Implications of Including Zipporah’s Story in a Theology of Mediation

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Abstract

Due to his role as mediator between YHWH and Israel (see Ex. 32:11-14; 33:12-13), Moses has often been seen as a type of Christ. But perhaps due both in part to the brevity of her story and in part to her identity as a "foreign" woman, Zipporah's role as a mediator has not afforded her the same legacy in the church. Nevertheless, her legacy is needed. The way that Zipporah acts in the narrative serves to fill out important aspects of Exodus's theology of mediation that are missed when she is overlooked. Reminding ourselves of her role is especially important today, when populist nationalism and xenophobia are gaining ground in too many majority Christian countries. Not only does Zipporah's actions in the narrative demonstrate that even Moses needed a mediator, and that God found one in a "foreign" woman, Zipporah's location between Moses's calling and YHWH's alleged slaughter of the firstborn Egyptian children provides a much-needed counter-voice in the text that hints toward a hope that, with the right mediator, God can become the saviour of all people, no matter which "side" they are on. Christians have tended to focus on the Passover Lamb as the substitute in the Exodus narrative--the one who stands in Israel's place and dies for it. But in practical terms it was the Egyptian firstborn children whose deaths effected Pharaoh's (temporary) change of heart, leading to the Israelites' liberation. If the story is read without Zipporah, an "us-versus-them" dualism tends stubbornly to emerge and re-emerge. But when Zipporah's is story is given its proper place, the force of the "us-versus-them" way of reading the Exodus story is mitigated. Meditating on Zipporah as mediator illuminates both our understanding of the theology of Exodus as a cohesive narrative as well as our Christology, as we consider how she foreshadows the mediating work of Jesus as the final deliverer of Israel and the world.

A Translation of Exodus 4:18-26 with Notes[1]

[18]And Moses went and returned to Jethro his father-in-law.[2] And he said to him, "Let me go and return to my brothers who are in Egypt and let me see (if) they are still living." And Jethro said to Moses, "Go in peace."

[19]But YHWH said to Moses in Midian, "Go, return to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking to take[3] your life have died." [20]And Moses took his wife and his sons and he put them on a donkey and he returned to the land of Egypt. And Moses took the staff of God in his hand. [21]And YHWH said to Moses, "When you go and return to Egypt, see that you do in Pharaoh's presence all the miraculous proofs[4] that I put in your hand. But, I will harden[5] the heart of Pharaoh and he will not release the people. [22]And you

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[1] This article focuses on verses 24–26, but I have translated the previous passage because it is referenced often.

[2] The masculine nominal form of *ḥātān* means broadly, "a man related through marriage," and usually references either a man's father-in-law or his son-in-law. At least once or twice it refers to a brother-in-law (2 Kings 8:27; cf. Num 20:29). It can also mean "bridegroom," and appears as such in Aramaic, Mandaic, Arabic and Syriac as well as possibly later in this text (v. 25). Its cognate verbal form in Arabic can mean "to circumcise" (BDB), which has given rise to some speculation that circumcision was a pre-marital rite in some ANE cultures and that the father-in-law was responsible for the operation. However, this connection has not been substantiated enough to warrant certainty. Otherwise, the verbal form in Hebrew and its cognates in Aramaic and Syriac mean, "to become related by marriage" (TDOT).

[3] See Exod 2:15. Whenever *nepeš* is the direct object of *bāqaš* the phrase means, "seek to kill" or "attempt to kill" (see e.g. I Sam 20:1, 22:23, 23:15, 25:29; II Sam 4:8; I Kings 19:10, 14). With the participle of *bāqaš* (as here) the phrase becomes a formula to designate one's "enemies" (see e.g. Jer 11:21, 19:7, 9, 21:7, 22:25, 34:20, 21, 44:30, 46:26, 49:37; Psalm 28:13, 40:15, 54:5, 63:10, 70:3, 86:14).

[4] The word seems to refer to miracles used to validate prophetic utterance or status (Deut 13:1, 20). Moses' greatness as a prophet is assessed by the number of *môpĕtîm* he performed (Deut 34:11; cf. I Kings 13:3, 5). Pharaoh later requests a *môpēt* as verification of Moses and Aaron's message (Exod 7:9). The multiplication of *môpĕtîm* is evidence of the depth of Pharaoh's obstinacy (Exod 7:3; 11:9, 10). The word is parallel to *ʾôt* and usually connotes supernatural phenomena (Exod 7:3; Deut 4:34, 6:22, 7:19; 26:8; 29:2; Jer 32:20, 21; Joel 3:3; Psalm 78:43, 105:27; Neh 9:10), though the supernatural character may not be obvious to a modern reader (Deut 28:46). However, it also refers to prophetic gesturing or drama (Isaiah 8:18, 20:3; Ezek 12:6, 11, 24:24, 27). It sometimes also refers to the prediction of a miraculous proof to come later (I Kings 13:3, 5; cf. Psalm 105:27; I Chronicles 16:12; II Chronicles 32:24). Of its thirty-six appearances in the Hebrew Bible, sixteen appear in relation to the Exodus story.

[5] Pharaoh is the first person whose heart YHWH "hardens" in the Hebrew Bible, and this is the first place YHWH foretells doing so. But in 7:13, 22 and 8:15 *ḥāzaq* appears in the imperfect of the Qal stem and should be translated statively—i.e. "was hardened"—thus ignoring the agent, though in all three cases the action is said to have occurred "as YHWH had said to Moses" (cf. 9:35). YHWH does not appear clearly as the agent until *ḥāzaq* appears in the Piel in 9:12 (cf. 10:27, 11:10, 14:4, 8; cf. Josh 11:20). Finally, YHWH promises to "harden the heart" of the Egyptians (Exod 14:17). While the overwhelming agency of heart hardening is attributed to God, a glimmer of human agency should also be kept in view. The metaphor of "hardening" seems to be a reference to pottery-

shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says YHWH: Israel is my firstborn son. [23]I say to you, release my son in order that he may serve me. (If) you refuse to release him, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.'"

[24]And it came to pass on the way, in a shelter,[6] YHWH encountered him[7] and sought to put him to death. [25]But Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched it to his feet.[8] And she said, "A relative-in-law[9] of blood you are to me." [26]He relented[10] from him. Then she said, "A relative-in-law of blood" because of circumcision.

Introduction

The story of Moses and the burning bush may be found in nearly all children's Bible story books and Sunday school curricula. A steady church attendee will surely hear several sermons preached on it eventually. It is also a key turning point in the plotlines of movies and television series featuring the

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making, in which a potter's removing his hands from the wet clay inevitably results in its drying and, thus, hardening (see Jer 18:1-11). If YHWH, as the potter, removes his hands from the Pharaoh, the resistant clay, one could say that YHWH has "hardened" Pharaoh while at the same time recognizing Pharaoh's agency.

[6] "Shelter" is better than "lodging place" because it maintains the "nuance of temporariness" (TDOT). It refers to a night's lodging place.

[7] The verb *pāgaš* may be translated simply "meet" (see v. 27), but it tends to be used in contexts in which the occasion of the meeting forebodes possible doom (Gen 32:18, 33:8; I Sam 25:20; II Sam 2:13) or in which the meeting is particularly meaningful (Isaiah 34:14; Psalm 85:11; Job 5:14; Prov 22:2, 29:13). In some cases it can mean "attack" as possibly—though not necessarily—here (Hos 13:8; Prov 17:12). "Encountered" preserves the sense of gravity not supplied by "met" while avoiding the possibly over-dramatizing effect of "attacked."

[8] Many commentators note that *rĕgâlîm* is often used as a euphemism for genitalia. However, in the places where this is clearly so, the whole phrase "between (*bayīn*) the feet" is present (e.g. Gen 49:10; Deut 28:57). Possible exceptions might be Judges 3:24, 5:27; I Sam 24:3; Isaiah 6:2 or II Chron 16:12. But in these texts the ambiguity of the referent of *rĕgâlîm* warrants positing a euphemistic expression. Here, however, as in the vast majority of appearances of *rĕgâlîm*, there is insufficient reason to see *rĕgâlîm* as something other than feet or legs.

[9] See note #2. Because it is impossible to determine conclusively the antecedent of this text's pronouns, it is better to preserve the ambiguity with "relative-in-law" or "relative by marriage" than to choose a more specific translation. That Zipporah points to a relationship of affinity rather than consanguinity is all that can be determined.

[10] The verb *rāpāh* followed by *mîn* appears nine times in the Hebrew Bible. There seems to be no English word with the same semantic field. It has to do with releasing, relaxing one's hold, leaving, refraining, abating (Deut 9:14; Josh 10:6; Judg 8:3, 11:37; II Kings 4:27; Ps 37:8; Job 27:6; Neh 6:9). Due to the ambiguity of the context here, it is difficult to know what the best translation might be.

Exodus story. In the minds of those familiar with the Exodus saga, it is surely second only to the Red Sea crossing in importance.

But the Bible story books, Sunday school curricula and movies tend to move directly from the burning bush scene to Moses' entrance into Egypt without reference to much in between. The same could probably be said of a typical sermon series on the life of Moses. As a result, many of the faithful will live their lives with little opportunity to consider the significance of a puzzling and, no doubt, somewhat disturbing vignette situated between the burning bush and Moses' entrance into Egypt. Exodus 4:24-26 reads as follows:

> On the way, at a place where they spent the night, the LORD met him and tried to kill him. But Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched Moses' feet with it, and said, "Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me!" So he let him alone. It was then she said, "A bridegroom of blood by circumcision." (NRSV)

Scarcely four lines long, this little account easily escapes the notice of less careful readers. However, its brevity notwithstanding, when one considers the implications involved, its importance far outweighs its length—especially if one takes the English translations at face value. Here is a moment when the whole plot of Exodus could have been utterly altered. Had YHWH succeeded in his alleged intent here, the story of Moses would have been finished before he even arrived in Egypt, and his body would have been buried somewhere in the wilderness east of Sinai. Zipporah, a Midianite woman, perhaps unwittingly became the savior of the greatest leader the Chosen People ever had. On that night, as journalist Beth Brophy rightly observes, "The entire fate of Israel rests with her."[11]

Due to his role as mediator between YHWH and Israel[12] Moses has often been seen as a type of Christ. Further, the story of Passover, with its focus on the Passover lamb sacrifice, tends to dominate imaginative reconstructions of the Exodus narrative. There is plenty of good reason for this. But omitting even the smallest parts of a biblical narrative can have significant implications for how people of faith shape the theological lessons they glean through them. Perhaps due to the shortness of Zipporah's story, her role as a mediator has not afforded her the same legacy as a great mediator of the Exodus that she deserves. More importantly, omitting her story affects the theology that we form through our reading of the Exodus narrative as a whole. As we will see in the following, a careful look at this story's placement in the Exodus narrative reveals that Zipporah should be understood as a mediator, and that her presence is essential for the development of a biblical theology of mediation.

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[11] Beth Brophy, "Zipporah May Be Obscure, but the Wife of Moses Mattered," *U.S. News and World Report,* January 25, 2008, https://www.usnews.com/news/religion/articles/2008/01/25/zipporah-may-be-obscure-but-the-wife-of-moses-mattered.

[12] Cf. Exod 32:11-14; 33:12-13.

Even upon first reading of this short account, several questions emerge. The first that comes to mind is, why was YHWH trying to kill Moses? Given the fact that God had called Moses to go to Egypt to confront Pharaoh just a paragraph earlier, this seems more than a little odd. Indeed, how did Zipporah even know that YHWH was planning to kill Moses at all? Did she see a dim silhouette at the door of the tent? Was there a smoky shadow? Did Zipporah just feel something ominous and foreboding, like the icy "chill" we have come to associate with impending doom? Or, perhaps Moses was ill, and Zipporah interpreted this as YHWH's intent to kill him. But if that were the case, how did a circumcision save him from death? And, even more puzzlingly, how did Zipporah know that it would?!

These questions are the fruit only of a first reading. If one looks a little further, and behind the English translations, more questions emerge. First of all, Moses' name never appears in the Hebrew text from verses 24–27, leaving the object of YHWH's alleged destructive design ambiguous. Was YHWH trying to kill Moses, or his son Gershom? And if it was Gershom, why did Zipporah act instead of Moses? Was Moses incapacitated in some way? One assumes initially at least that Moses is present, since he is present in the paragraphs both preceding and following this one. But the reader cannot help but notice the abruptness of the transition between verses 26 and 27, and the fact that Zipporah and Gershom vanish from the story completely until chapter 18.

Actually, a birds-eye view of the Exodus story suggests that Moses may have been absent altogether from this encounter. This would not only explain Moses' inactivity on the night of the attempted attack (he simply was not there), it would also explain Zipporah's reappearance later in the narrative. In chapter 18, we are told that after Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt he passed again through Midian and was reunited with Zipporah and their two sons[13]. The Septuagint adds to the text's ambiguities by replacing YHWH with the "angel of the Lord" as the would-be attacker. It is not difficult to understand why the Septuagint's translators would prefer this change. After all, is not YHWH's role more appropriately the helper and deliverer of people who are attacked at night in the wilderness, rather than that of the attacker? Perhaps by changing YHWH to “the angel of YHWH,” the Septuagint’s translators hoped to reserve YHWH himself for a rescuer’s role instead. Perhaps they wanted readers to think, “The *angel* of YHWH attacked Moses, but YHWH himself rescued him through Zipporah.” (As we will see, these translators had precedent for this impulse in the Hebrew Bible itself.) In any case, the ambiguity provokes the interpreter to wonder, “Who, precisely, was there on that dark night in Midian?”

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[13] Exodus 18: 1-3.

There is one person whose presence is not in question: Zipporah was there. That much is clear, and somehow she successfully mediated between a divine attacker and his intended human victim. Zipporah’s role as a mediator, then, should not be overlooked. We may stumble at the idea that YHWH would attempt a nocturnal assault on anyone. But had YHWH followed through that night—had Zipporah *not* stood between YHWH and his would-be victim—her cry would have been but a harbinger of the “great cry” of thousands of Egyptian mothers as they awoke to find their firstborn children’s lifeless corpses.[14] When observed in this light, the Zipporah story becomes an otherwise obscured window into Exodus’s theology of mediation. Here we see a lone, no doubt frightened, Midianite woman thwarting the allegedly devastating plans of Israel’s God—a God whom she had ostensibly never encountered until then.

This text’s ambiguities, manifest in the varied interpretations that have been offered in its service, threaten to leave the interpreter in despair about arriving at a conclusive word regarding its theological message. And, perhaps such a sense of despair might be justified, *if* this story is read without reference to the overall narrative in which it has been passed down to us. But, it is important for the interpreter to step back far enough to realize that the greatest problem this text poses is theological, not textual. No matter how one ultimately arranges the series of events, God is still depicted as an aggressor, and a woman with a sharp stone is the only one who is able to stand in God’s way. One might be tempted to pass this story by as a result. It is short enough that many would not notice anyway and, admittedly, the storyline flows more smoothly without it. The Zipporah story can seem almost like a literary speed bump—those annoying hills of asphalt that we hurried drivers slow down just long enough to get over, but only so we can continue moving busily on our way.

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[14] Exod 11:6, 12:30.

But ignoring Zipporah's story would be precisely the wrong response to the theological challenges of a biblical image of God as someone who attacks in the night. The fact that the Zipporah story so noticeably disrupts its surrounding narrative is evidence of its intentional inclusion. That is, Zipporah's abrupt, sudden appearance and disappearance in the narrative shows that she was put there *on purpose*, not unlike a speed bump, to force the reader to slow down, because leaping ahead to Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh will cause us to miss something of deep theological importance. Skipping over Zipporah would not only represent a failure to honor her as the heroine she truly is, it will also lead to a smudging of the text's multivalent portrayal of God and God's relationship to Israel and, ultimately, to humanity as a whole. The fallout will be detrimental to any theological lesson we draw from the Exodus story as a whole and, in particular, the Passover climax thereof. To put it positively, including Zipporah's encounter with YHWH provides us with a significant resource for dealing with the theological questions that result from Exodus's depiction of a God who attacks, as I hope to show presently.

Because the transitions on either side of the Zipporah story are so sharp and sudden, some wonder if Exodus 4:24–26 existed independently before being inserted into its present context. But, Bernard Robinson correctly observes, "All the numerous attempts …to identify the original purpose of the tradition are speculative, and many are frankly fanciful."[15] It seems that whatever this passage meant before it appeared in the Exodus narrative has been lost to history.[16] Acknowledging this, some scholars have chosen to interpret the story in its context in Exodus, thereby opening the door, not to consensus, but to multiple theological meanings. As John I. Durham counsels, "Whatever their context of origin, these narrative fragments have been brought together in one place, and the resultant sequence must claim our first consideration."[17]

The text's inherent obscurities have to remain. However, they do not need to be seen merely as obstacles in our quest for an interpretation that accounts, in a historical manner, for all the chronological details. Instead, they can be regarded as invitations to a wider and more nuanced exploration into a theology of mediation. In the following I will take my cue from the unique insight of

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[15] Bernard P. Robinson, "Zipporah to the rescue: a contextual study of Exodus 4:24-6," *VT* 36, no. 4 (October 1, 1986): 448.

[16] Ibid., 449.

[17] John I. Durham, *Exodus,* WBC 3 (Dallas: Word, 1987), 54.

Joseph Walters, who argues that the object of YHWH's would-be assault should be left ambiguous as *either* Moses *or* Moses and Zipporah's son Gershom. I will build on this insight, showing that Zipporah's role as mediator is essential to this story's relationship to the rest of Exodus, and specifically to our understanding of the Passover lamb. Zipporah, we will see, is a type of Israel. By extension, Christians should also see her as a type of Christ.

Whom does God attack?

As we have noted, Moses' name does not appear in the Zipporah story. But their son is identified as one of the actors. While most interpreters have assumed that the "him" YHWH sought to execute was Moses (hence the presence of Moses' name in nearly all translations), this is not necessarily clear. It could have been Gershom, his firstborn son.[18] There are strong arguments supporting either reading. Thus, Walters writes, "What I propose is that the ambiguities within this passage are intentional and invite both readings."[19] Walters rightly insists that the story appears as and where it does, for theological reasons and that it should not be treated as a weird, unwelcome intruder. Terence Fretheim agrees: "[I]n the absence of any unequivocal indication as to who it is that God tries to kill, interpretation should leave the matter open, moving with both possibilities, Moses and his (presumably firstborn) son."[20] It is worth examining, therefore, the theological implications either way—both those that come from supposing that Moses, on the one hand, or Gershom, on the other, was YHWH's intended victim.

What if it was Moses?

There are three good reasons to suppose that Moses is the endangered party in this story. First, Zipporah acts alone. If Gershom were the potential victim, Moses would have risen to the occasion. After all, he is twice seen defending the helpless previously (see Exod 2:11-12 and 16-17). Pamela

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[18] Cf. Exod 2:22.

[19] Joseph Walters, "Moses at the lodging place: the devil is in the ambiguities," *Encounter* 63, no. 4 (September 1, 2002), 408.

[20] Terence Fretheim, *Exodus*, IBC 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 78.

Tamarkin Reis observes, “Whether the contenders are Egyptians, Hebrews, or women of neither stock, Moses flies to the side of the wronged.”[21] While not self-confident, Moses is no coward, and is famously even willing to argue with God when he sees the need. As some interpreters have suggested, perhaps Moses was incapacitated, thereby leaving Zipporah to her own devices.[22] Of course, this assumes that Moses was there when this happened, so the same observation could be used to argue that Gershom was the intended victim. More will be said about that possibility shortly.

Second, the previous narrative provides a motive.[23] Most interpreters, focusing on verses 24–26, have assumed that YHWH’s reason for seeking Moses’ life has to do with the fact that he had failed to circumcise his son. But this is not necessarily so. Verse 14, which is part of the burning bush scene, says, “YHWH became angry with Moses,” and nothing in the text implies that God’s anger abated afterward until, ostensibly, verse 26. If Moses is the intended victim in the Zipporah story, perhaps YHWH’s hostility was provoked by Moses’ reluctance to be God’s spokesperson before Pharaoh as they conversed at the burning bush.[24]

Moses’ neglect to circumcise his son could be marshaled as evidence that, not only did Moses hesitate to speak for Israel, he also hesitated to cast his lot with the enslaved Hebrews at all. There are a few clues within the previous narrative that may betray Moses’ evasion of his own ethnic identity. First, when Zipporah and her sisters first encounter Moses, they think he is an Egyptian (Exod 2:19), yet Moses nowhere seems to clear up their mistake. Further, Moses demonstrates no sense of solidarity with the Israelites in his conversation with YHWH at the burning bush. He uses no first-person possessive pronouns to refer to them, choosing instead to call them “the children of Israel,” as if to distance himself from them. When he refers to his “brothers” in his request to Jethro in verse 18, he seems to be dodging his kinship to the people of Israel as a whole. He asks Jethro’s permission to go and see if his “brothers” are still alive, implying that he wanted to check up on his immediate family. His request seems disingenuous, for he certainly knew that the Israelites were quite alive in Egypt. Indeed, their grinding bondage continued! If Moses is seen as the potential object of YHWH’s attack, and if that attack is seen as punitive in nature, his foot-dragging regarding identifying himself with his Hebrew kin seems like the most probable cause.[25]

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[21] Pamela Tamarkin Reis, "The bridegroom of blood: a new reading," *Judaism* 40, no. 3 (June 1, 1991): 326.

[22] Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus; a Critical, Theological Commentary*, OTL 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 103.

[23] Bradley Embry has shown that this story parallels the Balaam narrative (Numbers 22) closely, both in the sequence of events and linguistically. He is certainly correct. However, he concludes from this that Exodus 4 is a “type-scene” of a “missional journey narrative,” an insight anticipated by Gideon Miller (See Gideon Miller, “The "bloody bridegroom" in light of the Joseph narrative," *JBQ* 41, no. 2 [April, 2013]: 117.). YHWH, Embry claims, had no motive for attempting the killing. The incident was “simply a necessary procedure that Moses must endure” (Bradley Embry, "The endangerment of Moses: towards a new reading of Exodus 4:24-26," *VT* 60, no. 2 [January 1, 2010]: 185.). “As a result,” he writes, “Zipporah is indispensable to Exodus 4:24-26 for reasons other than Moses’s actions. She is present because she, *as a figure,* is indispensable to the narrative” (Ibid., 190.). But this gives Zipporah mere literary relevance, which seems to remove some of the weight of her import. It seems that a motive is still necessary for God’s anger even if the passage is a type-scene that parallels Numbers twenty-two.

[24] Miller sees this incident as a stern reminder of YHWH’s plan for Moses’ benefit. This is perhaps too generous, for the emphasis on pedagogy softens the gravity of the danger Moses faced (Miller, 116.).

Third, lexical parallels in the context connect others who “sought” (*pāgaš*) Moses with YHWH in this text, suggesting that Moses is the one “sought” here as well. Umbro Cassuto writes, “[O]ur paragraph is undoubtedly linked …with the paragraph before it and the one after. This is borne out by an expression like *and sought to* kill him, which recalls the earlier statement in v. 19: ‘for all the men are dead which sought your life’…”[26] Good evidence, therefore, points to Moses’ being the person under threat and, thus, the one who was saved through Zipporah’s mediation.

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[25] Historically, most interpreters have thought that Moses’ neglect to circumcise his son was itself the cause of YHWH’s aggression. While neglect of circumcision would certainly be an important indication of Moses’ reluctance to embrace his Israelite heritage, it does not seem to be sufficient reason in itself for YHWH to execute him. Given that YHWH’s previously mentioned anger with Moses has not been resolved at this point in the narrative, YHWH’s anger at Moses’ foot-dragging is the better candidate for a motive. William Propp mounts an impressive case that YHWH seeks Moses’ life because he still bears bloodguilt for having murdered the Egyptian in chapter two. He suggests that Moses’ flight to Midian was for asylum, by analogy to the cities of refuge, which is why YHWH does not seek Moses’ execution until he is on his way back to the land where the murder occurred. Propp takes Zipporah’s pronouncement, “*ḥătan dāmîm ʾatāh lî*” in a negative light. “When Yahweh attacks Moses, Zipporah realizes that the violent stranger she married is a felon …Had she known, she might have hesitated to marry a man with both a price and a curse on his head (William Henry Propp, *Exodus 1-18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 2 [New York: Doubleday, 1999], 235.). While initially convincing, Propp’s reading ultimately claims too much. As Embry has noted, the idea of “bloodguilt” (Numbers 35:6-34; Joshua 20) has to do with manslaughter, not murder. Moses’ crime would certainly have been considered murder, however, and there would have been nowhere analogous to a city of refuge for him to flee from an avenger of blood. Also, if bloodguilt is to be avenged at all, it is not by YHWH but by a human relative of the victim of the manslaughter (Embry, 183-84.). Propp further adds the negative element of seeing Zipporah as a discourager of Moses, which seems to do her injustice and robs the text of crucial theological wealth. If anyone was a support to Moses and his mission in the Exodus story, it was Zipporah and her family.

[26] Umbro Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus,* trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: The Magnes, 1967), 59.

What are the theological implications if this is so? This would certainly not be the first time feminine courage is highlighted in the Exodus narrative. The midwives of the Hebrews (possibly Egyptians) are blessed by God because of their courage (Exod 1:20). Moses' mother and sister, as well as Pharaoh's daughter, saved the infant Moses from Pharaoh's infanticidal aggression (Exod 2:1-10). Interestingly, Moses' father is absent from the story of Moses' infancy deliverance, a fact that points to a possible parallel between Moses' mother and Zipporah, each of whom act without her husband's assistance. The prominence of these two women's willing initiative juxtaposed to Moses' reluctance to embrace his election by YHWH serves to remind the reader that Moses' identity as God's chosen leader happens despite his own weaknesses. Ironically, if the midwives and Moses' mother defied Pharaoh to preserve a future for all Hebrew children, Zipporah paradoxically defies *YHWH's own destructive intent* to the same effect! (This is perhaps the first clue that Zipporah symbolizes something of profound theological importance.)

Here, a theological paradox emerges in the story. On the one hand, it appears that YHWH intends to kill. But on the other, the ease with which Zipporah appears to divert YHWH's intent leads one to wonder if something more is at work behind this facade. After all, the thought that a woman with a sharp rock could defy YHWH of her own accord is absurd. Fretheim wisely comments, "The action of Zipporah …is not effective in and of itself. God *decides* to let Moses live."[27] As we will observe later, this point is important, for a crucial shift occurs with regard to YHWH's role in the Passover narrative later on. Whereas here YHWH himself (at least in the Hebrew version of the story) is the aggressor, in the Passover story the aggressor becomes a shadowy entity called "the destroyer" (Exod 12:23), while YHWH's role shifts quietly to that of a deliverer. That is, paradoxically, *Zipporah herself rather than YHWH himself* (that is, as YHWH is presented in Exod 4:24–26) actually anticipates the role that YHWH plays later in Exodus 12 on the night of the tenth plague—*which of course is the next time a nocturnal attack occurs in the Exodus story*.

An additional important observation to be made is that Zipporah seems to introduce the concept of the human-mediator itself in the Exodus story. In this way, she precedes and anticipates Moses' role as such. As Fretheim observes: "She plays the role of mediator between God and Moses, anticipating the very role that Moses will later play on Israel's behalf (especially in chapters 32–34)."[28]

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[27] Fretheim, 79.

[28] Ibid., 80.

Indeed, this incident seems to effect a dramatic change in Moses. Walters suggests that Moses may have learned through this experience to fear YHWH above Pharaoh. "Moses never again shows such a lack of resolve."[29] Moses also begins referring to YHWH as his own God, rather than merely *their* God, with reference to the Israelites in Egypt (Exodus 5:3).

If one understands Moses as the intended victim in the story, therefore, Zipporah becomes a powerful agent in the Exodus story, regardless of the brevity of her appearance in the narrative. Not only does she save Moses, it is also possible to see her action as the occasion for a profound change in his self-identity. Further, on this reading, Zipporah as mediator becomes a foreshadowing of Moses in the same role. But most importantly of all—and as we will develop later—Zipporah functions as a type of YHWH himself, specifically as YHWH's role is described on the night of the Passover.

In light of this, the possibility that Moses was somehow once nearly killed by YHWH gives one pause to reflect. After all, the great moral-theological problem that looms over the Exodus story is *not* about the slavery and oppression of the Israelites, for that is obviously condemned by the entire narrative. Instead, the reader wonders whether or not Exodus intends its readers to envision the God of Israel ultimately and finally as an aggressor—one who attacks people at night. As we will see later, including Zipporah in the formation of a biblical theology of mediation changes how we respond to that question.

What if it was Gershom?

YHWH's victim could just as plausibly be read as Gershom, Moses and Zipporah's firstborn son. In my estimation, this is the more likely reading of the two. Adam Howell notes that the firstborn son is a major theme in the immediate and broader context of this passage. Indeed, "when vv. 24–26 are read following vv. 21–23, the most natural antecedent of the personal pronouns in vv. 24–26 seems to be Gershom, Moses' *firstborn.*"[30] This would mean that the tenth plague that would later befall the firstborn sons of Egypt was about to be applied to Gershom.[31] In addition, if Gershom is seen as the victim of YHWH's pending assault here, a clear parallel is drawn between the rite of circumcision and the rite of the Passover lamb sacrifice, for they both relate to the threat of death to firstborn sons.

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[29] Walters, 420.

[30] Adam J. Howell, "The firstborn son of Moses as the 'relative of blood' in Exodus 4:24-26,"

JSOT 25, no. 1 (September 1, 2010): 67.

While Christian theological reflection tends to focus on the Passover lamb's blood, Exodus 12:43–49 makes *both* the lamb's sacrifice *and* circumcision—both blood ceremonies—requirements for celebration of Israel's deliverance out of Egypt. It would be difficult to overstress this point, for even though in the Zipporah story we have a clear example of the successful deflection of YHWH's wrath through the circumcision rite, deflection of the same with regard to the Passover story is more often than not attributed to a "substitutionary" understanding the Passover lamb. That is, it is claimed that the Passover lamb's death stands as a substitute for the deaths of the firstborn Hebrew children. The trouble is, no death occurs in the Zipporah story, and yet she successfully dissuades YHWH from pouring out his alleged anger on a human victim. We will consider some of the implications of this observation in more detail later.

If Gershom is YHWH's victim, why does Zipporah act alone? As previously noted, it could be simply because Moses was not there. Note that verse 20 says Moses caused his wife and sons to mount a donkey, but it does not specify where he sends them. Then, the narrator chooses to use the masculine singular, "and *he* returned (*wayāšob*) to the land of Egypt," instead of a plural, possibly suggesting that Moses was making the journey alone. Also, Zipporah does not appear again after this story until chapter 18, where we are told that Moses had sent her and their two sons to live with Jethro while Moses was in Egypt.[32] There are several good reasons, then, to posit Gershom as YHWH's intended victim in this passage—and they are just as strong as those that posit Moses.

What are the theological implications for Zipporah's mediatory role if Gershom is the one that she saves? They are largely the same: Zipporah stands between YHWH, the supposed attacker, and the attacked. The difference, of course, is that Gershom is a child, which means there is no way Zipporah could be seen as defending a guilty party. If YHWH might have killed Moses because of something Moses did, YHWH might have killed Gershom because of something *someone else*—probably Moses—did. This implies that we as readers are obliged to imagine Moses, if only for a moment, standing in

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[31] Ibid., 69.

[32] Cf. Exod 18:1–3.

Pharaoh's place, and his firstborn son's (nearly) dying. It is possible that YHWH's proclamation, "I will kill your firstborn" in verse 23 is a case of double address in which God speaks both to Pharaoh *through* Moses and *to* Moses directly. This points toward a facet of the Passover story that is often ignored: the firstborn sons of Egypt who were killed on the night of Israel's deliverance were the vehicles of Israel's redemption. It was *their* "blood" that effected Israel's freedom. It was *their* blood that finally moved Pharaoh to let the people go. There was surely no person alive for whom this truth would have been more real than for Zipporah, who had herself felt the weight of the imminent death of her own son.

Walters wonders if YHWH was challenging Moses concerning his own identity by addressing his son's circumcision status. Was he a son of Pharaoh or a son of Israel? "After the divine attack and the circumcision of Moses's son, the situation is resolved."[33] Fred Blumenthal observes that Moses may have thought he would deliver the Israelites, and then return to his in-law family in Midian without ever fully casting his lot with Israel.[34] Zipporah more than any other human figure, then, must also be understood as the person who helped Moses—to use a modern cliché—"find himself." She, the Midianite woman, reified his Israelite self. Terry John Lehane puts it well: "Zipporah's acceptance of God's Covenant was needed before the people could be delivered from the first bondage."[35] This highlights a point that will become important later on: Zipporah's mediation was an act characterized by *identification.*

Some commentators have unfortunately seen Zipporah as the reluctant party in this story instead of giving her a rightful place as a "woman of valor."[36] For example, one accuses Zipporah of bearing responsibility for not having circumcised her son.[37] Allen S. Maller notes that some rabbis blamed Zipporah and her family for Gershom's uncircumcised condition.[38] Likewise, popular films like,

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[33] Walters, 422.

[34] Fred Blumenthal, "The circumcision performed by Zipporah," *JBQ* 35, no.

4 (October 1, 2007), 257.

[35] Lehane, 50.

[36] Allen S. Maller, "The Brideground of Blood," *JBQ* 21, no. 2 (April 1, 1993), 98.

[37] Lawrence H. Fink, "The Incident at the Lodging House," *JBQ* 21, no. 4 (October 1, 1993), 241.

[38] Maller, 94-95.

The Ten Commandments,[39] *The Prince of Egypt*,[40] and *Exodus: Gods and Kings*[41] all portray Zipporah, albeit to varying degrees, as resisting Moses' calling.

But in the text, this part of the story is not ambiguous: Zipporah is clearly a heroine mediator. In fact, she is the one who initiates the theme of blood mediation, so prominent in the rest of Israel's history. The blood of circumcision seems, mysteriously, to remind YHWH of the covenant he had formed with Abraham. Howell reasons,

> "[T]he blood …needed to be in a place that was visible. The best translation of *raglāyw* based on this evidence is 'his legs', particularly Gershom's legs. Following the thematic connection to the Passover, it seems most reasonable that Zipporah would have touched the bloody foreskin to Gershom's legs in order to make the visible 'sign' of blood."[42]

Zipporah is reminding God, thus, of the covenant that binds *God* to God's people while at the same moment prefiguring the Passover.

Theological Implications of Including Zipporah

Any theology of mediation that references the Exodus story—and thus Moses, the Passover lamb, etc.—*must also include a discussion of Zipporah's actions in this short episode.* Walter Brueggemann writes, "There are provisional strategies for safety in the face of holiness, but none that will finally tame this dangerous God."[43] Perhaps we cannot say that Zipporah "tamed" God, but we can say that she knew what to do to bring salvation to someone who needed it. Zipporah doesn't tame God, but she *does* help to explain who God is, and how humans need to relate to God. Brueggemann's emphasis on God's holiness is complemented by Douglas Stuart's emphasis on grace in this passage.

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[39] Cecil B. DeMille, director, *The Ten Commandments*, Paramount Pictures, 1956.

[40] Brenda Chapman, et. al., directors, *The Prince of Egypt,* DreamWorks Pictures, 1998.

[41] Ridley Scott, director, *Exodus: Gods and Kings,* 20th Century Fox, 2014.

[42] Howell, 72.

[43] Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus," in *The New Interpreter's Bible,* Vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 718.

> The fact that Zipporah had time to do the right thing and remove the danger shows that somehow she was warned and given time to act. The specifics of that warning are not provided in the narrative, but the grace of God is implied clearly in the fact that by acting, Zipporah prevented a serious consequence.[44]

Repelled by the vision of a God who attacks at night, some commentators have chosen to see "YHWH" in this text as merely a vestige of some Midianite demonic being. For example, Hans Kosmala writes, "In spite of the fact that the divinity in this story bears the name of the God of Israel, he was the divinity of the Midianite desert lands …This reflexion (sic.) would account for the 'strange' and 'un-Israelite' behavior of God in our story."[45] But is the vision of YHWH in Exodus 4 really very different from those to be found in the rest of Exodus? Is YHWH not depicted as *successfully* slaughtering the innocents of Egypt in the tenth plague? (The answer to that question is not as straightforward as one might assume, as we will see.) Indeed, *without the Zipporah story*, there seems to be little sign of hope for an Egyptian firstborn child in light of that vision of God. In other words, removing this story from relevance to the Exodus saga by relegating it to Midianite folklore exacerbates the problem of a dangerous God, for unlike the Egyptians, Zipporah found a way to evade the death of her family member.

Both Christian and Jewish readers of Exodus readily see Moses as the great mediator of the Old Testament—the one who stands between God and God's people. Abraham is another such mediator, though he meets with less success (see Genesis 18). But how often do Christians hear of Zipporah's role as a mediator in the church? Perhaps the image of a wiry, staff-toting prophet standing before the thundering presence of an angry deity, gray beard blowing in the windy night, captures our imaginations better than does the image of a (no doubt) frightened, foreign woman tremblingly clutching a sharp stone alone in the quiet, starlit night in the Midianite wilderness.[46] Moses was a statesman—a political leader, general and prophet; Zipporah was "just" a wife and mother trying to save her family. There is no election story for Zipporah—no burning bush experience. She was not even a daughter of Abraham and Sarah. As was noted before, some clues in the text hint it is possible she did not even know about Moses' Israelite heritage or that he had been chosen by YHWH to confront Pharaoh at all.

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[44] Douglas Stuart, *Exodus* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 155-56.

[45] Hans Kosmala, "The Bloody Husband," *VT* 12, no. 1 (January 1, 1962): 21. Cf. Julian Mogenstern, "The "bloody husband" (?) (Exodus 4:24-26) once again," *HUCA* 34, (January 1, 1963): 70.

[46] The text does not mention whether or not Zipporah was frightened. This is just the way I imagine her in this situation. One might imagine otherwise. Perhaps she was confident, defiant and bold. Either way, she was courageous.

But Zipporah's foreignness, her gender and her status as a non-elect person are precisely the factors that make her crucial to the formation of a biblical theology of mediation. Do prophets—indeed a great mediator-savior prophet—like Moses need a mediator too? It seems Moses did, and Zipporah is how we know. Fretheim summarizes her significance well,

> Zipporah is important in her own right. She is the only one named. She is the only active person in the passage, in both word and deed. Given what God is about here, that action is not without risk to her own life. Moreover, she knows what is called for to save Moses/Moses' son in this situation …as Zipporah saves Moses from the wrath of God, so Moses will save Israel. Moses is thus revealed as one who does not himself stand without need of mediation.[47]

The phrase I have translated "relative-in-law of blood" (*ḥātān damîm*) is notoriously difficult to define, being further complicated by the ambiguity in its context here. It seems best to interpret it in a positive light, however. Moses is not the only one whose role in God's redemptive plan is changing in this story; Zipporah also sees *herself* as also having entered into a new relationship because of her own action. She becomes a relative by blood to Moses and, in turn, to YHWH's people—a kinswoman through the ceremonial blood of circumcision. Israel was elected by God, but Zipporah includes herself in that election, by an act of her own initiative.

Including Zipporah must go beyond merely recognizing her importance in the narrative, however. How does Zipporah's inclusion change the theology that we glean from that narrative?

First, to speak anachronistically, Zipporah is a "Gentile" whose mediation saves an Israelite from YHWH's wrath. Israel rightly saw itself as the mediator of God's glorious presence to the world. But, Israel also needed an outsider—at least once in its history—to stand between it and YHWH, and that person was Zipporah the Midianite woman. In her wonderful book, *Reading the Women of the Bible,* Tikva Frymer-Kensky notes that, when her story is read within the Genesis narrative, Hagar—who as an Egyptian was also one of the non-elect—is "the type of Israel." Frymer-Kensky writes, "At the heart of the Abraham-Sarah cycle is a story demonstrating that the destiny of the people around Israel is not utterly different from Israel's."[48] Even as Hagar the Egyptian is delivered from her *Hebrew* masters by YHWH, so Israel is freed from her *Egyptian* masters by YHWH later. Hagar the Egyptian, therefore, represents Israel's story. Something similar could be said of Zipporah within the Exodus narrative. God chose Israel, yes. However, Israel's deliverance depends, at times, on the *un*chosen. Zipporah becomes for Moses—or for Gershom—what Israel ultimately becomes for the world: the vehicle of God's salvation.

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[47] Fretheim, 80-81.

Secondly, as noted above, Zipporah's story identifies her with the parents of the Egyptian firstborn children who were killed in the final plague. Thus, her story provides a unique opportunity for Bible readers to place themselves in the shoes of "the other"—in this case, those of the Egyptians. It is all too easy for people of faith to read the Exodus story, as well as the Canaanite conquest narratives, simply in terms of "us versus them" or "good versus evil." "We" are the Israelites, we quickly assume, and God is on our side. Some Christian apologists, eager to justify Exodus's portrayal of God's actions in the tenth plague, point out the guilt of the Egyptians, who for several centuries stubbornly resisted God's will to free Israel from slavery. Without dispute, the Egyptians were guilty as charged. But when we intentionally include the Zipporah incident in our reading of the story, Egyptian guilt suddenly becomes a shared problem, and *all* parties suddenly find themselves in need of salvation. The Bible stubbornly works against a simplistic "guilty-versus-innocent" application of its own story. Things are far more complicated than that, and Zipporah would surely have understood this—indeed, perhaps better than anyone in the story would have. The Bible's presentation of its own story insists there is never a neat separation of an "us" over against a "them." "We" could just as easily be the Egyptians as we could be the Israelites. "We" could just as easily be the people on the *inside* of Jericho's walls as we could be those marching around them. The only thing that will make a difference *for anyone* is the right mediator. In the Exodus story, Zipporah teaches the reader what this means.

Thirdly, and most consequentially—at least for Christians reading this story—including Zipporah in a theological reading of Exodus has implications for how we understand the Passover, and particularly the role of the Passover lamb. In turn, this changes how we explain the way that the Passover lamb points forward to Jesus. This last point will take some developing, so we will dedicate to it a separate subheading.

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[48] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (New York: Schocken, 2002), 236.

Zipporah and the Passover Lamb

How, precisely, a mediator functions in God's economy is a theological topic of great importance and complexity. Any adequate theology of mediation will be nuanced, carefully crafted, and will try to take into account biblical revelation as a whole. Such a fully developed theology of mediation cannot be accomplished in a short article. Still, there is room to offer some suggestions to point us in the right direction. I will make two observations, and then discuss their theological implications.

First, Zipporah teaches us that mediation between God and man does not necessarily need to involve an execution, or putting to death, of a living being. Even more importantly, no one would argue that circumcision is—or even represents—a form of punishment. Circumcision, rather, is universally recognized as a rite of *identity.* Males were circumcised to mark them out from others as the children of Abraham. The physical location of the circumcision scar, likewise, marks the identity of their descendants as well. In social terms, circumcision is a mark of ethnic identity; in theological terms, it is a mark of election. Including Zipporah in a theology of mediation, therefore, entails either backing away from or relativizing views thereof that require substitutionary death.

Our second observation stems from the first: including Zipporah's story in the development of a theology of mediation compels Christians to revisit a common understanding—or, as I will argue, misunderstanding—of the role and purpose of the Passover lamb sacrifice. Once we have observed that Zipporah successfully mediates between God and man without employing a sacrifice, the modern reader is moved to ask whether or not the rite of the Passover lamb can also be understood as a rite of identity rather than of substitutionary punishment. In the following I will argue that a close re-reading of the narrative surrounding the Passover points in that direction, and that seeing the Passover lamb as symbolic of penal substitution is to misunderstand it.

To illustrate how this misunderstanding has made its way into Christian retellings of the Passover story, consider how it is depicted in the popular 2013 television miniseries entitled, *The Bible.*[49] In the second episode in the series, a scene appears in which Moses addresses a group of discouraged

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[49] Roma Downey and Mark Burnett, directors, "Exodus," *The Bible,* season 1, episode 2, 20th Century Fox Television, 2013.

Israelites sitting around a fire. Moses approaches the group with a disturbed expression on his face. The dialogue proceeds as follows:

> **Israelite man**: "What's wrong?
>
> **Moses**: "Soon there will be a final plague. The Angel of Death is coming. Every firstborn son will die."
>
> *(A worried hubbub ensues. A woman cries, "No!")*
>
> **Israelite man**: "But not us! Why would he punish us?!"
>
> **Moses** (in hushed, dramatic tone): "Death is coming for us all."
>
> *(More worried hubbub)*
>
> **Other Israelite man** (with terrified expression): "Why us?!"
>
> *(Worried hubbub continues)*
>
> **Moses** (in raised voice with hand uplifted to silence the hubbub): "Friends! We can be spared God's vengeance, but only if we do exactly as he tells us."

The scene cuts away, and Israelites are shown slaughtering lambs and spreading the lambs' blood on their doorposts. The emotion of the scene is anxiety and fear—a sense of, "If we don't to this exactly right, we will be in danger of death."

Similarly, in an episode that tells the Exodus story in the animated children's television series, *Superbook*,[50] a bluish, murky smoke darts in and out of the doors of houses, presumably extinguishing the lives of firstborn sons therein, but then pauses in front of a door on which a lamb's blood has been painted. The smoky entity then moves on. Inside we hear a man say, "It's just passed us by." A woman replies, "Thank God," and the viewer feels a sense of relief.

These examples from recent Christian popular culture illustrate a common understanding of the Passover lamb. Christians have often assumed that that the blood on the Israelites' doorposts functioned something like a magical amulet or talisman. In brief, the thinking goes like this: "YHWH, as an act of punishment, was about to kill *both* the Israelites *and* the Egyptian firstborn children, but mercifully provided a ritual to the Israelites that, if performed correctly, would allow them to escape." What the text actually says falls short of providing a basis for that conclusion. There are three unwarranted assumptions that lead to this way of understanding this part of the Passover narrative, which we will address in turn.

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[50] Bryant Paul Richardson, "Exodus: Let My People Go," *Superbook*, season 1, episode 4, Christian Broadcasting Network, 2011.

Unwarranted Assumption #1: The ten plagues functioned as punishments

The presence of violence in the Exodus story, especially violence attributed to God, easily leads the modern reader to this assumption. But, given that not all violence is punitive in nature, the conclusion that the ten plagues were meant as punishments should be decided based on textual evidence from the narrative itself.

But, an examination of the text leaves the reader wanting. Despite Egypt's having enslaved the Israelites for several centuries, YHWH's goal is undistractedly to liberate the Israelites. The only objects of "judgment" specifically identified in the narrative are Egypt's gods.[51] Undoubtedly, the plagues *do* signify the judgment of YHWH on the Egyptians as well. But the biblical term "judgment" (*špt*) does not necessarily entail punishment, and is more frequently associated with arbitration, or giving verdicts.[52] Thus, even insofar as the plagues "judge" the Egyptian gods, we should probably not understand them as being physically painful for those deities, or as "killing" them, but rather as a public demonstration that YHWH is their superior. In western and westernized contexts we often associate justice with what happens to a criminal *after* he or she has been apprehended, and we associate it with prison sentences, executions, etc. Justice, for us, often *means* punishment. This view of justice, however, does not capture the biblical notion, and it seems to have confused our understanding both of the significance of YHWH's actions in the Exodus story and, in turn, of the role of the Passover lambs, as I will argue below.

Unwarranted Assumption #2: On the night of the tenth plague, YHWH was ready to kill the Israelite firstborn sons as well as the firstborn sons of Egypt

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[51] Cf. Exod 12:12; Num 33:4.

[52] Cf. e.g. Exodus 18:13, 16, 22.

While it is certainly possible to read the text this way, there is nothing in it that requires one to draw this conclusion. In addition, there are at least two good reasons to reject it. First, we should note that YHWH, without requiring any sacrifices or rituals of any kind, exempted the Israelites from suffering the effects of the first nine plagues. If we are to claim this pattern was broken in the tenth plague, evidence from the text is required. Second, the text simply never says that YHWH intended to take the lives of the Israelite firstborn. The crux of the matter seems to be an over-reading of Exodus 12:13, 23, and 27. Because the popular English translations fail to bring out the ambiguity in these verses present in the Hebrew, we should examine them each in turn.

12:13

Notice that there is no "if …then" clause present. The normal word that would take the role of the conditional conjunctive "if" in Hebrew is *ʾim*. But this word does not appear in this verse, though the conjunction is ubiquitous throughout the book of Exodus elsewhere. A wooden translation would read, "And the blood will be *for you* a sign on the houses where you are and I will see the blood *and I will pass over you* and no plague will destroy you when I smite the land of Egypt." The text does not say that *if* the Israelites participate in the Passover rites only *then* will YHWH "pass over" them. Rather, the reader is left with the impression that YHWH simply assumes the Israelites will celebrate the Passover. The Passover rite is not given as a condition of survival, but as a mark or symbol of God's salvation—a salvation that God has already determined to provide beforehand.

Furthermore, in the same verse God says that the blood on the doorposts is meant to be a sign "for you." Elsewhere where the sequence, "it shall be a sign *for you,*" appears in the Hebrew Bible, the "sign" consistently has a pedagogical or memorializing purpose.[53] Why would it be different here? Again, while one *could* understand the blood as functioning like an amulet that wards off destruction, the text's wording does not require it. Instead, it seems more natural to see the blood's purpose as a sign for the benefit of the Israelites, to teach and remind them of something—in this case, of God's salvation.

12:23

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[53] See Exod 3:12; 2 Kings 19:29; Isaiah 37:30; Ezek 4:3; 12:6, 11.

This is one of the most intriguing verses in the Exodus saga. It frankly states that YHWH will "strike" Egypt, referring to the tenth plague. The phrase inaugurated in verse 13, "and I will see the blood," is then repeated (this time in the third person). But then a subtle shift occurs, and a third party is introduced. The NRSV reads, "the LORD will pass over that door and will not *allow the destroyer* to enter your houses to strike you down" (emphasis added). This shift should not be overlooked, for doing so would be to miss the fact that *both* YHWH's actual action *and* YHWH's potential action toward Israel on the night of the tenth plague were entirely salvific. In other words, while the text says that YHWH *himself* would strike Egypt, it carefully reserves YHWH for the role of deliverer—*not* aggressor or punisher—in relation to Israel. It then identifies "the destroyer" as being the one who is *actually* carrying out the slaughter of the Egyptian firstborn sons. The situation is not, therefore, one in which YHWH's wrath is abated by the presence of blood, but one in which YHWH *himself, upon seeing the blood,* delivers the Israelites from a *third party attacker.* The blood does not move YHWH to spare Israel, like a merciful executioner lowering his axe to the earth; rather, the blood becomes a sign that YHWH is the one who is actively delivering Israel from the nameless, nebulous, cryptic "destroyer."

12:27

No further comment on 12:27 would be necessary if it were not for the prevalence of an aberrant translation choice in popular modern English translations. The NRSV, NIV, ESV, and NASB all choose to translate the word *nāṣal* as "spare" in this verse. The clear connotation of the English word "spare" as a verb involves an act of restraint or omission. An attacking army, for example, might "spare" the women and children—that is, refrain from killing them. Someone might say she was "spared" a company's downsizing layoffs. We might personify a storm or earthquake to say that it "spared" a building or bridge. The word, then, implies that party A either intends to or has reason to act in some negative way toward party B. But then, party A for whatever reason exempts B and refrains from following through with the negative action. Thus, on the surface, when one reads the verse in popular modern English translations, it seems that 12:27 claims that the Israelite firstborn were, in fact, in danger of losing their lives just like their Egyptian counterparts.

The trouble is, "spare" seems to be a mistranslation of *nāṣal*. BDB does not include it as a possible meaning of the word. Though the word *nāṣal* appears 194 times in the Hebrew Bible, Exodus 12:27 is the only place in the NIV and ESV in which it is translated "spare." The NASB and NRSV likewise translate *nāṣal* “spare” in Exodus 12:27, and each translate the same word as such in only one other place—the NASB in Genesis 32:30, where it appears in the passive voice (the Niphal) and the NRSV in Isaiah 31:5, a verse that alludes to the Passover, and can be subjected to the same critique we are about to give of the translation of Exodus 12:27. Everywhere else the translators follow the standard meaning set out in BDB. *Nāṣal* means “deliver” or “take away.” Especially in the Hiphil, the word denotes an intentional or positive action, not a refraining from action.

Because the end result of an action that “spares” a person’s life and an action that “delivers” a person’s life are the same—namely, the person goes on living—the connotations of the two words can be easily overlooked. An example may serve to bring out the important difference between the two words. Consider these two scenarios:

> **Scenario #1:** Suppose Peter and George go hiking together in the mountains. Peter, unbeknownst to George, is angry with George and plans to push him off a cliff at some point during their hike. But somewhere along the way, Peter has a change of heart, and chooses to *spare* George this fate. The two finish the hike, go to their respective homes, and live happily ever after.

> **Scenario #2:** Suppose Peter and George go hiking together in the mountains. At a point of the trail that runs along the side of a cliff, George’s foot slips on a rock and begins to fall. But Peter extends his hand at just the right moment and grasps George’s shirt collar, thereby breaking George’s momentum enough for George to regain his foothold, and thereby *delivering* him from falling to his death. The two finish the hike, go to their respective homes, and live happily ever after.

If we choose “spared” as the translation of *nāṣal* in Exodus 12:27, the relationship between Peter and George in “Scenario #1” becomes the better analogy to explain the relationship between YHWH and the Israelite firstborn sons in the Passover story. But, if we choose “delivered” to translate *nāṣal*, our “Scenario #2” becomes the better analogy. Notice that in Scenario #2 both Peter’s intentions and his actions toward George remain entirely for George’s benefit. Peter poses no threat to George. Rather, factors organic to the nature of mountain hiking such as gravitation, a loose rock and a jagged cliff pose the threat. Peter's role is to step into a situation in which George is in danger in order to rescue him from that danger.

There does not seem to be any good reason to translate *nāṣal* as "spared" in Exodus 12:27 when the word so clearly has an active sense. YHWH, thus, does not "spare" the Israelite firstborn boys in Exodus; YHWH *delivers* them. The Passover lamb sacrifices, therefore, did *not* memorialize a possible action—that is, the killing of the Israelite firstborn children—that YHWH *refrained* for doing. Rather, the Passover celebrates YHWH's *active* role as Israel's deliverer. YHWH comes to the rescue, as it were, preventing the Israelite firstborn from being killed by a mysterious *third party* called "the destroyer." Older English translations like the King James Version, the Wycliffe Bible, and the Geneva Bible translate this verse more accurately than their modern counterparts, recording either that God "delivered" or "preserved" the Israelite houses.

Misguided Assumption #3: The Passover lambs had a penal substitutionary function

We can make three observations about the text to build a corroborative case for the non-penal purpose of the Passover lamb sacrifices.

First, Moses' initial request to Pharaoh, which seems well beyond reasonable given the oppression Pharaoh had meted out upon the Israelites, was that the Israelites be allowed to go into the wilderness for a few days to offer sacrifices to God.[54] This means that the Israelites already possessed a notion of sacrifice before the Passover ritual was inaugurated. *If* the purpose of the sacrificial system was to symbolize the principle of penal substitution in the economy of God's salvation, this was *already happening* in the Israelite collective consciousness. It would not make sense, therefore, for God to reintroduce an idea, by means of a new sacrificial rite, that was already there, let alone to do so on pain of the mass execution of all of Israel's firstborn sons!

Second, a Passover lamb was to live with each Israelite family for a period of four days before being slaughtered (Exod 12:1-11). There is no indication that these four days are intended to result in the lamb's suffering, such that the Israelites would view the lamb as bearing Israel's punishment as

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[54] See 3:18; 5:3, 8, 17; 8:8, 25-29; 10:25.

Israel's substitute. Rather, the practice seems to encourage Israelite families to bond with the lambs. I do not think this is a farfetched claim. Descriptions of close bonds between humans and animals are not common in the Hebrew Bible. In my home culture, we most readily associate dogs, and maybe horses, with the non-human party in such bonds. But in the Hebrew Bible the lamb seems to be the most likely animal to participate in such an interspecific friendship. In the parable the prophet Nathan told to David in order to grab his emotions and compel him to confess to adultery and murder, Nathan describes a poor man whose solitary lamb was "like a daughter" to him (2 Sam 12:3). The fact that David reacts so angrily toward someone who would slaughter someone else's "pet" lamb shows that it was easy for him to imagine a person's having a close relationship with that particular animal. Further, the Hebrew Bible frequently draws an analogy between God's loyal and affectionate relationship to Israel and that of a shepherd to his flock, with Psalm 23 being the most familiar example.[55] The possibility, then, of a close bond forming between an Israelite family and a lamb is well within the scope of biblical imagination. We are justified in envisioning, therefore, the Passover lambs' becoming something like family pets. Israelite families would "identify" with them, not only formally, but on an emotional level as well. Far from being an object of punishment, these lambs were treated with special care, at least when compared to other animals who were not chosen.

Third, the Israelites were obliged to consume the entirety of the Passover lamb's meat once it had been roasted. *Merely* slaughtering the animals and following through with the blood ritual was not enough. Again, a penal category would fail to explain this aspect of the Passover ceremony. Instead, categories like *identification* or *participation* serve much better to explain the symbolism. The lamb is literally consumed, its body and life *becoming* the life and body of the participants in the ritual.

Zipporah as Mediator

Our foregoing deconstruction of these three unwarranted assumptions leads to the conclusions that (1) substitution, whether penal or otherwise, may not be the best category for understanding the meaning of the Passover lamb sacrifices and (2) the category of *identity* holds comparatively more promise. This conclusion brings us back to our discussion of the Zipporah story. As we have observed, Zipporah employs the circumcision rite to successfully mediate between YHWH and an endangered person. We noted that circumcision is a rite of identity or participation, and has nothing to do with punishment or substitution. The surrounding narrative shows that Zipporah reified Moses' identity with his people, thereby enabling him to live out his elected purpose. She also interprets her own action as an act of self-identification with Moses and, in turn, with Moses' people. There is a real sense in which Zipporah *opts in* to God's elected people!

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[55] See also Num 27:17; Psalm 28:9; 78:71–72; 80:1; Isaiah 40:11; Jer 31:10; Ezek 34:15.

But further, Zipporah also takes on a unique role in relation to the Egyptians—those who are the most quintessentially *non*-elect in the story. She more than any other is able to identify on an emotional level with the women of Egypt who would later suffer the terrible loss of their firstborn sons.

Here, then, is what I propose for consideration: the Passover lambs were meant to memorialize, for the Israelites, the deaths of the firstborn of Egypt. On this view, the lambs would not represent a mass death that was *evaded* in the Exodus, but would rather memorialize the deaths of Egyptian firstborn children that *actually* occurred. As each Israelite family lived with the lambs for four days, they would inevitably develop an emotional bond, even if it be a minor one, with the animals. Each year, then, as the Israelites remembered their own deliverance, they were simultaneously reminded that their deliverance did not come without a cost. Yes, they were God's elect, and this was marked by circumcision. But, in Exodus we see God established an enduring ritual that would remind the Israelites, in a manner that engaged their minds, emotions and bodies, of their ultimate connection with the suffering of their enemies. The Passover places the Israelites as a whole, therefore, in the place of a mediator—just like Zipporah.

How Including Zipporah Affects Our Understanding of God

There are three parallels between the Zipporah story and what we have observed above in the Passover story that inform the theological lessons we can glean from the Exodus narrative as a whole.

- **Parallel #1:** Both the Zipporah story and the Passover story involve three roles—an aggressor, a potential victim, and a deliverer.

- **Parallel #2:** Both the Zipporah story and the Passover story involve a rite that is best explained as symbolizing *identity*. This is made most explicit in the Zipporah story, as it would be in any story involving circumcision. But as I have argued above in my deconstruction of the "unwarranted assumptions" that often dictate our reading of the Passover story, I have tried to show that the Passover lamb sacrifice is *also* more accurately thought of as a rite of identity.

- **Parallel #3:** Both the Zipporah story and the Passover story occur in the immediate context of predictive statements regarding the tenth plague of Egypt.

I propose that a biblical theology of mediation that includes Zipporah should begin with a conversation about how these two stories, which bookend the ten plagues, relate to each other. In order to do that, we must also observe one crucial difference between the two stories in addition to the three parallels above: In the Zipporah story, YHWH is depicted as the aggressor, an Israelite is his intended victim, and Zipporah is the deliverer. But in the Passover story, a mysterious "destroyer" becomes the aggressor, and YHWH's role shifts mysteriously and quietly to that of a deliverer. In other words, when we juxtapose the two stores in this way, *Zipporah parallel's YHWH's role in the Passover story*. We observed previously that Zipporah is a type of Israel. But here there is a hint that, in fact, she is also a type of YHWH himself. YHWH goes from being the aggressor in the Zipporah story to being the deliverer in the Passover story. The catalyst for this change in how the author presents YHWH's role seems to be Zipporah.

Conclusion

It is undeniable that, in the view of the New Testament, the Passover lamb is a type of Christ. Not only is Jesus explicitly identified as the Passover lamb in 1 Corinthians 5:7, the New Testament contains quite a few references to Jesus as a sacrificial lamb, though, interestingly, none linking him with other sacrificial animals. The lamb, in a special way over against other sacrificial animals, points to

Christ. Moreover, the New Testament specifically calls attention to the efficacy of Jesus' *blood*, which makes the connection with the Passover lamb sacrifice and Jesus' crucifixion clear.[56]

For that reason, some might think that the foregoing arguments diminish the importance of Christ's crucifixion for salvation, since I have argued that there is no evidence in the text of the Exodus narrative itself that the Passover lamb's death was meant to substitute for the deaths of the Hebrew firstborn. However, this is not what I have intended to say. The death of the Passover lambs was just as important as any other part of the Passover ritual. There is a sense in which the lamb's death sealed or crowned the entire picture for which it was chosen to be the subject. That is, the fact that the Passover lamb's purpose was not to be a death substitute *per se* does not mean that its death is without meaning or even that it was unnecessary. Rather, it means that the significance of the lamb's death is best understood using some other category besides substitution. I have suggested the category of *identification* is a promising possibility. If this suggestion proves true, drawing out the theological implications of seeing the Passover lamb as a type of Christ would involve finding ways to understand the death of Christ as part of Christ's saving identification with humanity. Other promising categories might be *participation* or *representation*. Christ's full identification with (or participation with, or representation of) humanity *necessitates* his death and, thus, joins with the rest of the reality of who Jesus is as the Savior of humanity. It is also important to note that this article has not sought to give a full critique of a penal substitutionary atonement view of the cross, but has merely called into question the use of the Passover lamb as a basis for supporting such a view.

Zipporah's success as a mediator plays a key role in the Exodus story, and a crucial role in the formation of a biblical theology of mediation. She, as the deliverer from a would-be attacker, actually stands in the place that God later inhabits in the Passover story. Theologians and all Christians must continue to seek understanding of the cross's meaning. Part of that enterprise involves revisiting, on their own terms, the various pictures in the Hebrew Bible that inform that understanding. In the above we have tried to show how any adequate theology of mediation that draws from the Exodus narrative must include Zipporah, and that doing so results in real change in the theological lessons we derive from that narrative, including how we understand the way the Exodus narrative as a whole points to Christ.

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[56] See especially 1 Pet 1:19; Rev 7:14; 12:11; 13:8.

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