

WHY DID GOD WANT TO KILL MOSES? THE IMAGE OF THE DANGEROUS GOD IN EXODUS 4:24-26*

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Abstract. The strange pericope of Ex 4:24–26 is discussed in numerous studies, mainly from the perspective of religious history or rhetorical criticism. Building on the results of previous research, this study confirms earlier suggestions that this passage cannot be connected well with its direct context, specifically with the larger call narrative of Ex 3:1–4:18, or with the smaller preceding unit in vv. 20–23. The observations regarding rhetorical and logical problems around Ex 4:19.24–27 are corroborated by independent text-historical arguments, derived mainly from the Old Greek version. It is also unlikely though that Ex 4:24–26 would be an entirely independent segment in the Moses-tradition. The narrative in its earliest form (reconstructed here as consisting of vv. 19.24–26) was the original follow-up of Ex 2, specifically 2:23a. It is this particular context which unveils YHWH’s stance towards Moses. The intention of this alternative Moses-story differs from the better-known Ex 3:1–4:18.

Keywords: Ex 4:24–27, Moses, Moses-tradition, circumcision, murder, YHWH, compositional history.

Exodus 4:24–26 is one of those Old Testament stories that evoke a series of questions in today’s Bible readers. This short episode presents a fearsome God who, apparently without reason, attacks Moses with the intention of killing him – the same person who just a few lines earlier had been given the demanding task to free his people from Egypt. Neither this episode, nor its immediate context seem to explain the unusual manifestation of the divinity. The New Revised Standard Version translates the story as follows:

- 4:24 On the way, at a place where they spent the night, the LORD met him and tried to kill him.
- 4:25 But Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin, and touched Moses’ feet with it, and said, “Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me!”
- 4:26 So he let him alone. It was then she said, “A bridegroom of blood by circumcision.”