ZIPPORAH TO THE RESCUE:
A CONTEXTUAL STUDY OF EXODUS IV 24-6

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Among the enigmatic and intractable points in the notoriously difficult narrative of the nocturnal assault made by YHWH during the return of Moses' family from Midian to Egypt, and of Zipporah's circumcision of her son, are the following: (1) we are not told whom YHWH attacked and sought to kill, or why; (2) we are not told whose raglayim (feet? genitals?) Zipporah touched with her son's severed foreskin (Moses'; the boy's; YHWH's?) or why; (3) the phrase biitan-dāmīm is of uncertain connotation (bloody husband? blood circumcised one? relative by virtue of the blood of circumcision?) and it may refer to either Moses or the lad—or even YHWH; (4) in v. 26 lammālōt (in respect of circumcision/circumcised ones/the woman circumciser?) is a hapax legomenon and the contribution to the story of the clause in which it occurs is far from obvious; (5) because of its primitive features—YHWH is represented as acting in, as has often been remarked, a surprisingly demonic way and Zipporah uses an unsophisticated instrument for the operation (a flint-knife, as in Josh. v 2)—the story is almost universally attributed to J;¹ but no other J text (except for Gen. xxxiv, where, however, the references to circumcision may derive from a later source) even mentions, let alone, as here, insists on the importance of, circumcision.

Scholars are agreed that the narrative comes from an ancient tradition and that its original point has been played down in, or even eliminated from, the text as it has reached us. I am sure that they are right. All the numerous attempts, however, to identify the

¹ Those, however, who believe in a second "Yahwistic" source apart from J, tend to attribute the passage to this source. Thus O. Eissfeldt gives it to his L, and G. Fohrer to his N, source. H. Kosmala attributes it to none of the usual Pentateuchal sources but to a special Zipporah tradition.
original purpose of the tradition are speculative, and many are frankly fanciful. It is not my intention to add to their number, and I think it necessary only to sketch briefly the principal ones among them before I attempt—for this is my purpose—to identify the meaning of the story as it stands in the final text of Exodus.

According to J. Wellhausen, the background to the tradition is the notion that circumcision is a rite preparing adult males for marriage (he calls in aid Gen. xxxiv for this contention, where the Hivite Shechem and his male relatives have to submit to circumcision before marrying Israelite women). Moses had not been circumcised, so Zipporah circumcised Gershom instead, and this vicarious act placated the angry deity. The story functioned as an aetiology to explain why circumcision, originally a puberty rite, was in Israel performed on infants. Wellhausen's approach has been influential. Many have, in particular, accepted his notion that circumcision was originally a prenuptial rite—e.g. B. W. Bacon, H. Gunkel, E. Meyer, A. J. Reinach and E. Reuss. J. Morgenstern has, however, shown good grounds for doubting whether this was ever the case in Israel. Nor is it easy to see, according to Wellhausen's interpretation, why Zipporah should be the circumciser rather than Moses.

J. de Groot agrees that the action was vicarious, but explains it differently. Moses could not celebrate Passover without being circumcised (so Ex. xii 44, 48—Priestly texts); his circumcision during a journey would have been dangerous; Zipporah, therefore, circumcised her son instead, and this sufficed.

H. Gressmann explains the text, having emended it first to make it fit his interpretation better, as saying that Zipporah circumcised not her son but Moses and that she touched the genitals of the deity (!) with his foreskin, hailing him as a bloody bridegroom and getting him to spare Moses. The original setting of the narrative was Moses' wedding-night and it told how YHWH was thwarted of the exercise of the *ius primae noctis* by Zipporah's action, being satisfied (with remarkable gullibility, surely) by the bloodying of his

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3 "The 'Bloody Husband' (?) (Exod. 4:24-26) Once Again", HUCA 34 (1963), pp. 35-70.  
4 "The story of the bloody husband (Ex. iv 24-26)," Oudtestamentische Studiën 2 (1943), pp. 10-17.  
5 Mose und seine Zeit (Göttingen, 1913), pp. 56-61.