

THE "BLOODY BRIDEGROOM" IN LIGHT OF THE JOSEPH NARRATIVE

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The bloody bridegroom (*hatan damim*) episode occurs in Exodus 4:24-26:

And it came to pass on the way, in the place where they spent the night, that the Lord met him, and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took a sharp stone and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet, and said: 'Surely a bridegroom of blood you are to me.' So He let him go and she said: 'A bridegroom of blood [you are] because of the circumcision.'

This enigmatic incident has stretched the imagination of biblical exegetes: What was the purpose and nature of this Divine encounter? Why would God seek to assassinate His agent of redemption, Moses, immediately following his appointment? The challenge of demystifying the assault on Moses is compounded by the striking abruptness of the text, the obscure and ambiguous textual expressions, and the question of the role of this incident within the broader narrative sequence.

I will show that the story is anything but incidental: rather, it is fundamental to the broader Exodus narrative and a proper appraisal of Moses. My approach does not attempt to solve, nor could I address, all possible difficulties regarding the unique textual character of the story. However, I will show that many of its difficulties can be resolved by reading the episode in the context and continuum of the greater Exodus epic, rather than as an isolated incident.

To unravel the roots of the story of the bloody bridegroom, one must begin not with the Book of Exodus but with Genesis and the narrative of Joseph. When comparing the characterizations of Joseph and Moses and plotting the development of their persona, a pattern surfaces which indicates an interrelationship between the two. Furthermore, lexical similarities between the two narratives provide additional evidence that the narratives are meant to be read together as one. This essay will map the points of comparison between Joseph and Moses, showing their inextricable connection and their extraordinary disparity. Through the lens of Joseph and in the specific points of con-

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trast to him, the essential Moses becomes clear. With this background, the incident of the bloody bridegroom can be more easily understood.

CONVERGENCE

Danger befalls Joseph when he is sent to call upon his brothers in Shechem. As he approaches his brothers, the verse states, *They saw him from afar* [me-rahok] *and they plotted to kill him* (Gen. 37:18). Reuben intercedes for Joseph, who is then thrown [va-yashlihu] into a pit (Gen. 37:24), which the text curiously describes as not only being empty, but also *having no water* [mayim]. Joseph is subsequently brought to Egypt where various twists of fate lead him to an appointment in Pharaoh's court.

Moses' early brush with danger echoes that of Joseph in many respects. Following Pharaoh's decree to cast [tashlihu] (Ex. 1:22) male infants into the Nile, Moses is kept hidden for three months. His sister then floats him down the river in a box, *as she stands from afar* [me-rahok] (Ex. 2:4). In an ironic reversal of fortune, the child condemned at birth by Pharaoh's decree is plucked from the *water* by Pharaoh's daughter, who adopts him as her son and names him Moses, *because I drew him out of the water* [mayim] (Gen 2:10).¹

The pattern of their endangerment and rescue, coupled with the common terminology (*me-rahok*, *va-yashlihu-tashlihu*, *mayim*), demonstrate the connectivity between the two stories. As the sagas unfold, so do the similarities between Joseph and Moses. Each individual matures within arm's reach of Pharaoh, estranged from his ancestral origins. Although both acculturate themselves, and even bear Egyptian names (Zaphenath Paneah and Moses), neither fully shakes free from the shadows of his heritage.² As they develop, both seem to have feet in two different worlds, though not completely planted in either. After living a privileged Egyptian life, each is reunited with his brethren as their redeemer.

Starting with parallel episodes of danger and rescue from harm, the path of Moses' life (although he himself may be unconscious of it) duplicates the trajectory of Joseph's. Remarkably, the Joseph-Moses storylines converge. Joseph's dying testament to his brethren and final words in the text are: *'God will surely remember you'* [pakod yifkod etkhem] (Gen. 50:25). It is precisely

this phrase that Moses echoes when he is introduced to the elders of Israel and instructed by God to proclaim, '*I have surely remembered you*' [pakod pakadeti etkhem] (Ex. 3:16).³ Moses is not simply a new chapter in the march of events. Rather, he is Joseph's protégé, charged with sustaining the progression towards the Exodus that was initiated by Joseph.

DIVERGENCE

Although at first Moses follows Joseph's pattern, this correlation does not persist. Joseph's endangerment and estrangement would be formative in his future role as the redeemer of his brothers. Joseph acknowledges this without prompting when he reassures his brothers, with a keen sense of self-awareness, '*Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that you sold me here; for God did send me before you to preserve life*' (Gen. 45:5). At the moment of truth, Joseph does not hesitate and immediately embraces his role and responsibility.

In stark contrast, Moses is inclined to reject his appointment as the redeemer of the Jewish people. He responds to God's mandate with a series of excuses which seem to test God's patience. When he continues to downplay his suitability for the task, God provides two miraculous signs which, Moses is told, will win over his audience. If the two signs are not effective, he is instructed to perform a third symbolic act – to pour river water over the dry banks of the Nile, turning it into blood. Moses' constant objections finally provoke God's anger and he is ordered to join his brother Aaron in Egypt.

It is then that the text recounts the markedly terse and cryptic event: *It came to pass on the way, in the place where they spent the night, that God met him and sought to kill him . . .* (Ex. 4:24-26). Zipporah takes a stone, circumcises their son, and proclaims, '*a bloody bridegroom you are to me,*' at which point God releases Moses from his lethal grasp.⁴ Why would God threaten to kill Moses immediately after sending him to carry out His directive?

Against the panoramic backdrop of the broader narrative we can understand this enigmatic incident in a straightforward manner. The Joseph narrative, which up to this point found parallels with the story of Moses, shows what *should* have happened. Moses should have accepted his role in God's plan, as Joseph did, and embraced his redemptive task, as Joseph did. He did not do so, however, and his equivocation is all the more striking when contrasted

with the readiness of Joseph. God's expression of intent *to kill him* (Ex. 4:24) was a direct response to Moses' prevarication, which showed that he lacked a basic consciousness of the initial endangerment experienced as a child. Moses did not apparently recognize that his miraculous rescue as an infant indicated that he was destined for a special role in the divine plan. Consequently, through this near-fatal engagement, God sternly reminded Moses of his dramatic history: he was not the product of good fortune, but of divine intercession.

The preceding narrative, in which Moses disquieted God, suggests that His frustration centered on Moses' denial of his past. It was Moses' stubbornness that prompted God to provide the third miraculous sign for Moses to gain the trust of his brethren. Moses is to spill water from the River Nile, transforming it into blood. It is especially noteworthy that of the three signs which God provides, this act is the only one Moses does not actually perform as a dry run. It is also the only one that alludes directly to the Ten Plagues, and it is charged with symbolic meaning. Discrediting the supremacy of the River Nile, which was emblematic to Egyptians as the source of life, would have awakened the Israelites to Moses' legitimacy.⁵ Moreover, the river water turning to blood was intended to be a stark reminder *to Moses personally*, symbolically recalling the water that had earlier both imperiled and saved him.⁶ When even this admonishment fails to secure Moses' acquiescence, God "ups the ante."

If the event seems to occur abruptly and unexpectedly, perhaps we are vicariously experiencing it through Moses' eyes. He had become so divorced from his true identity that even he did not see this coming, in spite of God's having spelled it out for him, Joseph, having escaped danger, acknowledged his special role. Moses did not come to this realization as Joseph did and had to be made aware of his ordained task; drastic measures were needed, resulting in the bridegroom of blood episode.

MOSES THE HERO

Modern critics have compared the Moses narrative to the ubiquitous hero persona in Near Eastern and Greek literature. The plight of the infant Moses, left to his fate in the Nile, is reminiscent of the "abandoned hero motif", in which a child survives some form of exile and abandonment to evolve into

the heroic figure.⁷ Further, the bloody bridegroom incident resembles a "rite of passage" episode which, as Alter explains, "the hero must undergo before embarking on his mission proper."⁸ Granted, Moses endures a metamorphic initiation, which serves as a prelude or precondition to his future appointment as liberator. However, seeking parallels in extra-biblical myths is a gratuitous exercise, since we have shown that a precedent for Moses' initiation can be found in the Bible itself, namely Joseph's exile and ascendancy, his peril and rescue. Reading the bloody bridegroom episode in isolation disregards the intended context provided by its antecedents.

CONCLUSION

The incident of the bloody bridegroom is a logical progression from the events that precede it, and should be viewed in the context of the broader literary structure. When comparing the respective biographies of Joseph, who personifies the Egyptian exile, and Moses, who characterizes the Exodus, we see that both endure life-threatening experiences that result in extended separation from their kin, followed by their transformation into a redeemer.⁹ The narrative symmetries and common textual elements serve as the nexus between the two and highlight the composite nature of their characters.

Through their personal life experiences, Joseph and Moses are groomed to perform their individual parts of a *single* mission, spanning the continuum from the original sojourn and exile in Egypt through the Exodus. Unlike Joseph, however, Moses does not immediately seize hold of the opportunity afforded him by God. The episode of the bloody bridegroom occurs at the precise point of Moses' equivocation, which threatens to derail God's epic plan. This brief episode serves to set Moses on his destined path, as the successor of Joseph and redeemer of the Israelites.

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NOTES

1. "Water" emerges as a leitmotif of the Exodus narrative. As Alter notes, Moses floating among the reeds foreshadows the Hebrews' escape in the Sea of Reeds. See Robert Alter, *Five Books of Moses: a translation with commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004) p.313.
2. Rabbinic commentators differ as to whether the names Zaphenath Paneah and/or Moses are of Egyptian or Hebrew/Canaanite origin. Nevertheless, whether Hebraic or Egyptian, the parallel remains that Pharaoh (in the case of Joseph) or Pharaoh's daughter (in the case of Moses) selects

a name based on Joseph's or Moses' Egyptian experience. See further Rashbam and Ramban (Gen. 41:45) as well as Ibn Ezra (Ex. 2:10). See also U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1967) pp. 20-21.

3. See also the commentary of Rashi to Exodus 3:17.

4. I have favored the prevalent reading that Moses is the one God sought to kill. TB Nedarim 32a cites a variant interpretation that it was Moses' uncircumcised son who was the one under threat.

5. Regarding the symbolism of the third sign, see Cassuto, p. 30.

6. The role of the Nile in Moses' childhood rescue is suggested by Rashi (Ex. 7:19) as the reason why Aaron rather than Moses performed the rites touching off the first two plagues.

7. See, for example, W. Propp, *The Anchor Bible – Exodus 1-18* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1998) pp.155-160. For a critique of the abandoned hero comparison, see N. Sarna, *Exodus: The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991) pp. 267-268.

8. See Alter, p.331.

9. The broader biblical theme of endangerment-deliverance is plainly visible in the narratives of Moses' ancestors; specifically the binding of Isaac (Gen. 22) and Jacob's encounter at Jabbok (Gen. 32). For additional discussion with regard to the recurring motif of danger and rescue in Genesis and Exodus, see my article, "Peril and Deliverance and the Akedah-Sinai Narrative Structure", *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 40:4 (2012) pp. 247-252.



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