Interpreter's Bible
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
IDB	Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible
Imm	Immanuel
ISBEFR	International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Fully Revised

ITC	International Theological Commentary
JAB	Journal of the Aramaic Bible
JBC	The Jerome Biblical Commentary
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
JBQ	The Jewish Bible Quarterly
JE	The Jewish Encyclopedia
JNES	Journal of Near Eastern Studies
JNSL	Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages
JPSTC	The Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series
JSOT	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series
Jub.	Jubilees
Jud	Judaica
KEHAT	Kurzgefasstes exegetisches Handbuch zum Alten Testament
KHCAT	Kurzer Hand-commentar zum Alten Testament
LBBC	The Layman's Bible Book Commentary
LBC	The Layman's Bible Commentary
LTJ	Lutheran Theological Journal
Mekh.	Mekhilta
NAC	The New American Commentary
NBC	The New Bible Commentary
NCamBC	New Cambridge Bible Commentary
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
Ned.	Nedarim
NIB	The New Interpreter's Bible
NIBC	New International Biblical Commentary
NIDB	The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible
NIVAC	The NIV Application Commentary
NJBC	The New Jerome Biblical Commentary
NPNF	The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers
NTS	New Testament Studies
OBO	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis
OTE	Old Testament Essays
OTL	The Old Testament Library

OTS	Oudtestamentische Studien
OTSSA	Old Testament Society of South Africa
POT	De Prediking van het Oude Testament
PSS	Psychoanalytical Study of Society
R.	Rabbi
RB	Revue Biblique
REES	Revue des Études Ethnographiques et Sociologiques
RevistB	Revista Biblica
RGG	Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart
SBLSS	Society of Biblical Literature Semeia Studies
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
SBU2	Svenskt Bibliskt Uppslagsverk, 2 <sup>nd</sup> ed., I. Engnell (ed.)
SC	Sources Chrétiennes
SEAJT	South East Asia Journal of Theology
SIJD	Schriften des Institutum Judaicum Delitzschianum
SP-B	Studia Post-Biblica
StB	La Sainte Bible
TANZ	Texte und Arbeiten zum neutestamentlichen Zeitalter
TBT	The Bible Today
TDOT	Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament
TeU	Tekst en Uitleg
Tg. Neof.	Targum Neofiti I
Tg. Onq.	Targum Onqelos
Tg. Ps.-J.	Targum Pseudo-Jonathan
ThB	Theologische Bücherei
TLZ	Theologische Literaturzeitung
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
TRE	Theologische Realenzyklopädie
TZ	Theologische Zeitschrift
UBSMS	United Bible Societies Monograph Series
VB	Verklaring van een Bijbelgedeelte
VT	Vetus Testamentum
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WC	Westminster Commentaries
WestBC	Westminster Bible Companion
ZÄS	Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde
ZAW	Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
ZRGG	Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte

# Introduction

## Purposes of This Study

Exod 4:24-26 is a tiny pericope tucked away in a narrative which begins by describing the migration of Jacob and his descendants from Canaan to Egypt (Exod 1:1-7) and concludes by relating Yahweh's liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian oppression and the songs of Moses and the Israelites and of Miriam and the women of Israel praising Yahweh for this deliverance (Exod 14:21-15:21). This three-verse pericope relates an incident involving Moses and his family at a lodging place in the wilderness as they traveled from Midian to Egypt in order for Moses to carry out Yahweh's commission to lead the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery. For two thousand years or more, Jewish and Christian thinkers and scholars have attempted to explain the meaning and significance of this small passage. The present work represents an attempt to accomplish several goals relevant to biblical scholarship, especially scholarship of the Hebrew Bible.

First, this study seeks to categorize the different uses and interpretations of Exod 4:24-26. The advantage of this endeavor is to identify the thinkers who espouse each view, and thus indicate how long a certain use or understanding of this text has existed as well as how earlier scholars have influenced the views of later scholars.

Second, this study strives to present in as much detail as necessary the 'sequence of argumentation' employed by each scholar as that scholar presents it in his/her work. This enterprise attempts to avoid certain pitfalls: (a) as much as possible, it endeavors to let each scholar speak for himself/herself rather than providing a summary which reflects more the impression of the one reading and interpreting any given position rather than the lines of thought of the scholar being investigated; (b) it demonstrates that while scholars agree and overlap on one detail or another, their overall understandings of a text or context or word or phrase or concept diverge significantly, making it very difficult to reduce

any scholar to a 'stereotyped' position reflected by a 'cluster' of scholars.

Third, this study endeavors to demonstrate that the use and/or interpretation of a biblical text is inseparably connected to the culture, social and/or religious setting, and historical time period in which it was proposed, as well as the background, agenda, and politico-religious pressures or influences impacting the scholar under consideration.

Fourth, this study tries to show that a scholar's interpretation of a biblical text (in this case, Exod 4:24-26) depends on the approach or approaches which that scholar is using in dealing with that text. One's presuppositions (whether he/she is conscious of these or not) have a direct bearing on how he/she interprets a certain biblical text. For example, if one interprets Exod 4:24-26 as a very ancient (non-Israelite? Midianite?) story or legend which a later writer or editor incorporated into his work, which ultimately the redactor(s) of the Pentateuch included in the present book of Exodus, he/she will probably interpret the text in one way. However, if one interprets Exod 4:24-26 as a part of the narrative in Exod 1:1-15:21 as the text now stands, he/she will probably interpret the text in an entirely different way.

Fifth, this study advocates that diversity in interpreting scripture, in presuppositions held by biblical exegetes, in approaches used to determine the meaning of scripture, and in ways of understanding and applying biblical texts is inevitable and desirable. Indeed, it functions positively to help defenders of each view comprehend the strengths and weaknesses of their own positions and the positions of others.

Finally, in view of these considerations, the present writer proposes a particular understanding of Exod 4:24-26. This pericope is part of a much larger narrative context in its present final form. Hence, the first responsibility is to attempt to determine the role and function in this passage in that context. The final section of this book offers an explanation of this text and how it fits in its larger narrative.

In the course of arriving at this conclusion, this book organizes various views of Exod 4:24-26 throughout the centuries. After presenting the text of this passage in the MT and relevant ancient versions, this work first discusses early rabbinic treatments of this pericope. Sequentially, it will deal with usages and interpretations of Exod 4:24-26 by the early Church Fathers, medieval thinkers, and pre-critical scholars and expositors. Modern critical interpreters, beginning approximately with

J. Wellhausen, have proposed a wide variety of understandings of this passage. For the sake of organization, this study categorizes these views according to critical methods or approaches. Tracing these methods or approaches historically, this investigation discusses textual criticism [including lexicography, syntax], source criticism, form and tradition-historical criticism, historical criticism, redaction criticism, rhetorical criticism, intertextuality, social-scientific criticism, structural criticism, psychological criticism, ideological criticism, narrative criticism, discourse analysis, literary criticism, canonical criticism, theological criticism, reader [reader response] criticism and feminist criticism. Each section describes each criticism and discusses the ways various scholars have applied that criticism to Exod 4:24-26. In several cases, more than one method or approach comes into play, as the discussion makes clear.

As the various interpretations of Exod 4:24-26 make clear, some of these approaches or methods deal with this text in isolation from its surrounding context, while others attempt to understand this pericope in the broader context of its meaning and function in the larger narrative. The reader must know that the present writer favors the current movement toward appreciating and interpreting biblical texts as smaller portions of their larger contexts, sections, books, and canon. Accordingly, my bias inclines toward redaction criticism, rhetorical criticism, narrative criticism, literary criticism, theological criticism, and canonical criticism. While taking this stance, I hold diverse views in the highest regard, and desire to appreciate and extol other views.

## Textual Critical Issues

Textual criticism is fundamental to all biblical interpretation. All scholars are compelled to use textual criticism in some way or other, because only copies or copies of copies of biblical texts are available, since no alleged autographs existed. Ancient manuscripts contain problems in the text which thoughtful researchers must examine and strive to resolve. Even the ancient Masoretes adopted their own textual readings when faced with difficult problems. Its purpose is to attempt to recover the original text of each biblical passage. In order to attempt to determine

the meaning of a text, philology, syntax, and intertextual text [ancient Near Eastern and biblical] are essential. Accordingly, textual critical issues have a direct bearing on the meaning of Exod 4:24-26 irrespective of a view under consideration.<sup>1</sup>

The Masoretic Text (MT) and major ancient versions of Exod 4:24-26 read as follows in English translation.

MT [BHS]:

24 וַיְהִי בַדֶּרֶךְ בַּמֶּלֶךְ וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ יְהוָה וַיִּבְקֹשׁ הַמִּיתוֹ  
 25 וַתִּקַּח צִפּוֹרָה צֹר וַתִּכְרֹת אֶת־עֶרְלַת בְּנָהּ וַתַּנֵּעַ לְרַגְלָיו וַתֹּאמֶר  
 כִּי חֲתָן־דָּמִים אָתָּה לִי  
 26 וַיֵּרָק מִמֶּנּוּ אִזּוֹ אָמְרָה חֲתָן דָּמִים לְמוֹלֶת

English Translation:

24. And it came to pass on the way at the lodging place that Yahweh met him and sought to put him to death.
25. And Zipporah took a flint and cut off the foreskin of her son and touched his feet, and she said: 'Truly a bridegroom of blood are you to me.'
26. And he left him alone. Then she said, 'A bridegroom of blood for the circumcisions.'

Septuagint (LXX):

- 24 Ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ ἐν τῷ καταλύματι συνήνητησεν αὐτῷ ἄγγελος κυρίου καὶ ἐζήτει αὐτὸν ἀποκτείνειν
- 25 καὶ λαβούσα Σεπφώρα ψῆφον περιέτεμεν τὴν ἄκροβυστίαν τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτῆς καὶ προσέπεσεν πρὸς τοὺς πόδας καὶ εἶπεν Ὡς τὸ αἷμα τῆς περιτομῆς τοῦ παιδίου μου
- 26 καὶ ἀπῆλθεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ, διότι εἶπεν Ὡς τὸ αἷμα τῆς περιτομῆς τοῦ παιδίου μου

1 E. Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Biblical Hebraica* (trans. E. F. Rhodes; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979); J. Weingreen, *Introduction to the Critical Study of the Text of the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1982); P. K. McCarter, Jr., *Textual Criticism: Recovering the Text of the Hebrew Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); E. Tov, 'Textual Criticism (OT),' *ABD* 6 (1992) 393-412.



English translation:

24. And it came to pass on the way in the lodging, an angel of the Lord met him and sought to kill him.
25. And Zipporah, having taken a pebble [stone], circumcised the foreskin of her son and fell at the [his] feet and said, ‘The blood of the circumcision of my child has stood firm [stopped?].’
26. And he departed from him, because she said, ‘The blood of the circumcision of my child has stood firm [stopped?].’

Syriac Peshitta:

[illegible]

English Translation:

24. And it came to pass that Moses was on the journey at the caravansary (lodging for the night), and the Lord attacked him and sought to kill him, namely, Moses.
25. And Zipporah took a stone and cut off the foreskin of her son, and she laid hold of his feet and she said: 'A bridegroom [relative by marriage] of blood are you to me.'
26. And he left him at the time she said: 'A bridegroom [relative by marriage] of blood' concerning the circumcision.

Vulgate:

24. Cumque esset in itinere, in deversorio, occurrit ei Dominus et volebat occidere eum.
25. Tulit ilico Sephora acutissimam petram, et circumcidit praeputium filii sui tetigitque pedes eius et ait: Sponsus sanguinum tu mihi es.
26. Et dimisit eum postquam dixerat: sponsus sanguinum ob circumcisionem.

English Translation:

24. Whenever he was on the way, in a lodging, the Lord attacked him and wanted to kill him.
25. Immediately Zipporah brought forth a sharpened stone, and circumcised the foreskin of her son and she touched his feet and said: A bridegroom of bloods are you to me.
26. And he let him go when she said: A bridegroom of bloods because of the circumcision.

Tg. Onq:

- 24 וְהוּא בְּאוֹרְחָא בְּבֵית מִבְתָּא וְאָרַע בֵּיה מִלְאכָא דִּי וּבִעָא  
לְמִקְטִילָהּ
- 25 וְנִסִּיבַת צִפּוֹרָה טִינְרָא וְגִזְרַת יֵת עוֹרֶלֶת בְּרָה וּקְרִיבַת  
לְקַדְמוּחֵי וְאָמַרְתָּ בְּדַמָּא דְּמַהוּלְתָּא הָדִין אֶתִּיבָה חֲתָנָא לְנָא
- 26<sup>2</sup> וְנַח מִינִיה בְּכֵן אָמַרְתָּ אֵילּוּלֵי דְּמָא דְּמַהוּלְתָּא הָדִין  
אֶתִּיבָה חֲתָנָא קְטוּל

English Translation:

24. And it came to pass on the way at the lodging place that the angel of the Lord met him and sought to kill him.
25. And Zipporah took a stone and cut off the foreskin of her son, and she drew near to him and said: 'By the blood of this circumcision may my husband be restored to us.'
26. And he left him alone because she said: 'Had it not been for the blood of this circumcision, my husband would have incurred death (merited execution).'

Tg. Ps.-J.:

- 24 וְהוּא בְּאוֹרְחָא בְּבֵית אֲבִתּוּתָא וְאָרַע בֵּיה מִלְאכָא דִּי וּבִעָא  
לְמִיקְטִילָהּ מִן בְּגִלְל גְּרָשׁוּם בְּרִיה דְּלָא הוּא גָחִיר עַל עִיסְקָא  
יִתְרוֹ חֲמוּי דְּלָא שְׁבָקִיה לְמַגְזִרִיה בְּדָם אֲלִיעֶזֶר הוּא גִזֵּר  
בְּתַנְאָה דְּאֶתְנִיּוֹ תְרוּוִיָּהוּן

2 מקראות גדולות (New York: Pardes, 1951), 20-21; A. Sperber, *The Bible in Aramaic. I. The Pentateuch according to Targum Onkelos* (Leiden: Brill, 1959) 94-95.

25 ונסִיבת צפורה טִינרא וגזרת ית ערלת גרשום ברה ואקריבת  
 ית גזירת מהולתה לריגוי דמלאך חבלא ואמרת חתנא  
 בעא למזגור וחמוי עכיב עלוי וכדון אדם גוזרתא  
 הדין יכפר על חתנא דילי  
 26<sup>3</sup> ופסק מלאך חבלא מיניה בכך שבחת צפורה ואמרת מה  
 חביב הוא אדם גוזרתא הדין דשויב ית חתנא מן ידוי  
 דמלאך חבלא

English Translation:

24. At a lodging place on the way the angel of the Lord met him and sought to kill him because of Gershom, his son, who had not been circumcised on account of Jethro, his father-in-law, who had not allowed him to circumcise him. But Eliezer had been circumcised according to an agreement which they had made between them.
25. Then Zipporah took a flint-stone and cut the foreskin of Gershom, her son, and brought the circumcised foreskin to the feet of the Destroying Angel and said: 'The bridegroom wanted to circumcise, but the father-in-law prevented him. And now may the blood of this circumcision atone for my husband.'
26. And the Destroying Angel left him alone. Then Zipporah praised (God) and said: 'How precious is the blood of this circumcision that saved the bridegroom from the hands of the Destroying Angel.'<sup>4</sup>

Tg. Neof.:

24 וְהוּהּ בְּאוֹרְחָא בְּבֵית אֲבִתּוֹתָא וְאָרַע יִתְיָה מִלֵּאכָא מִן  
 קִדְּם יֵי וּבַעַה לְמַקְטֵל יִתְיָה  
 25 וְנִסְרַת צִפְרָה טִנְרָא וְגִזְרַת יִת עוֹרְלַתָּא דְּבִרָא וְקִרְבַּת  
 לְרִגְלוֹי דְּמַחְבֵּלָה וְאִמְרַת אַרוּם חֲתָנָא בַּעַא לְמַגְזוֹר

3 E. G. Clarke, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of the Pentateuch: Text and Concordance* (Hoboken: KTAV, 1984).

4 M. Maher, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Exodus*. Vol. 2 of The Aramaic Bible (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1994) 172-73.

וחמוי לא שבק יתיה וכפר כען אדם גזירתה הדא  
 על חובוי דחתניה הדין  
 26<sup>5</sup> וארפי מיניה מלאכא בכדן שבחת צפורה ואמרתה מה  
 חביב דם [גזירת] הדא דשיזב לחתניה הדין מידא  
 דמלאך מותא

English Translation:

24. And it happened on the way, in the resting-house, that an angel from before the Lord overtook him and sought to kill him.
25. And Zipporah took a flint and circumcised the foreskin of her son, and brought it near the feet of the destroyer and said: 'In truth the bridegroom sought to circumcise, but his father-in-law did not permit him. And now may the blood of this circumcision atone for the sins of this bridegroom.'
26. And the angel let him go from him. And Zipporah gave praise and said: 'How beloved is this blood which has delivered this bridegroom from the hand of the angel of death.'<sup>6</sup>

Frg. Tg.:

25. ותקח ונסיבת צפורה טינרא ונורת ית עורלתא דברה  
 ואקריבת יתיה קדם ריגלוי דמחבלא ואמר <ת> חתנא  
 בעא למימר וחמוי לא שבק יתיה וכדון יכפר אדם  
 גזירה הדא די ישיחב לחתנא מן ידוי דמלאך מותא  
 26. וירף וכד ארפי מ ל חבלא מיניה בכדן שבחת צפורה  
 ואמרת מא תקוף הוא אדם גזורתא הדא די שיזיב  
 לחתנא הדין מן ידוי דמלאך מותא

English Translation:

24. [Not preserved].
25. And she took: And Zipporah took a flint-stone and cut off the foreskin of her son, and brought it near the feet of the de-

5 A. D. Macho, *Neophyti: I: Targum Palestinense ms de la Biblioteca Vaticana: Exodo* (2 vols; Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Cientificas, 1968-79).

6 R. Hayward, *Targum Neofiti 1: Exodus*. Vol 2 of The Aramaic Bible (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1994) 24-25.

stroyer, and <she> said: 'The bridegroom [Moses] wanted to circumcise, but his father-in-law [Jethro] did not allow him to; and now may the blood of this circumcision atone, so that it might rescue the bridegroom from the hands of the Angel-of-Death.'

26. And he let up: And when the destroyer let him go, Zipporah then sang praise, and said: 'How strong is this circumcisional blood, that it rescued this bridegroom from the hands of the Angel-of-Death.'<sup>7</sup>

The MT of Exod 4:24-26 presents several problems.

1. Whom did Yahweh meet [attack] and seek to kill? Exod 4:24 does not identify the direct object of the verbs 'met' and 'kill.' Is it Moses, his older son Gershom, his younger son Eliezer, or someone else?
2. Why did Yahweh apprehend this individual and wish to kill him? If this individual was Moses, as the flow of the narrative in the book of Exodus seems to suggest, why did Yahweh commission Moses to return to Egypt to carry out the mission Yahweh had given him to lead the Israelites out of bondage (Exod 3:1-4:17), and assure him that those who were seeking his life for killing the Egyptian (Exod 2:11-15) were dead (Exod 4:19); then, while Moses was on his way back to Egypt, attack him and seek to kill him (Exod 4:24)? Or, if the individual Yahweh sought to kill was one of Moses' sons, what was wrong with that child, or what had Moses or Zipporah done to arouse Yahweh's anger and motivate him to want to kill the child?
3. How did Zipporah know what to do to keep Yahweh from killing her husband or one of her sons?
4. Whose 'feet' (legs, genitals) did Zipporah touch with the bloody foreskin she had just cut off (Moses'? one of Moses' son's? Yahweh's?), and what was the significance of this act?
5. What does Zipporah's statement at the end of vv 25 and 26 mean? How is one to translate her statement? How is this statement connected to her acts of circumcising her son and touching (someone's) 'feet' (legs, genitals) with his bloody foreskin?

7 The Hebrew text, respectively, is from M. L. Klein, *The Fragment-Targums of the Pentateuch According to their Extant Sources. Volume I. Texts, Indices and Introductory Essays* (AnBibl 76; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1980) 36.

6. How is the hearer or reader to understand and evaluate Exod 4:24-26 in the flow of the narrative in the book of Exodus (in the Pentateuch)?

The various translations and interpretations of the ancient versions complicates the meaning of this text. Basic to interpretation are textual critical considerations: philology, etymology, morphology, grammar, semantics, and syntax. Every explanation of Exod 4:24-26 has some bearing or other on these aspects of this method.

From the third century B.C.E. (the translation of the LXX) to the present time, Jewish and Christian thinkers have proposed several answers to these questions. In these proposals, at least two important particulars become clear. On the one hand, those who struggle to understand this text attach two or more meanings to it. The combination of understandings of this passage varies from thinker to thinker and from scholar to scholar, and the sequence of thought of each thinker and scholar differs. Rather than attempt to reduce the various proposals to neatly arranged categories, it seems only fair to present each thinker's or scholar's viewpoint as closely to that thinker's or scholar's sequence of thought as possible. Thus, this study inevitably reports the same or similar positions which appear several times in the historical survey of viewpoints on Exod 4:24-26, and seeks to follow the sequence of thought of each thinker and scholar as closely as possible. One result of this study has discovered that diligent scholarly pursuit of difficult problems in this passage often eludes significant issues.

The purpose of the present work is to offer a history of the treatments and interpretations of Exod 4:24-26, beginning with the early Jewish rabbis, then discussing relevant works of the early Church Fathers and medieval thinkers, and, in modern times, describe and evaluate critical methods and approaches applied to scholarly research in the past 150 years. Finally, the writer proposes his own interpretation of this difficult text.

## Noncommittal Commentators and Contributors

Before launching into a study of the history and interpretation of Exod 4:24-26, at some point, the reader will come to realize that some scholars choose to refuse to take a position on the meaning of this text, or allude to this text in dealing with a certain subject pertaining to an idea in this passage. Thus, before attempting to categorize the various interpretations of this text, this section describes relevant scholars who have dealt with Exod 4:24-26 in noncommittal ways.

Exod 4:24-26 bristles with difficulties. This is without doubt the most obscure passage in the book of Exodus. A. Bertholet, R. E. Murphy, T. C. Mitchell, J. P. Hyatt, E. Isaac, W. Dumbrell, O. Betz, N. A. van Uchelen, M. Görg, T. Pippin and G. Aichele, and A. Herbst do not attempt to explain its meaning or its function in the narrative.<sup>8</sup>

A. Bertholet [very similarly O. Betz] does not offer an interpretation of Exod 4:24-26. He remarks that the use of stone instruments to perform circumcision (Exod 4:25; Josh 5:2) suggests circumcision goes back to the Stone Age. He asserts that in early human history, people circumcised boys at puberty, so circumcision was a puberty rite. Originally it was connected with marriage, as Exod 4:25 and Gen 34:14ff, and the word *ḥātān*, meaning 'bridegroom,' show. Some trace circumcision back to Joshua's act to roll away the contempt of the circumcised Egyptians from the Israelites (Josh 5:2ff), while others trace it back to Abraham (Gen 17:10ff). The full meaning of circumcision as a 'sign of the

8 T. C. Mitchell, 'The Meaning of the Noun *ḥtn* in the Old Testament,' *VT* 19 (1969) 93-112; J. P. Hyatt, 'Circumcision,' *IDB* 1 (1962) 629-31; *Commentary on Exodus* (NCBC; London: Oliphants, 1971) 86-88; N. A. van Uchelen, *Exodus Hoofdstuk 1-20* (VB; Kampen: J. H. Kok, n. d. [1985?]) 21. M. Görg ('Der "schlagende" Gott in der "älteren" Bibel,' *BK* 51 [1996] 94-100) cites Exod 4:24-26 and several other passages, e.g., Gen 32:22-32; Exod 12:13, 23a, 29; 2 Sam. 5:8, to show that the Hebrew Bible describes Yahweh as a 'smiting' God, i.e., God of violence, but the only observation he makes pertinent to the interpretation of Exod 4:24-26 is that what Zipporah accomplished by circumcising her son and daubing some of the blood of his foreskin on Moses' genitals was to protect Moses from Yahweh's smiting him.

covenant' arose during the have exile when other cultic practices became impossible.<sup>9</sup>

R. E. Murphy says almost nothing about Exod 4:24-26. He says the meaning of this passage escapes us today, but it seems at least to witness to the scruples of the traditionalists to correlate the practice of circumcision with Moses.<sup>10</sup>

T. C. Mitchell does not take a position on the meaning of *ḥtn* in Exod 4:24-26. He says that if 'you' whom Zipporah addresses in 4:25b is Moses, *ḥtn* means 'bridegroom' or 'husband,' since Moses was Zipporah's husband. It is also possible that *ḥtn* here means 'circumciser' (although this meaning does not appear anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible) on the basis of the Arabic *ḥatanu*, 'to circumcise.' So *ḥātān dāmīm*, spoken in the heat of the moment, would mean 'circumciser of blood' or 'bloody circumciser.' But the meaning of Exod 4:24-26 is uncertain. Mitchell thinks the noun *ḥtn* in the Hebrew Bible and in some related languages is a classificatory term meaning something like 'relation by marriage.'<sup>11</sup>

E. Isaac mentions Exod 4:24-26 briefly, but his concern is the meaning of circumcision in the Hebrew Bible, and he is convinced that Exod 4:24-26 contributes nothing to that issue. He thinks Genesis 15 and especially Genesis 17 are the main texts of the Hebrew Bible which deal

- 9 A. Bertholet, 'Beschneidung,' *RGZ* 1 (1927) cols. 946-47. O. Betz ('Beschneidung. II. Altes Testament, Frühjudentum und Neues Testament,' *TRE* 5 [1980] 716-19) essentially makes the same observations as Bertholet, in addition asserts that circumcision was probably originally considered to be an apotropaic act performed at the beginning of puberty (cf. Gen 17:25) or at the wedding (Exod 4:24-26); God did not tolerate Moses delaying obedience to God (Exod 4:24-26; bNed 31b); the 'blood of circumcision' has soteriological effect (Exod 4:25 LXX; 4:26 Tg. Onq. Tg. Ps.-J.).
- 10 R. E. Murphy, O. Carm., *The Book of Exodus. Part 1 with a Commentary* (New York: Paulist Press, 1960) 13.
- 11 Mitchell, 98-99, 111. A. Guenther ('A Typology of Israelite Marriage: Kinship, Socio-Economic, and Religious Factors,' *JSOT* 29 [2005] 390-98 [entire article 387-407]) argues that the verb *ḥtn* indicates a request or offer to contract a marriage with outsiders whether people outside the tribe or cultural group, or people outside one's social or economic stratum, as royalty marrying commoner or rich marrying poor. The essence of the newly formed relationship is to create a unified community of peace and religious tolerance which in cases of interfaith marriage involves respect for the spouse's deity(ies), religious beliefs and traditions, and worship. Guenther does not discuss the meaning of Exod 4:24-26.



with this matter. He says circumcision is a special case of general cutting or dismembering rites to establish covenants or treaties. Cutting or dismemberment connected with covenants occurs in Genesis 15; Jer 34:10-19; Deut 21:1-9; and a Hittite rite. E. Isaac agrees with M. Noth that *likrôt b'ērît* means 'to cut between.' Several African parallels show that by dividing an animal, a person took a conditional self-curse: may I suffer the fate of the divided victim if I fail to live up to this agreement. The parallel of circumcision with initiation rites is obvious. The Hebrew words for bridegroom, son-in-law, father-in-law, all derived from the root *ḥātān*, which in Arabic means 'to circumcise.' Fertility is the central theme in Genesis 17. As a descendant of Adam and Noah, God promises Abraham many offspring. The covenant in Genesis 17 is similar to the ancient Near Eastern accession or enthronement ritual of sacral kings. The candidate for the throne, often after a symbolic death, was reborn king and given a new name – God changed Abram's name to Abraham. The covenant established Abraham's status as vassal to his liege lord. For the author of Genesis 17, the rite of circumcision was a particular application of an ancient custom associated with treaty and covenant obligations.<sup>12</sup>

The purpose of T. Pippin and G. Aichele's essay is not to offer an interpretation of Exod 4:24-26, but to suggest that this text influenced later works of Paul and F. Kafka. F. Kafka's story, 'In the Penal Colony' (1948), describes a writing machine which inscribes the death penalty on an unsuspecting inmate. The condemned man can read his own death sentence only by *becoming* the text; writing is the circumcision of the body. Kafka's story has roots in Paul's affirmation that circumcision binds one to the Law (Gal 5:2-4), and that material writing is opposed to the spirit who writes on human hearts (2 Cor 3:1-6), so that the spirit who writes on the hearts is the true circumcision (Rom 2:26-27). In turn, Kafka and Paul have roots in the strange story in Exod 4:24-26. This story is filled with ambiguities, and mixes the roles of demons and gods. Here the foreskin is both more and less than a metaphor; it is narrative

12 E. Isaac, 'Circumcision as a Covenant Rite,' *Anth* 59 (1965) 444-56.