

# THE CIRCUMCISION PERFORMED BY ZIPPORAH

FRED BLUMENTHAL

In the account of Moses' return to Egypt we are confronted with a very short, cryptic story describing the circumcision of one of his sons by his wife Zipporah. The JPS translation of these three verses reads as follows:

*At a night encampment on the way, the Lord encountered him and sought to kill him. So Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched his leg with it, saying 'You are truly a bridegroom of blood to me.' And when He let him alone she added: 'A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision' (Ex. 4:24-26).*

The brevity with which this event is reported deserves more attention than the event itself. As it reads, it does not specify who was threatened with death. Was it Moses or one of his sons who was uncircumcised? If one of the sons, was it the older or the younger? Why did Zipporah have to perform the act instead of Moses himself? Last but not least, why was this circumcision of such overriding importance at this moment, when we read in the fifth chapter of the Book of Joshua that all circumcisions had been suspended during the journey in the wilderness, seemingly with the full consent of Moses.

Perhaps we should add that if it was the younger son who was being circumcised at this ceremony, as it appears at first glance, it is surprising that Moses should have had a newborn son at the age of 80, without any mention of this birth in the preceding text. And it appears equally puzzling that he should have taken a newborn child on a perilous trip, together with the mother who could hardly have recovered from the delivery so quickly. All of these questions are left unanswered in this story which is inserted between the account of Moses leaving Midian and his arrival in Egypt.

At the end, the reader cannot be sure what really happened; even the leading commentators present totally different versions. Rashi, based on the Talmud,<sup>1</sup> thinks it was Moses who was threatened for having failed to circumcise his baby son. Targum Jonathan applies the threat to the older son, who had been left uncircumcised until now. Other exegetes (including Ibn Ezra)

*Fred Blumenthal is a retired businessman who divides his time between Jerusalem and Cedarhurst, NY. He was educated at the Samson Raphael Hirsch School and the Yeshiva of Frankfort, Germany, and has pursued biblical studies throughout his adult life.*

think it was the younger son whose life was in jeopardy. There is also an opinion expressed by Abraham ben HaRambam that the event happened when Zipporah was on her journey back to Midian, a time when Moses was not even present.

If the death threat was against one of the children because of what his father had failed to do, there would be a conflict with a basic biblical maxim that a son cannot be punished for a father's sin. With so many different opinions, all skillfully documented, readers are kept in a state of uncertainty as to what had happened and, equally important, why it needed to be reported.

It is for this reason that I suggest that an allegoric approach be tried in which the details of the story are of less significance than the transcendent ideas which emerge.

To arrive at such a symbolic understanding we have to focus first on the contemporary position of the great future leader, Moses. Here we find a person whose life had deprived him of close cultural belonging to the people he set out to lead. He had been raised in the royal palace of the Egyptian dynasty of this era. He seems to have learned early of his ancestral background and seemingly had knowledge of the tradition of the Hebrews and the stories of their Patriarchs. But his upbringing must have been dominated by the Egyptian religion and culture.

When forced to flee to Midian he ended up in the household of Jethro, the priest of that area, whose daughter Zipporah became his wife. This was not just an ordinary Midianite family, but the household of the religious leader of the community. The culture and polytheistic religion of this family became the main source of cultural influence upon him until the age of 80. To have been so conditioned, and yet to see, hear and accept the revelation at the Burning Bush was an accomplishment probably unequalled in the history of mankind.

All this happened at a time when the concept of one universal God was unknown in the world at large. The overriding belief was that gods, similarly to human leaders, were ruling over a distinct locality or a specific nation. Once a god's adherents no longer lived in his domain, or if his nation no longer could serve him (and according to Egyptian belief slaves had no god) he had lost his potency. He either disappeared or died. The fact that Moses was able to experience and accept the message of the Burning Bush testifies

that through the years he had carried within himself an awareness of his biological ancestry and some of its religious and cultural beliefs.

However, it is unimaginable that the influences of Egyptian upbringing and a subsequent long stretch of life at the center of Midianite religion would totally vanish overnight when Moses accepted the prophetic demand of the God of his forefathers. At this very early stage of his prophetic career Moses must have carried within himself a dichotomy of feelings and beliefs. He was ready for the heroic mission to liberate the Hebrews from Egypt with the help of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but perhaps not yet to become totally identified with the Israelite nation. It is quite possible that he considered it a task to be carried out in order to eliminate injustice, and then, upon the completion of this task, he would return to Midian. Perhaps he intended to act like a humanitarian who would lend his strength and conviction to wipe out the cruelties being done to his people without having to become a permanent member of their group. History has seen such noble actions.

If read in symbolic terms, the biblical text expresses such an ambivalence. When Moses set out for Egypt he *took his wife and his sons and set them upon an ass, and he returned to the land of Egypt; and Moses took the rod of God in his hand* (Ex. 4:20). Allegorically, his wife, the daughter of the Midianite priest, and his uncircumcised son become the symbols of his attachment to Midian. The *rod of God*, on the other hand, is the symbol of belief in and adherence to the Hebrew God, the God of his fathers.

Halfway between Midian and the present abode of the Hebrews in Egypt, the above-described circumcision takes place. The location of this inn is by itself an allegoric repetition of the dichotomy which plagues the great prophet at this early stage of his mission. It is at this in-between location that *the Lord encounters him and sought to kill him*. In poetic language "kill" need not necessarily mean to cause the end of life. It could refer to the termination of the prophetic status. It is used in this meaning in Job (2:9) where the words *Curse God and die* seem to convey this meaning.<sup>2</sup> Also, in the story of Balaam the angel with the unsheathed sword is much better understood as a threat of killing prophetic ability. At this moment, what God expressed to Moses by threatening to "kill" him is the demand that the prophet dedicate himself totally and irrevocably to the people he is about to lead. Unless he severs any remaining adherence to the cultures of his educational past, he

cannot become the liberator and teacher of God's people; his prophetic status would die.

Zipporah, his wife, who stands as the symbol for his link to Midian, is the one who can and does terminate whatever lingering connection Moses may still harbor. The allegoric story of the circumcision, carried out by her, terminates her and her sons' symbolic status as a connecting link to Midian. When she performs the only ritual which at that time connects the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to their God she expunges whatever loyalty to his immediate past Moses may still have carried.

Such a seemingly abrupt embrace of total belonging called for additional ritual emphasis. The severed foreskin is held up to express loudly that there is no return; it is held against the legs of Moses which can no longer walk back. The culture and religion of Midian are now reduced to a memory.

The symbolic story of Zipporah's action and the reality of Moses' acceptance thus foreshadows the prohibition which was later on expressed by Moses himself. In Deuteronomy 13:5 he says: *Thou mayest not put a foreigner over thee, who is not thy brother.*

The allegoric meaning of this brief story becomes even more evident when compared to the symbolism of Lot's wife, who turned into a pillar of salt (Gen. 19:26). Here, too, we find that a wife is used as the symbol of attachment to a strange culture. The nephew of Abraham had lived in an atmosphere far inferior to the ethics and culture he had learned when he had joined his uncle. When fleeing from Sodom, his unnamed wife disobeyed instructions and looked back. The wife can be symbolically seen as Lot's link to his immediate past. Her action, contrary to Zipporah's, represents Lot's inability to disengage totally from the influence of his preceding surrounding. The text hints at this interpretation by saying *She looked behind him*, insinuating that the backward glance was his as much as hers. The conversion of the wife into a pillar of salt, salt being a preservative, tells us that Lot failed to cut this link. So he becomes the forefather of two nations, Moab and Ammon, whose names proclaim loudly that they are the fruit of sinful incest.

Zipporah's determined action, portraying the total absorption of the new Torah culture by Moses, is immediately followed by the meeting with his brother, Aaron, as if to demonstrate once more that Moses had no longer any

adherence to his past. Aaron, whom he had not seen for many years, is now his brother and confidante. The Israelite slaves have become his brethren.

It was the story of the circumcision, and the ceremony surrounding it, that had completed the appointment of Moses; it made no difference which one of his sons was being circumcised, whether Gershom or Eliezer. The transformation of Zipporah from a symbol of Midianite religion to a companion on their way ahead is the essence of the story told in these three short sentences. Moses becomes her "bridegroom," her newly-acquired husband, because they both were culturally new persons. The expression *hatan damim* [bridegroom of blood] refers to the blood of circumcision which erases any preceding affiliation and allegorically seals the appointment of Moses to the leadership of his people.

#### NOTES

1. BT Nedarim 32a
2. Compare the author's article "The Book of Job," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* Vol. XXVII:4 (October 1999) pp. 222-230.



## INSTRUCTIONS FOR AUTHORS

Detailed *Instructions for Authors* and journal style can be found on our Internet website:

<http://www.jewishbible.org>



**WE WELCOME ARTICLES ON THE FOLLOWING BOOKS OF TANAKH: KINGS, ISAIAH, JEREMIAH, MICAH, AMOS, JOEL, HAGGAI, HABAKKUK, PSALMS, PROVERBS, CHRONICLES**

