

BLOOD WILL OUT: JESUS' CIRCUMCISION AND EARLY CHRISTIAN READINGS OF EXODUS 4:24-26*

ANDREW S. JACOBS, *University of California, Riverside*

"Does this passage make much sense to you?"

Cyril of Alexandria, "On Adoration"

"Oh, blood will out. It cannot be contained."

Robert Frost, "The Flood"

1. *Another Roadside Attraction*

"For the truth is," sighs the seventeenth-century English biblical commentator, "the whole matter is very obscure."¹ This exegetical complaint resonates down the centuries,² suffusing modern examinations of the perplexing incident recounted toward the end of the fourth chapter of Exodus:

At a lodging-place on the way the LORD met him and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched Moses' feet with it, and said, "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!" So he let him alone. Then it was that she said, "You are a bridegroom of blood," because of the circumcision. (Exod 4:24-26; RSV)

This recent translation tries to ameliorate some of the lexical oddities of the passage (e.g., by inserting "Moses" as the owner of the feet; the Hebrew has only "his feet" [לְרַגְלָיו]), leaving other lacunae intact ("who" let "whom" alone?). Punctuation (!) adds a sense of emotion, so that the characters within the story seem at least as startled as we to happen upon this scene. Other translation choices subtly color the passage: the KJV's "sharp stone" renders a savage immediacy lacking in the more technical "flint"; the NKJV makes the whole passage even starker by setting it not at a cozy inn but near a chilly "encampment," while the NRSV opts for the fuzzier "place where they spent the night."

* Many thanks to Annette Yoshiko Reed and Ra'anan Boustan for their careful editing of this piece, and for encouraging me to write it in the first place.

¹ S. (Patrick), Bishop of Ely, *A Commentary upon the Second Book of Moses, Called Exodus* (London: Chiswell, 1697), p. 76.

² B.S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), p. 95: "Few texts contain more problems for the interpreter than these few verses which have continued to baffle throughout the centuries."

No amount of linguistic shading, however, can make the brief scene anything other than “obscure,” not to mention “controverted,”³ “enigmatic,”⁴ “notoriously difficult,”⁵ and “one of the strangest stories in the Old Testament and one of the most difficult to explain.”⁶ The curious incident of the circumcision in the night demands interpretation, because in its raw form it makes very little sense: narratively (why try to kill the messenger you have just dispatched one verse prior?), theologically (how does Yahweh try and fail to effect his will?), ritually (why was Moses’ son not already circumcised?), and verbally (“bridegroom of blood”?). Among the Five Books of Moses, this brief scene stands as *summum interpretandum*.

Yet if Exod 4:24-26 is *summum interpretandum*, certainly the rest of the Bible constitutes a slightly less bewildering collection of *interpretanda*, requiring some form of intellectual (as well as theological, sociological, ritual, and so on) discipline in order to be meaningfully productive. The most persuasive interpretation masks its own hermeneutical agency: the meaning simply “makes sense” or “seems right.” In interpretations of Exod 4:24-26, however, the structures and processes of commentary must be made visible in order to be persuasive. More than thirty years ago Fredric Jameson famously insisted that “every commentary must be at the same time a metacommentary,” that is, “genuine interpretation directs the attention back to history itself, and to the historical situation of the commentator as well as of the work.”⁷ These few verses of Exodus with their notorious “obscurity” cannot help but produce such metacommentary.

I contend that interpretations of Exod 4:24-26 serve not (only) to clarify the meaning of the passage, but to provide a window into a particular interpreter’s sense of what, and how, the Bible itself should mean. I focus below on the ways in which early Christians reveal their own scriptural desires through interpretation of Exod 4:24-26, particularly the desire to appropriate and transform signs of Jewish distinction. Yet it is not only in the “precritical” milieu of ancient Christianity that we find the Exodus pericope creating a legend for decoding strategies of biblical signification.

³ W.H. Propp, “That Bloody Bridegroom (Exodus IV 24-6),” *VT* 43 (1993), pp. 495-518, at 495.

⁴ S. Ackerman, “Why is Miriam Also among the Prophets? (And is Zipporah among the Priests?)” *JBL* 121 (2002), pp. 47-80, at 73 n. 75.

⁵ B.P. Robinson, “Zipporah to the Rescue: A Contextual Study of Exodus IV 24-6,” *VT* 36 (1986), pp. 447-461, at 447.

⁶ H. Kosmala, “The ‘Bloody Husband,’” *VT* 12 (1962), pp. 14-28, at 14.

⁷ F. Jameson, “Metacommentary,” *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 86 (1974), pp. 9-18, at 10. A concise overview of the move to historicize “commentary” is found in E.A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1999), pp. 3-10.

Modern critical interpretations also reveal how, and what, the Bible comes to signify.⁸

The academic and literary construction of “Ancient Israel,” through the tangential disciplines of “biblical archaeology” and “higher criticism,”⁹ permits scholars to rationalize the weirdness of Exod 4:24-26.¹⁰ It becomes a fragment of a primitive past: the now-lost tribal customs of a desert people,¹¹ or perhaps a frightening myth in which a demon named Yahweh demands Zipporah’s virginity and is fooled (or appeased) by very different genital blood.¹² Its incongruity within the larger scheme of Exodus 4 (as many commentators will point out, the chapter reads more smoothly without these verses)¹³ also makes it highly amenable to the tools of higher criticism.¹⁴ Through the rational magic of source criticism, these verses can be explained as part of the “Kenite Code, the oldest document of the Hexateuch.”¹⁵ The central phrase that draws much scholarly attention for its lexical and semantic strangeness – “You are a bridegroom of blood to me” (אַתָּה לִי כַּחַם דָּם) – can even float free of its Exodus context to waft through ancient Near Eastern history.¹⁶

The invention of “Ancient Israel” had the power to make the sacred past of Jews starkly alien – the stalking ground of night-time demons and

⁸ For a brief overview of modern and ancient interpretations, see now S.M. Langston, *Exodus Through the Centuries* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 72-77, who contrasts ancient interpretations that shape Jewish and/or Christian identity with modern interpretations that “challenge institutional religion.”

⁹ Biblical archaeology was for much its formative period, under W.F. Albright, at odds with higher criticism: see T.W. Davis, *Shifting Sands: The Rise and Fall of Biblical Archaeology* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2004), pp. 21-27, 85-89. Even during Albright’s heyday there existed (from the Biblical Studies perspective) a kind of intellectual détente: see G.R. Berry, “Biblical Criticism and Archaeology,” *JBR* 6 (1938), pp. 131-132, 170-171.

¹⁰ Robinson, “Zipporah,” pp. 447-449, surveys modern biblical critical interpretations beginning, appropriately enough, with J. Wellhausen, the “father” of the Documentary Hypothesis; see also C. Houtman, “Exodus 4:24-26 and its Interpretation,” *JNSL* 11 (1983), pp. 81-105.

¹¹ J. Morgenstern, “The ‘Bloody Husband’ (?) (Exod. 4:24-26) Once Again,” *HUCA* 34 (1963), pp. 35-70.

¹² The *ius primae noctis* interpretation was offered by Eduard Meyer, *Die Israeliten und ihre Nachbarstämme: Alttestamentliche Untersuchungen* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1906), p. 59, cited by Childs, *Book of Exodus*, p. 97, and elaborated in very different ways by H. Eilberg-Schwartz, *God’s Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), pp. 158-162.

¹³ Robinson, “Zipporah,” p. 450: “Ex. iv 21-3 and 24-6 are patches let in to the fabric of the book of Exodus and the joins show.”

¹⁴ Not to mention lower criticism: entire studies deal with the textual difficulties of the passage without even attempting to explore its meaning. See W. Dumbrell, “Exodus 4:24-26: A Textual Re-Examination,” *HTR* 65 (1972), pp. 285-290.

¹⁵ Morgenstern, “Blood Husband,” p. 38, citing his earlier “The Oldest Document of the Hexateuch,” *HUCA* 4 (1927), pp. 51-54.

¹⁶ S. Frolov, “The Hero as Bloody Bridegroom: On the Meaning and Origins of Exodus 4,26,” *Biblica* 77 (1996), pp. 520-523, connects the phrase “bloody bridegroom” to the gruesome dowry of Philistine foreskins demanded of David by Saul (1 Sam 18:20-27).

strange tribal rites¹⁷ – but also reassuringly comprehensible. Our modern, scientific minds can pick through this morass of odd phrases and tales to connect us in some profound – and yet, safe – way to the bloodiness of that alien past.¹⁸ We create distance through the rational reconstruction of a primitive “Ancient Israel,” yet we locate ourselves as the cultural translators and possessors of that past.

The primitive, in more postmodern interpretations, also becomes personal.¹⁹ In recent years the focus has shifted from the “bloody bridegroom” (whoever he might be – Moses, Gershom, Eliezer, or Yahweh) to the heroic circumciser, Zipporah; she embodies a host of feminist and political positions as wife, mother, foreigner, particularly with respect to the traditionally masculine domain of circumcision: “Zipporah’s scene invites feminist access to the text and to an act from which women have mainly been excluded.”²⁰

Feminist historians like Carol Meyers emphasize the importance of Zipporah in her ancient Near Eastern context: “Zipporah functions as a savior, as do two other women (her sister and the Egyptian princess) in Moses’ life. But professional expertise rather than sibling ties or human kindness characterizes her salvific deed.”²¹ Likewise Susan Ackerman argues that Zipporah should be understood as a “ritual specialist” with “priest-like status.”²² Feminist midrash finds Zipporah initiating a “violent scene of marital strife,”²³ while others celebrate her spontaneous, bloody entry into the covenant family.²⁴ Cultural studies interpretations play on the multiple differences of Zipporah, who both “sustains and subverts”

¹⁷ S.L. Sherman – J.B. Curtis, “Divine Human Conflicts in the Old Testament,” *JNES* 28 (1969), pp. 231-242, at 241, go so far as to abstract the tale entirely into the story of two battling, totemic demons by reading “Zipporah” as a literal “bird(-demon)” and removing Moses, whose name does not appear in Exod 4:24-26, from the story.

¹⁸ J.E. Park, “Exodus (exposition),” *Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. G. Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1952), vol. 1, pp. 881-882 writes that this passage “is of value to us in that it emphasizes the jungle of primitive superstitions out of which the religion of Yahweh was developed” (cited by Robinson, “Zipporah,” p. 459). See also H.P. Smith, “Ethnological Parallels to Exodus iv.24-26,” *JBL* 25 (1906), pp. 14-24, who, inevitably, compares the Exodus incident to Australian aborigines.

¹⁹ See The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven: Yale University, 1995), p. 14: “Biblical scholars have been slow to awaken from the dream in which positive science occupies a space apart from interests and values, to awaken to the realization that our representations of and discourse about what the text meant and how it means are inseparable from what we *want* it to mean, from how we *will* it to mean.”

²⁰ B.D. Haberman, “Foreskin Sacrifice: Zipporah’s Ritual and the Bloody Bridegroom,” in *The Covenant of Circumcision: New Perspectives on an Ancient Jewish Rite*, ed. E.W. Mark (Hanover: Brandeis University, 2003), p. 22.

²¹ C. Meyers, *Exodus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2005), p. 64.

²² Ackerman, “Why is Miriam,” pp. 74-75.

²³ P.T. Reis, “The Bridegroom of Blood: A New Reading,” *Judaism* 40 (1991), pp. 324-331.

²⁴ Haberman, “Foreskin Sacrifice.”

androcentric and ethnocentric biblical discourses.²⁵ Desires and contradictions play out in postmodern readings of Zipporah on the roadside: she is a “typical” woman (whether in her Near Eastern context or in the relatability of her wifehood and motherhood) who nonetheless acts in extraordinary fashion.

In all of these modern interpretations, we see not only commentary but metacommentary: the passage cannot help but disclose the social and cultural locations of its readers. Modern metacommentary of Exod 4:24-26 reveals a set of internalized contradictions: rationalizing interpretations that cover over a desire for, and fear of, the primitive and the radically personal. Ancient interpretations of the Exodus incident are equally revealing of the inner contradictions of early Christian identity.²⁶ After surveying general references to Exod 4:24-26, which convey a deep fear of and desire for Jewish distinction, I turn to places where the roadside circumcision is interpreted through Jesus’ own curious circumcision.

2. “She Took a Pebble”

When the late fourth-century Christian writer Ambrosiaster included the Exodus story among various biblical curiosities in his *Book of Old and New Testament Questions*,²⁷ his question and answer are posed rather quickly. Question: “Why was the angel who wished to kill Moses in the road placated by the circumcision of his child?”²⁸ Answer: the angel was appeased by the required circumcision that Moses had neglected “ill-advisedly” (*sine consilio*). Of more interest than *what* the passage says, for Ambrosiaster, is *how* it says. Remarking on the fact that it speaks “briefly”

²⁵ E.K. Silverman, *From Abraham to America: A History of Jewish Circumcision* (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 2006), pp. 85-94, citation at 94; see also G. Kessler, “Let’s Cross that Body When We Get to It: Gender and Ethnicity in Rabbinic Literature,” *JAAR* 73 (2005), pp. 329-359, who compares Zipporah and Mordecai.

²⁶ Ancient, mainly Jewish, reading of this passage has been surveyed by G. Vermes, “Circumcision and Exodus IV 24-26: Prelude to the Theology of Baptism,” in *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism: Haggadic Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), pp. 179-192; and, in the broader context explained by her title, K.S. Winslow, *Early Jewish and Christian Memories of Moses’ Wives: Exogamist Marriage and Ethnic Identity* (Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity 66; Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2005), pp. 45-55, 127-145, 227-257, 305-367.

²⁷ Ambrosiaster is the name given to an otherwise anonymous commentator in late fourth-century Rome: A. Souter, *A Study of Ambrosiaster* (TS 8.4; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1905); A. Volgers, “Ambrosiaster: Persuasive Powers in Progress,” in *Erotapokriseis: Early Christian Question-and-Answer Literature in Context, Proceedings of the Utrecht Colloquium, 13-14 October 2003*, ed. A. Volgers – C. Zamagni (CBET 37; Leuven: Peeters, 2004), pp. 99-125; A. Cain, “In Ambrosiaster’s Shadow: A Critical Re-Evaluation of the Last Surviving Letter Exchange between Pope Damasus and Jerome,” *REAug* 51 (2005), pp. 257-277, esp. 268-275; and now S. Lunn-Rockcliffe, *Ambrosiaster’s Political Theology* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Oxford University, 2007), pp. 11-88.

²⁸ Ambrosiaster, *Liber quaestionum* 16 (CSEL 50:42-43).

(*compendio*) about Zipporah's motives and actions, Ambrosiaster muses: "Sometimes Scripture speaks briefly (*aliquando compendio loquitur Scriptura*)," offering the seemingly unrelated example of Jesus' admonition to the Pharisees in Matt 15:3-6.²⁹ Both passages teach the diligent reader that some things in the Bible must simply "be understood" (*subintelligitur*). What Exod 4:24-26 means is not as important as how it makes meaning: for ancient Christians, as much as for modern interpreters, Exod 4:24-26 could not help but produce metacommentary, a self-reflexive theory of how meaning works.³⁰

It is perhaps surprising how little ancient Christians were concerned with deriving a definite meaning from this text. Cyril of Alexandria begins a long disquisition on the passage by asking his interlocutor, Palladius: "Does this passage make much sense to you? I mean, is the meaning clear?" Palladius responds, "Not at all," and Cyril launches into a typological explanation. At the end, Palladius exclaims, "How clear and distinct this reasoning is!" Cyril deflates his own exegesis: "It is? (τί δέ;)"³¹ To coin a phrase, the exegetical journey matters more in early Christian readings of Exod 4:24-26 than the destination; put another way, the metacommentary matters more than the commentary.

Most ancient Christians read a slightly different version of these verses than is found in the Hebrew text.³² The Septuagint (both in Greek and in Latin) rendered the passage this way:

And it happened that, on the road at the inn, an angel of the Lord met him and sought to kill him. And, taking up a pebble (ψῆφον), Zipporah circumcised the foreskin of her son and she fell at his feet, and she said, "The blood of my son's circumcision has ceased [ἔσθη]." And he withdrew from him because [διότι] she said, "The blood of my son's circumcision has ceased." (LXX Exod 4:24-26)³³

²⁹ The connection may come in the common theme of *pietas*, loyalty to ancestors and ancestral customs.

³⁰ The same may be said, of course, for ancient Jewish interpretations of Exod 4:24-26 as well. Rabbinic interpretation tended to read this passage in the larger context of covenantal salvation: see S.J.D. Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California, 2005), pp. 16 and 30.

³¹ Cyril of Alexandria, *De adoratione* 2 (PG 68:261). The *De adoratione* is a topically arranged commentary on the Christological meaning of the Pentateuch, composed as a dialogue between Cyril and a certain Palladius. Along with the *Glaphyra*, a more traditionally arranged Pentateuch commentary, it is one of Cyril's earlier works.

³² Vermes, "Circumcision," pp. 179-181.

³³ The Latin version of the Septuagint is similar: "Et factum est, in via ad refectonem obviavit ei angelus, et quaerebat eum occidere: et assumpto Sepphora calculo, circumcidit praeputium filii sui; et procidit ad pedes eius, et dixit, 'Stetit sanguis circumcisionis infantis mei.' Et recessit ab eo; propter quod dixit, 'Desiit sanguis circumcisionis.'"

Some of the Septuagint’s alterations likely derive from theological concerns (for example, Yahweh no longer tussles with Moses in undignified fashion but rather sends his “angel”); others do not appreciably clarify the story’s strangeness. Even as the text traveled into new linguistic and cultural arenas, it maintained its requisite resistance to “straightforward” reading.

The exegetical process becomes especially explicit in early Christian interpretations of Exod 4:24-26. Like most ancient commentators, early Christians began at the basic level of grammar:³⁴ “First, we should ask: whom did the angel wish to slay?” asks Augustine.³⁵ The lack of proper nouns in Exod 4:24, Augustine points out, means that the “him” (“he sought to slay him”) could refer to Moses, whom the angel surely would have “met” first on the road, or to his son, whose emergency circumcision placates the angel. Augustine looks elsewhere in Scripture for a place where a pronoun precedes its antecedent, and finds Ps 86:1-2 (“His foundations in the holy mountains; the Lord loves the gates of Zion”).³⁶ Augustine deduces that the “him” in Exod 4:24 probably refers to Moses’ son, but adds congenially: “Nevertheless, even if someone should wish to take it as referring to Moses, this should not be greatly resisted.” For all of Augustine’s lexical and intertextual work, his basic question – who is “he”? – remains unsettled. As for other lexical difficulties of the passage – why should the blood “stand still” (*stetit*) at the circumcision instead of “flow” (*cucurrit*)? – Augustine can only suggest reverentially that “it is a great mystery” (*magno sacramento*). The lesson of *how* to make meaning – through lexical investigation and intertextual application – supersedes any definitive meaning. Moses makes way for method: from word, to intertext, to *sacramentum*.

Cyril of Alexandria also begins with individual lexical elements in his commentary on Hab 3:6 (“The earth stood and shuddered”). Cyril posits that “stood” (τὸ ἔστη) does not mean “cease,” but rather “might be understood in the divinely inspired Scriptures as, in a certain manner, having reached its limits.”³⁷ The enigmatic events of Exod 4:24-26 illustrate this point clearly. When Zipporah exclaimed, “The blood of my child’s circumcision has stood,” “[s]he did not wish to indicate that the flow of blood stopped (πέπαυται), but that the matter of circumcision has been

³⁴ Classical commentary, appropriated and elaborated by educated Christians, started with the smallest individual lexical units (words, phrases) before moving on to larger (rhetorical) meaning. Yet, as Catherine Chin points out, even the seemingly mechanical task of grammatical parsing “cannot... be taken as a simple fact of Roman cultural life but deserves examination as a forum for cultural production in its own right” (*Grammar and Christianity in the Late Roman World* [Divinations; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2006], p. 7).

³⁵ Augustine, *Quaestiones in Hexateuchum* 11 (PL 34:599-600).

³⁶ Robinson, “Zipporah,” p. 455 n. 15 points out that Augustine is mistaken to use Ps 82:1-2, “the text being probably corrupt.”

³⁷ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentarius in Habacuc prophetam* 3:6 (46) (PG 71:911-913).

settled and that which was sought was perfected.” Cyril turns next, like many early Christian commenters, to the pebble:³⁸

For he shames death who has been circumcised by the spiritual pebble (τῆ νοητῆ ψήφω): and that is the spirit of Christ, just as even Joshua [Jesus] who came after Moses, when bringing the Israelites across the Jordan, commanded that they be circumcised with stone swords (μαχαίραις πετρίναις), fulfilling the figure of the circumcision of the spirit (Josh 5:3-7). For just as Christ is called “the Rock” (πέτρα; 1 Cor 10:4), so also a pebble, or even a stone sword, is his Spirit. (Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentarius in Habacuc prophetam* 3:6)³⁹

Zipporah’s pebble bounces across the pages of Scripture like a skipping stone, not so much crystallizing into a single signification (what is the “spiritual pebble”? is it Christ? Christ’s “spirit”?) as demonstrating the possibilities of meaning-making. The “pebble” is less important than the texts it links together (historical and prophetic, Old Testament and New), the system more important than the individual signs.⁴⁰ The *fact* that Scripture interlinks to produce God’s mysterious word signifies more than the nature of the links themselves.

If the tiny pebble seems so alluring to the church fathers, it does not bespeak a patristic fascination with petrohermeneutics. On the one hand, the pebble demonstrates the metahermeneutical lesson outlined above: that each individual word, letter, *lemma* of Scripture contains within it the seed of God’s mystery. On the other hand, the pebble is also the instrument of the action that most drew the Fathers’ interest in this passage: the performance of circumcision. Circumcision was much on early Christians’ minds. Jews and non-Jews throughout Late Antiquity viewed circumcision as a mark of distinction,⁴¹ and we see in attempts to decode this passage the

³⁸ See, for instance, Jerome, *ep.* 18.18 (CSEL 54:98-100), where the pebble (*calculus*) of Exod 4:24 is linked to the various “rocks” (*carbones*) and “stones” (*lapidi*) of Isaiah, Joshua, and Revelation.

³⁹ Cyril’s *Commentarius in Johannem* 4.7 (PG 73:693-697) likewise focuses on the intersection of circumcision and liberation from death in this passage, and makes a strong connection to the circumcision performed by Joshua in Joshua 5.

⁴⁰ Cyril anticipates Saussure’s concept of semiology: “the main object of study in semiology will none the less be the class of systems based upon the arbitrary nature of the sign” (F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. C. Bally – A. Sechehaye, with A. Reidlinger, trans. and annotated by R. Harris [La Salle: Open Court, 1983], p. 68 [100]).

⁴¹ The literature on circumcision has grown in the past decade, but for context (Roman, Jewish, Christian) see: R.S. Abusch (Boustan), “Circumcision and Castration under Roman Law in the Early Empire,” *Covenant of Circumcision*, pp. 75-86; G. Clark, ““In the Foreskin of Your Flesh”: The Pure Male Body in Late Antiquity,” in *Roman Bodies: Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century*, ed. A. Hopkins – M. Wyke (London: The British School at Rome, 2005), pp. 43-53; S.J.D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California, 1999), *passim*; P. Cordier, “Les Romains et la circoncision,” *REJ* 160 (2001), pp. 337-355. L.A. Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood: Circumcision*

degree to which Christians were drawn to this distinction and desired to make it their own. Few passages are more suited to this task than this ambiguous tale of a circumcision almost *manqué* from which Christians might hope to learn the difference between “the true circumcision (*vera circumcisio*) that is Christ Jesus” and mere “Jewish cutting” (*concisione Iudaica*).⁴²

In Christian hands, the distinction of Jewishness inscribed by circumcision becomes a distinction *from* Jewishness. We see in this story that Moses, the father of the Law, is derelict in his legal observance and nearly pays with his life. A “pro-circumcision,” pro-Torah reading was certainly the preferred interpretation of most late antique Jewish interpretation of the Exodus incident.⁴³ Tertullian, in his treatise *Adversus Iudaeos*, claims that Jews indeed find such a pro-Law message in Exod 4:24–26:⁴⁴ “‘But also the son of Moses,’ he says, ‘would have been suffocated by the angel then if Zipporah, his mother, had not circumcised the infant’s foreskin with a pebble. From this [we know] there is the greatest danger of slaughter if one does not circumcise the foreskin of flesh.’”⁴⁵ Tertullian disagrees: “Now we consider that the coerced circumcision of a single infant could not prescribe for all people and establish some kind of law out of this command for salvation.... Indeed circumcision continued to be given, but as a sign by which Israel, in more recent times, was to be distinguished when by its own merits it was prohibited from entering the holy city.”⁴⁶ For Tertullian, the Jewish distinction of circumcision remains, but now understood in a Christian fashion: what seemed universal is painfully particular, and what seemed

and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism (CSJH; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996), treats the growing significance of circumcision as a Jewish rite throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages, although his focus on circumcision blood is called into question by S.J.D. Cohen, “A Brief History of Jewish Circumcision Blood,” *Covenant of Circumcision*, pp. 30-42, and see now idem, *Why Aren't*.

⁴² Jerome, *Commentarius in epistolam ad Galatas* 2.5:6 (PL 26:398): Christians, who understand true circumcision, need not be “moved by a stone lifted up by Zipporah.”

⁴³ Most of the ancient Jewish discussion of Exod 4:24-26 is rabbinic: Philo and Josephus do not mention it at all (see Winslow, *Moses' Wives*, pp. 227-229). The rabbinic *locus classicus* is *b. Nedarim* 31a-32b, in which the reasons for Moses not circumcising his own son are addressed amid the refrain “Great is circumcision!” (גדולה מילה).

⁴⁴ This passage is also discussed by B. Leyerle, “Blood is Seed,” *JR* 81 (2001), pp. 33-34, who credits Tertullian with an “awareness” of popular Jewish belief in the apotropaic function of circumcision blood. See also Origen’s discussion of the passage below, which may also draw on Jewish sources.

⁴⁵ Tertullian, *Adversus Iudaeos* 3.1-2. Text in H. Tränkle (ed.), *Q.S.F. Tertulliani Adversus Iudaeos mit Einleitung und kritischem Kommentar* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1964), pp. 6-7. See also G.D. Dunn, *Tertullian* (Early Church Fathers; London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 47-51 and 63-68.

⁴⁶ Tertullian, *Adversus Iudaeos* 3.2-4 (Tränkle, *Adversus Iudaeos*, p. 7).

good is actually a mark of (future) opprobrium. Jewish signs still mean, but they mean Christianly.

The transformation of Jewish distinction into something other – something Christian – emerges as the basic social context (metacommentary) for readers of the Exodus text. The variety of “other meanings” into which Jewish distinction was pushed show that the *fact* of this otherwise meaning was more important than any one, specific interpretation. For instance, the distinction of circumcision might be transformed into a moral boundary between pagan philosophy and Christian humility. Ambrose of Milan contrasts the audacity of Socrates⁴⁷ with the humility of patriarchs, kings, and prophets of the Hebrew Bible, such as “Moses [who was] almost killed, if his wife Zipporah had not driven off all danger from him through the circumcision of their son and the sprinkling of his blood.”⁴⁸ For Gregory of Nyssa, the circumcision distinguishes proper Christian philosophy, pruned of its offensive elements, from non-Christian attempts to achieve wisdom and virtue.⁴⁹

Circumcision might also articulate distinction between different classes of Christians. Jerome, in his polemical treatise *Against Jovinian*, sees Moses as the star of an ascetic drama: “it is clear he would have been endangered on his path if Zipporah... had not circumcised their son, and cast aside the foreskin of marriage with the gospel knife (*cultro evangelico*).”⁵⁰ Here the edge of Zipporah’s pebble hardens into an evangelical tool of renunciatory discipline against Christians who are, according to Jerome, all too lax.

Syriac authors, too, viewed the incident through the lens of levitical purity transformed into Christian asceticism.⁵¹ But whereas Jerome viewed Zipporah as Moses’ partner in the ascetic life, the Syriac authors viewed her as an obstacle.⁵² Aphrahat describes how Moses, after his encounter with

⁴⁷ Ambrose refers to Plato, *Apologia* 36d-37a, when Socrates “usurped honor” by claiming his punishment should be maintenance at public expense in the Prytaneum.

⁴⁸ Ambrose *Commentarius in psalmum 118* 16.11 (PL 15:1427).

⁴⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Moysis* 1.22 mentions the nighttime circumcision in a survey of the surface meaning; the allegory is laid out in *Vita Moysis* 2.37-41 (PG 44:308, 335-337).

⁵⁰ Jerome, *Adversus Iovinianum* 1.20 (PL 23:238). Jovinian, in defending marriage through Scriptures, apparently included Moses in a list of married biblical heroes: see D.G. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Oxford University, 2007), pp. 33-35.

⁵¹ On such ascetic readings of Old Testament purity laws, see Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, pp. 204-232.

⁵² A. Guillaumont, “Un midrash d’Exode 4:24-26 chez Aphraate et Ephrem de Nisibe,” in *A Tribute to Arthur Vööbus*, ed. R.H. Fischer (Chicago: Lutheran School of Theology, 1977), pp. 89-95, suggests that Ephrem and Aphrahat drew on Jewish traditions, followed by Winslow, *Moses’ Wives*, pp. 309-330. More generally, see L. van Rompay, “The Christian Syriac Tradition of Interpretation,” in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation, from the Beginnings to the Middle Ages*, ed. M. Saebo (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1996), pp. 612-641, esp. 620-632 on Aphrahat and Ephrem. On Moses’ celibacy and ancient Jewish sources, see D. Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in*

the Lord in the burning bush, desired “holiness” (*qaddishuta*, that is, chastity).⁵³ He apparently needed some persuasion toward this new celibacy: when he took his wife with him on the road to Egypt, the Lord had to attack him to persuade her to send him away.⁵⁴ Here the circumcision is not even mentioned, merely the Lord’s “attack” upon Moses and its secret reason: the promotion of divinely inspired celibacy. According to Aphrahat, God’s lesson stuck: he remarks later in his *Demonstrations* that Moses had only the two sons, Gershom and Eliezer, because he had kept apart from his wife for forty years.⁵⁵

Ephrem also portrays Zipporah as distressed at Moses’ post-bush celibacy, while Moses simultaneously broods over Zipporah’s insistence (as a foreigner) that one of their sons remain uncircumcised.⁵⁶ The angel arrives in order to resolve both of these maritally inflicted distractions, and Zipporah is suitably chastened by Moses: “If you were so afraid of [the angel] who appeared to you for a single moment, how much more should I be fearful and sanctify myself for God?”⁵⁷ Moses then sends Zipporah and the newly circumcised son back to Midian, to await his return with the rest of Israel. For both Aphrahat and Ephrem, ascetic distinction (married vs. celibate) is projected onto religio-ethnic distinction (Midiante vs. Israelite); yet it is unclear what this religious divide should signify in the commentary of two notably anti-Jewish Christian commentators.⁵⁸ Is Zipporah a stand-in

Talmudic Culture (Berkeley: University of California, 1993), pp. 159-165 and N. Koltun-Fromm, “Zipporah’s Complaint: Moses is Not Conscientious in the Deed! Exegetical Traditions of Moses’ Celibacy,” in *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. A.H. Becker – A.Y. Reed (repr. ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007 [2003]), pp. 283-306.

⁵³ Aphrahat, *Demonstration* 6.5 (PS 1.1:261); see also *Demonstration* 18.4 (PS 1.1:825).

⁵⁴ Aphrahat, *Demonstration* 6.3 (PS 1.1:256). Zipporah, placed in a long line of biblically misleading women, is called his “counselor of evil deeds” (ܟܠܘܠܬܐ ܕܥܝܠܘܬܐ), which the *Patrologia Syriaca* translates as “scelerum hortatrix.” In defense of Aphrahat, see A. Lehto, “Women in Aphrahat: Some Observations,” *Hugoye* 4/2 (2001).

⁵⁵ Aphrahat, *Demonstration* 18.6 (PS 1.1:832).

⁵⁶ On Zipporah’s insistence that one son not be circumcised, see Ephrem, *Commentary on Exodus* 2.8. Text in R.M. Tonneau (ed.), *Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesim et in Exodum Commentarii* (CSCO 152; Louvain: CSCO, 1955), pp. 128-129; trans. J. Amar in *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Prose Works* (FC 91; Washington, D.C.: Catholic University, 1994), p. 230. See Winslow, *Moses’ Wives*, pp. 332-349; and, generally, A. Salvesen, “The Exodus Commentary of St. Ephrem,” *StPatr* 28 (1993), pp. 332-338, who points out the (relatively) positive portrayal of women in Ephrem’s commentary and suggests it may have originated as lectures to the female monastics (*bnat qyama*) of his community.

⁵⁷ Ephrem, *Commentary on Exodus* 4.4-5 (CSCO 152:132-133; trans. Amar, *Ephrem*, pp. 235-237). Theodoret of Cyrrihus, *Quaestiones in Octateuch* Exodus 14 (PG 80:241-242), similarly reads the scene as being more about fear than circumcision.

⁵⁸ The question of Ephrem’s anti-Jewish language – virulent in his public compositions but notably less intense in his commentaries – is complex: see C.C. Shephardson, “‘Exchanging Reed for Reed’: Mapping Contemporary Heretics onto Biblical Jews in Ephrem’s *Hymns on Faith*,” *Hugoye* 5/1 (2002), as well as eadem, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy: Ephrem’s Hymns in Fourth-Century Syria* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic

for the pagan, the heretic, or even – in a kind of inverse exegesis – the Jewish foil of Moses’ Israelite Christian?⁵⁹

The distinction of circumcision, like the sanctity of the Old Testament itself, must always mean otherwise, it must always mean Christianly even – or especially – at its most Jewish. But that “otherwise meaning” is only the first part of the metacommentary that frames early Christian readings of Exod 4:24-26. For the rest of the story, we must turn to a specific group of interpretations that link the roadside circumcision of Moses’ son to the circumcision of Jesus.

3. “If I Had Been A Jew”

We have seen that, whatever Exod 4:24-26 may mean to early Christians, it must transform the core of Jewish distinction (circumcision) into something else. What we see in commentators who link Exodus to Jesus’ circumcision is how the trace of Jewishness never really dissolves or vanishes in a supersessionary haze. The Christian distinction fashioned out of this passage remains – tractably, awkwardly, persistently – Jewish.

One of the earliest places where Jesus’ circumcision intersects with Exod 4:24-26 is in Origen’s apologetic treatise *Contra Celsum*.⁶⁰ In this interlinear response to the dead pagan critic Celsus, Origen answers Celsus’ various charges of barbarism and credulity leveled against Christians of his day. In order to do this, Origen defends Judaism along with Christianity: its antiquity, its distinctiveness, and its superiority (over against Celsus’ paganism). Origen introduces the Exodus story as a way of explaining the unique circumstances behind Jewish circumcision that distinguish it as “superior” (προηγούμενην) to Egyptian or Colchian circumcision, which are merely “circumstantial” (ἐκ περιστάσεως).⁶¹ Of course, the covenant with Abraham is what primarily distinguishes Jewish circumcision (as well as Ishmaelite circumcision, Origen pointedly remarks).

Additionally, Origen speculates that “it is fulfilled on account of some angel hostile to the Jewish people (πολέμιον τῷ Ἰουδαίων ἔθνει), who

University of America, 2008). On Aphrahat, see J. Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism: The Christian Anti-Jewish Argument in Fourth-Century Iran* (StPB 19; Leiden: Brill, 1971); N. Koltun-Fromm, “A Jewish-Christian Conversation and Fourth-Century Mesopotamia,” *JJS* 47 (1996), pp. 45-63; and A.H. Becker, “Anti-Judaism and Care for the Poor in Aphrahat’s ‘Demonstration 20,’” *J ECS* 10 (2002), pp. 305-327.

⁵⁹ Cyril of Alexandria, *De adoratione* 2 (PG 68:261), pushes such inversion to its limit, understanding the Exodus circumcision, the paradigmatic mark of Jewishness, as an allegory of Gentile Christianity.

⁶⁰ The selections from Origen and the *Altercatio Simoni et Theophili* below are discussed in A.S. Jacobs, “Dialogical Differences: (De-) Judaizing Christ’s Circumcision,” *J ECS* 15 (2007), pp. 291-335, at 305-316.

⁶¹ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 5.47 (SC 147:134).

is empowered to harm those among them who are not circumcised but who is weakened against the circumcised.” How does Origen know this?

Someone might say this is made clear from what is written in Exodus, when the angel before Eliezer’s⁶² circumcision was able to act against Moses, but once he was circumcised was unable. And learning this, *Zipporah lifted up a pebble and circumcised* her child, and, according to the common version of the account, is reported to have said: *The blood of my child’s circumcision has ceased*, but according to the Hebrew, *A bridegroom of blood are you to me* (νυμφίος αἱμάτων σύ μοι). For she had known the story (λόγον) about this angel, empowered before the bleeding and stopped on account of circumcision blood. (Origen, *Contra Celsum* 5.48 [SC 147:138-140])

By Origen’s time, both Aramaic and Greek scriptural traditions had introduced an “angel” to relieve God of the onerous task of covenant enforcer.⁶³ Only Origen, however, gave this angel a backstory: his job was to enforce circumcision among the Jews, indeed, among “all who worship the Creator alone,” that is, all monotheists.⁶⁴ Why doesn’t this bloody avenger then continue to attack uncircumcised monotheists, such as Christians?

And [the angel] was empowered for this task as long as Jesus had not taken up a body. When he took one up, and that body was circumcised, all his [i.e., the angel’s] power against those who were [not]⁶⁵ circumcised in this religion (τῇ θεοσεβείᾳ) was removed: for Jesus by his ineffable divinity has annulled him. Therefore it is forbidden to his disciples to be circumcised. (Origen, *Contra Celsum* 5.48 [SC 147:140])

⁶² Most ancient (and modern) interpreters assume the son who is uncircumcised is Gershom, the elder of Moses’ and Zipporah’s two sons. This assumption is possibly due to the mention of “firstborn son” in Exod 4:23 (so Winslow, *Moses’ Wives*, p. 40), or to the fact that the second son – Eliezer – is not mentioned until Exodus 18. Origen seems to assume here that Gershom, the elder, would already be circumcised and that the younger son was not. *Exodus Rabbah* 5.8 also thinks this son was Eliezer.

⁶³ Targums Onqelos, Ps.-Jonathan, and Neofiti all place an “angel” (מלאך) in the road; *Jub.* 48:2-4 has “Prince Mastema” (the Devil) attacking Moses on the road back to Egypt, who is repelled by God: see Vermes, “Circumcision,” pp. 181-185.

⁶⁴ It is unclear if this angel works “for” God as a covenant enforcer, or is an enemy ward off by the prophylaxis of circumcision. That an angel was responsible for Jewish Law in some manner seems to have been understood by second-century Pauline communities (see Gal 3:19; Acts 7:53; Heb 2:2; but see L. Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* [Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1987], pp. 35-44), perhaps influenced by still-prominent Enochic traditions: see A.Y. Reed, *Fallen Angels and the History of Judaism and Christianity: The Reception of Enochic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2005).

⁶⁵ The editors of *Contra Celsum* add μή here.

Origen admits this interpretation is speculative: “these matters seem to be rather curious and not fit to be floated before the masses.” If Origen cannot arrive at any certainty – with regard to circumcision in general, Jewish circumcision, or the particular circumcisions of Eliezer or Jesus – what are we to make of this constellation of circumcisions?

We have already seen, above, how Jewish distinction becomes transformed by Christian exegesis: here we see it play across the very body of the Christian savior, where it is indeed transformed, after a fashion. The power of circumcision, embodied in a hostile angelic enforcer, is abnegated, Jewish distinction rendered moot (and, after all, revealed to be little more than a blood-rite of protection), but it is indelibly fixed at the origins of Christianity. What does it mean that Jesus submitted to this ritual: was he bound by the same regulations as other (?) Jews? Did he fear the avenging hand of the angel? Origen would likely not go so far as that, but he does not explain further; what is clear is Jesus’ circumcision makes him like Moses’ son but *unlike* his own disciples and followers. Whatever transformation of Jewish distinction takes place in Origen’s exegesis, it is incomplete on the very conspicuous site of Christ’s body.

In the *Altercation of Simon and Theophilus*, we likewise see Christian transformation of Jewish distinction in Exod 4:24-26 interrupted. Drawing on earlier Greek and Latin traditions,⁶⁶ this fifth-century Latin text presents a “dialogue” between an aggressive Christian named Theophilus and a milquetoast Jew named Simon. Simon poses several questions to Theophilus, who eventually persuades Simon to receive baptism. At one point, Theophilus insists that, even though Christians forbid “circumcision of the flesh,” Simon the circumcised could still be accepted as a Christian. Christ, Theophilus points out, was circumcised (indeed, Theophilus has already mentioned this fact),⁶⁷ but only to prove his physical descent from David, not as an example to his followers: “circumcision,” Theophilus says, “is indeed a sign of race, not of salvation” (*circumcisio enim signum est generis non salutis*).⁶⁸

Perhaps prompted by the mention of saving, Simon broaches Exod 4:24-26: “So why was the angel going to choke Moses’ son for being foreskinned unless Zipporah, his mother, took up a pebble and circumcised

⁶⁶ A. von Harnack saw in the *Altercatio Simonis et Theophili* a later Latin reworking of the lost, much earlier (second-century) *Dialogue of Jason and Papiscus: Die Altercatio Simonis Judaei et Theophili Christiani nebst Untersuchungen über die antijüdische Polemik in der alten Kirche* (TU 1.3; Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1883). See also W. Varner, *Ancient Jewish-Christian Dialogues: Athanasius and Zacchaeus, Simon and Theophilus, Timothy and Aquila: Introduction, Texts, and Translations* (Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity 58; Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2004), pp. 1-15 and the survey of L. Lahey, “Evidence for Jewish Believers in the Christian-Jewish Dialogues through the Sixth Century (Excluding Justin),” in *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries*, ed. O. Skarsaune – R. Hvalvik (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007), pp. 581-639.

⁶⁷ *Altercatio Simonis et Theophili* 3.14. Text in Harnack, *Altercatio*, p. 24.

⁶⁸ *Altercatio Simonis et Theophili* 5.18 (Harnack, *Altercatio*, p. 26).

him? And when blood appeared, she prayed, saying, 'Let my son's circumcision blood cease.'⁶⁹ Theophilus responds:

I shall answer you, Jew, for even earlier I showed you how Moses was a figure (*typum*) of Christ, and everything at all that he did, he preceded in the image of Christ (*in imagine Christi praecurrabat*). Now his wife Zipporah, who circumcised the child, is understood as the synagogue. Moreover what is said, *Let my son's circumcision blood cease*, that is, when Christ came the circumcision of children halted. So God says this to Moses: *Build me an altar of uncut stones (lapidis non circumcisis), but do not use iron on them* (Deut 27:5), because indeed when he came Christ was going to construct a church out of an uncircumcised people (*populo incircumciso*). (*Altercatio Simonis et Theophili* 5.19)

Moses the Hebrew is the image of Christ, while Zipporah the non-Jew symbolizes (in a neat inversion) the Jewish synagogue crying out for release from the burden of circumcision: this typological reading of Exod 4:24-26 finds in the dramatic roadside circumcision a lesson about Gentile supersession. Jewish distinction means Christianly.

Yet what are we to make of the circumcision of Christ itself, mentioned twice immediately before this passage, but glossed within it simply as "Christ's coming" (*adveniento Christo, adveniens Christus*)? Does Christ bear this sign "of race" (*generis*) legitimately, like Simon, or does it mean something different on Christ's body? Does he cry out with the rest of "the synagogue" for his own circumcision blood to stop flowing? Even as Moses supposedly "runs ahead" (*praecurrabat*) in anticipation of Christ, Christ's circumcision pulls the Christian meaning of the passage back into its originary Jewishness. Even as Simon the Jew moves inexorably toward the baptismal font, Theophilus – even against his will – is drawn back through Jesus, Moses, and the roadside circumcision to kinship with "the Jewish race."

At such boundary-making moments the Christian hermeneutical transformation of Jewish distinction seems the most destabilized: the moment where distinction and clarity is demanded, it fails.⁷⁰ Jesus, at the flashpoint between two testaments and two covenants, continues to wield this destabilizing power. Instead of affirming a solidly Christian interpretation of Exod 4:24-26, he instead constantly re-Judaizes it.

⁶⁹ *Altercatio Simonis et Theophili* 5.19 (Harnack, *Altercatio*, p. 26). The author of the text has a variant reading of Exod 4:24: *stet sanguis circumcisionis pueri*, where most Latin Septuagintal versions had *stetit*.

⁷⁰ See generally D. Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Divinations; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2004), particularly his introduction (pp. 1-37).

In his *Panarion* (“Medicine Chest Against Heresies”), Epiphanius of Salamis introduces the Exodus passage as part of his refutation of the Jewish-Christian sect of Ebionites.⁷¹ The Ebionites (according to Epiphanius) claimed both Old and New Testament precedent for circumcision: on the one hand, they followed the Law of Moses and were faithful to the covenant of Abraham; on the other, they taught that “Christ was circumcised, so you be circumcised!” (περιετιμήθη... ὁ Χριστός, καὶ σὺ περιετιμήθητι).⁷² By tying the Exodus passage to Christ’s circumcision, Epiphanius can therefore meet the Ebionites on their own terms, refuting them out of New and Old Testament traditions simultaneously. Since Christ both instituted the Law and fulfilled its shadowy “types,” Christian interpretation of the Old Testament can show how Christ’s new “dispensation” (οἰκονομία) was always already present in the old one:

For upon him what was pronounced in the Law was fulfilled; it had lasted until his time, and in him was it abolished but also transformed into fulfillment: that which Zipporah said, namely, *The blood of my child’s circumcision has ceased*. For she did not say, “I have circumcised my son”; for the angel who was sent did not arrange this (ῥυθύνει) in order that a circumcision might occur, nor did he halt because he was afraid of circumcision blood, but on account of the mentioning that the blood of the child’s circumcision was about to stop. Upon hearing this and arranging it he halted. (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30.27 [GCS 25:370])

According to Epiphanius, the angel “attacked” precisely in order to elicit this strange phrase from Zipporah, and was not really interested in making sure Moses’ son was circumcised, nor was he warded off by the bloody by-

⁷¹ There is a vast literature on the Ebionites, who may or may not have existed as a distinct sect of Christianity (or Judaism). See, generally, A.F.J. Klijn – G.J. Reinink, *Patristic Evidence for Jewish Christian Sects* (NovTSup 36; Leiden: Brill, 1973); R.A. Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity: From the End of the New Testament until its Disappearance in the Fourth Century* (StPB 37; Leiden: Brill, 1988); S.C. Mimouni, *Le judéo-christianisme ancien: Essais historiques* (Patrimoines; Paris: Cerf, 1998). On the Ebionites in particular, see R. Bauckham, “The Origin of the Ebionites,” in *The Image of the Judaeo-Christians in Ancient Jewish and Christian Literature*, ed. P.J. Tomson – D. Lambers-Petry (WUNT 158; Tübingen: Mohr, 2003), pp. 162-181, and O. Skarsaune, “The Ebionites,” *Jewish Believers*, pp. 419-462. On the Ebionites in Epiphanius, see G.A. Koch, “A Critical Investigation of Epiphanius’ Knowledge of the Ebionites: A Translation and Critical Discussion of *Panarion* 30” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1976); J. Verheyden, “Epiphanius on the Ebionites,” *Image of the Judaeo-Christians*, pp. 182-208. Finally note Boyarin’s caution: “The Ebionites and Nazoreans, in my reading, function much as the mythical ‘trickster’ figures of many religions, in that precisely by transgressing borders that the culture establishes, they reify those boundaries” (*Border Lines*, p. 207).

⁷² Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30.26 (GCS 25:368).

product.⁷³ Zipporah speaks prophetically, looking ahead to the new dispensation. For “this child” about which she spoke was not really her own son, but Christ, whose birth was also foretold in Isa 9:5-6: “upon him the rest of circumcision blood ceased.” Indeed, after Christ’s circumcision salvation rested with the uncircumcised Greeks, Epiphanius claims, as Jesus himself explained in the Gospel of John (12:20-26).⁷⁴ Epiphanius peers back into the Old Testament, at a moment of dramatic circumcision that might seem to affirm the Jewish covenant, and sees there instead the shadow of the Christ-child coming to bring an end to that covenant. The Ebionites, claiming to rely in equal measures on Moses and Jesus, stand refuted by both.

But perhaps Epiphanius’s introduction of Exod 4:24-26 (and his interweaving of Isaiah 9 and John 12) is not so straightforward. Epiphanius does not simply see Christ prefigured in the Exodus scene, he sees him prophetically embodied in the circumcised child of Moses, covered in the same stanch blood of circumcision. Cyril of Alexandria, too, in his commentary on Exodus, associates the circumcision blood of Gershom, the firstborn son of Moses whose name means “the stranger” (Exod 2:22), with Christ – “a stranger while on earth” – in whose blood “death has been conquered.”⁷⁵ The desire to make the characters of the Old Testament meaningful in the present, Christian dispensation – the desire to identify, as Cyril does, with the “spiritual (νοητή) Zipporah” – stands at the heart of Christian commentary, as we have seen: making Jewish distinction speak Christianly. But if the blood of Jews becomes the sign of Gentile Christian salvation for Cyril (for whom Zipporah represents the Gentile Church) and Epiphanius (who hears echoes of Christ’s call to the Greeks in John 12), surely it is no less *Jewish blood* – the blood of Gershom, Moses, Abraham, and Christ – that serves this purpose. Christ’s blood is simultaneously that of the cross and that of his own (Jewish?) circumcision. This identification of Jewish Law and Christian salvation was, of course, the very goal of the Ebionites against whom Epiphanius wrote. By pushing Christ so deeply back into the matrix of the Law, Epiphanius evinces their same desire to know and inhabit Judaism.

A second component of metacommentary begins to emerge out of patristic interpretation of Exod 4:24-26: the longing for and the fear of the

⁷³ It is interesting that Epiphanius, unlike Origen, does not acknowledge the Hebrew version of Zipporah’s words, even though (according to Jerome, at least) he knew Hebrew: Jerome, *Apologia contra Rufinum* 3.6 (SC 303:230), describes Epiphanius as “*pentaglossus*,” that is, knowing Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Syriac, and Coptic. His own treatise *On Weights and Measures* (which deals with biblical translations and survives complete only in Syriac) expresses an interest in Hebrew, although its modern editors are more dubious of Epiphanius’s expertise: J.E. Dean (ed.), *Epiphanius’s Treatise on Weights and Measures: The Syriac Version* (SAOC 11; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1935), pp. ix-x.

⁷⁴ Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30.27 (GCS 25:371).

⁷⁵ Cyril of Alexandria, *Glaphyra in Exodum* 2.7 (PG 69:484).

persistent Jewish origins of Christianity.⁷⁶ While this desire and fear are particularly clear in Christocentric interpretations of Exod 4:24-26, they nonetheless provide the subtext – the metacommentary – for much Christian “anti”-Jewish exegesis. Ambrose, in a letter to one of his *protégés* Horontianus, attempts to drive home the lesson from Galatians that “if you are circumcised, Christ will be of no use to you” (Gal 5:2).⁷⁷ Ambrose recites a familiar litany opposing Judaism to Christianity: “The Law is a pedagogue, but faith is free; therefore, let us cast aside the works of servitude and let us take hold of the grace of freedom; let us leave behind the shadow, and follow the sun; let us leave behind Jewish rites” (*ritus iudaicos deseramus*). Because Jewish circumcision only treats part of the body, it is “of no use” (*circumcisio membri unius non prodest*).⁷⁸

Horontianus shouldn’t be misled by scriptural examples that seem to suggest this partial circumcision was useful: “Before that Zipporah circumcised her own son, and warded off the danger which threatened; but back then Christ was of use (*sed tunc profuit Christus*) while perfect things were deferred.”⁷⁹ When Christ came, perfection came with it:

Although the population of believers was small, he did not come in a small way (*parvulus*) but Lord Jesus was perfect in all things. He was circumcised first according to the Law, in order not to dissolve the Law (*ne legem solveret*); afterward [he was circumcised] through the cross, so that he might fulfill the Law (see Matt 5:17). Therefore that which was partial ceased, since perfection has come; for in Christ the cross has circumcised not one member, but the superfluous desires of the whole body. (Ambrose, *ep.* 78.3 [PL 16:1268])

Christ’s double circumcision – first as a baby, and then on the cross – is more complete than Jewish circumcision, and fulfills the promise that this partial circumcision can only suggest. It is, in fact, the most *Jewish* circumcision possible, taking hold of and extending that ancient rite to the point where it touches not just one member, but “the whole body” (*totius... corporis*).

As if sensing, perhaps, that he has gone a bit far in his exuberant celebration of Christ’s circumcision, Ambrose pauses: “Perhaps at this point it may be asked for what reason he wished to be circumcised partially [i.e., Jewishly], he who came in order to demonstrate the perfect [i.e., Christian] circumcision. About this I don’t think we should debate too

⁷⁶ Along similar lines, see my “A Jew’s Jew: Paul and the Early Christian Problem of Jewish Origins,” *JR* 86 (2006), pp. 258-286.

⁷⁷ S. Cooper, *Marius Victorinus’ Commentary on Galatians* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Oxford University, 2005), pp. 176-179, places this letter in the context of elite Christian concerns over Judaizing.

⁷⁸ Ambrose, *ep.* 78.2 (PL 16:1268).

⁷⁹ Ambrose, *ep.* 78.3 (PL 16:1268).

long.”⁸⁰ Ambrose offers a tentative rationale for Jesus’ circumcision that, once more, casts the “Law” and its Jewish rites into opprobrium: “if he was made sin to cleanse our sins (2 Cor 5:21) and if he was made a curse for us so that he might vacate the curses of the Law (Gal 3:13), for this reason was he circumcised for us: so that he might take away (*aufferet*) the circumcision of the Law, as he was about to grant the salvation of the cross.”⁸¹ From fear of the Jewishness of circumcision, to a desire for its perfect expression, back to fear and loathing, Ambrose’s brief encounter with Zipporah, Jesus, and circumcision discloses a more ambivalent view of the ways in which Judaism can – and cannot – signify Christianity absolutely.

As in so many areas of early Christian thought, Augustine, bishop of Hippo Regius at the turn to the fifth century, proves both paradigm and exception.⁸² Like his mentor Ambrose, and other patristic interpreters who used Christ’s circumcision to tease Christian meaning out of Exod 4:24-26, Augustine’s interpretation presses the Jewish rite for Christian meaning. Embroiled in schismatic debates, in which the sacraments of the “one church” were called into question, Augustine elaborated the connection between Jewish circumcision and Christian baptism in new and creative fashion. When arguing for the necessity of infant baptism in his treatise *Against the Donatists*, Augustine found value in the Exodus story.⁸³ Likewise, in arguing against the Donatist bishop Maximinus’s call for the rebaptism of schismatics, Augustine deploys circumcision as a clear, indeed blunt, precedent: “But if I can’t find a place in the flesh of a circumcised man where I could repeat his circumcision – since there’s only one member (*quia unum est illud membrum*) – how much less is a place to be found in the single heart, where Christ’s baptism might be repeated!”⁸⁴ Augustine concludes that, unless a man can be found with two hearts, rebaptism is impossible.

Augustine’s curious appeal to anatomy comes in the midst of a longer argument in which Jewish circumcision is placed in sacred historical continuum with Christian baptism.⁸⁵ After bemoaning the Donatist clerics

⁸⁰ Ambrose, *ep.* 78.4 (PL 16:1268).

⁸¹ Ambrose, *ep.* 78.4 (PL 16:1268).

⁸² Particularly with respect to Judaism, as we learn from P. Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews: The Story of Christianity’s Great Theologian and his Defense of Judaism* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).

⁸³ Augustine, *De baptismo contra donatistas* 4.24 (PL 43:175): “This was made clear in the case of Moses’ son by the angel, who when he was carried uncircumcised by his mother, it was necessary – by clear and present danger! – that he be circumcised; and when this had been done, the danger was repelled.”

⁸⁴ Augustine, *ep.* 23.4 (PL 33:97). Augustine either does not know, or pretends not to know, that a circumcision ritual – the drawing of blood – was performed by Jews on males who lack foreskins. See below, n. 86.

⁸⁵ Augustine was, of course, not the first Christian theologian to draw an analogy between the two rituals: it is present already in the pseudo-Pauline letter to the Colossians, on which

who would destroy the fabric of Christ's church – something the soldiers at the cross would not even dare with Christ's earthly robe (John 19:24) – Augustine suddenly announces: “If I had been a Jew of the ancient people back then (*si veteris populi temporibus Iudaeus essem*), when I couldn't be anything better, I would have certainly received circumcision.” All of sacred history, from Moses to Jesus, proves the potency of circumcision:

Because the seal of faith's righteousness (*signaculum iustitiae fidei*) was of such value in that time, before it was vacated by the Lord's coming, that an angel would have choked Moses' infant son, if his mother, having snatched up a pebble, had not circumcised the child, and repelled the danger by this sacrament. This sacrament also checked the Jordan River, and turned it back to its source. This sacrament the Lord himself, although he vacated it when he was crucified, nonetheless received when he was born. Indeed those seals were not condemned, but made way before those coming later which were more suitable. For just as circumcision was set aside by the first coming of the Lord, so his second coming will set aside baptism. (Augustine, *ep.* 23.4 [PL 33:97])

The Exodus circumcision is relevant precisely for its continuity with Christ and Christianity: the serial power of the “seals” of faith, from primitive circumcision directly into Christian baptism. And lest a Christian should feel superior for the fact that Jewish circumcision was “vacated” by Christ's first advent, Augustine introduces the notion that baptism too will give way to something “more suitable” (*opportunior*) when Christ comes again. Like Ambrose before him, Augustine pushes Christ – and his own Christian community – into closer and closer identification with Jewish circumcision through a connection with the Exodus account.

Unlike Ambrose, however, Augustine does not flinch to drive his point home. As if to affirm that close identification with the circumcised people of the first dispensation, Augustine repeats, “So if I had been a Jew at that time...” (*si ergo illo tempore Iudaeus essem*). He then conjures the hypothetical situation of a Samaritan – already circumcised – coming to Augustine the Jew (*veniret ad me Samaritanus*) and asking to join the Jewish community and leave behind his error. It baffles the mind, Augustine marvels, to imagine a second circumcision for this poor soul who wishes to be made a Jew!⁸⁶ Augustine concludes with the passage I cited

see J. Hunt, “Colossians 2:11-12, the Circumcision/Baptism Analogy, and Infant Circumcision,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 41 (1990), pp. 227-244. Cohen, *Why Aren't*, pp. 84-86, points out the innovative quality of Augustine's sacramentalization of Jewish circumcision.

⁸⁶ Interestingly, Epiphanius makes exactly this claim about Symmachus, the translator of the Greek Old Testament: that he was a Samaritan who, converting to Judaism, was recircumcised. Epiphanius claims such recircumcision was common for Jews and Samaritans cross-converting (“Don't be shocked [Καὶ μὴ θαύμαζε],” he chides), and gives further

earlier, on the singleness of the baptized Christian’s heart (and the circumcised Jew’s genitals). Augustine the hypothetical Jewish priest returns to his bishop’s throne, but that tantalizing echo remains: *si Iudaeus essem*. Present at the roadside circumcision of Zipporah’s son, at Joshua’s baptism of the Israelites at the Jordan, at Christ’s own circumcision, Augustine cannot help but place himself in the skin of the circumcised Jew and derive from that mimetic moment deep Christian meaning.

Augustine, in so many ways absolutely typical of his late antique milieu, nonetheless is at his most creative and innovative in his discussions of Judaism.⁸⁷ In placing Christ on the roadside with Zipporah, and pulling himself and his reader along for the ride, I suggest Augustine is expressing what we find throughout Christian interpretations of Exod 4:24-26: a deep and abiding longing for, and fascination with, the Jewish roots of Christianity. In authors such as Origen, Ambrose, or Epiphanius, this fascination is tempered and hesitant, cloaked in the logic of supersession. Augustine is not, however, unique in his desire to make Judaism signify Christianity while remaining, at heart, ineluctably Jewish.

4. Blood Will Out

I began by describing Exod 4:24-26 as a text that cannot help but elicit metacommentary – that is, it interprets the commenter even as the commenter interprets it. In their efforts to make sense of Exod 4:24-26, early Christians pressed the text, which centers on the paradigmatic Jewish rite of circumcision, to mean in an indisputably Christian fashion. Some Christians, in pressing this Christian meaning for Moses’ son’s circumcision, introduced as an intertext the circumcision of Christ. Here, the desire to make Jewish ritual signify Christianity unraveled, as Christ was drawn back into the matrix of the old Law, and Christians were drawn along with him. To signify in a Christian fashion, the text must still signify Jewishly.

Let me turn at last to the blood of my title, the blood which persists in Zipporah’s outcry in Hebrew (“my bloody bridegroom”) and later Greek and Latin versions (“my son’s circumcision blood”). For modern interpreters, the bloodiness of this passage bespeaks its primitive origins, pulling the rational reader back into a past dripping with gore: it both repels and fascinates. For early Christian readers, when the blood of Moses’ son mingles with that of Christ it also draws and repels Christians eager to be linked to Christ in his humanity and divinity.

details on surgery to undo circumcision: *De mensuris et ponderibus* 16 (Dean, *Weights and Measures*, p. 32; this passage is also found in the Greek fragments: E. Moutsoulas, “Τὸ Περὶ μέτρων καὶ σταθμῶν ἔργον Ἐπιφανίου τοῦ Σαλαμίνος,” *Θεολογία* 44 [1973], pp. 157-198).

⁸⁷ See Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews*.

Early Christians were powerfully drawn to the blood of Christ, not only as a sign of redemption but a sign of communion: in the incarnation, Christ took on human flesh and blood and became kin to humanity. When he shed blood in the circumcision, this blood too was proof of the humanity he held in common with all Christians.⁸⁸ Yet it was, irrefutably, circumcision blood, Jewish blood: even as Christians denied that Jesus was simply a Jew, they did not refute that the ritual itself was Jewish. “Blood is a universal fluid,” David Biale writes, “but also a marker of difference.”⁸⁹ To be united to Christ in his bloody humanity was also to be divided from him in his bloody Jewishness. And the inverse: to be strangely drawn to his infant, Jewish body (as it must seem, even contingently, at the moment of circumcision) was to find solace in common humanity. The Jewish body of Jesus repelled and attracted, and out of that oscillation emerges Christianity.⁹⁰

This attraction and repulsion of Jesus’ Jewish blood frames Christian interpretation of the Bible, as well. We have seen how Christian readers appropriate – but never erase – Jewish signification in the Scriptures. The frantic roadside circumcision of Exod 4:24-26 amplifies this desire to see through a Jewish text Christianly, marking that Jewish remainder through circumcision, the absolute sign of a Judaism that is apart from Christianity. But this oscillating exegetical desire and anxiety I think figure in much Christian scriptural interpretation.⁹¹ Scripture, like blood, becomes universal and also a marker of difference and it is that sense of identification and alienation that both energizes and problematizes Christian subjectivities. Like Christ’s blood, Jewish texts must signify a Christianity that never loses its Jewishness.

⁸⁸ In heresiological literature, Christ’s circumcision is used to counter docetic tendencies among Gnostics and Manicheans: see, for example, Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30.28 (GCS 25:371).

⁸⁹ D. Biale, *Blood and Belief: The Circulation of a Symbol between Jews and Christians* (Berkeley: University of California, 2007), p. 5.

⁹⁰ See V. Burrus, *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints, and Other Abject Subjects* (Divinations; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2007), pp. 44-80.

⁹¹ An interesting contemporary attempt to work out this oscillating desire is J.D. Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California, 2002).