

Night Terror

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Exod 4:24

(BHS)

וַיְהִי בַדֶּרֶךְ בְּמִלְוֹן
וַיִּפְגַּשׂהוּ יְהוָה וַיִּבְקַשׁ הַמַּיִתָּהוּ:

(NIV)

At a lodging place on the way,
the LORD met Moses and was about to kill him.

The first word of course is the verb “to be.” You may remember *derek* from first year Hebrew, “path.” Yahweh is readily seen in line 2. *Pagash* is “to meet.” *Baqash* is “to seek,” so technically it says that Yahweh “sought to kill him.” Yahweh found him in a dwelling, and meant to kill him there.

Moses’ little family was traveling to Egypt, to confront Pharaoh and set God’s people free. Here is the rest of the mysterious story in ESV,

Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin and touched Moses’ feet with it and said, “Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!” So he let him alone. It was then that she said, “A bridegroom of blood,” because of the circumcision. (4:25 – 26)

Curious, don’t you think? We are not told how they knew God’s intentions. What would motivate him to sabotage his own plan of salvation by killing Moses? We are not told how Zipporah knew what to do about it. And—if this tiny pericope were removed from the larger narrative, we would never miss it. Thus, some critics have dismissed it as a scrap of tradition, a story about a night demon that somehow became attached to Exodus but is best ignored.

We can do better than that. I am persuaded that the passage has several connections to the main story. Although many interpretations are possible, here is one that makes sense to me:

First of all, take another look at the Hebrew. Remember that “every translation is an interpretation.” This is particularly true here with NIV. Look at line 2 closely. What is missing? Yahweh sought to kill whom? Was it Moses? Hmmm? Come on, look!

In fact, Moses is not there in the text at all. The NIV interpolated him. But don’t be too hard on NIV. The ESV likewise inserts Moses in the very next verse (see above) where the text again just has a pronoun. Whose feet did Zipporah touch with the bloody foreskin anyway? She called someone (Moses? Gershom? Yahweh?¹) a *chatan*—although never elsewhere in biblical narrative does *chatan* denote “bridegroom.” It can mean many kinds of relationships due to marriage.²

What if it wasn’t Moses that God sought to kill? What if it was Gershom? Take a look at the text and see if that is a possible reading. Yes? No? Here are the two verses preceding our text:

Then you shall say to Pharaoh, “Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, ‘Let my son go that he may serve me.’ If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.” (4:22 – 23)

Israel is God’s firstborn son. Thus Pharaoh was keeping for himself that which is rightfully God’s. The final plague concerned Egypt’s firstborn. The Destroyer would stalk the land, killing their firstborn—except houses marked with blood. The sign of the covenant was bloody circumcision, and Moses’ son did not yet bear this sign. Zipporah marked her son with blood and Yahweh passed by him. Whew!

All of these ideas come together in the scene of Yahweh stalking Moses' son. It foreshadows what will come to pass in Egypt. It emphasizes that no one is exempt from the power of the Destroyer except those marked with blood. So our little vignette anticipates the epic salvation that was coming in Exodus. Yahweh passed over Moses' firstborn son, for he was marked with sacramental blood.

The Passover was experienced ahead of time by Moses' family. Of course, the New Testament naturally understands the true Passover to be about Christ. He is our Passover (1 Cor 5:7). Since we are covered by the blood of Jesus, we need not fear on the day of reckoning.

Paul actually applies it this way: since Christ has been sacrificed as our Passover lamb, therefore we should symbolically participate in the whole meal of unleavened bread by getting rid of the leaven of malice and evil. We should purify ourselves. Zipporah knew to cut off the foreskin of her son. Paul says, "In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ" (Col 2:11). What about you must be cut off and offered up? Invidia? Ego? Avarice? Luxuria? Umbrage?

Meditate on this and in so doing, apply the text to your life. And thank God that you have the opportunity to do this, since you are covered by Jesus' blood and not destroyed.

¹ God is likened to a *chatan* in non-narrative poetry of Isa 61:10 and 62:5.

² In Exodus, it always elsewhere means "father-in-law." See also Gen 19:12; Deut 7:3; Judg 15:6; 1 Kgs 3:1.