

# WHY MOSES DID NOT CIRCUMCISE HIS SON

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There have been numerous commentaries on the confusing passage in Exodus: *At a night encampment* [literally, "lodging-place"] *on the way, the Lord encountered him* [Moses] *and sought to kill him. So Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched his legs 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).

This passage is made particularly obscure because of the extensive use of pronouns throughout. It is clear, however, that a son of Moses was not circumcised. Why did Moses not circumcise the infant?

In the Talmud (TB *Nedarim* 32a), R. Yose explains that Moses delayed circumcising his youngest son, because doing so would force him to postpone his mission to Egypt by three days while the baby recovered. This was a valid concern. However, Moses took care of the lodging arrangements on the way *before* attending to his son's circumcision, and that is what angered God. This explanation, quoted by Rashi in his commentary, has become the standard traditional approach.

I would like to suggest another explanation as to why Moses did not circumcise his son. While it may seem unusual to read that Zipporah performed a ritual circumcision, this was in biblical times a widespread practice among West Semitic peoples (Israelites, Edomites, Ammonites), though not among the East Semitic peoples (Assyrians, Babylonians).<sup>1</sup> That Zipporah was familiar with circumcision was therefore by no means unusual.

"The practice was . . . prevalent in Egypt" we are told.<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah states: *Lo, days are coming – declares the Lord – when I will take note of everyone circumcised in the foreskin; of Egypt, Judah, Edom, the Ammonites, Moab* (Jer. 9:24-25). Note that the Egyptians appear first in this list. Similarly, when Ezekiel speaks against Pharaoh, he tells of his bitter end: *And you too shall be brought down . . . to the lowest part of the netherworld; you shall lie among the uncircumcised* (Ezek. 31:18). This indicates that not being circum-

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cised was, for the Egyptians, a disgrace.<sup>3</sup> Egyptian circumcision dates back to at least 2400 BCE and was usually confined to the priesthood or the royal family.<sup>4</sup> Its association with the Egyptians was also noted by Herodotus, who mentions "the obvious antiquity of the custom in Egypt" and the fact that "other peoples learned the practice through their contact with Egypt" (*Historiae*, 2:104). Accordingly, there is a strong connection between Egypt and circumcision.<sup>5</sup>

We can now understand why Moses would decide not to circumcise his son. When he fled to Midian, Moses repudiated his Egyptian upbringing. It is reasonable to assume that Moses consciously rejected circumcision as an ancient Egyptian rite, the first of the Egyptians' practices which the Israelites would have to renounce. He decided to abandon this ritual, starting with Gershom, his own firstborn son.

The concept of abandoning Egyptian circumcision may appear in Joshua 5:2, where God commands Joshua to *make flint knives and proceed with a second [shenit] circumcision of the Israelites* (NJPS). The term *shenit* used in this verse suggests an alternative rendering: *circumcise the Israelites a second time*. We know that the Israelites and the Egyptians had differing surgical procedures for circumcision: the Israelites amputated the foreskin whereas the Egyptians made a dorsal incision of the prepuce. Accordingly, those Israelites who had been circumcised in the Egyptian manner (prior to the Exodus) needed a second operation. That is why, after the circumcisions were completed, God said, *Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt* (Jos. 5:9).<sup>6</sup> From this we can deduce that although Israelites may have performed circumcision in Egypt, they did so in the Egyptian manner, which necessitated a further procedure to make it acceptable. It was the Egyptian version that Moses rejected.

We can now understand what Zipporah meant when she said, *bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision* [la-mulot]. The Hebrew word *mulot* is the plural form of *mulah* ("circumcision"). What is its significance here? According to TJ *Nedarim* 3:9, the plural form refers to two distinct actions, cutting (*milah*) and peeling (*peri'ah*) of the epithelium. Rabbenu Bahya explains that at first Zipporah performed only *milah*, but the danger did not pass until she completed the ritual with *peri'ah*. In light of our understanding of the Egyptian manner of circumcision, we may assume that at first Zipporah performed

the Egyptian version, which (as Moses correctly understood) was not appropriate for Israelites, and then completed the second step, as the Israelites would do later (in Joshua, chapter 5). God was angry with Moses for rejecting circumcision in its totality, while Moses believed that he was rejecting an Egyptian practice. Through the actions of Zipporah, Moses realized that there was a distinctly Israelite version of circumcision that God had ordained.

#### NOTES

1. Philip King and Lawrence Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001) p. 43.
2. Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary – Exodus* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991) p. 25.
3. Yehiel Tzevi Moskowitz, *Da'at Mikra – Yehezkel* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1985) p. 346.
4. Felix Bryk, *Sex & Circumcision. A Study of Phallic Worship and Mutilation in Men and Women* (North Hollywood, CA: Brandon House, 1967) p. 238.
5. Peter Charles Remondino, *History of Circumcision* (London: F. A. Davis Publishers, 1891) p. 34.
6. Jack Sasson, "Circumcision in the Ancient Near East," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 85 (1966) p. 474.

#### DEDICATION

*I dedicate this paper to the following individuals: Rabbi Hyman Cohen (ז"ל) of Auburn, NY, Rabbi Meyer Korbman of Lakewood, NJ, and Rabbi Mark Mallach of Springfield, NJ.*



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