

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #50: DID GOD TRY TO KILL MOSES?

By John Temples

I have been asked to explain one of the strangest (some would even say most bizarre) accounts in Scripture. It is found in Exodus 4:24-26. God seemingly sought to kill Moses because he (Moses) had neglected to circumcise his son. At the last minute, Moses' wife Zipporah intervened and circumcised the boy herself, saving Moses' life.

Here is the account, with the broader context included to help us try to understand what happened:

“Now the Lord said to Moses in Midian, ‘Go, return to Egypt; for all the men who sought your life are dead.’ 20 Then Moses took his wife and his sons and set them on a donkey, and he returned to the land of Egypt. And Moses took the rod of God in his hand. 21 And the Lord said to Moses, ‘When you go back to Egypt, see that you do all those wonders before Pharaoh which I have put in your hand. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. 22 Then you shall say to Pharaoh, “Thus says the Lord: ‘Israel is My son, My firstborn. 23 So I say to you, let My son go that he may serve Me. But if you refuse to let him go, indeed I will kill your son, your firstborn.’” 24 And it came to pass on the way, at the encampment, that the Lord met him and sought to kill him. 25 Then Zipporah took a sharp stone and cut off the foreskin of her son and cast it at Moses' feet, and said, ‘Surely you are a husband of blood to me!’ 26 So He let him go. Then she said, ‘You are a husband of blood!’ — because of the circumcision” (Ex 4:19-26).

This passage is puzzling to say the least, and it is a Bible translator's nightmare, for the following reasons:

- What would make God so angry with Moses that He would seek to kill him? It seems totally out of character for God.

- If Moses was on his way to do exactly what God has just told him to do, why would God attack him in the night and seek to kill him?
- Who is the “him” of verse 24--the object of God’s wrath? The passage is difficult because of the plethora of pronouns (he, him, his, etc.) and the lack of identifiable antecedents (names of persons to whom the pronouns refer). The NIV et al insert nouns or persons’ names in an attempt to clarify the persons meant in various statements, but there is no textual authority for this--the translators are just guessing.
- The text says God “sought” (some paraphrase versions say “tried” or “threatened”) to kill him. Did God aim a fiery dart at Moses and miss? Did Moses have quick reflexes and duck? Has God ever “tried” to do something and failed? You don’t even want to go there theologically.
- How do you explain Zipporah’s actions and her violent outburst to Moses, “You are a husband of blood”?

Here are some facts to help us understand what happened:

1. Moses had married a Midianite woman named Zipporah. She was the daughter of Jethro, priest of Midian (Exodus 2:16-21), for whom Moses worked as a shepherd after fleeing from Egypt at age 40.
2. Moses and Zipporah had two sons, Gershom and Eliezer (Exodus 2:22, 18:2-4).
3. Moses and his wife and sons were on the way to Egypt when this incident occurred, Moses having been charged by God with delivering the Israelites from bondage.
4. Moses had neglected to circumcise his son (we are not certain which one, Gershom or Eliezer). Part of God’s covenant with Abraham, Moses’ ancestor, was the circumcision of all male descendants on the eighth day after birth (Genesis 17:9-14). This seems to be the immediate cause of God’s anger with Moses.
5. The seriousness of Moses’ failure to circumcise his son is seen in Genesis 17:14, where God says to Abraham, “And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.” If Moses’ son had remained uncircumcised, he (the son) would have been cut off from Israel.

6. Why had Moses failed to perform such an important part of the Abrahamic covenant? It seems fairly certain that Zipporah's opposition to the practice was the reason. She was not an Israelite and may have thought it a barbaric custom. Many a man has failed to do some important religious duty to keep peace in the home!
7. In a moment of crisis, Zipporah overcame her revulsion and circumcised their son, and God's anger was averted. (As an interesting side note, notice that Moses had at this point been saved by four women: his mother, his sister, Pharaoh's daughter, and now his wife.)

The reason for God's anger, then, is apparent: He simply could not allow the future leader of His people to set a horrible example by failing to obey an essential of the covenant. But aside from the flawed example of Moses, there is a more subtle reason: later, when God did make good on His threat to kill the firstborn of all the land of Egypt, He spared the children of Israel (Exodus 11:7). But who were the "children of Israel"? For the males, it was every man who had been circumcised! Therefore, if Moses had continued to neglect the command to circumcise his firstborn son, and if the son involved here was Gershom, his firstborn, then Gershom would have died in Egypt in the plague of the firstborn!

Therefore, God sought to kill Moses as he and the family were traveling to Egypt.

But wait a minute...are we sure it was MOSES that God intended to kill? We pointed out earlier that verse 24 says the Lord met and sought to kill "him." Who was "him"? Most commentators assume it was Moses; and some translators insert the name of Moses. But the text only says "him." There is no mention of Moses in the immediate context to allow us to be certain of the identity of the object of God's wrath.

Could it be Moses' SON--not Moses--that God sought to kill?¹ Some commentators think so:

- "Him' is ambiguous, and could refer to either Moses or Gershom; the natural presumption would, however, be Moses. On the other hand, if the 'him'

¹ There are three "sons" mentioned in this account: God's son (Israel), Pharaoh's son, and Moses' son.

refers to Gershom, then there is a closer link with the context (death of the first-born), as showing how Moses' first-born nearly died."²

- “Are we sure God wanted to kill Moses? Perhaps He wanted to kill someone else. Many readers will be surprised to learn the Bible does not say God sought to kill Moses. The original Hebrew text does not name the person. In Hebrew, Exodus 4:24 only uses pronouns: The LORD encountered him and sought to kill him. Must ‘him’ refer only to Moses?...God punished Moses for delaying his mission, but the person He was trying to kill was not Moses, but Gershom his firstborn.”³

Would a loving God have actually killed a child because of the sin of a parent? Yes. Right in the text, in verse 23, God commands Moses to tell Pharaoh that if he (Pharaoh) does not release God's “firstborn” (Israel), God will kill Pharaoh's firstborn--a threat which was subsequently carried out (Exodus 12:29). And God slew David's firstborn as punishment for the sin of David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:15b-18). Mind you, that child (and most likely Moses' son) was not yet at the age of accountability, and thus died in innocence; but nevertheless the fact that sin has consequences was driven home to the parents in a most forceful way.

Finally, what did Zipporah's exclamation “You are a husband of blood to me” mean? One possible explanation is that her words reflect her disgust with the whole circumcision-of-a-baby ritual and its accompanying pain and bleeding. Duane Garrett explains it thusly: “She found the whole process disgusting and blamed Moses for putting her through the ordeal, so she threw the boy's foreskin at Moses's feet and called him bloody [sic] and disgusting).”⁴ She was venting her anger at Moses for having endangered her son's life.

Here are two other explanations of Zipporah's “husband of blood” rebuke:

² R. Alan Cole, vol. 2, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 85-86. Quoted at <http://www.michaelsheiser.com/TheNakedBible/EXO4.pdf>.

³ <http://hashivah.org/why-would-god-kill-moses/>

⁴ Duane Garrett, *A Commentary on Exodus*, cited at <https://www.fundamentallyreformed.com/2015/02/09/another-look-at-zipporah-and-her-bloody-husband-exodus-424-26/>

- Ellicott's Commentary says, "A bloody husband.—Heb., a 'husband of bloods.' A husband, i.e., who causes the blood of his children to be shed unnecessarily for some unintelligible reason."
- Pulpit Commentary: "The words are clearly a reproach; and the gist of the reproach seems to be that Moses was a husband who cost her dear, causing the blood of her sons to be shed in order to keep up a national usage which she regarded as barbarous."

Zipporah's anger was really directed at God; however, not daring to rebuke Deity, she vented her wrath against the nearest representative of God, her husband.

Based on all this, let me offer a possible reconstruction of this scenario. I believe this explanation better fits the context and removes the theological sticking points. But I stress that it is only a possible explanation:

- Moses and Zipporah are on their way to Egypt.
- Along the way, their son suddenly becomes deathly ill.
- Zipporah recognizes the illness as a judgment of God because of their failure to circumcise the boy.
- She quickly performs the circumcision and thus averts God's wrath.
- She takes the bloody foreskin and throws it at Moses' feet, as if to say, "See what you and your religion have cost me?"

Perhaps it is not possible to know with certainty the true meaning of this account. But there is a lesson for us that shines through loud and clear: God is serious about our obedience to His covenants and His laws! --John Temples