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Q&A#64 How Should We Understand the Weird Circumstances Around the Circumcision of Gershom?

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Today's question: "What is happening in Exodus 4 where the Lord seeks Moses' life, but Zipporah circumcises Gershom and touches Moses' feet with the foreskin to make him a "bridegroom of blood"?"

I reference James Jordan's 'Law of the Covenant', which is available in PDF format here: https://www.garynorth.com/freebooks/docs/pdf/the_law_of_the_covenant.pdf. It can also be purchased from Amazon: <https://amzn.to/2zMM2uv>.

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, what is happening in Exodus 4 where the Lord seeks Moses' life, but Zipporah circumcises Gershom and touches Moses' feet with the foreskin to make him a bridegroom of blood? Not a weird passage at all. And these sorts of questions are catnip for me.

I can't resist them. So here we go. We'll read from verse 18 of chapter 4. So Moses went and returned to Jethro, his father-in-law, and said to him, Please let me go and return to my brethren, who are in Egypt, and see whether they are still alive.

And Jethro said to Moses, Go in peace. And the Lord said to Moses and Midian, Go return to Egypt, for all the men are dead who sought your life. 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. And the Lord said to Moses, When you go back to Egypt, see that you do all these wonders before Pharaoh, which I have put in your heart. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.

Then you shall say to Pharaoh, Thus says the Lord, Israel is my son, my firstborn. So I say to you, Let my son go, that he may serve me. But if you will refuse to let him go, indeed I will kill your son, your firstborn.

And it came to pass on the way at the encampment, 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 Moses' feet and said, Surely you are a husband of blood to me. So he let him go.

Then she said, You are a husband of blood, because of the circumcision. And the Lord said to Aaron, Go into the wilderness to meet Moses. So he went and met him on the mountain of God and kissed him.

So Moses told Aaron all the words of the Lord who had sent him and all the signs which he had commanded him. Then Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the children of Israel. And Aaron spoke all the words which the Lord had spoken to Moses.

Then he did the signs in the sight of the people. So the people believed. And when they had heard that the Lord had visited the children of Israel and that he had looked on their affliction, then they bowed their heads and worshipped.

So first of all, when we meet a weird passage like this, one of the helpful things to do is to consider the parallels, the contexts, all these other things that can help to hem in the problem and give us some sort of grasp upon what's taking place in the context. So one of the most helpful things that gives us a grasp on this particular context is the parallels with the story of Jacob. Jacob has to flee for his life into the land of Midian and then he spends time with his or he meets Rachel at a well, his future wife.

He keeps the flocks of his father-in-law Laban and works for his father-in-law. And then he meets, or God tells him to return to the land after he's born a number of children there. And as he returns to the land, God seeks to kill him or comes out to threaten him.

And so we see the angel of the Lord wrestling with Jacob at the fort of the Jabbok. And it's a nighttime wrestling. Again, we see a similar thing here.

And then he's met by his brother who he's been separated from for many years. In this case, Aaron. In the story of Jacob, it's Esau.

And then they go back to the land. So there are similar patterns taking place here that

help us get an initial grasp upon what's taking place. Other things that are significant, the immediate context talks about God seeking to kill Pharaoh's son if he will not let God's firstborn son go.

So Israel is God's firstborn son. And if Pharaoh will not let Israel go, God will kill Pharaoh's firstborn son. And this is immediately before the encounter with the Lord and as he seeks to kill them at the encampment.

Now, again, there are questions of interpretation. So these verses within this passage, as it's translated with the New King James Version, which I've used, verse 25 has a number of marginal notes. First of all, made it touch instead of cast.

And it doesn't say Moses' feet, it says his feet. So it could be Gershom's feet. It's not necessarily the feet of Moses.

It's the firstborn son, presumably, who's being circumcised at this point. And the expression husband of blood is literally bridegroom of blood. You've got bridegroom of blood.

You've got the reference to touching Moses' feet or his legs. And then it may not be Moses at all. It may be just his.

And that might be a reference to Gershom as the firstborn son of Moses, which I think is most likely. So what might be taking place here? First of all, we've seen that God comes as a threat at key points. So in the story of Jacob, he wrestles with Jacob at the night before he enters into the land.

It's in this liminal location before he enters into the land on the borders of the land to prepare him for entering in. And he's given a new name and he limps from that point. There's a physical wound that he sustains at that point.

So again, these are significant parallels between the story of Moses and the story of Jacob. And that helps us to get some sort of weak paradigm, at least, for seeing what's taking place here. What more is taking place? Well, if we look in the wider context of the book of Exodus, I think we can see a very strong parallel between this and the Passover.

Circumcision was associated with the Passover in that the person who participated in the Passover had to be circumcised as a man. And then there was also the emphasis upon firstborn sons in that context. So here we have the threat to the firstborn son given to Moses to relate to Pharaoh.

And now we have the threat on Moses's firstborn son. And so there's a circumcision theme. And then taking the foreskin and the word that's used is the same verb that's used of putting the blood against the doorposts.

So it's the display of the blood on the feet or on the legs that is a sign to God that the blood has been shed. And then God ceases the attack, the attempt to kill Moses or Gershom, whoever it is who's under a threat. The connection between Zipporah and Gershom at this point is significant.

She's the one who circumcises her son. And maybe Moses wasn't present at that time. Maybe he was sorting out stuff within the encampment.

But Zipporah is the one who takes action and she's the one who's particularly associated with the son at this point. Now that's not surprising in the context of the book of Exodus. In the book of Exodus, there are two key themes, two key symbolic figures.

There's the figure of the woman who bears a child, a male child, and there's the firstborn son. These two figures loom large. Israel is the firstborn son, but Israel is also the woman groaning in travail, waiting to be begotten of her son.

And those themes come together in the Passover and in the crossing of the Red Sea, where just around those events, there's the rule of the opening of the womb with the firstborn child. And Israel is born through that event. Israel's travail and its birth pangs are heard by the Lord and he answers and he delivers them.

And he delivers them as a child is born. And so Israel is God's firstborn son, born through the water of the Red Sea, born through the Passover, and they become this son at that point. And this letting go, Egypt is the womb, the dark womb in which Israel is present.

And the mother or the woman of Israel is groaning in birth. So the connection between Zipporah and her son is significant here. Elsewhere, we see connections between women and their sons that are very pronounced.

The woman and her seed, the seed acts on behalf of the woman. The seed is the man for the woman. And in that respect, he plays a role similar to that of a husband or a bridegroom.

We see this in the verse one of chapter four of Genesis, that Eve gets a man from the Lord, or a man, the same term that's used of her husband. So she gets a man from the Lord, this bridegroom, as it were, this man who will act on her behalf. Her husband has fallen.

And here is her hope that this son Cain, who proves not to be that son, that he will act on her behalf, that he will deliver her, and that he will be the true kinsman redeemer for her. And so that connection is significant. Elsewhere within Ruth, we see, so Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife.

And when he went into her, the Lord gave her conception and she bore a son. Then the woman said to Naomi, blessed be the Lord who has not left you this day without a near

kinsman. And may his name be famous in Israel.

And may he be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is better to you than seven sons has borne him. And so Obed is the kinsman redeemer. He's, as it were, this husband type, acts in some ways as a bridegroom or husband type figure to Naomi, his grandmother.

And that relationship is a significant one within the story of Exodus. The firstborn son is the one who acts as it were as the priest for the family. He's the one whose blood is set apart by the Passover.

And he's also the one who will be replaced later on by the as the priesthood. The priesthood then is a representation of the firstborn sons of Israel, representing the firstborn strength of Israel's life. And in that respect, the firstborn sons stand for everyone in their family.

There is a, we tend to think about salvation in very individualistic paradigms, each person for their self, man or woman, and they're interchangeable. But within the Old Testament, it's significant that people stand for others. So circumcision is only performed upon men, but the men can stand for their wives and their daughters and others within their household.

And so when the firstborn sons are particularly set apart as priest-like figures, they can stand for the whole of their families. And here Gershom is circumcised, his blood is smeared and displayed, and his blood leads to the salvation and the deliverance of either his life or his father's life, or maybe just the whole of his family's life. There is a deliverance that occurs through the displaying of the firstborn son's blood.

And that should be read against the background of the broader event of the Exodus, and also against the background in particular of the Passover. The Passover associated with themes of birth and associated with the relationship between the woman who's struggling to give birth and the firstborn son who opens the womb. So here the circumcision of the firstborn son, the woman's association with him, close association with him in that event, those are to be taken very seriously.

That connection is pivotal within the context of the first 14 chapters of Exodus. What more can we say? If we go back to Genesis in chapter 17, when God comes to judge, just before he comes to judge, he meets up with Abraham. And the event just before that is the giving of the covenant and the requirement of circumcision for all the children, all those within Abraham's house and for Abraham himself.

Circumcision is a preparation for the coming of God in judgment. It's a sort of inoculation in some sense against judgment. It's a preparation with a cutting off of the flesh of the foreskin and the place where it is as significant.

It's related with seed, the bringing of seed, and that flesh at that particular point is cut off. It's a challenge to a sort of culture that's built upon phallic power and virility. It's a statement of the death of the flesh and its dependence upon God's promise instead.

And also the need to cut off flesh as a principle more generally. So when God comes in judgment, he cuts off flesh. But to prepare for that, you cut off the flesh of the foreskin.

So there is an anticipation of the coming in judgment. And when God comes in judgment, he judges Sodom and Gomorrah. And Abraham and his family are not judged, but there is this deliverance that occurs at that point.

And so the circumcision and the entrance and the preparation for judgment, entering into this fear of judgment is significant. We see a similar thing as they enter into the promised land when they cross the Jordan, that they cut off the foreskins of those who have been in the wilderness. When God comes to judge, you prepare by cutting off the foreskins.

In the same way, you have to have everyone circumcised in order to participate of the Passover. Once again, it's because God is coming in judgment and there must be a cutting off of flesh at that point. Of course, in the New Testament, the cutting off of flesh occurs in the circumcision of Christ, which is the cross and is something that is represented in baptism as well.

So this connection with circumcision and judgment helps us again to understand why it happens here in this liminal place as they are about to enter into the land of Egypt. God is about to come in judgment upon the land of Egypt and Moses must be prepared. There's an anticipation again of the story of Israel.

So there's a proleptic Passover, an event of Passover that anticipates this later event of Passover. Just as we have in the story of Moses, Moses is delivered through the water, through the reeds, and he's the one who's described as drawn out of the water. When Israel is drawn out of the water of the Reed Sea or the Red Sea, they are baptized into Moses as Paul refers to it in 1 Corinthians 10, 1-2.

There is this entrance into what has happened to Moses already. In the same way, the theme of the woman who's struggling in birth and then the firstborn son, that is presented here, but then later on we see that acted out on a bigger scale in the story of the Passover and the later deliverance through the water. Now I believe this provides us with a general paradigm within which to understand the meaning of this.

The bridegroom of blood is Gershom acting as he relates towards his mother. The blood is most likely smeared on Gershom's legs and there is a demonstration or presentation of the blood so that the destroying angel or God's judging presence will pass by. And so there's a Passover theme taking place here.

Just before they enter into the land, God's about to judge and so they must be ready for this. And as the bringer of judgment, he must be the one who anticipates through circumcision the cutting off of flesh that will later on occur with the cutting off of the flesh of Egypt in judgment. And so it's either cutting off the foreskin or cutting off the firstborn.

That helps us to understand what's taking place in the connection between the sign of circumcision in Genesis 17 and then the judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah in 18 and 19. It helps us to understand those sorts of connections. It also helps us to understand when we see the connections between Moses and Jacob, as I've given the basic paradigm there, as Jacob enters into the land again, crossing over the Jabbok, this tributary of the Jordan.

He is met by the angel, challenged by the angel and wrestles with that angel who seeks to, he attacks him and perhaps, he presumes, seeks to kill him. And he's given this wound, this wound that is a mark of God's presence to him and he's given a new name. Jacob, the letters of that mixed up in the name of the Jabbok, he is now given the name Israel.

And Moses is prepared and the woman and her seed are prepared as they enter into the land of Egypt, ready for that period of judgment. There are a lot of further things going on here. James Jordan has a very stimulating and thought-provoking piece on this particular passage in one of the appendices of the Law of the Covenant.

That's available for free online, I think. So if you search around for you would be able to find it, I think. Otherwise, you can get it from Amazon.

I think I'll give the link for that below. I hope you found this helpful. If you have any follow-up questions or any other questions on other subjects, please leave them on my Curious Cat account.

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Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow with another video. I hope finally to do the book review that I've been putting off for a few days. And thank you very much for your time.

God bless.