The object of our inquiry is among the most controverted passages of Scripture.” The cliche applies nowhere better than to Exod. iv 24-6, the so-called “bloody bridegroom” story. The narrative’s ambiguities have repeatedly attracted the attention of commentators, yet they have reached no consensus. It is probably foolhardy to attempt yet another exegesis, but I think it important to show that many seemingly competing readings can be made to work together, and that there remain little-explored approaches that are interesting and even productive.

On the way, at the night-stop, Yahweh met him and sought to put him to death. But Zipporah took a flint and severed her son’s foreskin and

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1 The Syriac reads “Moses was on the way”, clarifying who is attacked, but most likely this is an explanatory plus.
2 C. Houtman shows that a mālān is not necessarily an inn (“Exodus 4:24-26 and Its Interpretation”, JNSL 11 [1983], pp. 81-2), and the ready availability of a flint suggests an outdoor setting. On the other hand, H. Gunkel conjectures that mālān is a noun meaning “place of circumcision” < mūl “circumcise” (apud H. Gressmann, Mose und seine Zeit [Göttingen, 1913], p. 58, n. 4); J. Morgenstem similarly translates “circumcision” (“The ‘Bloody Husband’ [?] [Exod. 4:24-26] Once Again”, HUCA 34 [1963], pp. 68-9). This approach is probably wrong (it will prove important that the attack is nocturnal) but worth noting nonetheless, as it raises the possibility of word play with the absent but implied root mūl.
3 Aquila has “the God”. The paraphrase “angel of the Lord” of the LXX and Targums Onqelos and Ps.-Jonathan is an attempt to mitigate the shock of the episode; Jub. xl 2 goes so far as to replace the Deity with Mastemah, the arch-fiend.
4 Although sometimes the causative of mūt “die” is synonymous with hrg “kill”, the former often has judicial connotations comparable to English “execute”. The subject of hēmīt is frequently Yahweh, whose decrees are by definition justice; cf. 2 Kgs v 7: “Am I God, to put to death (ēhānīt) or to let live?”
5 There is no real reason to doubt the reading; nevertheless, it is worth noting that in ancient orthography “her son” and “his son” would both have been spelled bnē. We are essentially reliant upon an orally transmitted vocalization.
dabbed his legs and said, ‘For you are a hāṭān of bloodiness to me.’”

26 He slackened from him. Then she said, “A hāṭān of bloodiness at circumcision.”

The difficulties of identifying the actors and explaining their actions lend this brief vignette the surrealism of a nightmare. After

6 This rendering is meant to capture the variety of proposed interpretations for wattiqqad. The parallel in Exod. xii 22, “Take a bunch of marjoram and dip it in the blood which is in the bowl and higgā’tem some of the blood from the bowl to the lintel and to the two doorposts”, suggests a specialized meaning of higgā’t meaning to dab or smear (S. Ben-Shabat, “He’ārōt lamma’tamār ‘hāṭān dārim’ me’ēt Dr. J. Blau”, Tarbiz 26 [1956-7], p. 213). There are other, less likely interpretations. As higgā’t ordinarily means “approach”, the Samaritan Targum renders “she approached his feet”. Also in this vein are the LXX “she fell at his feet”, and Syr. “she seized his feet”. On the other hand, Houtman understands higgā’t as “to cast down”, comparing Isa. xxv 12, xxvi 5; Ezek. xxi 14; Lam. ii 2 [n. 2] p. 85). By this reading, raglayim should mean “feet”, although Houtman himself strangely opts for “genitals”.

7 The word raglayim is doubly puzzling: what are these “legs” and whose? The LXX omits “his”—idiomatically, to be sure, but also in order to skirt a difficulty. raglayim may also denote “feet” or “genitalia”, and it is probably Moses’ penis that is meant here (see below). A less likely alternative is that Zipporah presents the aggrieved Deity with the foreskin “at his feet”; this seems to be the reading of Onqelos, which renders “before him” as if avoiding anthropomorphism. The LXX and Syr., too, inasmuch as they seem to describe an act of obeisance, may take Yahweh as the antecedent of raglayim.

8 ki is difficult to translate here; its function may be merely to introduce direct quotation, or it could be an emphatic “indeed”. Since, however, Zipporah has just performed an unusual act and is about to comment upon it, an explicating “for” seems the most suitable rendering (cf. the syntactic function of lēma’an in iv 5).

9 The word hāṭān properly means “relative by marriage” (T. C. Mitchell, “The meaning of the noun hām in the Old Testament”, VT 19 [1969], pp. 93-112), but most often it corresponds to English “son-in-law” The translation “bridegroom” is usually preferred in our passage, however, because of the likelihood that Zipporah is addressing Moses. Even so, this rendering may be misleading. In English a man is a bridegroom only on his wedding day, but, since hāṭān certainly denotes a life-long relationship with one’s father-in-law, it perhaps also denotes a life-long relationship with one’s wife; i.e., it may simply mean “husband”. The Samaritan Targum translates hām “father-in-law”, as if reading hōṭān.

10 As the medieval Jewish commentators on our passage were aware, the plural of dām “blood” has a special connotation; it describes either the blood shed by a killer (Gen. iv 10, 11; 1 Kgs ii 5; 2 Kgs ix 26; Isa. i 15, iv 4, iv 4; Ezek. xvi 36; Zech. ix 7; 1 Chr. xxii 8, xxviii 3) or else the miasma of guilt that clings to the perpetrators of the most heinous crimes and to their land, i.e. “blood-guilt” (Exod. xxii 1, 2; Lev. xx 9, 11, 12, 13, 16, 27; Deut. xix 10, xxii 8; 1 Sam. xxv 26, 33; 2 Sam. iii 28, vii 7, 8, xxi 1; 1 Kgs ii 5, 31, 33; 2 Kgs xix 7; Isa. xxvi 21; Ezek. xix 9, xviii 13, xxii 2, xxiv 6, 9; Hos. i 4, iv 2, xii 15; Mic. iii 10; Nah. iii 1; Hab. ii 8, 12, 17; Ps. v 7, ix 13, xxvi 9, lv 24, lix 3, cvi 38, cxxix 19; Prov. xxix 10; 2 Chr. xxiv 25). In Isa. xxxiii 15; Mic. vii 2; Ps. li 16 dārim even seems