

Tzipporah and the Night Attack; Classical and Contemporary Commentary

RB By Rabbi Amy Bernstein

Exodus 4:19-26

.... (20) So Moses took his wife and sons, mounted them on an ass, and went back to the land of Egypt...

(22) Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD: Israel is My first-born son. (23) I have said to you, “Let My son go, that he may worship Me,” yet you refuse to let him go. Now I will slay your first-born son.’” (24) At a night

encampment on the way, the LORD encountered him and sought to kill him. (25) So

Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin, and touched his legs with it, saying, “You are truly a bridegroom of blood to me!” (26)

And when He let him alone, she added, “A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision.”

שמות ד':י"ט-כ"ו

(יט) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַּר לֵדָבָר
 שָׁב מִצְרָיִם כִּי־מֵתוּ כָּל־הָאֲנָשִׁים
 הַמִּבְקָשִׁים אֶת־נַפְשִׁי: (כ) וַיִּקַּח
 מֹשֶׁה אֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ וְאֶת־בָּנָיו וַיִּרְכַּבֵם
 עַל־הַחֲמֹר וַיֵּשֶׁב אֶרְצָה מִצְרָיִם....
 (כב) וַאֲמַרְתָּ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה כֹּה אָמַר
 ה' בְּנִי בְכֹרִי יִשְׂרָאֵל: (כג) וַאֲמַר
 אֵלָיךְ שְׁלַח אֶת־בְּנִי וַיַּעֲבֹדְנִי וְהִמָּאֵן
 לְשַׁלְּחוֹ הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי הֹלֵךְ אֶת־בְּנִי
 בְּכַרְךָ: (כד) וַיְהִי בַדְרֹךְ בַּמָּלֶוֶן
 וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ ה' וַיִּבְקֹשׁ הַמִּיתוֹ: (כה)
 וַתִּקַּח צִפּוֹרָה צֹר וַתְּכַרֵת אֶת־עֶרְלַת
 בְּנֹהָ וַתַּגַּע לְרַגְלָיו וְהִיא אָמְרָה כִּי
 חַתָּן־דָּמִים אַתָּה לִּי: (כו) וַיִּרְף
 מִמֶּנּוּ אַז אָמְרָה חַתָּן דָּמִים
 לְמוֹלַת: (פ)

Nedarim 32a:3

Rabbi Yehuda bar Bizna taught:
At the time that Moses our teacher was negligent about the circumcision, the destructive angels named **Af**, meaning anger, and **Heima**, meaning wrath, **came and swallowed him, and only his legs were left outside.**

Immediately, “Zipporah took a flint, and cut off the foreskin of her son” (Exodus 4:25), and **immediately “He let him alone”** (Exodus 4:26).

Nedarim 32a:2

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: **It was not Moses our teacher that Satan wanted to kill, but rather, that infant who was not circumcised, as it is stated: “Surely a bridegroom of blood are you to me”** (Exodus 4:25). **Go out and see: Who** does it make sense would be the one that **is**

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נדרים ל"ב א:ג'

דרש רבי יהודה בר ביזנא בשעה
 שנתרשל משה רבינו מן המילה
 באו אף וחימה ובלעוהו ולא
 שיירו ממנו אלא רגליו מיד ותקח
 צפורה צור ותכרת את ערלת בנה
 (שמות ז, כה) מיד וירף ממנו
 (שמות ז, כו)

נדרים ל"ב א:ב'

רָבֵן שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן גַּמְלִיאֵל אוֹמֵר לֹא
 לְמֹשֶׁה רַבֵּינוּ בִּקְשׁ שָׁטָן לְהַרוֹג
 אֶלָּא לְאוֹתוֹ תִּינוּק שְׁנֵאמַר כִּי חָתַן
 דְּמִים אַתָּה לִי צֵא וּרְאֵה מִי קָרוֹי
 חָתַן הוּי אוֹמֵר זֶה הַתִּינוּק

שמות רבה ה'ח'

וְהִי בְדַרְךְ בַּמָּלוֹן, חֲבִיבָה מִלָּה
 שְׁלֹא נִתְּלָה מֹשֶׁה עָלֶיהָ אֶפְלוּ
 שָׁעָה אַחַת, לְפִיכֹךְ כְּשֶׁהָיָה בְדַרְךְ
 וְנִתְעַסַּק בַּמָּלוֹן וְנִתְעַצַּל לְמוֹל

called the bridegroom in this instance? **You must say this is the infant**, since he is the one who entered the covenant of Abraham by means of the circumcision.

Shemot Rabbah 5:8

And it happened on the way of the inn - beloved is circumcision, that Moshe could not delay on it even an hour, therefore when he was on the way and took care of [the needs in] the inn and was careless regarding circumcising his son Eliezer, immediately "Hashem encountered him and tried to kill him." You find that this was a merciful angel, and still he wanted to kill him. "And Tzipporah took a flint" - and how did Tzipporah know that Moshe was endangered because of the dealings with circumcision? The angel came and swallowed Moshe from his head until his [place of] circumcision. When she saw that the angel did

לְאֵלֵינוּ בְּנוֹ, מִיָּד וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ ה'
וַיִּבְקֹשׁ הַמַּיִתוֹ. אֵת מוֹצֵא מְלֶאֱךָ
שֶׁל רַחֲמִים הָיָה וְאֵף עַל פִּי כֹן
וַיִּבְקֹשׁ הַמַּיִתוֹ. וַתִּקַּח צִפּוֹרָה צֶרֶד,
וְכִי מִיָּנִין יִדְעָה צִפּוֹרָה שֶׁעַל עֶסְקִי
מִיָּלָה נִסְתַּכֵּן מִשָּׂה, אֵלָּא בָּא
הַמְּלֶאֱךָ וּבִלְע לְמִשָּׂה מֵרֹאשׁוֹ וְעַד
הַמִּיָּלָה. כִּיֹּן שָׂרְאֲתָה צִפּוֹרָה שֶׁלֹּא
בִלְע אוֹתוֹ אֵלָּא עַד הַמִּיָּלָה הַכִּיָּרָה
שֶׁעַל עֶסְקִי הַמִּיָּלָה הוּא נִיזְק,
וַיִּדְעָה כִּמָּה גְדוֹל כַּחַ הַמִּיָּלָה
שֶׁלֹּא הָיָה יָכוֹל לְבַלְעוֹ יוֹתֵר
מִכָּאֵן, מִיָּד וַתִּכְרַת אֵת עַרְלַת בְּנָהּ
וַתִּגַּע לְרַגְלָיו, וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי חָתָן
דְּמִים אֶתָּה לִי, אָמְרָה חָתָנִי תִהְיֶה
אֶתָּה נָתוּן לִי בְּזִכּוֹת דְּמִים הִלְלוּ
שֶׁל מִיָּלָה, שֶׁהָרִי קִיַּמְתִּי הַמְּצֹנָה,
מִיָּד וַיִּרְף הַמְּלֶאֱךָ מִמֶּנּוּ. אִזְ אָמְרָה
חָתָן דְּמִים לְמוֹלֵת, אָמְרָה כִּמָּה
גְדוֹל כַּחַ הַמִּיָּלָה שֶׁחָתָנִי הָיָה חֵיֵב
מִיָּתָה שֶׁנִּתְעַצֵּל בְּמִצּוֹת הַמִּיָּלָה

not swallow him completely, but just up the circumcision she realized that it was because of circumcision that he was being attacked, and she understood how great is the power of circumcision because the angel could only swallow him up to there, immediately she cut the foreskin of her son "and touched his feet with it, and she said 'because you are a bridegroom of blood to me'" - she said: 'you will be my groom , given to me for the merit of this blood of circumcision, that behold I kept the mitzvah', and immediately the angel let him go. And then she said 'a bridegroom for the blood of circumcisions', she said: 'how powerful is circumcision, that my groom was liable for death because he delayed to do the mitzvah, and weren't for it he would not have been saved.

לְעִשׂוֹתָהּ, וְלוֹיֵי הָיָא לֹא נִצְּלָ.

ספורנו על שמות ד':כ"ד:ג'

(כד) ויבקש המיתו מלאך

הממונה על זה ביקש להרוג את

משה בשביל שנתרשל:

Sforno on Exodus 4:24:3

(24) [When the time passed without Eliezer being circumcised]

The angel in charge of circumcision requested to kill Moses for being negligent.

רש"י על שמות ד':כ"ה:ג'

כי חתן דמים אתה לי. אַתָּה

הַיִּתָּה גֹוֶרֶם לְהִיּוֹת הַחֲתָן שְׁלִי

נִרְצַח עָלַיךָ – הוֹרֵג אִישִׁי אַתָּה

לִי:

Rashi on Exodus 4:25:3

“You are a bridegroom of blood to me.” I.e., “You were to have caused my bridegroom to be slain

on account of you; you would thus have been my husband's killer.”

Rashi on Exodus 4:26:2
 אמרה חתן דמים למלות SHE SAID
 “BRIDEGROOM OF BLOOD
 BECAUSE OF THE
 CIRCUMCISION” — my
 bridegroom was on the point of
 being killed on account of the
 circumcision.

רש"י על שמות ד':כ"ו:ב'
 אמרה חתן דמים למולת. חתני

היה נרצח על דבר המילה:

רש"י על שמות ד':כ"ו:ב'
 אמרה חתן דמים למולת. חתני

היה נרצח על דבר המילה:

Rashi on Exodus 4:26:2
Then — she understood that on
 account of [delaying] the
 circumcision, he had come to kill
 him, [and] **she said, “Bridegroom
 of blood because of the
 circumcision.”** [Meaning:] My
 bridegroom would have been killed
 on account of [delaying] the
 circumcision.

Ibn Ezra on Exodus 4:25:3
 [A BRIDEGROOM OF
 BLOOD.] It is the custom of
 women to refer to a child as a
 bridegroom when he is

אבן עזרא על שמות ד':כ"ה:ג'
 ומנהג אנשים לקרוא לבן כאשר
 יומל חתן.

חזקוני, שמות ד':כ"ו:ב'

circumcised.

Chizkuni, Exodus 4:26:2

כי חתן דמים אתה לי, “for you are a bridegroom of blood to me.”

According to Rashi, the word דמים should be understood as in שופך דמים, “spilling blood, killing.”

Compare Samuel II 16,7 צא איש הדמים, “get out murderer!” The verse ought to be rearranged so that it is understood as: כי דמים חתן לי, “you were (potentially) a shedder of the blood of my groom for me.” (Alternately, these words could have been addressed to her baby Eliezer, meaning that the baby if not for the blood of his at the circumcision, it would have caused her groom’s death.

Rabbeinu Chananel on Exodus

4:24:1

ויהי בדרך במלון ויפגשוהו ה' ויבקש; Moses was not present at the inn. The Torah had written prior

כי חתן דמים אתה לי לפי

שפרש"י דמים כמו שופך דמים

כמו צא איש הדמים וצריך לסרס

המקרא כי דמים חתן אתה לי

כלומר הורג חתני אתה לי.

ר' חננאל על שמות ד':כ"ד:א'

ויהי בדרך במלון ויפגשוהו ה'

ויבקש המיתו. משה לא היה

שם במלון כי כן הזכיר למעלה

ויקח משה את אשתו ואת בניו

וירכיבם על החמור. ובאור

הפסוק ששלח אותם לפניו. ואחר

כך וישב מצרימה. וכיון שכן לא

היה משה עתה במלון. ואמר

ויבקש המיתו כלומר לנער

שהיה המלאך נעשה כמין נחש

ובולעו מראשו ועד ירכיו וחזר

ובולעו מרגליו ועל מקום המילה.

ואז ותקח צפורה צור. כי הבינה

שהיה העונש על שאיחרה זמן

to this that Moses had taken his wife and his sons and let them ride on the donkey. (verse 20) The meaning of the verse is that he sent his family ahead of him. [Rabeinu Chananel notices that the verb is "vayashav", he returned, and not "vayashuvu", they returned, which is what you would expect with a family of 4 people] Immediately afterwards we are told that Moses himself returned to Egypt. If the Torah reports sequentially, Moses could not have been at the inn at the time Tzipporah had this encounter. ויבקש המיתו, the person under threat of death was the boy, seeing that the angel had assumed the form of a serpent about to swallow the little boy. This serpent then spit out the boy and began to devour him from the opposite end, swallowing up to the part where the circumcision was to be performed. At that point, ותקה צורה, Tzipporah understood

המצוה ולא מלה אותו ביום שמיני:

Created with  Sefaria

what the problem was, i.e. that they were being punished for being tardy in performing the boy's circumcision so that she herself performed it with a sharp flint.

Ilana Pardes. *The Biography of Ancient Israel: National Narratives in the Bible.*

(Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000)

Zipporah

If Yocheved is the one who most clearly resembles Isis in her role as the suckling goddess, Zipporah, Moses' wife, calls to mind the Winged Savior. Zipporah, one should bear in mind, means "bird" in Hebrew, and this is but one feature that points to her affinity with the goddess. Much like Isis, Zipporah plays the role of a savior, rescuing her husband from the wrath of a persecuting deity. The scene of rescue takes place in a strange dramatic night, right after Moses' initiation by the burning bush. God, who had just sent Moses back to Egypt to do wonders before Pharaoh, and the people, suddenly attacks his messenger at a lodging along the road. Zipporah springs out of the dark and intervenes with unexpected force. She moves swiftly, takes a flint in her hand, circumcises her son, and touches "his feet" (Moses' feet? her son's?) with the foreskin, saying repeatedly: "You are truly a bridegroom of blood to me!") (*chatan damim 'ata li*; Exod 4:25). [YHVH] succumbs to Zipporah's magical act and withdraws, Moses is saved.

The story of the "Bridegroom of Blood" offers a perplexing counterpart to the episode of the burning bush. Here too, as in the nation's biography, initiation is a process that requires more than one rite and more than one representation. Moses' initial refusal to assume the position of deliverer in Exodus 3 turns into an eerie combat in Exodus 4, for here God's anger is conveyed by means of concrete violence and His insistence on having total possession of the one He had chosen comes close to murder. [-- p. 96, Pardes. *The Biography of Ancient Israel*]

Zipporah's intervention, however, is the most radical supplement. It seems to suggest that a feminine touch must be added before Moses' initiation can be regarded as complete. Zipporah designates Moses ceremoniously as her "bridegroom of blood" and takes him, as it were, under her wings. Women (and mothers in particular) -- despite, or rather because of, their powerlessness -- often have an important role in teaching the weak and threatened young heroes how to handle hostile paternal figures. Rebekah offers such help to young Jacob in his struggle to assume the position of the chosen firstborn against Isaac's will.

That Zipporah's opponent is the Father Himself makes her move all the more startling. She placates [YHVH] by complying partially and cunningly with His whims. Her strategy is synecdochic: *pars pro toto*, a foreskin and a touch of blood for the victim's life. If she can ward off divine violence she seems to assert, so can Moses. The mission will take its bloody toll.... She marks Moses (or her son) with blood, foreshadowing the two scenes in which the nation is marked by blood: on the night of the Exodus and then again on accepting

the book of the covenant at Sinai. The history of the people is already inscribed on his body and the body of their son. He must go on.

Zipporah is sent off by Moses after this nocturnal episode, and we do not hear of her until she returns to the camp in Exodus 18

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he rabbis, in any event, sensed the quest for maternal wings -- on this mountain and beyond it -- and fashioned a female symbol of Divine Presence, called Shekhina.... [-- p. 98, Pardes. *The Biography of Ancient Israel*]

The Biography of Ancient Israel is available now, and as ebook, through Univ. of California Press

From: [Omer Calendar of Biblical Women](#)

Why does Tziporah act in this way? Rabbinic legend says that God is angry with Moses for failing to circumcise his son, and communicates this to Tziporah by causing Moses' sexual organs to swell! So Tziporah circumcises her infant son, making him part of the Jewish people. Tziporah's instinct is to act to save the life of her husband and her children. In this respect she represents *gevurah shebenetzach*, strong endurance. She must call on her power to cut, and even to cause pain, in order to protect life. We are most like Tziporah when we endure discomfort in order to achieve a lasting purpose.

Julia Franco

One partial explanation for what's going on here comes from the commentator Rashi, who says "because he [Moses] had not circumcised his son Eliezer; and because he had showed himself remiss in this, he brought upon himself the punishment of death." Circumcision was, and is, a very big deal. In this scene, Moses is on his way to Egypt to speak to Pharaoh in order to free his fellow Israelites. It would be hypocritical if he claimed to speak for his people while refusing to uphold one of his people's most important traditions.

Translator Everett Fox takes a more literary approach, saying this scene "serves as an end bracket to Moses's sojourn in Midian. As mentioned earlier, Moses flees Egypt under pain of death; here, on his return, he is in mortal danger once more. Second, our passage seems to be an *inclusio* or bracketing passage for the entire Plague Narrative... God, designating Israel his firstborn and alluding to the future killing of Pharaoh's/Egypt's firstborn sons, demonstrates his power as a life-taker, to be pacified or turned away only by a ceremonial blood-smearing - parallel to the Israelites' smearing of blood on their doorposts when their own firstborn are threatened by the Tenth Plague.

Two final points should be noted here. First, it is with the act of his son's circumcision that Moses finally becomes a true Israelite... And second, it is telling, again, that the person who saves Moses's life in adulthood is a woman. In a sense, Moses's early life is now over, having come full circle."

Both of these are good interpretations, but here's my take: If the issue was that Moses had not fulfilled the obligation of circumcision, then Moses should have been the one to circumcise his son. But Tzipporah is the one

who does it. That implies that it was Tzipporah who needed to prove something. What was she proving? Well, she seems to be proving her child's right, and by extension her own right, to be included in God's covenant. She is physically marking her son as an Israelite.

Why does this scene happen now? She and Moses have been married for some time. If the issue was that she and her child were not "really" part of God's people, you'd think God would have objected much sooner. So why does God choose this moment to intervene?

Tzipporah is a Midianite. She has no personal experience of slavery and subjugation. Here, she gets a taste of what the Israelites have suffered. Pharaoh brought death upon the male infants; God threatens death upon Tzipporah's male family members.

"This is what it's like," God seems to be saying, "to be helpless before someone stronger than you. This is what it's like to see those you love in danger. This is what your husband's people - your people, if you choose to claim them - have suffered for four hundred years. Can you handle it?"

Tzipporah, unequivocally, answers *yes*. Yes, she's prepared to do whatever is necessary to protect her family. Yes, she understands the obligation she's taken on. Yes, she's prepared to uphold God's commandments, even the difficult ones. It's a moment of conversion. A bloody, painful conversion, but a conversion nonetheless.

The Israelite people are often referred to as the bride of God. Rashi, commenting on Numbers 7:1, says "on the day that the Tabernacle was

erected Israel was like a bride”; similarly, his commentary for Exodus 19:17 states “the Shechina [another name/aspect of God] was going forth to meet them, as a bridegroom who goes forth to meet his bride.” In this context, the phrase “a bridegroom of blood” makes more sense. Tziporah is addressing God directly, just as her husband does. She treats the circumcision as a marriage vow binding her and God together. She is ready to take her place as part of the Israelite people.

Avivah Zornberg from *The Particulars of Rapture*, p. 96-97

Why does God "attack" Moses in this uncanny way? The Talmud speaks of his "negligence" (nitrashel) in circumcising his infant son; for this, he is swallowed by a serpent from the head down, and from the feet up, to the site of circumcision on his own body. Zipporah reads this macabre event as a diagnostic drama and immediately circumcises the baby. I suggest that the repressed meaning of this narrative lies in a play on the word milah- "circumcision"—which, in Rabbinic Hebrew, also means "the word," "language." It is Moses' crisis of language that provokes God's attacking significantly, in a malon (hotel)- another pun on milah. The real issue is Moses' continuing resistance to language, to entering the world of others. The uncircumcised baby, foreskin uncut, is a figure for Moses himself, "of uncircumcised lips," resisting the embarrassments of language.

READING THE WOMEN OF THE BIBLE - Tikvah Frymer Kensky (pp. 29-33)

There are other possible explanations for God's attack. Some scholars have

suggested that God is angry at Moses for first refusing to go to Egypt. This does not seem likely, for prophets are expected to refuse their call initially, and it would make no sense for God to attack someone who had "repented" and was now doing God's bidding. But Moses carries a different kind of guilt, the bloodguilt (*dämím*), on his head for having killed the Egyptian. Perhaps this bloodguilt might imperil him as he leaves on his mission, and the blood serves as atonement. Or perhaps Moses has done nothing wrong, and God attacks for the same reason that the angel attacked Jacob at the Jabbok River in Genesis 32 (and perhaps Balaam in Num. 22:22-35) in some kind of dangerous ordeal from which he will emerge transformed before he goes to complete his destiny. The text leaves the cause mysterious.

Zipporah doesn't hesitate or ask why. She quickly takes a flint and circumcises their son, and by circumcising him, she averts doom. Nothing else is clear. Did circumcision rescue Moses or his son by sanctifying them? Or was it the blood that averted the doom? Does blood always have mystical protective properties, or is it only the blood of the first born or a foreshadowing of the blood of the Paschal Lamb? There is something almost homeopathic about the saving use of blood: a few drops of bloodshed avert the spilling of a person's blood, which is the life. Perhaps circumcision contains this "hair of the dog" aspect: a small act of ritual violence to keep away other, more dangerous acts of violence. The narrator does not tell us, and perhaps does not know.

Zipporah then touches the bloody foreskin at his feet. Whose feet? Her son's? Moses'? God's? And is it really "feet" that she touched, or is it genitalia? And

then Zipporah cries, "You are a bridegroom in blood for me." To whom is Zipporah talking, who is the "bridegroom," and is she referring to a "bridegroom"? Hatan often means "father-in-law" rather than "groom," so the "you" may be God, and Zipporah may indicate that she has entered into a special relationship with God through this ceremony. The "you" may also be Moses, but even then there are questions about the meaning of her statement. By calling Moses her bride groom, Zipporah may mean that this ritual has now united them in a blood-sealed covenant stronger than normal marriage. But hatan can also be "son-in-law." Zipporah may be suggesting that she herself has become the virtual father-in-law of Moses by becoming the circumciser of the family. She has assumed her own father's role in the family, becoming a surrogate for Jethro even as she leaves his household. Circumcision often has to be performed before marriage, and Israel may have known customs in which the prospective father of the bride circumcised his son-in-law-to-be, symbolically exposing and preparing the boy's genitalia.

Moses cannot act. He is either under attack, deathly ill, or paralyzed by a "dark night" of the soul. He needs another savior, and another woman steps up. Zipporah may know about the protective value of circumcision or of blood from Moses or her own traditions. Circumcision was wisely practiced in the ancient world, and may have had an apotropaic aspect in her tradition. She draws on ritual for dispelling the overwhelming power of deity, and on almost incantatory words to accompany her act. Above all, she acts with whatever methods she knows to protect her young. It is not hard to see why the Bible associates such protection with women. There are ferocious females in the divine world: Ishtar acts as "mother" particularly when she protects in

war; Anat protects her brother by defeating his enemy Mot; Isis protected her brother Osiris, guarded his dead body, and milked it to bring him back to life through his child Horus. These goddesses are related to the animal kingdom. Ishtar is mistress of lions and protects as a lioness protects her cubs. Anat is a winged deity, and Isis is often represented as a hawk hovering over Osiris. No creatures are more protective of their own than the great eagles and hawks. It is no accident that Zipporah means "bird."

The story, the language used to relate it, and its themes are highly cryptic, and even in biblical times this story was not understood, for the narrator of the last line is trying to puzzle it out, identifying Zipporah's statement with *mulôt*, most probably circumcision. But within the enigma, the figure of Zipporah is decisive and clear. She understands what is happening, knows what to do, averts the doom, and rescues Moses.

Zipporah acts to prevent a killing. In this experience of the frightening aspect of divine power, Moses' wife grows into a savior. She becomes a surrogate parent, protecting Moses as well as her children. Moses Israelite "biological mother and his Egyptian "foster" mother are now joined in a triad of saviors by this Midianite "ritual" mother Now Moses will turn from being the rescued to the rescuer, from the saved to the savior.

Wife of Moses by Shirley Kaufman

(referenced in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*)

Something went wrong

when he told her to pack
and went on listening
to voices she couldn't hear.
It wasn't her job
the blood on her fingers,
this cut flesh, red love-bites
in the sand.

The desert widens between them
like and endless argument.

His mouth is too soft
for God's omnivorous rage,
fish will die, the river
stink and lice and flies
and boils and the rest.

Slice of the covenant: blood
on the doors.

He's off to his mountain.

She'll lose

what she saves,

fall out of the future

thankless, nothing to lean on

but her own arms,

holding the small face

unfathered anyway, crying

between her hands.

Rachel Sharanksy Danziger, *A Bridegroom of Blood and Water*

The blood is dripping off Ziporah's fingers, and Moses can't tear his eyes away.

His first mother may have held him with such hands when she gave birth to him. He imagines them sometimes: chafed by servitude, stained with labor. He imagines them reaching down to her thighs and pulling him out, life gore and all.

His second birth, the one he knows about, was different. His second mother's hands pulled him from the river's water. The hands remained unsoiled: there

was no blood to mark his passage into life.

“A bridegroom of blood,” Zipporah spits at him, and finally, he doesn’t need to imagine. He can finally see, truly see, the bloodied hands of a woman forming life.

You saved us, he wants to tell her, but words fail him. As he told God earlier, he is not a man of words.

You took me back to my very beginning, he wants to add then. You gave me life through blood. I am reborn.

Moses doesn’t know it yet, but he will never be free from the shadow of his second birth. Water and miracles will continue to define his trials and his fate. He will lead his people through a sea and grant them wellsprings in the desert. He will hit a rock to give them water and die alone by a river he can’t cross. And they – his people – they will follow him. They will cross the sea and drink from the wellsprings, flock to the rock and cross the river once he’ll die. But they will do so begrudgingly, distrustfully. They will take his water and his miracles and see him as Other. They won’t see him as a man of flesh and blood and wants.

But this will come later. For now, there are only bloody fingers and a sense of wonder. One day soon, Moses will replace the Nile’s water with red blood. But today, for once, it’s Zipporah turn to birth a miracle. Moses was born in blood, but knew only of the water. Today, Zipporah showed him what it is to come from blood.

The blood is dripping off Zipporah's fingers, and Moses can't tear his eyes away.