

Mystery at the Malon

Introduction

Who, What, and Why?

The episode described in Shemot 4:24-26 is one of the most enigmatic stories in Torah. As Moshe travels from Midyan to Egypt to begin his mission, the family stops at a lodging place and trouble strikes:

(כד) וַיְהִי בַדֶּרֶךְ בְּמִלּוֹן וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ יְיָ וַיִּבְקֶשׁ הַמֵּיתוֹ. (כה) וַתִּקַּח צִפּוֹרָה
 צֹר וַתִּכְרֹת אֶת עֶרְלַת בְּנָהּ וַתַּגֵּעַ לְרַגְלָיו וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי חֲתָן דָּמִים אַתָּה
 לִי. (כו) וַיֵּרָף מִמֶּנּוּ אִזּוֹ אִמְרָה חֲתָן דָּמִים לְמוֹלֶת.

(24) And it came to pass on the way at the lodging-place, that the Lord met him, and sought to kill him. (25) Then Zipporah took a flint, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet; and she said: 'Surely a bridegroom of blood art thou to me.' (26) So He let him alone. Then she said: 'A bridegroom of blood in regard of the circumcision.'

Filled with ambiguous pronouns, difficult phrases and an unknown backdrop, these verses hide more than they reveal, raising a host of questions:

- Who is in danger of being killed, Moshe or one of his sons (and, if a son, which one)?
- Is Gershom or Eliezer the son who is being circumcised? Why had he not been circumcised until now? Why is it Zipporah rather than Moshe who performs the circumcision,¹ how does she know to do it, and why is circumcision the solution to the problem?
- What do the phrases חֲתָן דָּמִים לְמוֹלֶת and חֲתָן דָּמִים אַתָּה לִי mean? To whom is Zipporah referring, and what does she intend by her words?
- Finally, the most troubling question of all, why would Hashem want to kill anyone, let alone His trusted servant Moshe whom He has just entrusted with the most important mission in the history of mankind?²

A Prophetic Interruption

The immediate context of our story raises additional difficulties. Shemot 4:18-20 introduce Moshe's journey back to Egypt, and our episode would seem to be the logical continuation of these verses. Yet, the intervening verses of 4:21-23 appear to suddenly switch gears, recounting how Hashem told Moshe of Paroh's looming obstinacy and commanded him to relay a warning to Paroh about the Plague of the Firstborn. The placement of this prophecy is puzzling as Hashem has previously given Moshe much of this information, and the warning seems somewhat premature as Paroh has not yet been approached. These difficulties make one wonder whether the prophecy has some other meaning or purpose and to what extent it is connected to the mysterious events at the inn.



¹ The precedent of Zipporah is raised in the context of the discussion in the Talmud Bavli Avodah Zarah 27a as to whether a woman can perform the circumcision. [An additional question may be raised regarding Zipporah's religious status, and the prohibition of a heathen performing the circumcision – see Zipporah – Overview.] In attempting to reconcile the story with the opinion that a woman is prohibited, the Bavli suggests that either Zipporah may have only arranged for the circumcision or that Moshe may have completed it. The Halakhically questionable status of Zipporah's act motivates other exegetes to assume that there was no other option in this situation.

² See the opening formulation of the Toledot Yitzchak: "יש לשאול למה בקש המיתו ששלוחי מצוה אינן ניזוקין וכל שכן". In his subsequent analysis of Moshe's actions, R. Yitzchak Karo provides a wonderful illustration of the quandary faced by every exegete who attempts to comprehend this episode: A better rationale and justification of Moshe's conduct makes it that much more difficult to understand Hashem's wrath, and conversely, a clearer reason for the Divine punishment makes Moshe's deeds that much more perplexing. The Toledot Yitzchak bounces back and forth struggling to find a proper balance. Some modern commentators attempt to answer this question by dredging up "sins" of Moshe from his distant past. W. Propp in *The Anchor Yale Bible: Exodus 1-18* (New Haven, 1999): 234-238, notes that the plural "דמים" often connotes bloodguilt. He suggests that "התן דמים", then, refers to a bridegroom who has shed blood, and that the whole incident is a consequence of Moshe's killing of the Egyptian. Before Moshe could return to Egypt, his guilt had to be expiated. Zipporah accomplished this by spilling some of the blood of her son, touching it to her husband, and thereby atoning for him.

See also the suggestion of R. Meir Spiegelman that Moshe's marriage to Zipporah created a dangerous precedent for intermarriage and ultimately led to the problem of the "ערב רב". Cf. the Tur in his Long Commentary Shemot 4:25 who places a similar concern in Zipporah's mouth: "יש מפרשים שאמרה למשה חתן: 'דמים אתה לי, לפי שאתה שנתחתנת בי לפי שאני מדינית ואיני ראוייה לך'".

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Exegetical Approaches

Overview

When trying to comprehend the incident at the inn, commentators find themselves in a quandary. On one hand, the verse appears to say that Hashem sought to kill Moshe or his son, implying that there was some serious transgression. But on the other hand, the text contains little hint of any such wrongdoing, and attributing a terrible deed to Moshe would make him unworthy of being God's messenger. The exegete is thus left in a Catch-22, as the more defensible one tries to make Moshe's actions, the less justified Hashem's appear to be, and vice versa.

The most prevalent approach suggests that Moshe is in fact being punished for some sin. Tannaitic sources, working backwards from the circumcision at the story's conclusion, suggest that Moshe must have been lax in circumcising his son. Some attempt to minimize Moshe's guilt by explaining that there was merely a slight delay due to the journey, and R. Saadia even casts off all responsibility from Moshe by positing that he was not present for the entire episode. In contrast, R. Elazar HaModai tries to find a crime more befitting Hashem's harsh response, and he proposes that Moshe has sealed a pact with Yitro that one of his sons would never be circumcised.

Others look instead to the larger backdrop of our story, suggesting that such a severe Divine reaction must have resulted from issues with Moshe's national mission which had much more global ramifications. These exegetes need to explain why the seemingly unrelated circumcision served to quiet Hashem's anger. Rashbam explains that Moshe tarried in carrying out his mission, and that the circumcision was an atoning sacrifice. Ibn Ezra views Moshe's bringing his family along, not as a sin, but rather a tactical error which could potentially demoralize the nation. Hashem's reaction was thus intended only to rectify this error and ensure that the family stayed behind. Finally, Ibn Kaspi suggests that there was no sin or even an error on Moshe's part; it was just that Moshe's great anxiety from the daunting mission caused him to become gravely ill.

In assessing Moshe's actions and Hashem's reaction in this episode, commentators offer a spectrum of approaches. These can be divided into three main categories:

Sin and Punishment

Either Moshe or Zipporah sinned and was deserving of punishment. The commentators propose different possibilities as to the nature of the misconduct:

Uncircumcised Son

Moshe or Zipporah sinned by not circumcising one of their sons. The obvious motivation for this approach is that circumcision is what averts the crisis.¹ The variations of this position differ as to why the circumcision had not yet been performed:

Moshe Delayed Because of the Journey

This is perhaps the most straightforward reading of the text as it requires making the least additional assumptions. However, it encounters difficulty in justifying the severity of the punishment.

SOURCES: R. Yehoshua b. Korcha, Rabbi, R. Yosi, and Rabbi Shimon b. Gamliel in all of Mishna Nedarim, Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael, Yerushalmi Nedarim, and Bavli Nedarim, Shemot Rabbah, Rashi, Ralbag, Sforno

Moshe's sin – Rabbi in the Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael and R. Yehoshua b. Korcha in the Bavli say that Moshe was lax or negligent in performing the commandment of circumcision. R. Yosi² tries to minimize the infraction, suggesting that Moshe's only sin was busying himself with lodging arrangements before circumcising his son.³

Which son was uncircumcised and why not? Shemot Rabbah and Rashi identify the uncircumcised son as the newly born Eliezer.⁴ Had it been Gershom, Moshe's delay would have been more incomprehensible, and one would have expected Hashem to punish Moshe earlier rather than wait until sending him on his mission to Egypt.

Who was at the lodging place? According to this approach, the entire family was at the inn, including Moshe, Zipporah, and both of their sons.

"וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ ה' – Most of these commentators suggest that Hashem sent an angel to do the killing.⁵ R. Shimon b. Gamliel goes a step further and identifies the angel as Satan.⁶ The most ancient and extreme formulation of this position is found in Jubilees which suggests that Mastema (a Satanic figure) was attempting to kill Moshe to prevent him from punishing the Egyptians.⁷ Ralbag, however, says that the verse refers merely to a severe illness.

"וַיִּבְקֹשׁ הַמִּיתוֹ" – **Who was near death?** Most assume that Moshe was the one in danger, presumably because he is the one who sinned.⁸ R. Shimon b. Gamliel, though, disagrees and asserts that the baby was the endangered one as he is the one referred to as "חֵתָן דָּמִים".⁹ R. Shimon b. Gamliel is likely also motivated by the problem of why Hashem would attempt to kill His messenger immediately after sending him on a mission.¹⁰

Disproportionate punishment? One of the difficulties with this approach is that the potential punishment seems to be disproportionate to the crime.¹¹

Circumcision is the solution – Since the lack of circumcision is the problem, it is the obvious way to rectify the situation.

Why Zipporah and not Moshe? Those commentators who maintain that Moshe was endangered and incapacitated can thereby explain why Zipporah had to perform the circumcision.

How did Zipporah know the solution? R. Yehuda b. Bizna in the Bavli and Shemot Rabbah explain that Moshe was being swallowed until the place of his circumcision,¹² and thus Zipporah understood the cause of the problem.¹³

"וַתַּגַּע לְרַגְלָיו" – Whose legs? The Yerushalmi brings three opinions – Moshe's, the angel's, or the son's legs. Rashi chooses the position that it was Moshe's legs,¹⁴ while Ralbag adopts the option that it was the son's legs.¹⁵

"חֵתֶן דָּמִים / לְמוֹלֶת" – R. Shimon b. Gamliel assumes that the phrase is referring to the bloodied baby,¹⁶ while Shemot Rabbah and Sforno say that it refers to Moshe, who was saved by the blood from the foreskin.¹⁷ Rashi combines the possibilities, suggesting that Zipporah is in fact speaking to the baby, but saying that he almost caused her groom to be killed.¹⁸

Context – One of the disadvantages of this approach is that there is no obvious connection between this episode and the verses which precede it.

"אַחֵר שְׁלוּחִיהָ" – Shemot Rabbah and Rashi think that originally Zipporah was returning with Moshe to Egypt, and that she only later returned to Midyan. Sforno, though, suggests that the incident at the inn occurred while Moshe was accompanying his family back to Yitro in Midyan. For further analysis, see When Did Zipporah Return to Midyan.



Zipporah Delayed Because of the Journey

Moshe was not present at the inn, and Zipporah bore full responsibility for the entire episode. This position also does not explain the need for such a dramatic punishment.

SOURCES: R. Saadia Gaon,¹⁹ R. Chananel

Did Moshe sin? This approach avoids attributing any sin or blame to Moshe.²⁰

"אַחֵר שְׁלוּחִיהָ" and who was at the lodging place? R. Saadia explains that, at some point after departing for Egypt, Moshe decided to send Zipporah with their children back home to Midyan while he continued alone to Egypt.²¹ For further analysis, see When Did Zipporah Return to Midyan. Thus, only Zipporah and her sons were present at the inn.²²

Context – According to R. Saadia, Shemot 4:20 serves as a dual introduction, telling the reader where each of Zipporah and Moshe were headed. The text then continues as a split screen, first recounting the prophecy

received by Moshe as he embarked on his mission, and then relating the simultaneous incident which occurred to Zipporah at the lodge.

Which son was uncircumcised and why not? The newly born Eliezer is the uncircumcised son. According to R. Saadia, Zipporah was either negligent or thought it could wait until she arrived home.

"וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ ה'" – R. Saadia and R. Chananel both explain that this was an angel, with R. Chananel suggesting like the Midrash above that the angel was in the guise of a snake and was swallowing the baby until the point of his circumcision.²³

"וַיִּבְקֶשׂ הַמִּיתוֹ" – **Who was near death?** As Moshe is not present, it can only be his son (Eliezer) who is endangered. This opinion thus avoids the question of why Hashem would endanger His messenger.

Disproportionate punishment? It is difficult to understand why Hashem would want to kill Moshe's baby merely because his circumcision had been slightly delayed.

Circumcision is the solution – As circumcision was the cause of the situation, it was also the obvious way to solve the problem.

Why Zipporah and not Moshe? One readily understands that Zipporah performs the circumcision as Moshe was not there. In fact, this is R. Chananel's point of departure.

How did Zipporah know the solution? According to R. Saadia, Zipporah received heavenly inspiration. For R. Chananel who adapts the Midrash that a snake was swallowing the baby until the point of his circumcision, this provided a clear signal as to the nature of the problem.

"וַתִּגַּע לְרַגְלָיו" – **Whose legs?** This approach could maintain that it was the baby's legs, but R. Saadia may understand that Zipporah presented the foreskin in front of the angel.

"חֶתֶן דָּמִים / לְמוֹלֶת" – R. Saadia and R. Chananel explain that Zipporah is referring to the baby who was almost killed.



Pact with Yitro to Not Circumcise

In order to marry Zipporah, Moshe made a bizarre prenuptial agreement with Yitro²⁴ that one of his sons would "be for idolatry"²⁵ and the other for Hashem.²⁶

SOURCES: R. Elazar HaModai in Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael, Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan), Midrash Aggadah (Buber),²⁷ Midrash Vayosha

Moshe's sin and proportionate punishment – By providing a broader backdrop for the lack of circumcision and amplifying its problematic ramifications, this approach makes the severity of the potential punishment more understandable.

How could Moshe make such a deal? Ibn Ezra dismisses this entire approach, claiming that it is impossible that Moshe Rabbeinu would have agreed to such terms "וַנְּבִיא לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה כֵן. וְאִם כִּי נְבִיא הַנְּבִיאִים".²⁸ Others disagree, attempting to either defend or at least understand Moshe's actions:

- Midrash Vayosha says that Moshe actually had no intention of keeping his side of the bargain. Thus, as soon as Eliezer was born, he left for Egypt, planning to circumcise the boy there.²⁹
- It is possible that Moshe, having found refuge from Paroh in Yitro's home, had no choice but to accept the conditions set by Yitro or find himself once again on the run.³⁰
- One must also consider the possibility that at this stage of our story, having grown up in Paroh's palace, Moshe's Jewish identity was not fully developed, and he had no qualms about accepting Yitro's request. For more, see Moshe's Character.³¹

Textual basis – One of the main disadvantages of this approach is that there is no mention of any such agreement in the book of Shemot. Nonetheless, there are a number of possible hints which may have served the Midrashim as textual hooks for the existence of such a contract.³² These include:

- R. Elazar HaModai notes that the Biblical derivation of Gershom's name ("גֵּר הַיִּתִּי בְּאֶרֶץ נִכְרִיָּה") alludes to being "foreign to God."
- R. Elazar HaModai understands "וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לְשִׁבְתָּ אֶת הָאִישׁ" in Shemot 2:21 as a language of oath-taking.
- Chazal's identification of the idolatrous priest of Shofetim 18:20 as Moshe's grandson.³³

Context – It is possible that the proximity of verses 23-24 to our story influenced the development of the original Midrashic motif. It might have understood the second person direct speech of "וַאֲמַר אֵלָיךְ" in verse 23 as Hashem turning to speak to Moshe (rather than Paroh who is not present), and saying, "I have told you to send your son to worship me (i.e. circumcise him) but you have refused; I will therefore kill your firstborn son."³⁴ "בְּנֶךְ בְּכֹרְךָ" would then refer to Moshe's firstborn son, Gershom.

Which son was uncircumcised and why not?

- Gershom – R. Elazar HaModai in the Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael, Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan).³⁵ R. Elazar HaModai's choice of Gershom rather than Eliezer appears to be motivated by the Torah's derivations of the two names.³⁶ Additionally, Eliezer has not yet been mentioned explicitly,³⁷ and the context of "בְּנֶךְ בְּכֹרְךָ" may tip the scales toward Gershom.
- Eliezer – Midrash Aggadah and Midrash Vayosha.³⁸ Their choice of Eliezer explains why Moshe was punished only at the inn, and not already at the time of Gershom's birth.³⁹

Who was at the lodging place? If the son was Eliezer, then Moshe and his entire family were present. However, if the son was Gershom, it is possible that Eliezer was not yet born.⁴⁰

"וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ ה'" – Most of these sources suggest that Hashem sent an angel to attack Moshe. Midrash Vayosha goes a step further and identifies the angel as a "שָׂטָן" in the guise of a snake.⁴¹

"וַיִּבְקֶשׁ הַמִּיתוֹ" – **Who was near death?** Most of these sources maintain that Moshe was endangered, presumably because he was the one who sinned. However, if "הִנֵּה אֲנִי הֹרֵג אֶת בְּנֶךְ בְּכֹרְךָ" is directed at Moshe, it is Moshe's son who is in danger.

Circumcision is the solution – Since the lack of circumcision is the problem, it is the obvious way to rectify the situation.

Why Zipporah and not Moshe? If Moshe was being attacked, he was unavailable. If the son was being attacked, Zipporah may have performed the circumcision because she or her father was the one who had initially refused to have him circumcised.⁴²

How did Zipporah know the solution? If "וַאֲמַר אֵלֶיךָ שְׁלַח אֶת בְּנִי וְעַבְדִּנִי" in verse 23 is directed at Moshe, Hashem stated explicitly what was imperiling Moshe's life. Alternatively, Midrash Vayosha adopts the motif of R. Yehuda b. Bizna that Moshe was being swallowed until the place of his circumcision, and Zipporah thus was able to intuit the cause of the problem.

"וַתַּגַּע לְרַגְלָיו" – Whose legs? Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan) understands that Zipporah is presenting the foreskin as a penance offering in front of the angel's legs. Midrash Vayosha, on the other hand, cannot explain it as the Satan-snake's legs, as snakes do not have legs. It thus depicts Zipporah sprinkling blood on Moshe's legs,⁴³ perhaps as protection.⁴⁴

"חַתָּן דְּמִים / לְמוֹלֶת" – Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan) says that Zipporah was referring to Moshe, as he was the one endangered.



Delayed Mission

Moshe tarried in executing his mission to redeem the Israelites.⁴⁵ This approach must explain how the circumcision of Moshe's son fixed the situation.

SOURCES: Midrash Yelamedeinu, Midrash Aggadah (Buber), Rashbam, R. Yosef Kimchi, R. Avraham Ibn Daud, Tzeror HaMor

Moshe's sin – These commentators suggest two possible infractions which constituted the delay:

- Lodging at the inn⁴⁶ – Midrash Yelamedeinu and Midrash Aggadah (Buber) say that Moshe procrastinated by staying at the inn.⁴⁷ This approach likely understands "בִּמְלוֹן" as an actual guest lodge and not just any place where Moshe pitched a tent for the night.⁴⁸
- Bringing his family with him to Egypt – Rashbam⁴⁹ and the Tzeror HaMor suggest that Moshe taking his family caused unnecessary delay.⁵⁰

Proportionate punishment – Hashem's reacted harshly because Moshe's action (or inaction) had consequences for the entire nation.⁵¹ Hashem's attack was intended to send a message to Moshe to execute his mission in a timely manner.

How does circumcision help? This approach encounters great difficulty in understanding the role of circumcision.

- According to Rashbam, the circumcision functioned as some form of sacrifice⁵² to appease the angel who was trying to kill Moshe.⁵³
- R. Avraham Ibn Daud says that the drawing of blood can have an astrological influence and save people who are in life threatening danger.⁵⁴
- The Tzeror HaMor, on the other hand, maintains that Moshe rectified his mistake by hurrying off to Egypt and leaving Zipporah with their sons at the inn.⁵⁵ The account of the circumcision, according to him, is wholly unconnected to either the sin or punishment.⁵⁶
- Alternatively, Moshe's procrastination was a sign of his lack of identity with his Jewish brothers; performing the circumcision actively showed his connection to his people.⁵⁷

"וַיִּבְקֹשׁ הַמִּיתוֹ" – Who was near death? According to most of these sources, the target of Hashem's wrath was Moshe as it was his sin.⁵⁸ However, R. Yosef Kimchi claims that Hashem came to kill Gershom.⁵⁹

Which son was uncircumcised and why not? Most of these commentators probably hold that Eliezer was the uncircumcised son who had just been born. R. Yosef Kimchi, though, combines this approach with the Midrash above, suggesting that a deal was made with Zipporah and her family not to circumcise Gershom.⁶⁰

Why Zipporah and not Moshe? Those who hold that Moshe was endangered can say that he was incapacitated. R"Y Kimchi says that Zipporah was compensating for not previously allowing this son to be circumcised. According to Tzeror HaMor, as soon as Moshe became aware of Hashem's anger, he hurried to Egypt, leaving Zipporah behind to circumcise their son.⁶¹

How did Zipporah know the solution? According to R"Y Kimchi,⁶² Moshe told her that the cause of the danger was that Gershom was uncircumcised. The Tzeror HaMor, who says that Moshe was not present, would probably simply maintain that the baby was eight days old.

"וַתִּגַּע לְרַגְלָיו" – Whose legs?

- Moshe's – Rashbam says that Zipporah touched the foreskin to Moshe's feet as a way of appeasing the angel.⁶³
- The son's – R. Yosef Kimchi⁶⁴ maintains that "וַתִּגַּע לְרַגְלָיו" describes the act of circumcision itself, with "לְרַגְלָיו" being a euphemism for genitals.⁶⁵

"חֵתָן דָּמִים / לְמוֹלֶת" – According to Rashbam, Zipporah meant that Moshe was saved because of the circumcision. Tzeror HaMor, though, maintains that Moshe was not there and thus understands the "חֵתָן" to be the son with whom Zipporah was playing.

Context – R. Yosef Kimchi suggests that verse 23 is integral to our story. Hashem instructs Moshe to command Paroh to let His "son" (The Children of Israel) go and then Hashem turns to Moshe telling him "You have refused to go on my mission to take them out,⁶⁶ and therefore, I will kill your (Moshe's) firstborn."⁶⁷ The words "בְּנֶךְ בְּכֹרֶךָ", according to him, refers to Moshe's firstborn son, Gershom. R. Avraham Ibn Daud adopts a similar approach, arguing that the verse was really directed at Paroh, but that it applied to Moshe as well because he had also caused a delay of the nation's redemption from Egypt.

"אָחֵר שְׁלוּחֶיהָ" – According to the Tzeror HaMor, after the circumcision, Zipporah returned with her children to her father's home.⁶⁸



Error of Judgment and Corrective Action

Moshe erred in planning to bring his family to Egypt, and the circumcision of Moshe's son prevented the implementation of this plan.

SOURCES: Midrash from the Genizah, Ibn Ezra, R. Yosef Kimchi,⁶⁹ Shadal

Moshe's error – These exegetes suggest two possible negative consequences that would have resulted had Moshe's wife and children arrived in Egypt:

- Ibn Ezra⁷⁰ and R. Yosef Kimchi⁷¹ suggest that it could have demoralized the Israelites in Egypt⁷² by causing them to believe that Moshe was merely coming to live with his family in Egypt and that the redemption was not imminent.⁷³
- Shadal posits that Hashem was concerned that Zipporah and Gershom would dissuade Moshe from his dangerous mission out of their fears that Paroh would kill him.⁷⁴

Proportionate reaction – Moshe's action was more of a miscalculation than an actual sin, and Hashem's reaction was intended more as a corrective warning than as a punishment.

Circumcision is the solution – Ibn Ezra and Shadal explain that by reminding Moshe of the need to circumcise his son,⁷⁵ Hashem arranged that Zipporah would need to stay behind with the children and not accompany Moshe to Egypt.

"וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ ה' – Ibn Ezra says that Hashem sent an angel.⁷⁶ According to Shadal, however, this merely indicates that Hashem brought an illness.

"וַיִּבְקֶשׁ הַמִּיתוֹ" – Who was near death? Ibn Ezra says that it must have been Moshe, as otherwise he would have performed the circumcision. He further argues that if the son were sick, one would not circumcise him as doing so would increase the pain and danger. However, R. Yosef Kimchi and Shadal claim that it was Moshe's son Gershom who became ill.⁷⁷

Which son was uncircumcised and why not? Ibn Ezra assumes that Eliezer was the uncircumcised son, having just been born. R. Yosef Kimchi, though, combines this approach with the Midrash above, suggesting that a deal was made with Zipporah and her family not to circumcise Gershom. Shadal holds the somewhat incongruous position that although Gershom was the son whose life was in danger, Eliezer was the uncircumcised one.⁷⁸

Why Zipporah and not Moshe? Ibn Ezra maintains that Moshe was incapacitated by illness, while R"Y Kimchi and Shadal says that Zipporah was correcting her mistake of not previously allowing this son to be circumcised.

How did Zipporah know the solution? Ibn Ezra, R"Y Kimchi, and Shadal all explain that Moshe told her that the circumcision would remedy the situation.

"וַתִּגַּע לְרַגְלָיו" – Whose legs? Ibn Ezra says that Zipporah dabbed the blood on Moshe's legs as a protective charm, similar to the role played by the Paschal blood on the doorposts in Shemot 12.⁷⁹ Shadal also says that it was Moshe's legs.⁸⁰

"חֶתֶן דָּמִים / לְמוֹלֶת" – Ibn Ezra says that newly circumcised babies are referred to as a "חֶתֶן". In contrast, Shadal explains that the "חֶתֶן" is Moshe.

"אֶחָד שְׁלוֹחֶיהָ" – According to Ibn Ezra and Shadal, Zipporah returns to Midyan after this episode.⁸¹



Natural Consequences

There was neither a sin nor a punishment.⁸² The near death experience was simply the natural result of the circumstances in which Moshe found himself.

Trepidation

Moshe's anxiety at having to confront Paroh and warn him of his son's impending death made Moshe himself gravely ill.

SOURCES: R. Yosef ibn Kaspi

Context – The context is integrally connected to our story. Hashem's charge to Moshe to speak to Paroh which appears in these verses are what leads to Moshe's fear and sickness.

"וַיִּפְגְּשׁוּהוּ ה' וַיִּבְקֶשׁ הַמִּיתוֹ" – This verse needs to be read metaphorically, as according to Ibn Kaspi Hashem was not actively trying to kill Moshe.⁸³

Was Moshe's son uncircumcised? Ibn Kaspi claims that the son was already circumcised,⁸⁴ and Zipporah was simply drawing more blood. He finds support in the plural form of the word "לְמוֹלֹת" (in the phrase "חֲתָן לְמוֹלֹת"), which suggests that this was a second circumcision.

Drawing blood is the solution – Zipporah drew blood (הִטְפַּת דָּם) because of her belief that blood acts as a charm (אֲסֵלוּהָ) to calm nerves.⁸⁵

Why Zipporah and not Moshe? As Moshe was in a state of high anxiety, Zipporah took the initiative to try to tranquilize him.

"וַתִּגַּע לְרַגְלָיו" – **Whose legs?** Ibn Kaspi explains that Zipporah dripped blood onto Moshe's legs either because that was the custom or so Moshe wouldn't see and think that her actions were simply "women's silliness".⁸⁶

"חֲתָן דָּמִים / לְמוֹלֹת" – Zipporah was fearful of losing her husband and so she cried out to him that he is a "חֲתָן דָּמִים" (a bridegroom of blood). When he was saved, she modifies her statement to make it more positive by adding "לְמוֹלֹת".

"אַחֲרֵי שְׁלוּחֶיהָ" – Ibn Kaspi maintains that Zipporah and family arrived with Moshe in Egypt and only returned to Midyan after some time had passed.⁸⁷ Ibn Kaspi contends that Moshe's bringing of his family to Egypt was done with Divine approval, and gave the Children of Israel a critically needed morale boost, strengthening their confidence in Moshe's leadership and their belief that the redemption was imminent.⁸⁸



Unprepared for Prophecy

Since Moshe was occupied with his lodgings and family, he was not in an appropriate state when the Divine prophetic spirit came upon him,⁸⁹ and this resulted in a near fatal experience.⁹⁰

SOURCES: Abarbanel

"וַיְהִי בְדֶרֶךְ בְּמִלּוֹן" – Similar to many of the above approaches, Abarbanel explains that these words identify the preoccupation with lodgings as the cause of the problems which ensued.

"וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ ה' וַיִּבְקֶשׁ הַמִּיתוֹ" – Abarbanel explains that "וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ ה'" means that prophecy came to Moshe. The words "וַיִּבְקֶשׁ הַמִּיתוֹ" don't mean that Hashem wanted to kill Moshe, but rather that his lack of preparedness for prophecy led him near death.

Circumcision is the solution – Zipporah didn't know the cause of Moshe's sickness, but she assumed that it was either because he had not circumcised his son or because he had erred in bringing his family with him to Egypt. She therefore acted to correct both, first by circumcising her son and then by returning to Midyan.⁹¹

"חֲתָן דָּמִים / לְמוֹלֶת" – Zipporah referred to Moshe as a "חֲתָן דָּמִים", her almost dead groom. At first she cast blame on herself (לי = בגללי) but when she saw the effects of the circumcision she said that Moshe was a bridegroom of blood "לְמוֹלֶת" due to the circumcision.

Which son was uncircumcised and why not? Abarbanel explains that Eliezer was born just before they left to Egypt. As Moshe didn't want to postpone his mission, he left immediately but delayed the circumcision due to the dangers posed by the journey.

Why Zipporah and not Moshe? As Moshe was too sick to act, Zipporah took the initiative.

¹ Circumcision also possesses a number of unique features which make it an ideal candidate to constitute the sin. It is one of the only commandments that existed already at this point and it carries a severe punishment for its violation of being cut off from one's people. Yet, it is also easily rectifiable and does not leave a stain of moral turpitude.

² This is the opinion of R. Yosi in the Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael, Yerushalmi, and most textual witnesses of the Bavli (the printed editions read merely Rabbi).

³ Minimizing the sin portrays Moshe in a more favorable light, but makes the punishment less comprehensible. R. Yosi's position also raises the question of why Moshe was expected to circumcise his son immediately upon arrival at the inn, given that they were still in the midst of a dangerous journey which (according to R. Yosi himself) would normally mandate a delay of the circumcision. Rashi Nedarim 32a attempts to answer that the inn was very near to Egypt, and thus there would have been no danger. However, from the continuation of the story it would appear that they met Aharon at Mt. Sinai after this episode, implying that they were still quite a distance from Egypt. See also the Shitah in the Shitah Mekubetzet Nedarim 32a which offers an alternative answer.

⁴ Although Eliezer has not yet been mentioned in the text, the plural form of "בְּנָיו" in verse 20 suggests that he has already been born. Ibn Ezra further explains that the lack of mention might be due simply to the fact that he had not yet received a name. See, though, Ramban, who suggests that the plural form is not conclusive, comparing it to a similar plural in Bemidbar 26:8 where there is only one son.

⁵ Often a messenger is referred to by the name of his sender. For other cases where "ה'" may refer to an angel, see Ibn Ezra below and see here.

⁶ This is how he is cited in the Bavli (both printed versions and manuscripts); in the Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael and Yerushalmi (and see also the gloss in the margin of the printed Bavli) he simply says "angel" (cf. LXX and Onkelos). See also Targum Yerushalmi (Neofiti), Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan), and Targumic

fragments from the Genizah which refer to a "מלאך דבֿלֿא", as opposed to Shemot Rabbah which speaks of a "מלאך של רחמים". R. Yehuda b. Bizna in the Bavli attributes the event to the destructive powers of "אף וחימה". See also Midrash Aggadah (Buber) which speaks of Uriel in the guise of a snake, and Midrash Vayosha which has a "שטן" in the form of a snake.

⁷ According to Jubilees, Moshe may not have committed any sin – see below. Jubilees appears to be motivated by the difficulty in Hashem Himself deciding to kill His messenger. However, this solution creates a different problem of how Mastema could act against Hashem's will, and how Zipporah's action helped. For other cases where Jubilees attempts to circumvent difficulties by attributing perplexing events to Mastema, see Hardened Hearts and About Jubilees.

⁸ This would also explain why it is Zipporah rather than Moshe who performs the circumcision.

⁹ Not all agree how to understand this phrase, or that it is referring to the baby. See other explanations below.

¹⁰ See R. Shemuel b. Chofni Gaon (quoted by Ibn Ezra) who says explicitly: "חלילה להיות השם מבקש להמית: 'משה שהולך בשליחותו להוציא עמו, רק בקש להמית אליעזר'".

¹¹ Ralbag responds that Hashem held Moshe to a higher standard, as he would later serve as an example for the entire nation. See also the Toledot Yitzchak, who after an extensive analysis which attempts to understand the logic behind the actions of both Hashem and Moshe, sums up: "סוף סוף החטא קטן מאד ואם כן: 'למה בקש המיתו, יספיק עונש קטן, ועוד שאין עונש מי שלא מל בנו אפילו שיהיה במזיד אלא כרת, וגם זה לו עצמו כשהגדיל ולא לאב'". He answers (similar to Ralbag) that Hashem is more exacting in judging the righteous.

¹² For Ancient Near Eastern parallels, see the commentary of Olam HaTanakh on Shemot (Tel Aviv, 1993): 49-50.

¹³ According to R. Shimon b. Gamliel that the baby was being attacked, it would be even more obvious. Cf. R. Chananel below.

¹⁴ As Moshe was being swallowed until the place of his circumcision, "לִרְגְלֵיו" may be a euphemism for genitals (cf. R"Y Kimchi and Chizkuni).

¹⁵ Ralbag explains that Zipporah was unskilled at circumcision and did not know how to stanch the bleeding, until Moshe recovered enough to tell her. According to him, the subject of "וַתַּגֵּעַ" is not Zipporah, but rather the (yet unmentioned) blood which flowed all the way down the baby's legs. [Blood (דם), though, generally takes a masculine form of the verb.] Ralbag, as per his usual tendencies, attempts to minimize the supernatural and superstitious aspects of the story – see About Ralbag.

¹⁶ R. Shimon b. Gamliel may be influenced by the fact that in the Torah a חתן never refers to the husband but rather to the son-in-law. See Maharsha Nedarim 32a (Chiddushei Aggadot s.v. "מי"), and see חתן and חתן. Ralbag agrees, but explains that Zipporah is referring to the circumcision of the child being a first time experience for her.

¹⁷ Sforno writes that Zipporah was defending Moshe's conduct to the attacking angel by pointing out that Moshe had conditioned their marriage on circumcising their sons.

¹⁸ According to Rashi the words "אַתָּה לִי" should be understood as "you almost caused for me."

¹⁹ R. Saadia is apparently the "master" whom R. Avraham b. HaRambam is citing in Shemot 4:24.

²⁰ R. Saadia here is consistent with his general tendency to neutralize apparent sins of prophets. For elaboration, see About R. Saadia Gaon.

²¹ This explains the shift from the plural "וַיִּרְכְּבֵם" to the singular "וַיֵּשֶׁב", as well as "אַחֵר שְׁלוֹחֵהֶ" (in Shemot 18:2). R. Chananel similarly writes that Moshe "sent [his family] ahead of him," but it is unclear if he means

that Moshe sent them back to Midyan or ahead to Egypt.

²² Cf. Sforno above who also suggests that the incident happened when Zipporah was returning home to Midyan, but has Moshe accompanying them and on the scene for the entire episode.

²³ According to R. Yehuda b. Bizna and Shemot Rabbah above, Moshe was being swallowed, not the baby.

²⁴ According to the version of the Midrash cited by Ibn Ezra, the agreement was reached with Zipporah. Cf. Ephraem's Commentary on Exodus 2:8 who similarly posits that Zipporah would not allow Moshe to circumcise their son as "she took pride in her father and brothers, and although she had agreed to be Moses' wife, she did not wish to adopt his religion".

²⁵ This may mean that he would be an idolatrous priest, like his maternal grandfather Yitro. See Yitro's Religious Identity.

²⁶ This is the language of the Bavli. The formulation of the Midrash Aggadah (Buber) is less strident, saying simply that one son would be circumcised while the other would not be. See Chizkuni who notes that only the latter formulation is consistent with the Midrash that Yitro had abandoned idolatry before Moshe's arrival in Midyan. For more, see Yitro's Religious Identity.

²⁷ See also the דבר אחר in Midrash Aggadah (Buber) Shemot 4:24.

²⁸ See also Ibn Ezra's position in Yitro – Religious Identity.

²⁹ The Tur also defends Moshe, but he suggests that Moshe only agreed since he knew that he would eventually bring Yitro to forsake idolatry. For more on whether and when Yitro abandoned idolatry, see Yitro's Religious Identity.

³⁰ See Moshe's Killing of the Egyptian and discussion of R. Dan's position in Yitro's Religious Identity for more about Yitro's priestly estate acting as a "city of refuge" for Moshe after he killed the Egyptian.

³¹ For the opposite possibility, that Moshe's delay really stemmed from his desire to preserve the baby's Jewish identity, see R. Yoel Bin-Nun's article, "מגדים נ", "מאבק הזהות של משה – איזה בן לא נמול ומדוע", (תשס"ט) 21-38. See also Shut Tzitz Eliezer 18:53 who cites the נחלת בנימין's fascinating read of the Midrash, which parallels that of the Mirkevet HaMishneh on the Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael. They suggest that though Moshe actually was observant, Yitro, a recent convert, was suspicious of the "Egyptian" stranger, thinking him to be an idolater. In his desire that his grandchildren worship Hashem, he thus made him swear that though one son (Moshe's!) might be for idolatry, the other son (Yitro's) would be for Hashem. Only after swearing ("וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה"), did Yitro believe Moshe's insistence that he was in fact God-fearing. This reading raises important questions of the nature of both Moshe and Yitro's religiosity. For further discussions, see Moshe's Character, Moshe and Zipporah's Marriage (regarding the debate between R. Saadia and R. Mubashir HaLevi), and Yitro's Religious Identity. See also Yosef's Character for parallel questions in understanding the Yosef narratives.

³² The immediate context of verses 23-24 may have also influenced the Midrash – see below.

³³ See the Tur Shemot 2:16. For a discussion of the parallels which serve to connect the two stories, see Shofetim 17-18.

³⁴ See R. Yosef Kimchi below, who has a similar read of the verses but with a different understanding of the sin, and see Ibn Ezra's critique of those who say that Hashem is speaking to Moshe in this verse. Michael Hochstein offered an interesting variation of this reconstruction, suggesting that perhaps the words "וַתִּמְאֵן לְשַׁלְּחֵהּ" are a third person feminine form (rather than a second person masculine) and refer to Zipporah who, being an idolater like her father, refused to circumcise her son. Accordingly, the story of Moshe's pact with Yitro and Zipporah has a textual basis, and it is logical why Zipporah is the one to do the circumcision.

The standard interpretation of verse 23 is that it discusses warning Paroh of the tenth plague. However, this understanding encounters some difficulties: First, the words "וְאָמַר אֵלָיו" seem redundant after verse 23 states "כֹּה אָמַר ה'" (cf. Rashi and Ibn Ezra). Additionally, the whole warning regarding Paroh's refusal and the Plague of the Firstborn seems premature as Paroh has not even been asked, let alone refused, to send anyone (cf. R. Saadia's attempt to obviate this problem with the translation in his Tafsir). The alternatives above are able to circumvent these problems.

³⁵ In Targum Yerushalmi (Neofiti) and the Targumic fragments from the Genizah the son is not identified.

³⁶ Eliezer's name which contains an explicit reference to Hashem was logically chosen as the circumcised one, while Gershom, named because "גֵּר הָיִיתִי בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם", was the "stranger to God".

³⁷ His name is mentioned for the first time in Shemot 18:4, although he may have been born already at the time of the episode at the inn – see below.

³⁸ See also the opinion cited by Ibn Ezra.

³⁹ As there are simpler ways of explaining why Eliezer was not yet circumcised, it is likely that the original Midrashic motif contained Gershom. Only at a later stage was this motif synthesized with the approaches above which focused on Eliezer.

⁴⁰ See Ramban who suggests that the plural form of "בָּנָיו" in Shemot 4:20 is not conclusive, comparing it to a similar plural in Bemidbar 26:8 where there is only one son. Ramban raises various options as to when Zipporah became pregnant with Eliezer, either before the journey, on the way back, or in Egypt. For more, see When Did Zipporah Return to Midyan.

⁴¹ See the discussion above of these possibilities.

⁴² See Toledot Yitzchak who answers similarly.

⁴³ Midrash Vayosha may understand "לְרַגְלֵיו" as a euphemism for Moshe's genitals (the point past which the Satan-snake was not able to swallow – "לֹא הָיָה יָכוֹל לִיגַע"). Cf. R"Y Kimchi and Chizkuni.

⁴⁴ See Lekach Tov, Ibn Ezra below, Chizkuni, and Ibn Kaspi below for the parallel to the Paschal blood on the doorposts.

⁴⁵ Cf. Ibn Ezra below who says that Moshe pushed off the circumcision of his son, because he did not want to delay his mission.

⁴⁶ Cf. the opinion of R. Yosi above who also says that the problem is indicated in the words "וַיְהִי בְדֶרֶךְ בְּמִלּוֹן". While R. Yosi understood that the lodging delayed the circumcision, these Midrashim maintain that it delayed Moshe's mission.

⁴⁷ Midrash Aggadah depicts Moshe literally vacillating between continuing his journey and entering the inn, uncertain whether the time of the redemption had really come. It is unclear if this Midrash is critical of Moshe. This depends on how one punctuates the text and whether one reads "כַּעַס עָלָיו הַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא" (like the printed text) or "יַכַּעַס עָלָיו הַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא" (like the proposed emendation which would better fit the context).

⁴⁸ See מלון and cf. Shadal Shemot 4:24 who disagrees.

⁴⁹ Rashbam explains that Hashem was already angered by Moshe's reluctance at the Burning Bush to undertake the mission, and that the consequences of the anger in 4:14 were felt only later (cf. Rashi there who identifies different ramifications). He compares the incident to the cases of Yaakov, Yonah, and Bilam who are punished for trying to evade implementing Hashem's will.

⁵⁰ R. Yosef Kimchi also speaks of general tarrying, but it is not clear if this is connected to Moshe bringing his family. He notes that the need for Hashem to tell Moshe again "לֵךְ שָׁב מִצְרָיִם" indicates that Moshe was

procrastinating.

⁵¹ R. Avraham Ibn Daud says that just as Paroh was punished for not releasing the people immediately, Moshe was punished for his delay.

⁵² For an Ancient Near Eastern parallel, see the account of Philo of Byblos cited by Eusebius in *Praeparatio Evangelica* 1:10: "But on the occurrence of a pestilence and mortality, Kronos offers his only begotten son as a whole burnt-offering to his father Uranus, and circumcises himself, compelling his allies also to do the same."

⁵³ Rashbam on 4:26 adds that Zipporah understood that a delay in the circumcision had contributed to Moshe's punishment, but it is unclear whether this was merely Zipporah's understanding and how this should be reconciled with the sin of tarrying. There is a similar ambiguity in R"Y Kimchi's reconstruction of the story.

⁵⁴ In addition to noting that this was and is the practice of idolaters such as the prophets of the Baal at Mt. Carmel, he also says that this was the purpose of the blood of the Paschal sacrifice. See Purpose of the Pesach. Cf. Ibn Kaspi below who explains similarly Zipporah's action and the blood of the Paschal sacrifice, but adds that this was an erroneous belief.

⁵⁵ Apparently according to R. Avraham Saba, Moshe departed as soon as he realized that his procrastination had placed him in danger, and thus was not present for the circumcision. One of the difficulties with this approach is that Moshe leaving his family at the inn is not mentioned in the text here (and is only possibly alluded to in Shemot 18:2). Cf. R. Saadia and R. Chananel above who also posit that Moshe was not present for the circumcision. According to them, however, Moshe had already parted from Zipporah when the attack happened.

⁵⁶ It is merely recorded here because, as a result of Moshe's leaving for Egypt, Zipporah needed to perform it herself.

⁵⁷ Cf. the second approach in Midrash Yelammedenu that Moshe could not command the Israelites to circumcise, until his own sons were circumcised.

⁵⁸ The Tzeror HaMor likely agrees, but according to him the danger does not incapacitate Moshe, and he is still able to proceed to Egypt. Alternatively, the Tzeror HaMor thinks that the son became ill, and Moshe departed for Egypt leaving Zipporah to tend to their ill son.

⁵⁹ R. Avraham Ibn Daud concurs. See also below for R. Yosef Kimchi's rendering of "הָיָה אֲנֹכִי הָרֹג אֶת בְּנִי" "בְּכִרְךָ".

⁶⁰ See below for the basis of his theory.

⁶¹ The Tzeror HaMor proves from the fact that Zipporah performed the circumcision that Moshe was not there. Cf. R. Chananel above.

⁶² Cf. R. Avraham Ibn Daud who says that Moshe's instructions reflected either a foreshadowing or foreknowledge of how the Israelites would be saved through the blood of the Paschal sacrifice.

⁶³ Since according to Rashbam this was a sacrificial act, one would have expected that Zipporah would have placed the foreskin in front of the angel's legs – cf. Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan) above. Rashbam rejects this possibility, but only because he is unsure that Zipporah was capable of seeing the angel.

⁶⁴ R"Y Kimchi posits that the son was the one in critical danger, and therefore there would be no reason to touch Moshe's legs.

⁶⁵ See Chizkuni who cites a similar interpretation, adding that one needs to reverse the word order of the verse (סירוס המקרא) and read it as if it said "ותקח צפרה צר ותגע לרגליו ותכרת את ערלת בנה".

⁶⁶ According to R"Y Kimchi, one would have expected the verse to read "להוציאנו" instead of "לשלחו".

⁶⁷ Cf. the possibility above that the original Midrashic motif read the second half of this verse similarly. R"Y Kimchi's interpretation is able to avoid the exegetical problem that a warning regarding Paroh's refusal and the Plague of the Firstborn seems premature and out of place.

⁶⁸ Surprisingly, though, from Rashbam Shemot 18:2 it appears that Zipporah arrived with Moshe in Egypt - see When Did Zipporah Return to Midyan.

⁶⁹ See above that R"Y Kimchi also blames Moshe for delaying in fulfilling his mission.

⁷⁰ Ibn Ezra points out that one should not be surprised that Moshe erred, for even prophets can make mistakes. Ibn Ezra cites the example of Natan. For elaboration, see Prophets and Moshe's Character.

⁷¹ R"Y Kimchi says that Moshe brought his family because he himself thought that the Exodus was far off.

⁷² See Ramban and Ibn Kaspi below who argue against this position, suggesting that Moshe bringing his family actually boosted the nation's morale by demonstrating confidence that the Exodus was on the horizon. Ramban Shemot 5:22 further suggests that Zipporah returned to Midyan only when it became clear that the Exodus would not happen immediately.

⁷³ These commentators apparently maintain that the Exodus happened soon after this episode. For further discussion, see Chronology of Shemot 5-7.

⁷⁴ Shadal views Zipporah as having a generally harmful influence on Moshe – see Zipporah's Character, and see also Shadal's view of Yitro in Yitro's Religious Identity.

⁷⁵ Ibn Ezra says that Hashem informed Moshe that He preferred him to circumcise his son and leave him with Zipporah to recuperate rather than taking them to Egypt and postponing the commandment of circumcision.

⁷⁶ He cites the case of Shemot 13:21 and 14:19 to show the interchangeable use of "ה'" and "מלאך". See ה'.

⁷⁷ See above that R. Yosef Kimchi interprets the verse "הִנֵּה אֲנִי הֹרֵג אֶת בְּנִךְ בְּכֶרֶךְ" as Hashem speaking to Moshe. Shadal, while understanding that the verse refers to Paroh's firstborn, suggests that Moshe was made to understand that a similar fate could befall him if he didn't carry out Hashem's mission. According to Ibn Ezra, though, this verse is unconnected to the events at the inn.

⁷⁸ According to Shadal, Moshe had been convinced by Zipporah to wait until Eliezer was thirteen, like the practice of the Midianites.

⁷⁹ Cf. Lekach Tov, Chizkuni, and Ibn Kaspi below.

⁸⁰ According to Shadal, though, Moshe was not the one in danger.

⁸¹ Ibn Ezra supports this read by pointing to the singular form of "וַיִּשָּׁב" in Shemot 4:20. For more, see When Did Zipporah Return to Midyan.

⁸² Cf. the approach of Jubilees cited above which also does not attribute any sin to Moshe.

⁸³ Ibn Kaspi (4:26) explains that actions are sometimes attributed to Hashem since Hashem is the ultimate cause of everything ("הפועל הראשון"). For additional cases, see ה'.

⁸⁴ Ibn Kaspi assumes that Eliezer was more than eight days old (see Shadal who assumes that Zipporah could not be traveling if her son had just been born), and thus Moshe must have previously circumcised him.

⁸⁵ Ibn Kaspi suggests that putting blood on the doorposts on the night of the Plague of the Firstborn was for a similar reason; Hashem wanted to calm the fears of the Children of Israel as they heard the cries of the dying Egyptians. For elaboration, see Purpose of the Pesach. For more on Ibn Kaspi's position that the Torah sometimes takes the erroneous views of the masses into consideration, see About R. Yosef ibn Kaspi.

⁸⁶ For more on Ibn Kaspi's view of women, see About R. Yosef ibn Kaspi.

⁸⁷ It is unclear what led Zipporah to return to Midyan, but Ibn Kaspi suggests that perhaps someone got sick or Zipporah just longed to see her family again. See *When Did Zipporah Return to Midyan*.

⁸⁸ Ibn Kaspi is following and expanding on the position developed by Ramban. In contrast, Ibn Ezra and Shadal above argue that this entire episode was aimed at preventing the harmful consequences of Zipporah and her children coming to Egypt. Ralbag charts a middle ground on this issue, concurring with Ramban that Moshe's actions were proper (in *Toelet* 3 he learns from this story that "והוא שאין ראוי לאדם שיעזוב אשתו ובניו" (he should not leave his wife and children), but maintaining that Hashem was not in favor.

Ramban and Ibn Kaspi posit that Moshe's family not only joined him in Egypt, but that they also rejoined him at Mt. Sinai shortly after the Exodus and before the Decalogue – see *Chronology of Shemot* 18. The resulting portrait of Zipporah (and by extension, Yitro) is a much more sympathetic one – see *Zipporah's Character and Yitro's Religious Identity*.

⁸⁹ See R. D"Z Hoffmann who similarly explains that Moshe's illness resulted from his being in a state of impurity during Divine revelation (he references *Yeshayahu* 6:5). However, according to him, the impurity resulted from having an son who was still uncircumcised. An additional possibility is that Moshe needed to be in a constant state of purity in order to be prepared for Divine revelation, and this required separation from his wife. For more, see *Moshe's Character*.

⁹⁰ Cf. Rashbam's interpretation of Nadav and Avihu's death – see *Vayikra* 10.

⁹¹ Abarbanel does not explain why the circumcision had any effect if that was not really the cause of Moshe's sickness.

Mystery at the Malon

Points of Dispute

These are some of the central points of dispute (נקודות המחלוקת) between the various exegetes:

- Who was at the lodging place?
 - Moshe's whole family – Most commentators
 - Just Zipporah and children – R. Saadia, R. Chananel
 - Moshe, Zipporah and Gershom – One opinion in Ramban
- "וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ ה' וַיִּבְרָק שְׁמֵיתוֹ"
 - Hashem sent an angel to do the killing – Most commentators
 - The Satan was coming to kill – Jubilees, R. Shimon b. Gamliel, Midrash Vayosha
 - Hashem brought an illness – Shadal
 - Moshe became deathly ill – Ibn Kaspi
 - Prophecy came to Moshe bringing him near death – Abarbanel
- Who was near death?
 - Moshe – Most commentators
 - Gershom – R. Yosef Kimchi, Shadal
 - Eliezer – R. Shimon b. Gamliel, R. Saadia, R. Samuel b. Chofni Gaon, R. Chananel
- Which son was uncircumcised?
 - Gershom – R. Elazar HaModai, Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan), R. Yosef Kimchi
 - Eliezer – Most commentators
 - Neither – Ibn Kaspi
- How does circumcision help?
 - Lack of circumcision was the cause – Most commentators
 - It acted as a sacrificial act of atonement – Rashbam
 - It served as a protective charm – Lekach Tov, Ibn Ezra, Ibn Kaspi
 - It is unconnected to both sin and punishment – Tzeror HaMor
 - It ensured that Moshe's family would stay in Midyan – Ibn Ezra, Shadal
- Why Zipporah and not Moshe?
 - Moshe was incapacitated – Most commentators
 - Moshe was not present – R. Saadia, R. Chananel, Tzeror HaMor
 - Zipporah was at fault – R. Yosef Kimchi, Toledot Yitzchak, Shadal
- "וַיַּגֵּעַ לְרַגְלָיו" – Whose legs?
 - Moshe's legs (or genitals) – Midrash Vayosha, Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Ibn Kaspi, Shadal
 - The baby's genitals – R. Yosef Kimchi
 - The angel's legs – Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan)
- Zipporah's return to Midyan
 - Zipporah was en route to Midyan when the incident occurred – R. Saadia, R. Chananel, Sforno
 - Zipporah returned immediately after the incident – Ibn Ezra, Tzeror HaMor, Shadal
 - Zipporah went to Egypt and only returned to Midyan at some later point – Ramban, Ibn Kaspi

Mystery at the Malon

Related Topics

- Can prophets sin?
 - —
- Can prophets err?
 - Yes – Ibn Ezra
- Was Zipporah a Positive or Negative Influence on Moshe?
 - Negative – Shadal
 - Positive –
- What was Moshe's religious identity while in Midyan?
 - —