MEANING OF HEBREW UNCERTAIN: EMBRACING MULTIPLE MEANINGS IN
TEXTUAL AMBIGUITY AS A WAY OF EXPLORING THE DIVINE

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ABSTRACT

The Torah is a foundational text for many faiths. However, it abounds with phrases, words, and passages, whose meanings remain ambiguous. Over centuries many have attempted to clarify what the Bible might have really meant. However, maybe the Bible is intentionally ambiguous in order to foster multiple meanings. This thesis will examine grammatical ambiguities in syntax and lexicography. It will survey thousands of years of translations and interpretations.

This work primarily focuses on two ambiguous points in the Bible. The first ambiguity explored is Genesis 15:6: "because he put his trust in *Adonai*, he credited it to him *tzedakah*." It is unclear in the latter half of this verse who credits whom. The field of meaning for *tzedakah* influences interpretations. This thesis also explores the Tzipporah narrative where she circumcises her son in Exodus 4:24-26. This pericope has up to three ambiguous subjects and objects. They are Moses, *Adonai,* and Moses' son. It also includes several words whose meaning remains uncertain such as *chatan-damim*. While the process will be grammar intensive, I hope that the translations and explorations will represent viable Torah for anyone who seeks it.

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CH. 1 BIBLICAL AMBIGUITIES

For much of humanity, Scripture has defined our mortal relationship with God. Sometimes the understanding of that definition hangs on just a word. Many live their lives based on sacred texts; wars have been fought because of these inherited words. This intensity lends itself to a natural desire from the reader to understand *the* message that the words intended to carry. Even for the curious non-believer, translation after translation seeks to uncover the perfect nuance which conveys *the* meaning. However, the inherited text remains unclear.

I use the term "inherited text." While a religious answer may ascribe the full text which the Deity gave directly to Moses, the Torah upon closer inspection appears more fragmented. Modern text-critical scholars simply resolve the discomfort around discrepancies of meaning in Scripture by acknowledging the complicated transmission. That the text of Torah we use today, usually the Masoretic Text for Jews (MT), contains a collection of different stories, perhaps Divinely inspired and very likely written down by various authors over many centuries, that were then copied by various scribes over many centuries. While I acknowledge the textual and manuscript (or lack thereof) reality

of Scripture, this thesis will confront the Masoretic Text as if it were a holistic work intended by one Divine author.

Daniel Boyarin describes the paradox of the Bible's wholeness and its discontinuities as "the intertext provided by the cannon itself, the intertextual and interpretive interrelations which exist, and which can be made to exist between different parts of the cannon..."[1] David H. Aaron describes the largesse of what we will never know about the author/s of the Bible[2] and opts to approach the text with a "naive attitude toward authorial intent."[3] If we combine these two approaches to the Torah, we can accept the Bible, as Dan Nichols might phrase it, "as perfect the way [it is] and a little broken too."[4]

Previous scholarship, from antiquity to modern day, has developed three ways of looking at biblical ambiguity: 1. rejection, since the text is stable and perfect; 2. acceptance that readers (probably because they are mortal and the text is Divine) cannot

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[1] Boyarin, Daniel. *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994. 17.

[2] David H. Aaron, in *Biblical Ambiguities: Metaphor, Semantics, and Divine Imagery* (Boston: Brill Academic Publ., 2002), 14.

[3] ibid 15. He also speaks to this in chapter 4 (pp. 79-83).

[4] Dan Nichols, "Asher Yatzar" *Beautiful and Broken*, 2015.

understand how it seems incongruous, and then trying to fix the dissonance; and 3. acceptance that the ambiguity is on purpose, to make us interpret the text.

In this thesis, I would like to add a fourth way of examining biblical ambiguity: 4. recognition that the ambiguity is on purpose, not to be interpreted, rather to be accepted in all its multiple meanings simultaneously. Perhaps the multiple meanings were never meant to be stable and whole and yet are perfect. This recognition will require proving that the ambiguities found in the Masoretic Text are ambiguous and attempting to present the possible meanings side by side. The multiple layers of meaning stem from millennia of interpretation and many different theories of critical reading.

1. REJECTION: THE SEPTUAGINT

As far back as our writings go, we find attempts to reconcile ambiguity in Scripture. Not only did scholars of Antiquity seek to translate it, but they also sought a perfect translation with no errors or discrepancies, or at least, that is how the surviving legend presents the story.

The origin of the Greek translation of the Torah, the Septuagint, (LXX, 3rd century Egypt) is recorded in *The Letter of Aristeas*. As Tessa Rajak points out, "[T]he

tradition endured in Jewish historical memory better than did its hefty and unwieldy

subject, the translation itself. The power of the story is thus evident."[5] Hoping for a

perfect meaning, this origin story rejected ambiguity.

The legend of the Septuagint tells us that, around the 3rd century BCE, the chief

librarian in Alexandria heard about this Jewish "law" and wanted his own Greek copy for

the Library of Alexandria. The librarian persuaded the king and subsequently 72

translators were hired from the High Priest, asking him to send "men who have lived

exceedingly good lives and are eminent, skilled in matters pertaining to their own law,

six from each tribe, so that after examining the agreement of the majority and obtaining

exactitude in the translation..."[6] The most qualified translators were brought to Egypt

where they worked to produce *the best and most accurate translation*. Presumably this

translation served a large Greek speaking diaspora community of Jews who needed the

text in their vernacular, *and* needed a text they could trust to be true to the original.

[5] Tessa Rajak, *Translation and Survival: the Greek Bible and the Ancient Jewish Diaspora* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), https://oxford-universitypressscholarship-com.huc.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199558674.001.0001/acprof-9780199558674, 29.

[6] Wright, Benjamin G. *The Letter of Aristeas: 'Aristeas to Philocrates' or 'On the Translation of the Law of the Jews'*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015. Line 32.

The Letter of Aristeas conveys the human need for Scripture to be clear and perfectly understood. "And when the rolls were read, the priests and the elders of the translators and some from the *politeuma* and the leaders of the people stood and said, 'Since the exposition has been made well, piously and <u>accurately in every respect</u>, it is good that it remain just as it is and there be no revision at all.'"[7] This concurrence mattered because once the interpretation was accepted as 'perfect' it could not be changed.

2. <u>ACCEPTANCE AND REPAIR: MIDRASH</u>

While the legend of the Septuagint presents a view which rejects ambiguity, other efforts recognized certain inconsistencies in the biblical text but rejected the idea that the text could be inconsistent, so they created systems to address the inconsistencies. In particular, the efforts of the Midrash, as well as explicit comments from medieval interpreters, set a precedent which gives permission, and sometimes the obligation, for the receiver to interpret the passages and points in the biblical text which are unclear. The Midrash often seeks to resolve ambiguity, or as Boyarin describes it, a

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[7] Ibid line 310, emphasis mine.

"gap" in the biblical text.[8] This gap includes missing narrative context, syntactical or

lexicographical ambiguity, or intertextual lack of cohesion. The voices of the Midrash

each crave a single answer. While the eventual compilation of the Midrash includes

conflicting answers, the midrashim seek to resolve conflicts they find in the text or

between the reading of the text and the reality of their day. The Midrash, in the end,

does not just fill the gaps, it interprets the gaps to fill the gaps, resulting in a cascade of

multiple interpretations, which then must also be reconciled.[9] The "dialogue and

dialect" of the authors of the Midrash as Boyarin phrases it, is just "readings of the

dialogue and dialectic of the biblical text."[10] Perhaps the inclination to focus on one

interpretation at a time helps the reader understand an ambiguity which is not a mistake

but an incomprehensible multitude of possibilities that a mortal mind cannot grasp in a

Divine text.[11]

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[8] Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), xi, 16. Boyarin cites Wolfgang Iser.

[9] ibid 40, see also p.26 on Torah intertextuality where a verse from Jeremiah is misused in its local context in to preserve the greater system.

[10] Ibid 15.

[11] Aaron, in *Biblical Ambiguities: Metaphor, Semantics, and Divine Imagery*, p. 11 says that metaphor helps the reader understand the indescribable deity. However, on p. 35 argues against the assumption of the unknowability of the deity and whether one should take certain descriptions as metaphor).

3. ACCEPTANCE AND INTERPRETATION: RASHI AND GERSONIDES

The gaps that the midrashim examine are often not subtle. As Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki France 1040-1105) states, the text "cries out to be interpreted"[12] and so readers of the Bible have tried to. Back and forth since the beginning of these biblical stories, interpreters have sought the correct interpretation which resolves the dissonance that they noted in their received scripture. Modern retrospective tells us that this ability to interpret ambiguity has made an ancient prehistoric tradition flexible enough to adapt to thousands of years of human development.[13]

However, what if this ambiguity was not planted as a time-released trust to give us different concrete answers for different historical circumstances but was meant as a timeless treasure trove of ambiguity for all times? As Boyarin states: "Once we no longer assume that there is a single correct interpretation of the text.... then we can begin to answer the questions."[14] Perhaps we were meant to interpret these inconsistencies by accepting multiple meanings side by side.

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[12] Rashi on Genesis 1:1 אֵין הַמִּקְרָא הַזֶּה אוֹמֵר אֶלָּא דְּרְשֵׁנִי

[13] Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994. He covers this in several places, especially on p. 15 in a discussion of Heinemann's historical lenses.

[14] ibid x

4. <u>RECOGNITION AND ACCEPTANCE: MULTIPLE MEANINGS</u>

Language is flexible and can do so much more if we give it the chance. Aaron

writes that metaphor carries ambiguity *intentionally*. He proposes that the very purpose

of metaphor is that it can carry multiple, simultaneous meanings.[15] Referencing

Wittgenstein, Aaron gives the example of the phrase "the rose is red" which cannot be

understood literally as the two are not identical[16] (one is a flower, and one is a color)

and yet, most readers understand this statement to be true. This example proves that

any two items in metaphor (a blank "is" blank statement) fall on a scale of meaning[17]

which includes similarities and differences.[18] So in this way, they are somewhere

between being exactly the same or being metaphor (whether or not intended to be 'true'

or poetic). Therefore, "the rose is red" can conjure a flower, a color, or even, a scent.[19]

Perhaps our syntactic ambiguity, our gaps, with their inherited instability, should also

be so multitudinous in meaning as well.

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[15] Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities: Metaphor, Semantics, and Divine Imagery* (Boston: Brill Academic Publ., 2002).

[16] ibid 6.

[17] Aaron in *Biblical Ambiguities: Metaphor, Semantics, and Divine Imagery* uses the word "gradient" and gives various examples and how they relate to one another throughout his work, for my purposes he uses metaphor to open wide the door to multiple meanings.

[18] ibid 62.

[19] Ibid p. 62 fn. 36. Aaron raises the complication that "rose" can also be the name of a color.

There is a *baraita* referenced in the Talmud[20] which accounts for the fact that in

Exodus 20:8 we are commanded to *zakhor* or 'remember/note' the Sabbath day and in

Deuteronomy 5:12 we are commanded to *shamor*, or "guard/preserve/keep" the day.

The interpreters reconcile this ambiguity by assuming a human could not understand

something Divine. Just as Moses allegedly heard the command for Shabbat fractured

instead of whole, the onus will be on the reader of biblical ambiguity to hold multiple

meanings even if this is against their initial instincts.

Judaism from Antiquity until the present has accepted the fact that the Bible was

meant to be interpreted to make sense. Rashi, as previously noted, said the text asked to

be interpreted. Some commentators even say that the interpretation happens within the

Bible itself: Boyarin calls "the intertextuality of the midrash" "an outgrowth of

intertextuality within the Bible itself."[21]

This phenomenon is perhaps best viewed through the *Akeida*, or the Binding of

Isaac, in Genesis 22:2-8. *Adonai* says to Abraham in verse 2, "Take your son, your

favored one, Isaac, whom you love, to the land of Moriah and *veha'aleihu* there *le'olah* "

The word *veha'aleihu* could mean "to bring him up," or "to sacrifice him," since the

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[20] Rosh Hashanah 27a and Shavuot 20b.
[21] Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash,* 15.

word to sacrifice means to bring up (probably to the heavens where the Deity was thought to reside). The second iteration, of the root, *le'olah,* even if we accept the meaning "to sacrifice," could be transitive "to sacrifice *something.*" Many understand that Abraham will sacrifice Isaac. However, if read intransitively, Isaac becomes a co-subject of "to sacrifice." The verse often reads as "bring [Isaac] up (as a sacrifice) to sacrifice (him)." Medieval commentators present the alternative understanding of "bring him up (the mountain) to sacrifice (he performs the sacrifice)." Rashi cites a midrash that deals with the Akeidah's aftermath: After not killing his son, Abraham asks God why God requested this filicide of Abraham in the first place. God responds, "I told you to bring him up and you came up the mountain," meaning that God meant the non-sacrificial version of "go up."[22] Gersonides (Levi ben Gerson, also known as Ralbag, France 1288-1344) takes this ambiguity even further to say that God presented this command ambiguously *in order for Abraham to interpret it* as Abraham saw fit.[23]

Understandings of this almost-sacrifice remain critical to ideas of salvation in all three monotheistic faiths and will not be discussed here. However, the opinion of Gersonides— that God intended the ambiguity and the resultant process of

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[22] Rashi on Genesis 22:2.
[23] Gersonides on Genesis 22:2.

interpretation— takes us one step closer to our new theology of intentional multiple meanings. It gives us permission to engage in the ambiguity and to act as modern interpreters embracing ambiguity as its own tradition as much as the text itself is tradition. This project takes the heart of Gersonides' idea and combines it with the idea of "in one utterance" of the two decalogue commands for the Sabbath. It postulates that not only should we embrace ambiguity as a source for interpretation, but we should not settle on just one meaning. Instead, the reader should accept that in our inability to understand Divinity and the received text, we can embrace the full spectrum of meaning in any passage which defies clear understanding.

AMBIGUITY IN GRAMMAR

Even a living language understood fluently is not always perfectly employed and often needs interpretation.[24] It is therefore reasonable - and expected - that a several thousand-year-old document in a foreign language, a language which fell out of use for hundreds of years would contain irresolvable ambiguities. As such, generation after generation of translators and interpreters comment on verses and words and tenses to

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[24] Aaron, in *Biblical Ambiguities: Metaphor, Semantics, and Divine Imagery*, makes this point several times mostly in his first chapter/introduction pp. 1-22.

make them clearer. Each translation seeks to be the best or correct translation through their choice of words or inclusion of footnotes. However, as Boyarin, using the many midrashim, points out there might not be a singular meaning.[25]

In order to attempt to hold many multiple meanings, this thesis will focus on syntactic ambiguity in narrative prose. This ambiguity omits the intertextuality of the midrashic focus (we will not be reconciling the differences in different biblical stories) and it also omits the poetic range of metaphor. Nonetheless, it will still yield a treasure trove of ambiguity.

Biblical prose contains ambiguity in pronouns, syntax, and word meaning, among other features. An English example of pronoun ambiguity is: "His dad explained his job to me." The job could belong to either the father or the son, since "his" is third person masculine and singular. This problem occurs more often in Hebrew, as objects carry gender *and* number. A follow up sentence to our previous English example could be: "He explained *him* to me." Except in Hebrew, this "*him*" could be the dad, the son, or possibly, the job. Additionally, Hebrew is one of many languages which allow

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[25] Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994). Aaron, as previously noted, makes a similar case when he discusses the "gradient" of meanings in metaphor.

grammatical person in many syntactical placements, either as a stand-alone word, or as an affix to another word. An example of the latter has already been given in the Binding of Isaac example: in Genesis 22:2, "Bring him up" is written as one word, "*veha'aleihu,*" with the "*hu*" at the end indicating "him," most likely referring to "Isaac."

Hebrew is also a language which will drop the subject of a verb if the verb's conjugation indicates its person/gender/number. While these verbs often clearly indicate the antecedent, if both subjects are the same gender, usually masculine in the Bible, the antecedent can become unclear. Eynat Gutman uses the example of "Talia said to Itamar that-*tavo'.*"[26] The last word means "she will come," though "she" is not stated directly, as "she" is inherent in the verb's conjugation: primarily the "*ta.*" Talia is more obvious as the subject, since Itamar is male and would take a different verb, "*yavo'*" or "he will come." However, if the sentence were "Talia said to Sarah that she will come," it would be unclear which was the subject. First and second person subjects remain clearer because they are definite individuals, whereas the third person subjects depend more

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[26] Eynat Gutman, "Third Person Null Subjects in Hebrew, Finnish and Rumanian: An Accessibility-Theoretic Account." 466 citing Borer.

heavily on context. And if the context is unclear, the verb's subject - unless otherwise indicated - would also remain uncertain.

The lexicon of Biblical Hebrew also offers us many opportunities for ambiguity. This is the case in English as well: think of Aaron's example of "rose," or the different meanings "to cleave" and "to rent." A phrase can have multiple meanings, such as different subjects or recipients. Especially in Hebrew, it can be unclear if the object of a preposition is a thing or a person since there is no separate word for "it". Words whose field of meaning varies can give a statement many multiple meanings. The same way an ambiguous misworded email can cause strife in our lives, it only takes one confusing referent in the Bible to change our relationship with God. For example, in Genesis 28:13, when Jacob dreams of a "*sulam*," the Torah states "*hinei Adonai niṣav ʾalav.*" NJPS translates it as "And the Lord was standing *beside him*." The "him" indicates Jacob, perhaps suggesting that readers imagine the closeness of the Deity to the biblical hero. However, it could be just as likely that *Adonai* was standing "on it," on the *sulam*. Suddenly, it is possible that the Deity appears more distant. The words themselves are ambiguous. *Sulam* is a hapax legomenon. It can mean anything from a stairway or a ladder to a ziggurat. If it is the ziggurat instead of the ladder, does that indicate the

temple of a different deity being repurposed into a tale of monotheism? The preposition "`al" can mean "on" or "by". Finally, the prepositional object represented by the letter vav can mean "him" or "it". If "`al" means "on," then "it" is more likely the *sulam* than Jacob, unless God was standing on top of the patriarch, or hovering over Jacob perhaps? There are many possibilities and each one paints a different picture.

Finally, I will present a note on the word "*vehinei*" and disjunction in biblical storytelling, which will help us navigate the language of the Bible and home in on where it is ambiguous and where it is less ambiguous. "*vehinei*" begins with a disjunctive vav. The letter vav as an affix can mean "and" or it can carry a divisive, disjunctive meaning, more like "but." *Hinei* is a narratively disjunctive word. It often signals the appearance of a supernatural or surprise entity in the story.[27] Sometimes it begins a new pericope, or story scene.

These are not the only disjunctive indicators. Normally, biblical Hebrew order begins with the verb, then the subject, then any objects. Unlike tenses in modern, Western languages (such as past, present, and future), biblical Hebrew relies more

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[27] see Genesis 15:4, 18:2, 22:13, 24:15, 29:25 and others.

heavily on a spectrum of completed or perfect actions, and ongoing or imperfect actions, which form layers of time. The verbal form which is most often used is called *vayiktol*, and acts as a narrative past tense, which in English works sort of like, "He ran, then he jumped, then he landed. Then he told someone about it." Since this verbal form carries the narration of a scene, the "then" and the "and" are often inherent *though they are not explicitly stated*. Translations often include them to create a depth to narration. Otherwise, the story continues like Newtonian physics with the same subject in a series of actions until something causes a reaction. There are certain cues, disjunctive markers, which will cause a change. In biblical Hebrew, the word "*hinei*," a change in sentence order, or a change in verb form could signal a subject change as well. It might be the only signal that the subject has changed. These markers can be helpful in determining the subject of an ambiguous phrase, or in determining if it is possible to determine the subject.

CH. 2 GENESIS 15:6

The biblical Avram (later Abraham) makes the first particularistic covenant with God. Millenia of readers know him for his ability to haggle with God to save any

innocent souls in Sodom and Gomorrah. However, in an earlier scene, readers have

been haggling to decide whether God credits Avram with righteousness or if Avram

credits righteousness to the Almighty. The ambiguity in Genesis 15:6 brings up

questions of the directionality in human's relationship with the Divine and affects

theology from Nehemiah through the New Testament and beyond.

TRANSLATION OF GENESIS 15:6

In order to explore the text and its potential ambiguities, I will start by

presenting the Hebrew and a base translation. The other verses of the pericope have

been included. As previously discussed, sudden disjunction could indicate the subject

and position of characters and objects within the narrative. The verse in question will be

highlighted as will grammatical nuances that will be discussed. The safely assumed

character is indicated by brackets. Words which are not easily translated will be

indicated by italicized transliteration. The verse which will be the center of our focus is

presented in bold and any other notes on the narrative are in parentheses.

טו,ד וְהִנֵּה דְבַר־יְהוָה אֵלָיו לֵאמֹר לֹא יִירָשְׁךָ זֶה כִּי־אִם אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִמֵּעֶיךָ הוּא יִירָשֶׁךָ׃

טו,ה וַיּוֹצֵא אֹתוֹ הַחוּצָה וַיֹּאמֶר הַבֶּט־נָא הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וּסְפֹר הַכּוֹכָבִים אִם־תּוּכַל לִסְפֹּר אֹתָם וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ כֹּה יִהְיֶה זַרְעֶךָ׃

טו,ו וְהֶאֱמִן בַּיהוָה וַיַּחְשְׁבֶהָ לּוֹ צְדָקָה׃

טו,ז וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאוּר כַּשְׂדִּים לָתֶת לְךָ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת לְרִשְׁתָּהּ׃

(The pericope begins with a disjunctive shift "*vehinei*," translated as "And suddenly") 4:

"And suddenly *D'var Adonai*[28] appeared to him [Avram] saying, 'This one [Avram's

servant] shall not be your heir, rather your own issue will be your heir.'"

5: And then he [*D'var Adonai*] took him [Avram] (the continued use of narrative past

maintains the previous subject) outside, and said, "Look heavenward and count the stars

if you can count them." And he [*D'var Adonai*] said to him [Avram], "Here [as a

comparison] will be your issue."

6a: Because (the change in verb tense is once again disjunctive and could indicate a

causative meaning for the *vav*) he [Avram] had faith in *Adonai*,

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[28] For the most part, I use the transliteration preferred by HUC-JIR. However, I choose to deviate in on a few words which appear commonly enough as I present them here. The other most notable examples are *tzedakah* and Tzipporah in which I have preserved the "tz" as a *tzadi*. I will also be using "ch" in place of the letter *chet* as I will need to differentiate between *chet* and *heh* in chapter 3.

6b: and he [?] credited it [*tzedakah*] (this word is the only feminine referent in the two clauses) to him [?] a *tzedakah*. (I've maintained the ambiguity so it may be explored in the body of the chapter).

(The narrative past returns with a clear reference to subject) 7: "And he [*Adonai*] said to him [Avram], "I am *Adonai* who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land as a possession."

TEXTUAL EXEGESIS

The different understandings created by Genesis 15:6 present radically different ideas of relationship with Deity. Either God credits Avram or vice versa. Early Christian scriptures lean heavily towards one option while early Jewish commentators exhibit more diversity in their opinions.[29] The scene immediately surrounding the verse does

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[29] Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), xi. He highlights the Christian reliance on the stability of the Septuagint and their reception history as a circumvention of the Jewish retention of and continued interpretation of the MT. See also Tessa Rajak, *Translation and Survival: the Greek Bible and the Ancient Jewish Diaspora* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), https://oxford-universitypressscholarship-com.huc.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199558674.001.0001/acprof-9780199558674, 279 and how Christian interpreters claimed to have the authentic version, uncorrupted by Jewish distortions.

not clarify the relation between Avram and the Deity in either direction. The scene

begins when the *D'var Adonai* appears, "*vehinei*," and causes Avram to go outside. This

entity continues speaking to Avram. The subjects of the scene are clear until halfway

through verse 6, after which ambiguity appears in the form of an unknown subject and

object and brings with it thousands of years of questions. The 6th verse has two clauses.

In the first clause, the narrative scene switches from *vayiktol* to a *v'qatal* verb form,

which easily indicates a subject change. This changed verb form coupled with the

prepositional object of "*beAdonai*" can safely be read using Avram as the subject, which

gives us 6a: "Because he [Avram] had faith in *Adonai*." So, in the first stich, we have our

patriarch as the subject. But it is not clear if he continues as the subject of the phrases

which follows.

Having cleared up the first part of verse 6, in 6b we run into our ambiguous

trouble: "and he [?] credited it to him [?] *tzedakah*." In this second clause, an

unidentified "he" (a singular third person masculine subject) credits to a "him" (another

singular third person masculine indirect object) the direct object *tzedakah*. In this stich,

the verb form changes back to the narrative past. However, it is unclear whether the

subject continues with Avram from 6a, or switches to the Divine entity. The switch

could be translated as a continuation, "and (after believing in *Adonai*) he (Avram) credited it to him (*Adonai*) *tzedakah*." Alternatively, the change in verb form could represent a change in verb subject or indicate the resumption of the subject which had appeared in the previous *vayiktol* verbs. This would give us, "because he [Avram] had faith in *Adonai*, he [*Adonai*] credited *tzedakah* to him [Avram]." If it does return to the Deity as the subject, then it flows nicely into 7a's narrative past verb, whose object indicates its subject as "I am *Adonai*."

This ambiguity is further complicated as there are actually three referents in this scene, which starts off with "*D'var Adonai*" approaching Avram, and then also the potential for "*Adonai*" addressing Avram. To form a singular translation, one must decide if a word or thing of *Adonai* is synonymous with *Adonai*, and then decide whether it is the subject or the object of 6B. The scene lacks a back-and-forth dialogue and instead attributes multiple verbs to *D'var Adonai*. Targum Onkelos (circa 2nd century CE) interprets *D'var Adonai* and *Adonai* as synonymous in this scene.[30] For 6a it even replaces "*beAdonai*" with the Aramaic equivalent of "utterance/word", "*mamre*".

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[30] Targum Onkelos Genesis 15:6.

HALOT translates it as "word of the God."[31] Most uses of this phrase are phrase objects.[32] However, Joshua chapter 8 verse 7-8 move between *Adonai* and *D'var Adonai* synonymously. For the purpose of creating a manageable amount of ambiguity, we will treat the entities as synonymous in this scene as well, already proving the reader capable of holding multiple meanings in one place.

Even if one assumes that *D'var Adonai* and an unnamed but self-proclaimed *Adonai* are the same, that still leaves us with two of the same categories of referent: singular third person masculine. Normally, when one employs language correctly, the meaning can be intentionally made clear. If someone says Sally and Dave are coming and she is bringing the salad, we know the 'she' is Sally. Hebrew verbs demonstrate their subject's person, number, and gender in their morphology. We have seen a couple of examples already from Gutman's article about third person null subjects where he gives many cogent examples of third person null verbs in Hebrew in which the antecedent remains clear. However, he accounts for Schlonsky's "illicit"[33] examples

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[31] Köhler Ludwig, Walter Baumgartner, and Mervyn Edwin John Richardson, in *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), דבר pp. 211-212.

[32] Ex 9:20; Nu 15:31; De 5:5

[33] Eynat Gutman, "Third Person Null Subjects in Hebrew, Finnish and Rumanian: an Accessibility-Theoretic Account," *Journal of Linguistics* 40, no. 3 (2004): pp. 463-490, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022226704002890, 468.

when the verb conjugation and the "coordinated sentences"[34] do not clearly carry the

antecedent. Genesis 15:6b falls into this category.

Not only does this verse lack a clear antecedent, the ambiguity of the meaning of

the word "*tzedakah*" reinforces the multiple possibilities of meaning for the syntax. The

field of meaning for *tzedakah* can influence the assumption of the subject of v 6b.

Tzedakah can mean righteousness, justice, or charity. This range of definitions can each

be attributed to either of the speakers. Here alone we have created six different

permutations of the sentence.[35] These different potential interpretations carry

theological questions with them. Can we as humans give God credit for charity or

kindness? Perhaps it is easier to credit God for righteousness or justice? And should our

theology or perceptions of our theology decide the answer, or do they instead limit the

answers.

For example, many interpreters were more comfortable seeing "charity" or

"justice" as flowing from the Deity to the human and not from a mortal character to the

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[34] ibid 469.

[35] These permutations are *Adonai* credited righteousness to Avram; *Adonai* credited justice to Avram, *Adonai* credited charity to Avram; Avram credited righteousness to *Adonai*; Avram credited justice to *Adonai*; Avram credited charity to *Adonai*.

Divine.[36] In *Man and God*, Eliezar Berkovits defines *tzedakah* as something which

"represents a bond between the two that motivates the one to act toward the other with

kindness and charity because one sets value by the other." Berkovits does not believe it

is possible for a mortal to do this stating, it is "not to be expected that man could

practice [*tzedakah*] toward God."[37] He says that if we interpret the passage as "God

credited *tzedakah* to Avram," then this acknowledgement was in exchange for

something that normally would not be *tzedakah*.[38] As several of our commentators

suggest, Avram's faith in God cannot be righteous since he should just believe in and

have faith in God without a *quid pro quo*. And since one cannot offer to God *charity* or

kindness, Berkovits suggests that this passage should actually be read "as if" or as an

approach to performing charity for the Divine.[39] Berkovits is explicit that one cannot

give God charity or show God kindness, but if one could, it would be Avram in this

verse. Here we have the different meanings of the word *tzedakah* presented in ways

which may alter our understanding of the subject and object in the sentence, or vice

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[36] see Rashi, Sforno, Radak, The Rosh on this verse.
[37] Berkovits. *Man and God*, "Chapter 7 Sedeq and S'daqah" sefaira.org line 18.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.

versa. Nothing in the flow of the scene, its verb forms, or its word choice clearly

indicate who is acting upon whom.

We have presented the two main ambiguities that exist in this one verse. The

first main ambiguity is that the pronouns used have no clear antecedents. The use of

third person masculine pronouns in a scene with no clear subject patterns makes

determining the subject and object difficult, as stated above. The second major

ambiguity is the semantic field of meaning for the word *tzedakah*. For some, the

interpretation of this word influences the translation of subject and object in the phrase.

The effect that the interpretation of the subject or of *tzedakah* can have on each other

creates a loop where the meaning of each word changes the meaning of each other word

in the phrase. Now that we have narrowed down and defined the ambiguity in the

grammar, we will review how historical commentators have approached these

discontinuities.

OTHER HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Translators and commentators have struggled to bring clarity to the second half

of verse 6 for thousands of years. They fall into three groups. Some translators choose to

leave the ambiguity alone, translating "he" and not making any indication as to who the

referent is. The other two groups make clear decisions, with most choosing the Divine

agent as the subject and fewer choosing Avram as the subject.

Many, particularly modern, translations leave the verse ambiguous, assuming

that an uncapitalized 'he' refers <u>either</u> to *Adonai* or to Avram. Their translation of

"credited" or "*vayachsheveha*" varies,[40] but their lack of decision on who "he" might be

is consistent: "he credited it to him" (NIV), "he counted it to him" (ESV and AV), "it

was credited to him" (ISV), "he reckoned it to him" (ASV). However, most

interpretations indicate that the subject of 6b "he" who does the crediting is the Deity,

not Avram. This is the most prevalent view. Most English translations do this merely by

capitalizing "He," for example "And because he put his trust in the LORD, He reckoned

it to his merit." (NJPS, NKJV, NASB, and others) There are many interpretations,

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[40] The difference between these seemed negligible compared to other points in this verse, and I chose "credited" because it seemed strongly transitive and felt close to the "accounting root" which Judaism uses during seasons of repentance and aligns well in theme with Christian use of this passage.

beginning with the New Testament and continuing through the modern day which indicate their preference for God as the subject more explicitly.

Most interpretations of Genesis 15:6 make the Deity the subject of the last phrase. Paul's *Letter to the Romans* (Mid-1st century)[41] references this verse twice, clearly indicating that Paul believed that God credited Avram with *righteousness*. (NIV Rm 4:3 and 4:9). The first citation quotes the Torah, "What does Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.'" (NIV Rm 4:3). The passage continues to describe how other, later believers are also credited for their faith. (v5) In verse 9 he explicitly states, "...We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness."

In this early proto-Christian tradition, the implications of choosing a meaning are clear:

> "This is why 'it was credited to him as righteousness.' The words 'it was credited to him' were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God

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[41] A mid-1st century dating makes this text one of the oldest texts about Jewish life in Antiquity; keep in mind the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Talmud point to the possibility that the Tanakh had not been fully canonized yet)

will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our

Lord from the dead." (vv. 22-24)

For this interpretation in Romans, making God the subject of 6b extends the

merit to contemporary readers as well. Lloyd Gaston's argument for Paull's

understanding of merit from Genesis 15 links to later commentaries through Isaiah

51:1-8, where future generations are told "to look to…Abraham and Sarah (v.1b-2a)."

According to Gaston, this passage references "the promise of YHWH's righteousness

(viz, Gen 15:6)."[42] He rests this assumption upon the parallel in the first verse of chapter

51, that places "pursuers of *tzedek*" in symmetry with "seekers of *Adonai.*" This creates a

relationship wherein God expresses righteousness by fulfilling God's end of the

covenant. Abraham believed and did what he was told, and the reward was paid out over

time (as an expression of God's *tzedakah*), not only to Abraham, but also to the

generations to come.[43] According to Gaston, if [Paul] "wanted to find the righteousness

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[42] Lloyd Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 52.
[43] ibid 56.

of God applied to the salvation of Gentiles there is no other passage in the Torah to which he could have turned but Gen 15:6."[44]

Many Jewish interpreters make the Divine the subject of Genesis 15:6 as well, including Rashi, Sforno, Radak, and the Rosh. They do so for a variety of reasons. Rashi begins by elaborating that "Because [Avram] believed" (6a) means Avram did not ask God for a sign concerning the promise of a biological heir. However, Rashi must then address the question from Avram in verse 8, "By what shall I know?" According to Rashi, the question does not refer to the miraculous promise. Rather he imagines that Avram asks, "according to what merit, shall this be fulfilled?"[45] Rashi answers this question with the fact that, shortly after in the narrative, Avram sacrifices animals to *Adonai*. Therefore, Avram merits his great promise with sacrifice and only questioned if he did enough to deserve it.

Sforno (Rabbi Obadja Sforno ca. 1475-1550, Italy) explains that when God affirms Avram's faith, by calling the mortal "righteous," it undermines anyone who

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[44] ibid 58. However, Gaston undermines this point when he says that Paul does not justify "individuals by their faith but" "the legitimacy of his apostleship to and gospel for the Gentiles." On p. 57.

[45] Rashi on Genesis 15:6.

reads Avram's later question "how will I know" (v. 8) as doubt instead of faith.[46] By

accepting that God is the subject, these commentators preserve the faith of their

religious patriarch.

The minority opinion holds that Avram is the subject of stich 6b and he credited

the Divine with *tzedakah*. The Book of Nehemiah offers what might be the earliest

interpretation of 6b (even before Paul), "Finding his heart to be faithful before You

[God] ……. You [God] kept your promise, because You are righteous" (NJPS 9:8).[47] This

opinion from a book in the Hebrew canon, in which mortals credit God with *tzedakah*,

contrasts with the interpretations from the book of Romans, discussed previously.

Perhaps this Hebrew source begins a precedent for later Jewish sources to be more

comfortable with a bi- directional relationship between mortals and the Deity.

The Jewish interpretations maintain a multi-directional relationship with one

another as well. Ramban (Rabbi Mosheh ben Nachman 1194-1270 Spain and Israel)

initially disagrees with Rashi's opinion. Instead, Ramban sides with the idea that Avram

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[46] See Sforno on Genesis 15:6.

[47] The midrash on this verse upholds Nehemiah's interpretation and cites two other times when G-d "found" biblical heroes worthy and displayed some form of *tzedek* or *tzedakah*. The midrash cites Psalm 89, where [G-d] "found David" (v21). Previously the Psalmist had proclaimed, "…they are exalted through Your righteousness" (v17).

ascribing credit *to the Divine* actually undermines Avram's faith. The commentator

expresses skepticism that Avram should be rewarded for faith, as if faith were an

exceptional act instead of the prophet's norm. Ramban asks incredulously, "Why

wouldn't he believe in [God]!?"[48] Avram was a prophet who heard the word of God

directly, and he was later willing to sacrifice his own miraculous son. Instead, Ramban

prefers Avram as the subject of 6b recognizing God's righteousness in bestowing

offspring to Avram *unconditionally*. It is not Avram's belief which merits such blessings.

Rather, it is because God is good and righteous that the Deity bestows an heir upon

Avram. This commentator cites an earlier verse, Gen 15:1, when God says to Avram,

"fear not". Ramban interprets these verses together stating that God reassures Avram

that the promise of offspring will be fulfilled no matter what. However, Ramban then

counters his own argument, acknowledging that one could easily draw the opposite

conclusion, especially when comparing 15:6 to other parts of the Avram/Abraham story.

The commentator begins this counter argument by pointing out that in verse 1, God

may say, "fear not," but God also mentions that "[Avram's] reward will be very great."

Ramban also cites Psalm 106:31, which credits generations with righteousness because

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[48] Ramban on Genesis 15:6.

of Pinchas' actions, "It was credited to his [Pinchas] merit for all generations for eternity." However, Ramban explicitly states that his original argument--that Avram's faith is true and Avram recognized God's righteousness as a non-*quid-pro-quo* goodness-- is "the most correct [interpretation]."[49]

In his commentary on the Torah, Bachya (Bachya ben Asher ibn Halawa 1255–1340 Spain) sides with Ramban's original opinion. He restates, "God will bless and do this [give Avram the biological offspring] through [God's] *tzedak[ah]* and not through Avram's merit. As the Ramban, may his memory be a blessing, interpreted."[50] But, like Ramban, Bachya also briefly acknowledges that the opposite translation could be possible.

Lloyd Gaston proposes that keeping Abraham as the subject of 6b constitutes a biblical parallelism, holding the two stichs as simultaneously true and making the two stichs as parts of a parallelism.[51] He situates the scene as "an individual lament" in which it is "quite appropriate for the passage to end with both 'a confession of trust' (6a)

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[49] Ibid.

[50] Rabbeinu Bachyah on Genesis 15:6 *Bar-Ilan University. The Responsa Project. [Ramat Gan, Israel]: Bar-Ilan University, 2000.*

[51] Lloyd Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 47.

and a 'praise of God' (6b)."[52] He cites a litany of psalms which include both

characteristics. For example, Psalm 7:18 "I will praise *Adonai* for [God's] *tzedek*; and

sing to the Name of *Adonai* the most high."[53] Gaston makes a good case for Avram's

ability to pronounce *Adonai*'s righteousness in this scene, even if he remains in the

minority opinion.

This intense historical debate over the ambiguity of this half a verse causes me to

wonder: Why would a Divine text leave room for ambiguity? Is it so we can create a new

answer to approach each new moment in history as our interpreters and commentators

have over the centuries? Or were we meant to have understood these multiple answers

in *every* moment in history?

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[52] Ibid 50.

[53] Ibid 51 Gaston used NT numbering and cites 7:17, I've used the traditional Jewish citation. Gaston lists
all of these psalms: 5:7-8; 7:17; 22:30-31; 31:1; 35:28; 36:5-6, 10; 40:11; 51:13-15; 69:27; 71:14-15a, 18b-19,
24; 88:12; 143:1, 11.

MULTIPLE MEANINGS

Both Bachyah and Ramban agree that either translation is possible, even though they lean in a certain direction. Thousands of years of commentators and translators have tried to 'solve' the ambiguity of this verse. But perhaps they have not agreed on a single interpretation because the passage was never meant to be solved. Nothing in the narrative context, grammar, vocabulary, or elucidations of the commentators resolves the ambiguity satisfactorily. If we accept the text we received as a whole, the many meanings are not just possible, they are intended.

The range of ambiguity in this verse will be easier to accept than that in other verses. This ambiguity raises questions for historical interpreters who wondered if-and often doubted that-- Avram was able to credit anything to the Divine. It also raises questions about whether faith in God should be given freely or if faith is just a means to a reward. Overall, whomever the subject and object are, or whatever *tzedakah* may have meant, this verse represents a complementary relationship. Party A said something nice about Party B. Saying that faith is good and righteous or saying that God is kind to us costs the reader and interpreter very little. This ambiguity creates a "yes and" situation. As readers, we may easily accept any of the interpretations, but can we accept them all at

once? Can we accept that Avram earned miraculous treatment for himself and

generations of others, including those of different faiths?

If we inherited Scripture to understand Divinity and to understand our

relationships to Divinity and the world, then the responsibility to bridge the gap

between human understanding and Divine revelation falls on the reader. It means

fighting deep drives to find the one "correct" answer, and to place meanings in tight,

neat groups. It might mean that another tradition may claim or reinterpret a verse which

your tradition holds as a foundation to its own uniqueness. The ambiguity in the Bible

helps the text adjust to the changing world by letting each reader explore within the

range of possibilities, to find one answer, or many answers, or no answers. The world

today and throughout history might look different if readers in the past had embraced

the whole of possible interpretation at once instead of treating faith as a zero-sum game.

GENESIS 15:6 CONCLUSION

The world probably looked very different when Avram was called upon in this

story. The buildup to the verse in question has *D'var Adonai* ask Avram to step outside

and see the stars in the sky (v. 4). This divine entity continues, "these will be as your

offspring." After the disjunctive "*hinei*" appearance of *D'var Adonai* in verse 4, the

infinitive form, *lei'mor* introduces the dialogue, and the narrative continues in verse 5

with regular *vayiktol* verbs. Since the last subject directly referenced was *D'var Adonai*,

it could be logical to attribute the first verb of verse 6 to the same subject rendering,

"Because he [continued *D'var Adonai*] had faith in *Adonai*."

This continuation does not work, firstly, because the object is synonymous with

the subject. While possible, it seems less likely that the Deity would interact with the

Deity's self in this way.[54] Secondly, the change in verb form from narrative past in verse

5 to a vav and *qatal*[55] form in verse 6 is disjunctive and probably signals a subject

change. Having accepted the disjunction of 6a, we have two possible interpretations of

the second half of the verse. First, the new subject, Avram,[56] continues as the subject of

the next phrase, taking up the *vayiktol* verb and rendering the verse: "[Avram] had faith

in *Adonai*, and [Avram] credited it to [*Adonai*] for *tzedakah*." The second possibility is

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[54] However, if we open the door to separate Divine entities, with *D'var Adonai*, as a messenger of *Adonai* had faith in *Adonai*, then this verse has many more possibilities which will not be explored in this thesis.
[55] This form acts similarly to a past participle in Biblical Hebrew and it has been noted just to indicate that a change in verb form has occurred.
[56] The new subject is actually an unnamed antecedent which is assumed to be Avram as the only other person there.

that 6b includes a response from the Deity, as one might have in a dialogue. Perhaps

Avram believed, and the Deity *responded* by crediting to him *tzedakah*. Verse 7 offers

no grammatical hint, since its *vayiktol* verb continues with (or returns to) *Adonai*, who

names the self as speaker with the first-person singular pronoun. So, we are left with the

question of 6b: Does Avram continue the expression of faith with crediting to *Adonai*,

or, since *Adonai* drives the speech in this scene, does *Adonai* credit Avram?

There are three interpretive options: the first is to leave the ambiguity; the

second is to maintain Avram as the subject of both verbs, crediting the divine speaker;

and the third is to start with Avram as the subject of the first verb and move him to the

object of the second, in which God rewards Avram for his loyalty. Most historical

commentators, including the early proto-Christian interpretations of Paul, prefer the

Divine as the acting agent in 6b, but a few Jewish commentators conclude the opposite.

I am encouraged by the medieval Jewish commentators who make space for both

interpretations, and the modern translations that do not choose at all. Having delved

into both sides, all answers seem to equally support the unresolvable ambiguity of the

verse. Through all of them, one can experience a depth and range of interpretive

options. If Avram, or Abraham, haggling with the Deity can be the same hero who

blindly puts his son on an altar, perhaps *Adonai* can reward his faith and Avram can

conversely pass a sort of judgment on the Deity, recognizing *Adonai*'s potential for

tzedakah. And we, as future readers, can have our ambiguity and our certainty too.

CH. 3 EXODUS 4:24-27

Like the previous verse from Genesis, the scene which occurs in Exodus 4:24-26

contains ambiguous words and ambiguous syntax, particularly with third person

singular masculine pronouns. This scene has been covered extensively by scholars from

many backgrounds. They have come to no easy answers. In this pericope, Moses and his

family camp for the night, and *Adonai* visits them and attacks "him." During the attack,

Tzipporah, Moses' wife, circumcises her son and touches (also approaches or falls

before) someone, which ends the fight. She calls presumably whomever she touches a

phrase which appears nowhere else and whose field of meaning is much less clear than

our previous hapax legomenon of *sulam*. Our example in Genesis was easy by

comparison; here in Exodus, we will travel from fighting God to Isis and back again.

It would be easiest, maybe, to simply wring what answers we can from the

grammar in order to figure out what the text may have intended. According to John T.

Willis, the purpose of this close reading "is to attempt to recover the original text of

each biblical passage."[57] However, as this thesis suggests, the lack of answers may point

to an ambiguous original text, especially for Exodus 4:24-26. The syntax ambiguity in

Genesis provided only two options, but the pericope in Exodus is far more complex.

Those who interpreted this pericope from Exodus often support their choices seemingly

from outside of the text.[58] They often delve further into the literary theory and

theological apologetics than they do the grammatical ambiguity. Since this pericope

lends itself strongly to proofs that work from the outside cultural context in toward the

textual ambiguity, the organization of historical interpretations in this chapter will

deviate from the previous chapter. Some of the insights and interpretations from

commentators will be inserted into the textual discussion, and some of the more literary

imaginings will be presented more fully in the following section.

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[57] Willis. *Yahweh and Moses in Conflict the Role of Exodus 4:24-26 in the Book of Exodus.* 3

[58] It is important to note that while many earlier sources such as the *targumim* can offer us clues as to the meaning of ambiguous passages, there is no proof that they would have worked from a less ambiguous text than we are or that they somehow had a better answer than we do. Therefore, they will be given the same trust and weight as medieval and modern interpretations.

In Genesis, the combination of subject or object and any of the meanings of

tzedakah produced relatively positive theological messages about potential relationships

with the Divine. In Exodus 4:24, the potential theological messages produced by the

ambiguity stretching into several verses are far more numerous and less clear. The scene

describes not only a Divine-mortal relationship, but also contains a ritual layer in its

presentation of circumcision. Is this text meant to teach us how circumcision changed?

Or how to perform it? Is this text about Moses' decision-making during the process of

circumcision or his fight with the Divine entity? Perhaps the range of meaning we are

meant to draw from directs us in familial obligations to one another. The many possible

meanings of these verses have created a mountain of interpretations. Like the Divine

promise of Avram's offspring, it is difficult to imagine or count them all. However, in its

complexity, this expansive field of meaning may change the reader as they try to

understand it, even and especially as they come to no easy conclusions.

TRANSLATION OF EXODUS 4:24-26

Here, as I did before, I present a translation for reference, which highlights some

of the notable areas in the passage. Unlike in Genesis, the ambiguity in this pericope

does not center upon a single verse but spreads throughout several verses. The

ambiguities I explore will be bolded, as will the grammatical nuances that will be

discussed. The safely assumed character is indicated by brackets. Words which are not

easily translated will be indicated by italicized transliteration and any other notes

provided appear parenthetically.

כד וַיְהִי בַדֶּרֶךְ בַּמָּלוֹן וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ יְהוָֹה וַיְבַקֵּשׁ הֲמִיתֽוֹ
כה וַתִּקַּח צִפֹּרָה צֹר וַתִּכְרֹת֙ אֶת־עׇרְלַת בְּנָ֔הּ וַתַּגַּע לְרַגְלָ֑יו וַתֹּ֕אמֶר כִּי חֲתַן־דָּמִים אַתָּה לִֽי׃
כו וַיִּרֶף מִמֶּ֑נּוּ אָ֚ז אָֽמְרָ֔ה חֲתַן דָּמִים לַמּוּלֹֽת׃

24. It happened (this phrase is another disjunctive indicator of a new pericope) on the way at the encampment. *Adonai* encountered **him [?]** and sought to kill **him [?]**. (either **Moses from previous scene or Gershom from following verse**)

25: Tzipporah took (note the new verb form accompanied by a subject change) a flint and cut the foreskin of her son and she *taga'* (I will translate this as "touched" though there are other options which influence interpretation of "his") **his [?]** nethers ("*regaiv*" could mean legs or genitals neither of which seem to change the meaning of the scene greatly) and said, "for **you** are a *chatan-damim* to me."

26: And **he [probably *Adonai*]** let go of from **him/i**t then she said, "*chatan-damim lamulot.*"

TEXTUAL EXEGESIS

After God[59] convinces Moses to accept his mission to rescue the Israelites, Moses

sets off from Midian and has an adventure along the way, which is marked by

ambiguous violence and familial relations. While much of this pericope contains

ambiguity in meaning, this chapter will home in on the masculine singular pronouns

with no clear antecedent and on the words which may affect these antecedents. 1. The

ambiguous pronouns are **whom** *Adonai* attacks (v 24); 2.a. **whom** Zippora touches after

circumcising her son (v. 25), 2.b. which will also answer **whoever** is the *chatan-damim*

(vv. 25, 26), and finally, 3. **who** is let go in verse 26. The words that indicate these actors

include *vataga', chatan-damim*, and possibly *lamulato*.[60]

Before we delve into the pronoun ambiguities from above, it is important to note

how interpreters use the previous verses to establish context for this scene. Many

interpretations comment on the potential links to the previous scene's discussion of the

death of the firstborn, "Thus says *Adonai*, my son, my firstborn is Israel (Ex 4:22) I

will slay your son, your firstborn (Ex 4:23)." These verses may hint that the son (now

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[59] Many of the interpretations, particularly older, religiously rooted ones, will replace *Adonai* with some sort of angel, for the purposes of keeping the verses as stable as possible, we will often ignore this point and refer to *Adonai* as such throughout this work.

[60] Talbot's summary is excellent; see Talbot, "Tsipporah, Her Son, and the Bridegroom of Blood: Attending to the Bodies in Ex 4:24–26. 2. The difference between "*chatan-damim*" and "*chatan-damim lamulot*" is presented in a fourth subsection of TEXTUAL EXEGESIS on pg. 60.

understood as the firstborn) is the reason our biblical family is attacked. A few theories

reach further back, to verse 19, where Moses is reminded of his murder. This might hint

that Moses is attacked. Other interpretations highlight connections between this

pericope and the next part of the Exodus narrative, which leads into the Paschal Lamb

and the saving power of anointing, *vataga',* the lintels with blood. However, before

Moses can return to Egypt, he or his son must encounter *Adonai* one more time when

Adonai attacks.

1. <u>**WHOM** DOES *ADONAI* ATTACK?</u>

"It happened on the way at the encampment. *Adonai* encountered **him** and sought to kill
him."
      1.1. The first option for **whom** *Adonai* attacks is **Moses.** The Syriac Peshitta (ca.

2nd century CE) explicitly names Moses as the "him" who is attacked.[61] The Deity and

Moses had been speaking with one another in the previous scene. And, since we hold

that the scenes can be narratively connected, this juxtaposition makes Moses the last-

named antecedent. Moses fits easily as the main character of both the greater Exodus

story and the story of his family stopping for the night. As such, most interpreters

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[61] See Syriac Peshitta on Exodus 4:24. Dumbrell, "Exodus 4:24-26: A Textual Re-Examination." 285;
Willis, *Yahweh and Moses in Conflict the Role of Exodus 4:24-26 in the Book of Exodus.* 5.

choose Moses. Interpreters who choose Moses support their choice in a variety of ways, including through the context of the surrounding story.

1.1.a. The most common interpretation is that *Adonai* attacks Moses because Moses did not circumcise his son. This interpretation indicts him (or goes to lengths to defend him) for not circumcising his son.[62] This reading fits well with the flow of the pericope since Tzipporah circumcising the son halts the attack. However, most of these interpretations rely more on theological and literary embellishment than they rely on the textual ambiguity or even the rest of the text. Many of the interpretations base their decisions and expansions simply on their knowledge of circumcision and will be dealt with in more detail below.

1.1.b. Other interpreters claim that *Adonai* sought to kill Moses because he had previously taken a life.[63] In verse 19, God gives Moses his mission to return to Egypt with the context that "the men who sought your life are dead." Since these verses are so proximal, many have made a connection between the attack in our pericope and Moses' murder of an Egyptian in chapter 2. It may be important to note that while both the

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[62] See Exodus Rabbah 5:8; see also Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Sforno on Exodus 4:24.
[63] LXX implies he was eligible for death sentence; Propp favors this theory see Propp, *Exodus Ch 1-18*. (*Anchor Yale Bible Commentary* New York: Doubleday, 1999).

men from verse 19 and *Adonai* "sought" with the same verb, the men sought Moses' <u>life</u>

and *Adonai* seeks someone's <u>death</u>. Propp in the Anchor Yale Bible Commentary

translates "sought his death" as "execute" in our pericope, citing similar language in

Numbers 35 and 2 Kings 5.[64] There are also interpretations of *chatan-damim* which

support the connection to Moses' murder which will be discussed below.

    1.1.c. Finally, there are parallels in this pericope to a hero typology, wherein the

character is attacked by a supernatural being, like in the case of Jacob, who wrestled

with a being at night.[65] In line with the hero typology, some interpreters propose that

this pericope is even a strange dream sequence since it happens at night.[66] Basing their

choice on a hero typology--whether or not it is a dream sequence--helps commentators

chose their hero, Moses, over his son as the focus of this scene.

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[64] Propp, *Exodus Ch 1-18.* (*Anchor Yale Bible Commentary* New York: Doubleday, 1999).219

[65] Gen. 32:22-32, see Allen, *The "Bloody Bridegroom" in Exodus*; Propp, William H. *Exodus 1-18.* (*Anchor Yale Bible Commentary* New York: Doubleday, 1999). 233, and *The Bloody Bridegroom.* 500, which include Balaam's confrontation which does not happen at night. See also Willis. *Yahweh and Moses in Conflict the Role of Exodus 4:24-26 in the Book of Exodus.* Particularly chs. iii, and iv.

[66] See Propp, William H. *Exodus 1-18.* (*Anchor Yale Bible Commentary* New York: Doubleday, 1999) 233. And Willis. *Yahweh and Moses in Conflict the Role of Exodus 4:24-26 in the Book of Exodus.* Ch.iii.

1.2. Almost as likely, and maybe even more likely if one homes in on the pericope without the surrounding material, *Adonai* could attack the son.[67] Those who chose the son as their referent support their claim either through arguments around the circumcision or around the previous scenes' discussion of the firstborn. Additionally, some interpreters reference Tzipporah turning to her son in face of the attack, and following that, her address of **whomever** she touches after circumcising her son.

Dumbrell and Propp all cite Morgenstern, who rearranged the word for "encampment" from the root, *mem, lamed, nun* into the word for circumcision, *mem, lamed, heh*.[68] This produces: "*Adonai* encountered him and sought his death <u>at the circumcision</u>." Purportedly this causes Morgenstern to list the son as the recipient of the attack. The Church Father Augustine of Hippo (354–430 Modern-Day Algeria) also concludes that *Adonai* attacks the son. He focuses on the ritual of circumcision as a sacrament which saved the boy "as the Lord would have strangled the infant son of

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[67] Many scholars and commentator's name the son as Gershom, Moses' firstborn, aligning it with ideas of the firstborn, but since the text does not name the son, nor indicate explicitly that it is Moses' firstborn, "son" will suffice.

[68] Dumbrell, William. "Exodus 4:24-26: A Textual Re-Examination." The Harvard Theological Review 65, no. 2 (1972) 285; and Propp, William H. *Exodus 1-18*. (*Anchor Yale Bible Commentary* New York: Doubleday, 1999) 218.

Moses."[69] For Augustine, circumcision answers the question of "whom." Morgenstern

left the text ever so slightly, in order to use circumcision as a justification while

Augustine worked more within the text. Their assumptions that *Adonai* attack the son

fit well since he's the only other male character explicitly named in this pericope.

Talbot relates in a footnote the importance of "her son" in the Hebrew verse,

since this "makes the son's presence [in the pericope] unquestionable." Whereas

"[Moses'] presence would require reference back to v. 20."[70] Reading the scene

beginning with the son would cause the scene to flow as such: *Adonai* attacks the son,

presumably because he has not yet been circumcised. Then Tzipporah circumcises the

son and touches someone who is also undetermined (perhaps also the son if we take the

pericope in isolation with only named referents). The fighting stops because the issue

was resolved. And Tzipporah calls someone *chatan-damim*.

Talbot, relying heavily on the work of Brennan, suggests that the angry Deity

approaching the camp instigated an aggressive, and lifesaving, response from Tzipporah

as a mother. We will discuss more of Talbot's application of this theory below, but I

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[69] *Letter 23* excerpted and translated in John T. Willis, *Yahweh and Moses in Conflict the Role of Exodus 4:24-26 in the Book of Exodus* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010). 29.

[70] Talbot, "Tsipporah, Her Son, and the Bridegroom of Blood: Attending to the Bodies in Ex 4:24–26," *Religions* 8, no. 10 (2017): p. 205, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8100205.8

wish to point out here that she quotes Gafney, who states that Tzipporah is one "who

will stand up in the face of God if that is what is called for to save the life of her child."[71]

Thus, relying on a close and perhaps closed reading of this pericope, the application of

the character's emotions points strongly towards the son, possibly to the exclusion of

Moses entirely.[72]

While Talbot presents a theory which might remove Moses from the scene,

previously, we have seen him identified in the scene because he appeared earlier in

Exodus, even though he is not named again in our pericope. Following a similar

redaction critical theory, there are some who posit that the previous scene where Moses

and God discuss the killing of the *firstborn* indicates that it is the son, the firstborn,

whom *Adonai* attacks.[73] Another potential clue comes after our pericope, when the

Exodus story describes the Passover narrative. Propp describes, "the blood of [the son's]

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[71] Ibid. 12. She cites Gafney p. 48.

[72] Talbot compares this briefly to the Nativity scene. Further connections can be drawn particularly from the book of Mathew which parallels Jesus and Moses, with Herod and Pharaoh as their antagonists. In This gospel the family flees to Egypt and then returns when it is safe, similarly to Moses being told he could return. While the gospel of Mathew includes these parallels to Moses' story the Gospel of Luke highlights its families' overnight stay. There are some who translate *bamalon* as "at the inn" in our pericope. Perhaps there is an intentional parallel here though the appearance of a Divine figure differs greatly between the two stories.

[73] Propp, William H. *Exodus 1-18*. 239.

circumcision is homologous with the blood of the paschal lamb."[74] However, this

paschal parallel could hold even if *Adonai* attacks Moses and the son's circumcision acts

as a proxy. This hypothesis lends to a reading wherein the victim of the attack is the

same person whom Tzipporah touches, or "smears" with blood, as the lintel in the

Passover narrative. This "smearing" connection reminds us that, because these verses

hold multiple related ambiguous pronouns, the potential meanings increase rapidly

when any element is changed. One may choose the same referent in many of our

ambiguous places. Or as we will see, particularly with Ibn Ezra's interpretation, they can

change not only between verses but between stichs as well.

2.A. <u>WHOM</u> TZIPPORAH "TOUCHES"

"Tzipporah took a flint and cut the foreskin of her son and *taga'***his** nethers with it and
then she said "for you are a *chatan-damim* to me."

 The three singular, male (grammatically) characters whom Tzipporah might

touch are Moses, their son, or even *Adonai.*

2.a.1 Certain literary readings lead to interpretations that Tzipporah touches Moses

after circumcising their son because Moses was under attack and because they interpret

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[74] Ibid. 239.

chatan-damim as referring to Moses. While the normal grammatical usage would make

the son the antecedent, the literary evidence combined with the margin of error for

language makes Moses possible even if syntactically less probable. This harkens back to

the potential interdependence of our many underdetermined pronouns. So, some

arguments identify Moses since they previously identified him as the victim of the

attack, and others identify Moses because they believe that "*chatan-damim*" refers to

him. The latter argument makes him the **retro**cedent of "she touched **his** nethers."

2.a.2. However, the syntax of the verse makes the son more likely. He is the

immediately previous third masculine singular noun.[75] His nethers are also most

immediately located since he has just been circumcised and presumably Tzipporah

stands closest to him. Whether this circumcision saved the life of Moses or his son,

Middlekoop writes that touching the son would have been akin to the laying on of hands

on a goat to expiate sin.[76] However, this parallel would be stronger if the "laying on of

hands" were the same word or at least the same root in Hebrew as "she touched." The

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[75] See Gutman. "Third Person Null Subjects in Hebrew, Finnish and Rumanian: An Accessibility-Theoretic Account." *Journal of Linguistics* 40, no. 3 (2004) as cited in chapter 1. See also Waltke, Bruce K., and Michael Patrick. O'Connor. *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax.* Winona Lake, IN, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990. 175, and 305.

[76] Willis, *Yahweh and Moses in Conflict the Role of Exodus 4:24-26 in the Book of Exodus* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010). 37.

touching from our scene comes from the root *nun gimel ayin*, and the touching of a goat

comes from the root *samekh mem khaf.* The word that Tzipporah's "touching" actually

shares a root with is the marking of the lintel in the Passover scene as seen in Exodus

12:22, "*vehiga'tem* to the lintel and to the two doorposts."

2.a.3. In order for Tzipporah to touch *Adonai*'s nethers, some interpretations

translate the word *taga'* as something other than "touch." The Septuagint's most notable

deviation from the Masoretic Text translates *taga'* as "she fell". The Syriac goes a little

further to say that "she seized."[77] Interpreters who take this meaning of the verb intend

Tzipporah as the subject and have her prostrate toward the *Adonai* in supplication.[78] We

have also already related Talbot's theory that Tzipporah responded angrily at *Adonai,*

which lends support to a reading where she touches *Adonai*'s nethers. The theory holds

that if we use the probable emotions in the scene, Tzipporah protects her son from

Adonai. In which case, Moses might not even be there. However, since the theory bases

itself on the perceived rage of the mother, "touch" might not be strong enough of a

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[77] Willis, *Yahweh and Moses in Conflict the Role of Exodus 4:24-26 in the Book of Exodus* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010). 5.

[78] ibid 17. See also Dumbrell, "Exodus 4:24-26: A Textual Re-Examination." 288. If we translate *taga'* as "she fell", in my opinion "she" could also be the foreskin or *'orlah*, rendering "it fell". In Hebrew and Aramaic *'orlah* is feminine and since "she" could also be "it" which "fell at his feet." Reading "foreskin" would make "his nethers" once again the son's.

word. Many of these interpretations, though not all, assume that Tzipporah touches the

nethers of the same character whom she addresses as *chatan-damim*.

2.B. "**YOU** ARE A *CHATAN-DAMIM* TO ME."

25: Tzipporah took a flint and cut the foreskin of her son and she *taga'*his [?] nethers
and said, "for **you** are a *chatan-damim* to me."

      While most interpreters seem to define *chatan-damim* based on who they choose

as the antecedent for "you," or from whomever they choose as the victim of the attack,

perhaps it will be more beneficial to work in reverse and define the term in order to

determine whom it describes. Propp, quoting Mitchell, states firmly that the core

meaning of *chatan-damim* is "male relative by marriage," and narrows it down further as

most often either a "son-in-law or bridegroom."[79] Dumbrell also suggests that the root

might be related to an Arabic word for "to cut."[80] Therefore, *chatan-damim* can

represent any of the characters in their relationship to Tzipporah and in their

relationship to the circumcision as well.

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[79] Propp, *Exodus 1-18*. 210.

[80] Dumbrell,"Exodus 4:24-26: A Textual Re-Examination." 286

Targum Onkelos translates verse 25b, which contains the first iteration of

chatan-damim, as "by the blood of this circumcision the bridegroom/son-in-law is

returned to us."[81] The translation reinforces its interpretation in verse 26 with "were it

not for the blood of this circumcision, my bridegroom/son-in-law would be liable for

execution."[82] Propp also supports a reading of *damim* which relates to bloodguilt, either

of the victims or of the "perpetrators of heinous crimes."[83] Contextually, this is

bloodguilt that Moses is now saved from, referring to verse 19 where he is told that the

men no longer seek his death. Perhaps these interpreters still felt that the hero's valor

and honor were at stake, even if he had gotten away. So, they interpret this phrase to

mean some sort of expiation. This is in line with almost any interpretation of this

circumcision, as the circumcision ends the attack. However, even if Moses is the one

who is saved by this act, it does not necessarily mean he is the one whom Tzipporah

touches, though some use it as their proof for such. The question we are attempting to

narrow down is who is being attacked and why.

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[81] see Targum Onkelos on Exodus 4:25.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Propp, *Exodus 1-18.* 220.

Propp firmly believes that expiating Moses confirms that it is Moses whom Tzipporah touches.[84] According to Willis, Middlekoop even goes so far as to compare the touching of Moses after the circumcision to parallel the marking of Cain after his murder of Abel.[85] It both reaffirms the plural of the blood, *damim*, in a context of blood guilt as well as the protective nature of the circumcision. However, the language and words used in the two stories differ on everything except the plural form of blood. And Propp in *That Bloody Bridegroom* points out in a footnote that Cain's mark protected him from retribution since it was visible on his head whereas whatever mark lent to Moses through circumcision (especially since it was symbolically applied through his son) would have been covered.[86]

Propp and many others suggest that this pericope could represent a shift between circumcising premarital men to circumcising newly born children. Dumbrell points out that the root of *chatan* in Arabic means either "to cut" or "to be a relative."[87] He provides a comparison to *choten,* or "father-in-law", as well.[88] According to Propp in

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[84] Ibid. 236.

[85] Willis, *Yahweh and Moses in Conflict the Role of Exodus 4:24-26 in the Book of Exodus.* 38.

[86] Propp. "That Bloody Bridegroom (Exodus IV 24-6)." 509.

[87] Dumbrell,. "Exodus 4:24-26: A Textual Re-Examination." 286.

[88] Ibid. 287, referencing Junker.

The Bloody Bridegroom, the Samaritan Targum even translates *chatan-damim* as "father in law."[89] Robinson suggests that in taking over the job of circumcision that would have fallen to Jethro, Tzipporah becomes Moses' father-in-law and Moses becomes her son-in-law (another potential meaning of *chatan*).[90] Talbot, relaying a theory of Dozemann, also raises this possibility, suggesting that it is Moses who is attacked, saved, and called a *chatan-damim* as part of the story of "yet another female savior in Moshe's life."[91] Highlighting the Midianite connection in this passage, she cites Dozeman as saying that the story is an origin of a Midianite circumcision practice being brought to the Israelites.[92]

2.b.1. Most commentators continue to favor Moses as the *chatan*, demonstrated by the most common translation of *chatan* as "bridegroom," i.e., Tzipporah's husband. This lines up with him as the victim of *Adonai*'s attack and protagonist of the Exodus story. The circumcision either saves him through the magic of the blood/circumcision or through assuming the responsibility that he should have had in circumcising his son.[93]

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[89] Propp "That Bloody Bridegroom (Exodus IV 24-6)."497.

[90] Robinson, Bernard P. "Zipporah To the Rescue: a Contextual Study of Exodus Iv 24-6." 457-458.

[91] Talbot, "Tsipporah, Her Son, and the Bridegroom of Blood: Attending to the Bodies in Ex 4:24–26." 3.

[92] Ibid. 4. She cites Dozeman 156.

[93] Willis, *Yahweh and Moses in Conflict the Role of Exodus 4:24-26 in the Book of Exodus.* 19.

Talbot quotes Pardes who writes that in some ways, Tzipporah "usurp[s] the father's position."[94] So she names Moses as *chatan-damim* in some form, "one responsible for circumcision," which theories suppose could be any of the male relatives.[95] These interpretations reinforce the ideas that this male relation relies on some possible combination of marriage and/or circumcision.

2.b.2. Despite the frequent English translation of "bridegroom," some interpreters believe that Tzipporah calls the son "*chatan-damim.*" While the simplest explanation for this defines the phrase as the recipient of a circumcision, there are others. Rashi, for example, infers that "she said" was directed to her son, possibly accusing him of endangering Moses who is the *chatan-damim.*[96] Ibn Ezra also appears to believe that Tzipporah addresses her son.[97]

2.3. Perhaps the most interesting theories identify *Adonai* as the *chatan-damim.* Sforno (1475-1550 Italy) deviates from the more popular interpretations discussed above, identifying *Adonai* as the referent of this ambiguous phrase. He draws a parallel

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[94] Talbot, "Tsipporah, Her Son, and the Bridegroom of Blood: Attending to the Bodies in Ex 4:24–26." 83.
[95] It could be father, father-in-law, oldest brother of clan, etc. See above in the exploration of definitions of *chatan-damim*, most notably Bernard P. Robinson, "Zipporah To the Rescue: a Contextual Study of Exodus Iv 24-6," 458.
[96] See Rashi on Exodus 4:25.
[97] See Ibn Ezra on Exodus 4:25 and also Talbot, "Tsipporah, Her Son, and the Bridegroom of Blood: Attending to the Bodies in Ex 4:24–26." 3.

to the celebratory presence of God at a circumcision, or the presence of God at the Tabernacle, which seems a little out of place from our night attack. Sforno's theory then reads as an unexpected and sudden shift: having shown up as It normally would for the circumcision, this Divine Presence then seeks to kill Moses for neglecting to do it in a timely manner. Talbot, referencing Brennan's focus on the mother's and son's experience, interprets Tzipporah declaration as an angry exhortation, "words spoken to the violent deity, reflecting the anger the deity has projected into the environment and into the affected mother."[98] This stretches into other theories which interpret the whole pericope as a story of a demon or another deity.[99] Almost all theories, no matter which ambiguity they address, concur that this story's main moral is about the salvific nature of circumcision.

3. "HE LET GO OF **HIM**"

26: **He** [probably *Adonai*] let go of from **him/i**t then she said, "*chatan-damim lamulot*."

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[98] Ibid. 8.

[99] This has been envisioned either a clan deity or as specific Mesopotamian deities. See Propp, William H. *Exodus 1-18*. 240-241, and Willis, *Yahweh and Moses in Conflict the Role of Exodus 4:24-26 in the Book of Exodus*. ch. iv pp. 47-57, among others.

The first "He" most likely refers to *Adonai* since the attacker would have had the most agency to let anyone go. In order to find out who was released, we will continue to sort through the text. Since we have identified the first as *Adonai*, that leaves only **Moses** or **the son** as the object of this phrase. Presumably, whichever object is considered would have to align with the object of the attack in verse 24, though perhaps anything is possible.

4. "SHE SAID, 'YOU' ARE A *CHATAN-DAMIM LAMULOT*.'"

26: And **he [probably *Adonai*]** let go of from **him.** Then she said, "*chatan-damim lamulot.*"

Dumbrell writes that the Septuagint points to a scribal mix up from "*chatan*" to "*hatan-damim*," or "the blood has stood still." He further states that this interpretation reinforces *Adonai* as the *chatan-damim*.[100] Dumbrell also explores a theory that *lamulot* actually forms the first half of a construct form, "circumcision of," to a lost second element of the construct, "*beno*" "his son."[101] Though as previously stated in other examples, this argument rests less on the present textual ambiguity than on applied

[100] Dumbrell, William. "Exodus 4:24-26: A Textual Re-Examination." 288-9.
[101] Ibid. 289

reconstruction of a text we did not receive. Dumbrell also openly stated that he believed

the *chatan* of *chatan-damim* to be the keystone of understanding the term,[102] whereas

we have already seen interpretations which rely more heavily upon interpreting

"*damim.*"[103] Propp posits that this whole verse could be a reiteration of the previous

verse. However, he attributes it to an impersonal "they" instead of Tzipporah restating

what she has said already.[104] This "neuter" is often represented by feminine grammar in

Biblical Hebrew.[105] It is the *lamed* in this last word which gives it the causative value "by

means of" circumcision.[106]

As we have previously noted, the root of *chatan*: *chet*, *tav*, *nun* could be related

to circumcision, to male relatives, and to the verb for marriage. Propp cites two other

biblical stories where circumcision is a precursor to marriage.[107] However, in many

places the Bible makes it clear that circumcision is a rite performed on children. Propp

hypothesizes that a story acknowledging a shift in this practice should "bring into

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[102] Ibid. 286.

[103] See the *targumim* which speak about the bloodguilt of Moses, and particularly the not fully founded connection with Cain, which rests strongly upon the plural use of blood. See pages 55-56.

[104] Propp, *Exodus 1-18*. 220.

[105] Waltke, Bruce K., and Michael Patrick. O'Connor. *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*. Winona Lake, IN, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990. 288 pronouns, 291 fn 43 for verbal example in Judges 11:39 "so it became (3fs)a custom for all Israel, and 297 use of *zo't* as a feminine neutral.

[106] Propp, *Exodus 1-18*. 220.

[107] Ibid 237. He gives the examples of Genesis 34:14-17 and 1 Sam 18:25-27.

contact a new husband and a circumcised child."[108] It brings together both being

marked with blood and being called *chatan*. While this argument is as anthropological

as it is grammatical, it supports the idea that the ambiguity in this passage is intentional

and meant to convey a variety of meanings which are simultaneously true.

OTHER HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS

As we have seen, this passage from Exodus has inspired many interpretations.

Some interpreters base their choices on nuances in the text or in the narrative, often

searching for an antecedent in earlier verses. Some try to reconstruct the story based on

what they know about sociological practices or literary archetypes, or by delving into the

feelings of the characters in the story. Many leave the text itself a little further behind as

they craft their explanations. According to Willis, most early Jewish interpretations

focus on four points,[109] though in my opinion, most of these points can be categorized

well outside of our textual ambiguity and into more freely crafted interpretations. The

two most strongly related to this thesis are the power of protection that circumcision

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[108] Ibid. 237. See also Shankman, Ray. "The Cut That Unites: Word as Covenant in Exodus 4:24–26." *CrossCurrents* 41, no. 2 (1991): 168-78. Accessed January 12, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24459833. endnote 12

[109] Willis. *Yahweh and Moses in Conflict the Role of Exodus 4:24-26 in the Book of Exodus*. 16.

bestows and the drive to relieve blame from Moses for not fulfilling his obligation of circumcision. They mitigate his blame for his son not being circumcised mostly through midrashim, which blame Jethro or Tzipporah. The Christian tradition as well seems to focus on circumcision, not through the textual ambiguity, but rather through its relationship to Christianity as a universal religion and to Jesus as a Jewish man who was circumcised.[110] These interpretations can push against the boundaries of what we might consider Scripture, but they confirm the power present in biblical ambiguity.

Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (dating ranges from the 4th century to the 14th century) takes far more liberty in filling in the ambiguous gaps in this passage than any other translation (though all exegesis is eisegesis), especially given that this text was possibly meant to stand in for the biblical text. It explicitly names the son as Gershom. It also gives the backstory for the attack, saying that Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, prevented the circumcision of Gershom. And it even includes a statement that Eliezer, Moses' other son, had been circumcised, which is why only one son is circumcised in our pericope. Tzipporah takes the cut foreskin to the "Destroying Angel" (*Adonai*). Her speech in this targum is much more expansive, "the bridegroom wanted to circumcise,

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[110] Ibid. 25-28.

but the father-in-law prevented him. Now may the blood of this circumcision atone for

my husband." It attributes the second utterance to Tzipporah (instead of a neutral

"they" statement see above) as her "praise" of God, "how loved is this blood of the

circumcision that has returned the bridegroom from the hands of the Destroying

Angel."[111] "Destroying Angel" is the same phrase which Pseudo-Jonathon uses in

Exodus 12:23 for the Destroyer, from which the blood smeared on the lintels protects.

While it does seem that Pseudo-Jonathan makes some bold decisions and adds to the

story, there is an element of synthesized ambiguity in this targum's incorporation of

father-in-law, son, and husband, which could easily align with many of the theories

about the changes in circumcision and family relation attributed to *chatan-damim*.

Rashi understands Moses as the one who is attacked "because he had not

circumcised his son Eliezer." He references the Talmud,[112] where Rabbi Yose argues that

Moses waited to circumcise because they were traveling and traveling soon after a

circumcision would have endangered his son. According to this Talmudic sage, Moses

prioritized God's command to "Return to Egypt" over the command to circumcise one's

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[111] See Willis. *Yahweh and Moses in Conflict the Role of Exodus 4:24-26 in the Book of Exodus*. 6-7, and
Talbot, "Tsipporah, Her Son, and the Bridegroom of Blood: Attending to the Bodies in Ex 4:24–26." 3.
[112] See Rashi on Exodus 4:24. See also Talmud Bavli Nedarim 31b.

son on the eighth day, the latter being a generic command to all Hebrews and the

former being an immediate and direct command to Moses. The sage continues that the

sin over which *Adonai* attacked Moses was busying with the encampment before

circumcising. Rashi also cites the midrash from Exodus Rabbah 5:8 where the attacker[113]

swallows Moses to his nethers, which reminds Tzipporah to circumcise their son. Rashi

continues with Moses as the *chatan*, interpreting the *damim* to signify that his life had

been threatened, and now was saved "*lamulato*" by the circumcision.

Ibn Ezra interprets Moses as the first ambiguous "him", but he interprets the

attack as some sort of sickness which impedes Moses' ability to perform the

circumcision. This interpreter makes the son the retrocedent of the second "him" from

24, rendering "*Adonai* encountered **him [Moses]** and sought to kill **him [the son]**."[114]

While Ibn Ezra is correct that this could be the son since neither is named explicitly and

the son eventually is clearly referred to, it seems more likely that the objects of these two

verbs would be the same or would use the much more common indicator of an

antecedent. This tactic is less likely but still possible and it seems that Ibn Ezra has

wrung more from this text than many. He also interprets the nethers as Moses'

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[113] Remember that in the midrash and Rashi, they say that it is an angel in place of *Adonai* the attacker.
[114] See Ibn Ezra on Exodus 4:24-26.

comparing marking them with blood to marking the lintel in the Passover scene in order

to protect Moses from harm.[115] However, Ibn Ezra changes the object again, calling the

son the "*chatan*," as was "the custom of people to call a son that had been circumcised",

and the blood, "*damim*," referred to Moses' life having been threatened.[116]

Sforno posits that Moses was attacked and has Tzipporah address *Adonai* saying

that she and her husband had agreed at their marriage to circumcise their children and

that Moses was innocent of neglecting this commandment.[117] As mentioned above, he

also interprets the word "encountered" to signify that the Presence of the Deity, or

"*shekhinah*," appears at a circumcision, and may even be the origin of placing a chair at

circumcisions. In this way, he demonstrates a crisp route as to how textual ambiguity

might affect one's life in very concrete ways.

The above historical commentators stretched this pericope well beyond even our

grammatical ambiguity. I would like to present one more commentator who differs in

that he stayed within the grammar and the textual exegesis. Once again Bachya dives

into concomitant possibilities. While this interpreter believes that "It happened" clearly

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[115] Ibid.

[116] Ibid.

[117] See Sforno on Exodus 4:24.

indicates that *Adonai* encountered Moses,[118] he does not throw all of his exegetical

weight into just one basket. He freely admits that based on the grammar and the scene,

it could also be the son.[119] As we saw above in Genesis, this commentator seems more

comfortable with the ambiguity, offering up multiple possibilities and sticking to the

ambiguity available in the text.

EXODUS 4:24-26 CONCLUSION

The importance of circumcision is clear in this passage, but the ambiguity of this

passage opens up so many questions about this ritual and its connection to the greater

narrative of the Bible. As Talbot writes: "the interpretive possibilities for this question-

raising text are as numerous as the lenses through which it might be viewed."[120] The

attack could be against Moses or the son-- or as we embrace the range of meanings,

both. Propp states that anyone who posits that the *chatan-damim* is both Moses and the

son "are equally right,"[121] since the phrase is used twice. The first time refers to a

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[118] Rabbeinu Bachyah on Exodus 4:24-26. *Bar-Ilan University. The Responsa Project. [Ramat Gan, Israel] :Bar-Ilan University, 2000.*
[119] Ibid.
[120] Talbot "Tsipporah, Her Son, and the Bridegroom of Blood: Attending to the Bodies in Ex 4:24–26." 2.
[121] Propp, William H. *Exodus 1-18.* 238.

"symbolically circumcised" Moses, and the second, in verse 26, refers to the "actually

circumcised child."[122] This multiple meaning highlights that Moses is a binding force for

the people and that circumcision, of him or his child, is one of the binding agents. If

Moses is being attacked, it is often read that it is his responsibility to circumcise his son.

The commentators are confused on his behalf. Perhaps the circumcision was delayed as

they traveled. Perhaps he should have performed the ritual the minute they stopped

before making camp (*bamalon*). Tzipporah ends up performing the circumcision, but

the ambiguity of *chatan-damim* could reinforce that it was not her job in the first place.

It could indicate that the circumcision of the child was transferable in some way to the

father. Like a Rubik's cube, moving any piece may change the other pieces.

Since the ritual performed in this text literally brings about a life-or-death

confrontation with the Deity, there can be an easy instinct to narrow down the singular

meaning of this passage. For example, Dumbrell's takeaway from the ambiguities that

he explored from this pericope highlighted "the experience of Moses" "with his early

Midianite connections."[123] The MT names *Adonai* directly (even if later translations and

interpretations are uncomfortable with this) so even if the root of this passage is

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[122] Ibid.

[123] Dumbrell, William. "Exodus 4:24-26: A Textual Re-Examination." 290.

Midianite, the explicitness of *Adonai* could refute these origins. When interpreters

identified *Adonai* as the *chatan-damim*, it was usually in a context of supplicating or

prostrating to the attacking Deity. We have not explored this identification in a marriage

or familial way. Dumbrell cites and disregards S. Talmon's theory that when Tzipporah

says, "*chatan-damim li*," the "*li*" is shorthand for "*l'Adonai*."[124] However, this theory, as

Dumbrell points out, reaches beyond the text that we have. Propp cites Schneemann as

identifying *Adonai* as the *chatan-damim* and adds parenthetically that the parallel is

later made to "Christ the Bridegroom."[125] Propp denies this assertion since it implies

that God is somehow capable of bloodguilt.[126] However, I would caution Propp that his

denial stands on two fallacies. First, because he assumes that *chatan-damim* relates to

bloodguilt, and second, because his preconceived notions of the Deity mean that God

cannot have bloodguilt. The ambiguity in this passage could open up the possibility of

nuances in God that we may not like.

   As I soak in the multitude of options and answers and reasons for this

ambiguous passage, I am struck that perhaps this ambiguity points us toward the Deity.

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[124] Ibid 286.
[125] Propp, William H. *Exodus 1-18*. 234.
[126] Ibid.

Perhaps this ambiguous life-threatening and life-saving circumcision changed our relationship with *Adonai* and marked our new kinship to the Deity. This kinship is then passed down through the circumcision of Moses' children, through both the rest of the Jewish tradition, and through its salvatory end in Christianity.[127] According to Talbot, Pardes even re-envisions what Dumbrell touched upon in the potential Midianite focus of this passage. She compares Tzipporah, literally the "bird," to Isis as this protective female leader topples patriarchal notions in order to save the men in her life.[128] By comparison, our previous passage in Genesis was more neatly bound in a monotheistic bow with few other options.

However, embracing the ambiguity and all the possible meanings of this passage gives the reader a more realistic and complicated version of confronting life. A story full of unknowns, where danger can be confronted and where even the messiest rituals (literally and figuratively) have great impact on the lives of people. This ambiguity shows us a world where anyone can step into a new role. Maybe Tzipporah takes up the

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[127] Shankman, Ray. "The Cut That Unites: Word as Covenant in Exodus 4:24–26." 177. He proposes that the scene brings Moses and Tzipporah and the son into covenant with G-d. However, his arguments rest more on a literary reading of action and speech than of grammatical ambiguity. This is especially noted in his almost disregard of the son to comment on Moses' journey and mission.

[128] Talbot, "Tsipporah, Her Son, and the Bridegroom of Blood: Attending to the Bodies in Ex 4:24–26." 4-5.

mantle of in-law only in this ritual. But maybe she also went toe-to-toe (nethers to

nethers?) with a repurposed Midianite tribal god. If, as the popular bumper sticker

phrase states, "All Gods are One," perhaps all ambiguous possibilities are as well, even if

they harken to other faiths. One of the many difficulties with ambiguity is that we will

never know. Some answers are easier than others, but the many possibilities should

discourage us from choosing a side and should encourage us to revel in as many

possibilities as we can at once.

CH. 4 INFINITE POSSIBILITIES

As I worked, I found I had two textual goals and one theological goal. The first

was to make sure the textual ambiguity in question was actually ambiguous. If one of

the potential solutions had seemed too strong, perhaps the ambiguity would not have

been intentional. The second goal flowed from the first. I needed to wring the full range

of meanings possible from these "illicit" points. Each new interpretation became a gift

given by the ambiguity. As far as holding them all in my mind as truth(s) from the text,

that third intangible goal seems more ambiguous than any textual discrepancy that

Scripture offers.

This thesis focused on syntactic and lexical ambiguity. Many languages, Hebrew

and English included, struggle to maintain clear antecedents with pronouns. The

Hebrew text of the Bible is thousands of years old and its lexicon is no longer clear.

There are words, like *sulam, tzedakah, chatan-damim*, and others, which have no clear

meaning in their biblical context. Over the centuries, many have tackled these syntactic

and lexical ambiguities. Some commentators, often grounded in their own theology,

have made decisive interpretations. Other commentators have admitted the difficulty

and given less-firm interpretations. Different faiths have split in different directions as

they interpreted ambiguous verses and passages. Modern scholarship tackled textual

ambiguity with a variety of tools: comparing similar stories and language roots, applying

anthropological information, and imagining the emotions of the characters in the

scenes. Many believe they have uncovered the best interpretation. This thesis joins a

trend of interpretation, inspired by the Midrash's concept of "in one utterance," that the

whole historical tradition was given in Revelation only to expand throughout the

generations. The trend expands with Gersonides' idea that God gave Abraham an

ambiguous command *on purpose* to see how he would interpret it. It also joins in modern scholarship, particularly from Daniel Boyarin and David Aaron, who refute the stability of meaning others have demanded from these texts.

In the introduction, this thesis examined the ambiguity in the story of Jacob and his "ladder." The meaning of *'al* and *sulam* complicated a familiar passage. The semantic ranges of this ambiguity created scenes from the comical to the theologically more difficult: from God standing on Jacob's head for some reason, to God standing on a ziggurat, the symbol of other deities' heights.

GENESIS 15:6

This thesis also struggled with Avram and *Adonai*'s relationship. While Avram believed in *Adonai*, it was unclear who credited to whom *tzedakah*. The disjunctive verse offered no clear grammatical answers. Many interpreters struggled with the idea that a mortal, even one they thought of so well, could credit to, bestow upon, or in any way reciprocate with the Divine. Many interpreters worried that highlighting Avram's faith meant that it had somehow been in question. Similarly, they would rise up to defend Moses and questions about him raised by the ambiguity in Exodus 4.

EXODUS 4:24-26

     The ambiguous verses from Exodus 4:24-26 raised many questions. In the syntax,

there were possibly three males in the scene and only a handful of the masculine

pronouns were clearly identified. Ritually, it presents a less than ideal circumcision by a

family member not often responsible for the act. And since *Adonai* is explicitly named as

attacking someone in this family, understanding the scene mattered to commentators

who wished to defend the protagonist of Exodus, as well as those who wished to

understand and appease the Deity with whom they were still in relationship.

     As Willis says in his introduction, one can interpret the Exodus passage as "a

very ancient (non-Israelite? Midianite?) story" that some redactor inserted into the full

work. Alternatively, one could interpret it as a part of the greater narrative, though they

"will probably interpret the text in an entirely different way."[129] This is true of both the

examples which this work explores in depth, as well as the story of Jacob and the *sulam*,

and anywhere else that the Torah catches our attention with an ambiguity. While the

goal of this work is to hold up the many possibilities as one, history and writing prove

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[129] Willis, *Yahweh and Moses in Conflict the Role of Exodus 4:24-26 in the Book of Exodus*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2010. 2.

that this is not fully possible. I cannot lay out every piece of scholarship or

interpretation of the Torah, and I have only investigated a few anomalies in the text.

Nothing could truly be comprehensive, but I encourage us to gather up all that we can at

one time to the extent possible. Even if we believe in one answer, we can keep the

minority interpretations just in case they were "the right one." Or we can realize that on

some level, we were given these openings, these "gaps," on purpose. Since there are so

many possible interpretations that could be true, perhaps they *are* true because they

could be. We were, in this way, given infinite potential by every "illicit" grammatical slip

in the Bible. If this text is Divine and the Divine is infinite, maybe these ambiguities

even more than the clear passages are our windows into God.

CONCLUSION

These stories were probably already ancient by the time they were folded into the

complicated text(s) which were formed and canonized early in the Common Era.[130] A

redaction critical approach might say it took all that time to create what the text would

become. One could also say that the time that we have had since the text stabilized was

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[130] This applies the MT and also the LXX and Vulgate and so many others which are each their own
multitude of texts.

necessary for us to reach the multitude of conclusions and possibilities that have been

revealed through these ambiguities. It is probable that I sit on a post-modern throne and

impose my concomitant realities upon a past that had no way of absorbing them. But as

I sit up here, I challenge a past that cannot hear me, and a present and future that can,

to know that all these possibilities have been here the whole time.

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