God Seeks Moses' Life

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Today's text, Exodus 4:18-31, is one of those passages that many people would just as soon skip over and pretend that it is not really in the Bible. Or, some might try to pretend that the story really does not say what it says. My approach is that if it is there, then we have to deal with it as it stands without trying make it fit within our own modern sensibilities and sensitivities. But I have to admit that this text is a little strange.

The reason that the text is so strange is that right in the middle of Moses' return to Egypt to carry out what God had commissioned him to do, the story says that one night God tried to kill Moses (4:24). Hard to figure, huh? Moses has had a chapter and a half conversation with God at the burning bush. Moses finally gives in and accepts God's call to go to Egypt and lead forth the Israelites from bondage. He has left the burning bush as well as his father in-law and is on his way to Egypt to do God's will.

- Why is God making an attempt on Moses life?
- Why go through the whole burning bush thing if only to kill Moses on the way?
- Did God lose it or what? Is God being precocious? Was this fair, just?
- Why Moses' lack of circumcision was cause for God to kill" Moses?
- Why was circumcision so crucial?
- Why would God want to kill Moses for not being circumcised?
- Why circumcise Gershom and not Eliezar?
- Was Moses not circumcised?
- Was he being deliberately disobedient? Was it something God had said to him but not reported in the burning bush story?
- Why did Aaron disobey and lead to golden calf idolatry and not get punished?
- Is there something else going on here that we don't understand?

It appears that God was about to kill Moses because Moses was not circumcised. The episode takes place while Moses, his wife Zipporah, and their son are lodging for the night. As Moses comes under attack by God, Zipporah takes a flint knife and circumcises their son. Scripture says that she then takes their son's foreskin and touches Moses' feet with it. "Feet" is a Hebrew euphemism for "private parts" (our own English euphemism for genitals) . The genitals are so private that they are not mentioned. Every Israelite reading/hearing the story would know that **Zipporah did not touch Moses' "feet"** with the foreskin, but his private parts. In this way she performed a vicarious circumcision, identifying Moses with the circumcision of their son. Upon this act the LORD "let him alone"(4:26) and let Moses live. Zipporah's quick thinking (and cutting) saved Moses' life. (As a side note, notice that Moses has now been saved by four women: his mother, sister, Pharaoh's daughter, and now his wife.)

Given that the LORD “let him alone” when Zipporah did this, it is implied that Moses must not have been circumcised, at least Hebrew style, prior to this. Perhaps this had to do with his upbringing in Pharaoh's house. Some Bible scholars have suggested that the reason Zipporah did not circumcise Moses as well was that the time required for healing would have interfered with their travel plans. A "freshly circumcised" man does not travel well.

My question is why Moses' lack of circumcision was cause for God to "about to kill" Moses. Why was circumcision so crucial? Why would God want to kill Moses for not being circumcised?

I don't know the answer to that question, but let me make three observations.

First, circumcision was the sign of the covenant that God made with Abraham in Genesis 17. It literally marked Abraham as belonging to God. This was not a unique cultural feature of the Hebrews since other people practiced male circumcision as well. However, in the Genesis narratives circumcision was adopted as part of the covenant signs of the Hebrews, most likely to distinguish them from some of the Canaanites such as the Philistines, who did not practice circumcision. All of Abraham's offspring were to be circumcised as well, thus bearing the mark of the covenant - that the LORD is their God and that they are the LORD's people. It is a sign of costly grace: they could not earn the covenant, it was gift; but it demands their all, it is costly.

Furthermore, in Deuteronomy we find the phrase "circumcision of the heart." This gets at the meaning symbolized in the ritual of the circumcision of the foreskin. Circumcision is more than just the surgical procedure of removing a piece of skin. It involves bearing the mark of God upon one's heart, yielding ownership of the heart to God, surrendering the center of one's being to God. Thus, circumcision, even though its origin lies in the culture of the ancient Middle East, became an exceedingly important ritual for the Israelites, indicating the profound grace of God as well as the all encompassing demands of that grace. That helps us understand the importance of circumcision, but does not really address God's intent to kill Moses.

This brings us to the second observation. In the New Testament the Jewish ritual of circumcision is replaced by that of baptism. New believers are not circumcised into the people of God. Rather, they are baptized into the people of God. Baptism serves the same function as circumcision, that is, of marking people as belonging to God, as having been brought into a covenant of costly grace. And just as circumcision was an outward ritual of a "heart thing," so is baptism. In Romans 6 Paul writes about the heart thing of baptism. He points out that in baptism the believer is baptized into the death of Christ and receives the newness of life of Christ's resurrection. In baptism the old life is crucified with Christ and the believer is given a new Christ-like life to live, along with the Spirit to empower Christ living. Thus, baptism, the church's circumcision ritual, involves the death of the believer vicariously in the death of Christ, and it is only via this death that one can receive the newness of life offered in Christ.

My general approach is to let the Old Testament speak for itself and then move to the New Testament. Here, perhaps we can allow the New Testament use of this theme to shed some light on the Old Testament passage, since the New Testament tends to develop and apply Old Testament ideas. If baptism is the church's ritual of circumcision, and baptism is the "faith death" of the believer with Christ, then might there be a similar "death element" in Old Testament circumcision? In other words, in the context of the Hebrew covenant with Abraham circumcision symbolizes the surrender of life, present and future, to God in a positive way. Failure to fulfill that commitment puts life at risk. This may well correspond to the covenant blessings and curses in Deuteronomy that consistently use the concepts of "life" and "death" for faithfulness to God (Deut 30:15-20).

This recalls God's covenant dealings with Abraham.
Before we get to the covenant of circumcision in Genesis 17 there is a covenant cutting ceremony between God and Abraham in Genesis 15. In this ceremony a heifer, goat, and ram are butchered and their parts laid out in a symmetrical fashion with an aisle down the middle. Generally the weaker party entering the covenant would pass between the cut up animals and pledge loyalty to the stronger covenant party, in essence declaring, "May it be unto me as unto these slaughtered animals if I fail to be loyal." Remarkably, it is not Abraham but God who passes through the body parts in Genesis 15. Abraham is left to marvel at God's commitment to him to keep God's promises. In Genesis 17 it is now Abraham's turn to come under a self-maledictory oath. As God passed between the cut animals, so now Abraham must come under the knife, cutting his foreskin and in essence declaring, "May I and my offspring be cut off if I do not act in loyalty towards God." This seems to support the idea that in relation to Israelite covenant theology there is, indeed, a death element in circumcision.

This brings us to the third observation.
In a certain sense, doesn't God seek to kill us all? Jesus said, "If anyone wants to come after me he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me daily." What is the purpose of a cross other than death? Dietrich Bonhoeffer succinctly put it, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." In a very particular way, God seeks to kill us for our own good. We can only enter God's kingdom, we can only receive the newness of life that Christ offers, through a particular kind of death. It is not a physical death but an "identity death," for lack of a better way to put it. The old, rebellious, me-centered self is put to death. A new identity is received and embarked upon which is Christ-centered, Christ-directed, and Christ-empowered. This death language is metaphorical, but it is no less real, for it depicts the larger reality of the radical change in our identities and relationship with God that occurs through Jesus. Thus, Paul testifies, "I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me." God seeks to kill us in this narrow sense, to bring about this baptismal death, in order that we might have the life of Christ within us.

Could it be that this was the kind of killing that God had in mind for Moses?
That the battle was not just physical, but that it was deep within Moses' heart and affecting his whole being? Could it be that Zipporah saw/felt Moses tossing and turning

all night, wrestling with God, even oppressed by God to the point of death, if he did not surrender himself utterly to God? Was God after Moses' life, heart, soul, will, body, identity, his very being, in the same way God is after ours in the call of Christ? Was the vicarious circumcision of Moses really (what we Christians now understand as) the "baptism" of Moses, in which he "died to self" and finally fully accepted a new life/identity in Yahweh? R to put in in the opposite terms, is our death to self in Christ really the circumcision of Moses in which we surrender our very life to God?