

Article

Tsipporah, Her Son, and the Bridegroom of Blood: Attending to the Bodies in Ex 4:24–26

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Abstract: Through the centuries, scholars and readers have looked through a variety of lenses to discover what might be revealed by the story of Tsipporah's circumcision of her son in Exodus 4, and to assign meanings to it. The ambiguity of the language and the particular interests of readers in their contexts allow for a breadth of possibilities. However, in most cases, the son and his body fail to attract much scholarly concern. In this reading, I suggest that considering more intently the bodies of the son, Tsipporah, and the deity through the lens of affect theory offers a fresh understanding of Tsipporah's utterance following the cutting of her son's foreskin. Teresa Brennan's work on the transmission of affect breaks down the "foundational fallacy" of the individuated bodies of the three, allowing the deity's threat, the son's pain, and the mother's response to affect the way Tsipporah's words might be heard and understood.

Keywords: Hebrew Bible; biblical studies; Exodus 4:24–26; affect theory; Teresa Brennan; circumcision

1. Introduction

Ex 4:24–26 is called by Berlin (2008, p. 319) an "enigmatic . . . old, no-longer-understood story"; Meyers (2005, p. 63) describes it as "one of the most . . . troubling passages" and "ambiguous"; and as Dozeman (2009, p. 154) and seemingly all other scholars who have wrestled with these few verses recognize, "the exact details of the episode . . . are impossible to determine." No wonder, then, that scholars through the years have chosen to turn their wondering eyes to these verses, called as if by a siren song to seek understanding, contextualize, puzzle out its questions, and perhaps in doing so, to explain and control its meaning. Multiplicities of methods shed various lights on the story of Tsipporah as circumciser of her son (Willis 2010).¹ However, scholars and readers of all sorts ultimately can be left with a Levinasian dis-satisfaction, in the best sense of the term (Levinas 1998, pp. 106–10).²

Recognizing the impossibility of establishing answers, but seeking to shed light on a somewhat less charted terrain of the passage, this paper examines closely the relationship between mother and

¹ Willis's reception history of the passage catalogues and categorizes the many ways that readers have interpreted and used the passage through the centuries, beginning with ancient Jewish and Christian interpreters. He traces 19 different critical methods and combinations of them that readers and scholars have used in constructing the passage's meaning, and he reports, without judgment, their "sequence of argumentation" before offering his own reading (Willis 2010). I'm grateful to Dr. Willis for sharing his enthusiasm for the pericope and for his response to this paper's presentation at the 2017 meeting of the Southwest Commission on Religious Studies (10–12 March 2017, Grapevine, TX).

² Emmanuel Levinas understands dis-satisfaction as an opportunity to encounter transcendence. Relying on Kierkegaard's recognition of "access to the supreme" in dissatisfaction, he suggests that while "good sense" dictated by "they"—also recognizable as common sense and conventional wisdom—devalues dissatisfaction as a "diminution," interpreters and readers might experience dis-satisfaction differently: Instead, the question without an answer is not "a knowledge in the process of being made," but a relationship to another—a relationship escaping correlation and thematization. Of course, in the hermeneutical task, scripture has the potential of making sense, and the translator, interpreter, and reader can all be content in their creation or recognition of the "correct" meaning. But scripture in its relationship to transcendence also has the potential of being other than "right." See (Levinas 1998, pp. 106–10).

son, using affect theory as a means to consider the vignette. In taking the bodies and emotions in the text seriously, I suggest that the passage retains an alternative understanding and critique, voiced through Tsipporah's anger, of the rite of circumcision and the relationship with the deity it supposes.³

2. Translations, Problems, and Previous Scholarship

The interpretive possibilities for this question-raising text are as numerous as the lenses through which it might be viewed. To illustrate the range of possibilities, I briefly explain the text itself in its context and then examine how scholars and commentators have brought their interests to bear on the gaps that must be filled.

Prior to 4:24, Moshe asks his father-in-law Yeter for permission to return to Egypt to see how his brothers (not his people, or his sister, or his mother, or even his rescuing princess) fare, after which YHWH says, "Go." The narrator tells readers that Moshe took his wife and sons, mounted them on a donkey, and returned to the land of Egypt, the rod of YHWH in Moshe's hand. YHWH then speaks again, instructing Moshe what to tell Paroh: "Thus says YHWH, 'my son, my first-born is Israel. I say to you, send my son, then he will serve me, but you refuse to send him. Just watch. I am the one slaying your son, your first-born.'"⁴

The narrator returns in the verses in question to describe the circumcision scene: In v. 24, "it happened" somewhere on the way—in an inn, possibly, or at a place where the family camped for the night. "YHWH encountered him and sought to put him to death." The pronouns are ambiguous throughout.⁵ Scholars generally assume YHWH encountered Moshe and sought to kill him, although some "clueless" scholars note the referent could be the "first born" from the previous paragraph, which is presumably Moshe's son Gershom.⁶ Tsipporah then emphatically seized a flint, perhaps a knife or maybe the sharp edge of a stone, and she cut the foreskin of her son. She struck or touched (it?) to "his" (whose?) feet or penis (**לְגַנְבָּה**), and she said "For a bridegroom of blood you (are) to me!" Then he sank down/went limp/relaxed from him or from a masculine "it" (again, ambiguous pronouns) "at the time when she said 'a bridegroom of blood,' according to the circumcisions." (Whether the last part of the quotation is indirect or direct is variously translated⁷; where Tsipporah's words end and the narrator's begin is difficult to determine.) Following this brief scene, YHWH gives Aharon instructions to go meet Moshe, which he does, and the two go to assemble the elders of the Israelites. Tsipporah and the sons apparently have exited stage left, not to return until a brief and unremarkable appearance (at least one unacknowledged by Moshe) in 18:2–5.⁸

³ That the reading is a reflection/projection of my embodied response to my own encounter with the story is not inconsequential in the choice to apply affect theory as a means to see meaning in the story.

⁴ Translations included in the article are mine unless otherwise noted.

⁵ As Thomas Romer states, "En effet, seul deux des quatre acteurs sont mentionnés par leur nom: YHWH et Zipporah." [Indeed, only two of the four actors are called by their name: YHWH and Zipporah.] (Römer 1994, p. 2).

⁶ Ibn Ezra calls such interpreters "clueless people" and suggests that their link of v. 23 to v. 24 to resolve the ambiguity in v. 24 is "insane" (Carasik 2005, p. 31).

⁷ In *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 4:26 reads "And when [God] let him alone, she added, "A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision" (Berlin, "Sh'mot," 320). Thus, the entire phrase is presented as words of Tsipporah.

⁸ Robinson provides a helpful summary of all the unanswered questions in the narrative:

(1) we are not told whom YHWH attacked and sought to kill, or why; (2) we are not told whose raglayim (feet? genitals?) Zipporah touched with her son's severed foreskin (Moses'; the boy's; YHWH's?) or why; (3) the phrase hatan-damim is of uncertain connotation (bloody husband? blood circumcised one? relative by virtue of the blood of circumcision?) and it may refer to either Moses or the lad—or even YHWH; (4) in v. 26 lammulot (in respect of circumcision/circumcised ones/the woman circumciser?) is a hapax legomenon and the contribution to the story of the clause in which it occurs is far from obvious; (5) because of its primitive features—YHWH is represented as acting in, as has often been remarked, a surprisingly demonic way and Zipporah uses an unsophisticated instrument for the operation (a flint-knife, as in Josh. v 2)—the story is almost universally attributed to J; but no other J text (except for Gen. xxxiv, where, however, the references to circumcision may derive from a later source) even mentions, let alone, as here, insists on the importance of circumcision. (Robinson 1986, p. 447)

Some readers and interpreters through the years seem to have thrown up their hands at trying to make sense of the passage. For example, surveying the treatment of the vignette in texts characterized as rewritten bible, Strand Winslow notes that Philo and Josephus both excise this circumcision account ([Strand Winslow 2004](#), p. 71).⁹ Meanwhile, in *Jubilees*, Moshe is attacked by a human, and Tsipporah is completely absent from the scene. Of all the Greek texts Strand Winslow reviews, only the LXX mentions Moshe's sons at all.¹⁰

Among certain Targumim (i.e., Onkeles, Neofiti, and Pseudo-Jonathan), Pseudo-Jonathan fills the gaps of the MT most completely ([Mahar 1994](#), pp. 172–73). In this telling, Tsipporah's father Yitro is the cause of the attack on Moshe because he prevented Gershom's circumcision. (An alternative agreement had been made about the son Eliezer, who was already circumcised.) So Tsipporah circumcises Gershom, presents the foreskin at the feet of the "Destroying Angel," and asks the angel to allow atonement for her husband via the blood of the circumcision. She then praises (YHWH) for the efficacy of the precious blood that saved her bridegroom. With such creative freedom as the Targumim embrace, the ambiguities of the passage can be more easily resolved.

The resolutions offered by some medieval Jewish commentators show signs of both free creativity and constraint as they enter fully into some of the gaps in the text. (Nahmanides is the exception: He refrains entirely from trying to shed light on vv. 4:24–26.) In their comments, Rashi, Rashbam, and Ibn Ezra each affirm the efficacy of circumcision for appeasing YHWH ([Carasik 2005](#), pp. 31–32). For Rashi, (the angel of) YHWH encounters and tries to kill Moshe for taking too long to circumcise his son Eliezer after finding lodging; Rashbam's justification for YHWH's attack is that Moshe, traveling with wife and children, "was taking his sweet time on the journey." Ibn Ezra explains the "encounter" as an illness healed by Tsipporah's act of circumcising Eliezer. All three commentators resolve the ambiguity of רגָל by reference to Moshe's legs/feet, and Rashbam and Ibn Ezra both explain the instrument used as a sharp knife or object. Tsipporah's spoken words are interpreted in interesting ways: Rashi claims the words are directed at Eliezer, whom she blames for the near-death of her husband; Ibn Ezra ultimately also has the words directed at Eliezer, although his full comment is nearly as confusing as the text itself, with a long aside about an alternative but incorrect reading; and Rashbam makes the pronouncement an observation without object (without explanation of the referent for "you") and the circumcision the means by which Moshe will remain Tsipporah's husband (without reference to the questionable status of the marriage in later verses). Meanwhile, Abarbanel's questions seek explanation for the full episode, as well as for Tsipporah's words. Looking ahead, he questions "What happens to Zipporah after this story, and why are we not told about it?" ([Carasik 2005](#), p. 32).

In certain methodologies of writing more contemporary biblical scholarship, tradition presupposes a critical, objective distance in the construction of meanings of the text. This arm's-length reading is visible in the treatment of this passage, despite the narrative's seeming capacity to actually affect its readers. What do scholars attend to, and what do they gloss over? Constructing a more traditional 2009 commentary on Exodus, Dozeman nicely lays out both the impossibility of knowing and the possibilities for answering various questions the text raises. The unnamed son, he says, is "presumably Gershom" (without explanation), and reading Tsipporah as yet another female savior in Moshe's life,

I do not intend to address or resolve all of the problems in the narrative noted by Robinson. Instead, the paper focuses specifically on issues that concern affect theory and the body's capacity to affect and to be affected.

⁹ Pseudo-Philo in *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* does the same. See ([Harrington 1983](#), p. 316–17). Says Strand Winslow of Josephus and Artapanus: "We can only surmise that it did not suit their particular agendas to retell the story of the attack and the circumcising Zipporah who thwarted it" ([Strand Winslow 2004](#), p. 70).

¹⁰ In addition to Josephus, Philo, and *Jubilees*, Strand Winslow reviews the works of Demetrius the Chronographer and Ezekiel the Tragedian, as well as Artapanus's "Life of Moses." Her translation of LXX reads as follows: "And it was on the way, at the lodge that an angel of the Lord met him and sought to kill him. And Sephora took a pebble, cut off the foreskin of her son, and fell down before the feet, and said, "The blood of the circumcision of my child stands." And he departed from him, because she said, "The blood of the circumcision of my child stands" ([Strand Winslow 2004](#), p. 63).

he suggests the one under attack by “the Deity” is Moshe (Dozeman 2009, p. 155).¹¹ Contra to the medieval rabbis’ readings, he states that “Zipporah’s statement: ‘For a bridegroom of blood are you to me,’ eliminates Gershom (the son) as the object of her [touching and speaking] action.” Obliged by his genre to construct a clear meaning, Dozeman (following Wellhausen’s influential reading, at least in some regards (Robinson 1986, p. 448)) sees in the story an “etiology for infant circumcision”:

What is clear in the story is that Zipporah, a Midianite, performs the proper ritual to appease the Deity and to protect her family. In the process she passes on the ritual knowledge to Moses and hence to the Israelites . . . As a cultic legend, the story tells of a transfer of circumcision from the religious practices of the Midianites to the Israelites through Zipporah, the Midianite wife of Moses.¹² (Dozeman 2009, p. 156)

Although the tone of certainty seems problematic in light of his own words about the impossibility of knowing, Dozeman certainly offers a helpful framework within which to come to some level of understanding, taking into account religious history and practices and intertextual gleanings about the Midianite/Israelite relationship.

Dozeman also echoes feminist-inspired readings that emphasize the significance of Tsipporah in the passage and her agency as Moshe’s savior. Says Meyers, “Her decisive and quick response makes her a heroic figure . . .” Her heroism is bound up in her “professionalism”: Her ability to “dispel mortal danger . . . points to the ritualistic and magical nature of the procedure and to Zipporah’s ritual expertise in knowing what to do” (Meyers 2005, pp. 63–64). Pardes also admires and expounds on the character of Tsipporah:

Like her precursors [in Exodus 1 and 2], Zipporah placates the attacker by complying partially and cunningly with his whims . . . Through this ritual of circumcision and the spreading (“touching”) of the blood, Zipporah transforms harmful violence into a regulated expression of violence, turning blood from a potential signifier of death into a beneficial substance that wards off danger.¹³ (Pardes 1992, p. 83)

Reading Zipporah in light of the Freudian sense of “symbolic substitution,” Pardes suggests that women “have an important role in teaching the weak and threatened young sons how to trick hostile oppressors, how to submit to paternal will and at the same time usurp the father’s position” (*ibid.*). However appropriate the lens for reading Tsipporah, one shortcoming of this view is that Gershom, if indeed he is the circumcised son in the story, seems to learn none of these things from Tsipporah’s action. In fact, both he and Tsipporah play virtually no role in the remainder of Moshe’s narrative. But Pardes also looks further, to “foreign origins of the tale,” to see similarities between Tsipporah’s pericope and the Egyptian myth of Osiris and Isis (Pardes 1992, pp. 89–90): “We have here a violent persecutor, a wife saving her husband, a penis undergoing treatment . . . , magical formulas, and above all, wings! Zipporah means ‘bird’ in Hebrew, and I venture to suggest that this name discloses her affiliation with Isis” (*Ibid.*, pp. 92–93).¹⁴ With such a reading, the need to extract Tsipporah from later tales of Israelite religious history, particularly in her relation to Moshe as the founder of monotheism for

¹¹ Levenson also takes the text as “reasonably clear” in showing that YHWH attacks Moshe: “the blood of circumcision saves Moses from YHWH’s sudden attempt to kill him . . . Moses lives because Zipporah has circumcised the boy.” (Glick 2005, p. 23).

¹² Römer, referring to Childs, disagrees, noting that the passage lacks the typical phrase for etiologies, “C’est pourquoi,” and only includes “alors.” (Römer 1994, p. 7, n. 21.)

¹³ Note Pardes’s recognition of the ritual as only a lesser but still a violent act.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 91–92. Pardes also shows how each of the female saviors of Moshe (Yocheved, Miriam, and the midwives) reflect elements of the Isis myth. “The similarities between the stories of Osiris and his son Horus, which are reflected in the dual personality of the Egyptian king, make better sense of the double saving of Moses—first in the ark and then at the night lodging on the way” (92). Left unexamined by Pardes are the similarities between the “violent persecutors,” YHWH and the jealous Seth. However, as the god of chaos and the desert, Seth’s relationship to Israelite depictions of its god(s) are worth considering in future research.

the nation, is more easily seen. Says Pardes: “Zipporah overcomes Yahweh in this fleeting moment in which patriarchy and monotheism prove vulnerable, but then she basically disappears. The ceremonial reunion between Moses and Zipporah is immediately denied” (*Ibid.*, p. 97).¹⁵

Ackerman’s interpretation of the event turns from Pardes’s divine consideration of Tsipporah to a human one—albeit an “elevated” human one. She resolves the ambiguities of the passage in the same way as “the vast majority of commentators”—the son is Gershom; the “feet” are those of Moshe; and in touching the penis, Tsipporah is “actually or symbolically” circumcising Moshe. In addition, the words she utters are spoken to Moshe and claim her position as his circumciser/father-in-law (following Robinson) ([Ackerman 2002](#), p. 73).¹⁶ Ackerman then proposes that “as liminal space and time in the life story of Israel made possible the characterization of Miriam as a prophet, so too have liminal space and time in the life story of Moses made possible a priest-like role for Zipporah” (*Ibid.*, p. 75). But as Tsipporah’s almost complete absence from the later story shows, the liminal space-time ends; in both the text and in Ackerman’s essay, Moshe and his role among the Israelites again become the focal point.

Mikael Larsson takes a more child-centered turn in his analysis of the family scene to suggest that the child and children’s subjectivity is worthy of readers’ attention ([Larsson 2012](#), p. 81). As he says, “focusing on children, YHWH’s enigmatic attack on the little family at the lodging place appears in a new light” (*Ibid.*, p. 84). His focus, however, is relatively brief, and the resulting conclusion is related only in a general sense to sons as children—sons who represent in the literary world of the text “divine blessing and the possibility of an afterlife.” Here, if the father provokes the god, the “logic of the narrative [is] that the son is at risk.” His conclusion is that the passage “appears very well integrated in the theme central to this reading: the struggle about the firstborn son” (*Ibid.*, p. 85).

Larsson’s attentiveness to the child in the scene can be taken a step or two further. In fact, closer engagement on an affective level with both Moshe’s son and his wife suggests new interpretive possibilities, particularly in relation to Tsipporah’s spoken words. In the following section, I explain affect theory—a relative newcomer in biblical studies—and its capacity to focus readers’ attention more pointedly on the bodies in the text and their relationships—their capacity to affect, and to be affected by, one another.

3. The Challenges and Benefits of Affect Theory

The greatest challenge in both articulating affect theory and reading/writing in light of it is nicely articulated by Brian Massumi: It cuts such a wide swath that “the whole world,” seemingly, “could be packed into it. In a way, it can and is” ([Massumi 2002](#), p. 43). Not much that concerns the human in relationship and the production of knowledge/power at this point in the twenty-first century can be fully removed from the capacity of the body to affect and to be affected—and thus we can in practice see how affect theory is relevant to “the whole world.”¹⁷

Affect arises, Gregg and Seigworth explain, “in the midst of in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon Affect is persistent proof of a body’s never less than ongoing

¹⁵ Fuchs sees significant problems with Pardes’s interpretation: “It is, I would argue, a bit of a stretch to extrapolate from two textually difficult verses that Zipporah outwits YHWH. After all, Zipporah is said to take a ‘flint’ and to cut off the foreskin of her son. She thus sanctions the entrance of her son into the covenantal relationship with YHWH” ([Fuchs 2000](#), pp. 318–19).

¹⁶ Ackerman raises the question, “If Zipporah is to be seen as assuming her father’s role as circumciser [she reads “son-in-law” for bridegroom, with Robinson], should she also be seen as assuming in certain ways his role as priest?” (For Robinson’s understanding of *hatan-damim* as son-in-law, see ([Robinson 1986](#), 457–58).)

¹⁷ Hardt also provides a glimpse of the seemingly limitless possibilities in seeing the turn to affect as a turn to the body. ([Hardt 2007](#), pp. x–xiii.) The essays in *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* ([Ticineto Clough 2007](#)), to which he provides the foreword, concern themselves with the relational/social body, the emotive body, the working/laboring/economic body, the political body, the inculcitated body, and the physical and traumatized body, among others. The affective perspective presents challenges to the discipline of biblical studies in light of the attention that affect theory demands. Says Hardt: “Affects refer equally to the body and the mind; and . . . they involve both reason and the passions.” Thus, “the perspective requires us to pose as a problem the relation between actions and passions, between reason and the emotions” (*Ibid.*, pp. ix–x).

immersion in and among the world's obstinacies and rhythms, its refusals as much as its invitations" ([Gregg and Seigworth 2010](#), p. 1). They identify two primary trajectories that have emerged in the development of affect theory—one based on the psychobiological work on emotions generated by Silvan Tomkins (and used to great effect by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick), and the other formed through the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze inspired by *The Ethics* of Baruch Spinoza. These two primary divisions have flowed further since the mid-1990s into eight more refined trajectories where "the affective turn" has emerged and found purchase: cultural and literary studies; cybernetics and biotechnology; political and feminist philosophies; psychoanalysis; emotions; and neuro-, quantum, and cognitive sciences (*Ibid.*, pp. 6–8).¹⁸ In each of these disciplines and areas, the turn to affect is influencing the sorts of "knowledge" being produced.

In biblical studies, scholars have found resources for their work in both the major strands, as well as in variations on them, although the emotion-attentive readings seem to dominate. However, the theory itself "does not yield a methodology in the standard biblical-scholarly sense of the term," note Koosed and Moore, who have edited a special issue of *Biblical Interpretation* that presents six articles under the theme, "Affect Theory and the Bible" ([Koosed and Moore 2014](#)).¹⁹ They describe affect theory as analyzing "emotions and still more elemental forces that are rooted in bodies and pass between them" (*Ibid.*, p. 381). The theory serves as corrective to biblical scholars' linguistic and cognitive theoretical fixations, partaking of but expanding beyond post-structuralism's and deconstruction's interest in "the subject's discontinuity with itself—a discontinuity of the subject's conscious experience with the non-intentionality of emotion and affect" (*Ibid.*, pp. 382–83).²⁰ That the theory has the potential to trouble, or be troubled by, biblical scholarship is clarified by Moore: "In the discipline of biblical studies, affective intensity is what is disciplined most of all" ([Moore 2014](#), p. 510).²¹

Allowing some liberation from these more traditional disciplinary constrictions, affect theory—or at least a sensitivity/body shaped by affect theory—potentially gives a biblical scholar fresh ways to read the texts and the stories and characters in them, as well as fresh ways to think about the processes of writing and constructing discourses in biblical scholarship. Deleuze and Guattari's imagery of the more egalitarian rhizomatic network, in contrast to the centralized powers of "arborescent" knowledge production, seems particularly relevant (although again the question remains of how to "use" it). In the Cartesian, tree-shaped model of knowledge, "rationality is the highest value . . . because it organizes and integrates all forms of knowledge into a unified, coherent system, according to the classical oppositional logic of Western metaphysics" ([McLean 2012](#), p. 268).²² Meanwhile, rhizomatic networks are intertwined systems of lines connecting horizontally "in a somewhat disorganized manner": Akin to the Internet, they have no trunk, no center, and no periphery (*Ibid.*, p. 269).²³ The rhizome "connects any point to any other point . . . ; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states" ([Deleuze and Guattari 1987](#), p. 21). In fact, Deleuze and Guattari describe the rhizome as "an anti-genealogy, . . . a short-term memory, or anti-memory. The rhizome operates

¹⁸ Koosed describes the range this way: "Affect theory includes issues of embodiment (especially encounters with animals or with new technologies); it includes non-Cartesian philosophical approaches to issues of identity, politics, culture; and (perhaps the best known realm of affect theory) it includes critical discourses on emotion" ([Koosed 2014](#), p. 416).

¹⁹ They raise the question, "what might affect theory look like transmuted into affect criticism?" ([Koosed and Moore 2014](#), p. 386).

²⁰ Quoting from ([Ticineto Clough 2010](#), pp. 206–7).

²¹ Moore describes with gusto the interrelationship of the biblical text and the bible reader's body via his own experiences of contact with his Bibles: "Their pages are indelibly marked by the secretions and excretions of my sebaceous and sudoriferous glands. My bodily fats, waxes, and acids have leaked copiously into those delicate, unprotesting pages and bonded chemically with them. My NRSV and my UBS contain my DNA, while the limbic system of my brain contains much of my Bibles. Our relationship is intercorporeal, intercellular . . . My relationship with 'the' Bible is a bodily affair, then—a tactile-textual, material-ideational, ethical-emotional affair of two unbounded bodies—and that relationship can only be crudely captured in language, if at all" ([Moore 2014](#), p. 509).

²² McLean gives the oppositional examples of essence vs. existence, subject vs. object, nature vs. culture, necessary vs. contingent, original vs. copy, content vs. form, and text vs. interpretation.

²³ For Deleuze and Guattari, "meanwhile" should be read literally. The two systems are neither oppositional nor mutually exclusive.

by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots [it] is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight" (*Ibid.*) In their articulations and illustrations of rhizomatic networks, they generate copious neologisms and new uses and meanings for existing words. "Lines of flight" is one of these terms, and it can only be understood in light of how the authors use it across varying contexts. Says McLean, "Deleuze and Guattari's terminology models the fluidity and mobility of the multiplicities they attempt to describe. New terminology is introduced in an unsystematic (rhizomatic) manner, without clear definitions, always putting the onus on the reader to assimilate the elastic connotations of their terminology" ([McLean 2012](#), p. 279).

[McLean \(2012](#), p. 269) asserts that textual interpretation has both arborescent and rhizomatic dimensions; the former comes from any sense in which the text is given "signifying totality," with an emphasis on factors that "stabilize, limit, and totalize textual meaning, such as authorial intent and socio-historical context." In its rhizomatic sense, the text "subverts the application of all such totalizing systems" (*Ibid.*, p. 270). In rhizomatic networks, and affect theory generally, interdisciplinarity is a given ([Cottrill 2014](#), pp. 432–33).

Looking back at the ways in which the previous scholarship on Tsipporah's circumcision has been considered in this paper, we might see glimpses of both arborescent and rhizomatic connections. The approach that requires hearing and reading the "right names" in the history of scholarship and seeing how the conversation develops based on dominant voices and whose work is given prominence and proceeds from whom implies hierarchy and stratification of the arborescent variety. A more randomly selected chorus of voices, connected by lines of intensity, of movement, can lead to lines of flight or becomings.²⁴ What seem to be strange juxtapositions of texts might reflect connections made out of sight, hidden below or before conscious thought—even from prepersonal intensities.²⁵ Of course, in scholarly writing, rationality can't be disregarded, but allowing for the possibility that "reasons" might not be easily or readily articulated opens onto Deleuze and Guattari's deterritorializing "planes of consistency."²⁶

The writers and writings thus far reviewed certainly fall within a narrow range of affectively motivated scholarly practice; although Pardes and Larsson in particular offer fresh views of the Tsipporah passage, all the resources I've considered are predictably and comfortably situated in biblical scholarship's traditions. To see further what affect theory and its focus on bodies lends to the reading of Ex 4:24–26 requires a foray into the work of Teresa Brennan, who provides a beautifully constructed perception and argument of how affects are transmitted between bodies ([Brennan 2004](#)).²⁷ She is the lone writer in the articulations of affect theory (thus far encountered by this reader) who takes into account the significance of transmissions between mother and child in utero—of the originating relationality of human life. In *The Transmission of Affect*, her goal is to recover a lost human

²⁴ Both terms are critical for Deleuze and Guattari in articulating the movement and release that the rhizomatic imagery allows. But again, challenges in "defining" the terms abound.

²⁵ "For Deleuze and Guattari . . . , 'affect' does not denote 'a personal feeling,' but rather 'a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another' *Intensity* and *intensities*, meanwhile are Deleuzian and Deleuzoguattarian shorthand for the incessant sensory bombardment of bodily existence—visual, aural, tactile, olfactory, kinetic, rhythmic, chaotic—prior to its processing by language, cognition, reason, or spatiotemporal organization." ([Moore 2014](#), pp. 506–7.)

²⁶ Another significant term for Deleuze and Guattari, planes of consistency are "everywhere, always primary and always immanent." Synonyms they use include "planomenon" and "abstract machine," as they note that the plane of consistency "is in no way an undifferentiated aggregate of unformed matters, but neither is it a chaos of formed matters of every kind Continuum of intensities, combined emissions of particles or sign-particles, and conjunction of deterritorialized flows: these are the three factors proper to the plane of consistency." (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 70.)

²⁷ Ticineto Clough describes "Deleuzian biophilosophy" such that the connection to Brennan's work is made: "The organism must be rethought as open to information, where information is understood in terms of the event or chance occurrence arising out of the complexity of open systems under far-from-equilibrium conditions of metastability, that is, where microstates that make up the metastability are neither in a linear nor deterministic relationship" ([Ticineto Clough 2007](#), p. 12).

consciousness of the transmission of affect and, in doing so, to underscore the ridiculousness of the “foundational fantasy”—the Western psychological fallacy of the self-contained, bounded individual.²⁸

Through the lens of bodies, affects, sensings, and feelings, we can develop a reading of Tsipporah’s circumcision scene that picks up where Larsson left off. However, rather than attending simply to the literary appropriateness of the son in the pericope, we actually *focus attention* on the son in the text, as well as on the mother and child and the mother and deity, and to the affects being transmitted and flowing between them. In light of these bodies and events, Tsipporah’s proclamation—“A bridegroom of blood are you to me”—becomes words spoken to the violent deity, reflecting the anger the deity has projected into the environment and into the affected mother.²⁹

4. An Affective, Gap-Filling Reading of the Events at the Camp

Reading affectively means getting involved in the muck and chaos of the scene at hand—reading (on behalf of) the bodies in the text—and what becomes obvious is that, far from a quiet night in a Bethlehem manger, this “inn” or nightspot or wide spot on the trail is threatening, potentially death-dealing for either Moshe or a son of Tsipporah. YHWH shows up with intent to kill, and regardless of whether husband or son is threatened, the body of Tsipporah is not likely to register the unfolding events in an unaffected, cognitively rational fashion—despite her apparent capacity to function appropriately in the stressful situation. In the following sections, I slow down the reading and refocus the lens to consider the affective implications, first, of the lexeme נָתַת; second, of Tsipporah’s action of circumcising her son; and third, of the angry, threatening deity.

4.1. Mothers and Children, Wombs and Wellbeing

That the boy in the scenario is referred to as “her son” is not at all inconsequential to the understood meaning of the roadside event. The significance of the pronominal suffix seems to have been of minimal interest to commentators, despite its capacity to communicate something relevant to the story; does it contain information, for example, about Midianite socio-cultural practices, or about the relationship between Moshe and Tsipporah, or about whether Moshe even appears in the scenario at all?³⁰ For purposes of this paper, the significance of the lexeme is in its explicit reference to the relationship between mother and son—the relationship begun in the womb and with the “loving attention” that creates connection in that relationship. “Her son,” whether referring to Gershom or Eliezer or some other progeny hidden among “his sons” in v. 20, bears the reality that Tsipporah carried the child for 40 weeks, grew large with him, perhaps came to know him when he was still a part of her, and endured the pain and uncertainty of childbirth to cradle a son who had lived—not in any way a given in ancient times, as Meyers indicates.³¹ (In its typically cryptic fashion, the text says

²⁸ Brennan makes her case for the transmission of affect “by diverse means: deductive argument from clinical findings and biological facts, some history (theology and philosophy) of the affects, and a little modern neuroscience” (Brennan 2004, p. 8).

²⁹ Brennan’s theoretical construction of a transmission of affect is certainly more complex than the treatment of it in this paper conveys. Some of its elements are based on the post-psychanalytic Kleinian object-relations schools of thought, premised on the assumption “that an infant psyche develops . . . through the interaction with, and internalization of, significant others An object-relations clinician cannot proceed [in her work] without a concept of love” (*Ibid.*, p. 33).

³⁰ Targum Pseudo-Jonathan does note the “agreement” that allowed Gershom to avoid circumcision to that point, and the insertion there might be seen to reflect a close reading of “her son” as the one who is *not* Moshe’s previously circumcised one, but the reading is not explicit, and the blame is laid at the feet of Yitro—rather than at Tsipporah’s feet—which makes the Targum’s attention to “her son” less probable (Mahar 1994, pp. 172–73). That at least some of the ambiguous pronominal suffixes allude to Moshe’s presence is, as suggested, widely accepted (recall also that Römer points to “four characters” in the verses), but whereas “her son” makes the son’s presence unquestionable, Moshe’s presence would require reference back to v. 20.

³¹ Meyers notes “the tenuous nature of new life in the biblical world,” indicating that “as many as one in two infants fail . . . to live to the age of five” (Meyers 2005, p. 65). Interestingly, she reads the data in light of circumcision to suggest that the practice was undertaken to appease the deity “by producing life-blood at the dangerous transition from neonate to infant” in order to address the “need for demographic increase” (*Ibid.*). Note that my description of Tsipporah’s pregnancy and childbirth is romanticized. Equally likely is the possibility that the prospect of the child’s early death led to a differently

of this time only that “[Yitro] gave Tsipporah his daughter to Moshe. And she delivered a son, and he called his name Gershom . . .”)

In her biochemically informed articulation of how affect is transmitted between bodies, Brennan helps to reveal how the foundational fantasy—individuated bodies with well-defined borders—influences and constricts commentators’ capacity to see these thoroughly relational aspects of the mother and son in the scene. Brennan’s paradigmatic shift, although not a necessary or the only way to focus the gaze on Tsipporah and the energies that flow between her and “her son” in these verses, nevertheless allows for a corrective in the way contemporary readers construct relationship between the individuated parties in a particular environment or scene.³² “Maintaining the fantasy of self-containment requires that neither the womb nor the world penetrate the flesh of the individual as intentional forces in themselves,” she notes (Brennan 2004, p. 78).³³ However, her research into how affects are transmitted between bodies and groups of bodies shows that “[w]e are not self-contained in terms of our energies. There is no secure distinction between the ‘individual’ and the ‘environment’” (*Ibid.*, p. 6). Since the time of Aristotle, the mother’s body has been deemed a passive container if all goes well in the pregnancy; meanwhile, “her influence in shaping embryonic life is acknowledged [only] if something goes wrong” (*Ibid.*, p. 89).³⁴ Blame and shame, given the ancient infant mortality rates suggested by Meyers, might have been the dominant affective experience for mothers in the text. As a corrective, Brennan presents the “[a]ccumulating scientific evidence” that supports “the assumption that the maternal organism, like the environment, affects and may even shape the subject” (*Ibid.*, p. 78).³⁵

In the threatening environment that leads to her son’s circumcision, attentiveness to the transmission of affect gives rise to the possibility of seeing how Tsipporah might be affected by the threat, whether to her son or her husband. It also gives rise to a vision of how Tsipporah’s “ritualistic” words might be intoned and heard, given the apparently appropriate action (at least the one deemed as such by priestly redactors) of taking a piece of flint and cutting off a piece of skin that is part of her son’s penis. With these pre-natal and post-natal flows of affects between mother and son in mind, we can now turn to the mother’s infliction of pain and the flow of blood that Tsipporah’s ritual circumcision entails.

4.2. Cutting Bodies: Circumcision Even Then, Even Now

The arm’s-length distance from which scholars tend to write of circumcision provides a generally anthropological perspective, along with protection from visceral affects induced by the text. Meyers notes, for example, that in “traditional” societies, circumcision was often linked with rites of passage into manhood, either at adolescence or at marriage. She also suggests that “[t]he relationship

experienced relationship between mother and fetus or child. My reading of Tsipporah and her son clearly reflects my own context and experience.

³² “The essence of the paradigmatic shift proposed here is that we regard the human being as a receiver and interpreter of feelings, affects, attentive energy” (Brennan 2004, p. 87). Brennan suggests that in the distant past, recognition of the transmission of affect was more naturally accepted: “If complex human affects are communicated by chemical and electrical entrainment . . . , this was also sensed by the authors of the Talmud, and known to the early church fathers The Talmud enjoins us to smell that which is pleasant and to avoid those odors that communicate demonic intentions” (*Ibid.*, pp. 97–98).

³³ In addition to enlightening the “encounter” of mother and son, Brennan’s words also have relevance for the threatening encounter of YHWH, which I address in a later section.

³⁴ In her work on Abraham, Carol Delaney points out “that the Abraham narratives express a belief, or theory, about parentage: specifically, that men ‘beget’ children by planting generative ‘seed’ in wombs; hence, while mothers merely ‘bear’ children, fathers create and own them” (Glick 2005, p. 18).

³⁵ Such scientific bases are related to neuroendocrinology and psychoneuroendocrinology and the chemical and hormonal signals that pass within and between humans. For her more detailed scientific analysis, see Brennan 2004, pp. 74–96. She tentatively suggests that the instructions concerning cell differentiation might be transmitted when “the days-old fertilized egg” comes in contact with the blood of the womb, upon implantation in the endometrial lining. The suggestion, although not particularly enlightening in respect to Ex 4:24–26, shines a light on how context, including scientific context, colors what interpreters have to say about the relationality of mothers and children when they happen to attend to it. The same light might be shone on interpretations of Exodus 1–2.

to sexuality for the Israelites might have been as a way to increase sexuality for a population with recurrent demographic problems . . . ; like vegetation, male sexuality would be ‘pruned’ to increase fertility” ([Meyers 2005](#), p. 65).³⁶ Dozeman offers other anthropological possibilities: “If Moses is the object of Zipporah’s action, the story may represent the protection of Moses through the circumcision of his son. But it may also reflect an ancient understanding of circumcision as a rescue of the firstborn from the divine claim upon his life” ([Dozman 2009](#), p. 155).³⁷ In his work titled *The Savage in Judaism*, Eilberg-Schwartz conducts a “symbolic exegesis” of relevant biblical passages to “teas[e] out the unstated meanings and functions of Israelite circumcision . . . [and to] show that the priest’s conceptualization of circumcision fits into their overwhelming preoccupation with reproduction and intergenerational continuity between males, and how these themes ultimately spring from the form of their social relations” ([Eilberg-Schwartz 1990](#), p. 144).

Lenses used, contemporary understandings, scholarly objectivity, and natural acceptance of circumcision all influence the way commentators read Tsipporah’s impromptu circumcision of her son. But by slowing down the reading, turning to affect, and questioning current norms, we might see how the anxiety and trauma of the encounter with YHWH is played out in the brutal cutting of sensitive skin, and we might hear the cries of Tsipporah’s child as the blood begins to flow, contributing further to the emotional anguish of the child’s mother and underscoring the way the deity’s threatening affects pervade the environment. Affect theory and its attention to bodies in the story—the bodies affecting and being affected—would say that such imaginative descriptions are not irrelevant. To aid in an aurally sensitive reading, consider this contemporary description:

. . . The silence was soon broken by a piercing scream—the baby’s reaction to having his foreskin pinched and crushed as the doctor attached the clamp to his penis. The shriek intensified when the doctor inserted an instrument between the foreskin and the glans The baby started shaking his head back and forth—the only part of his body free to move—as the doctor used another clamp to crush the foreskin lengthwise, which he then cut. The baby began to gasp and choke, breathless from his shrill continuous screams³⁸ ([Glick 2005](#), pp. 3–4)

Tsipporah’s procedure and instrument clearly would have been different, but contemporary readers might imagine that the effect on her son would sound something like the anguish of this unanesthetized baby. Valid knowledge of what infant circumcision actually felt like in ancient times—or contemporary times, for that matter—is hard to come by. (Infants tend not to provide “objective” and detailed descriptions.) Two biblical passages do suggest that adult circumcision would have required a few days to heal and recover: Josh 5: 8 “Now it was, when the entire nation was done being circumcised, that they stayed in their place in the camp, until their recovery . . . ” ([Fox 2014](#), p. 31) and Gen 34: 24b–25a “and all the males were circumcised, all who go out (to war) from the gate of this

³⁶ Glick, quoting Eilberg-Schwartz, also states that “for ancient Judeans the trimmed penis was a symbol not only of patrilineal social organizations but of male reproductive prowess and male social supremacy” ([Glick 2005](#), p. 18). Eilberg-Schwartz notes transitions in the meaning of the rite: “At some point in the development of the Israelite practice, Israelites began to circumcise their male children on the eighth day after birth. By this time, if not earlier, Israelite circumcision lost the sexual meanings and social functions it had among other peoples” ([Eilberg-Schwartz 1990](#), p. 142).

³⁷ In exploring possibilities for the words uttered by Tsipporah, Dozman notes that “The Hebrew *hatan* means ‘a male relative by marriage.’ The Arabic *htn* means ‘to circumcise’ and ‘to protect.’ Perhaps all of these meanings are playing a role in the story.”

³⁸ Glick notes that the description provided here by Marilyn Fayre Milos varies dramatically from how circumcision is often imagined. He describes the reactions of Jewish friends and family of his intent to write a book on circumcision: “What was there to write about? It was a simple snip that made the penis cleaner and prevented all kinds of diseases, even cancer” ([Glick 2005](#), p. vii). In 2016 the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) suggested that procedural pain for infants can have longer term deleterious effects and perhaps its prevention and management needs greater consideration by care providers ([American Academy of Pediatrics 2016](#)).

city. But on the third day it was, when they were still hurting . . . " (Fox 1995, p. 164). Those adults undergoing the procedure clearly were imagined as enduring some discomfort for a period of time.³⁹

Where bodies are central in the reading and readers have at times shown visceral reactions to the text, affect theory more pointedly brings the narrative into readers' embodied lives. In fact, without the arm's-length safety of scholarly commentary, circumcision makes people squeamish.⁴⁰ Exodus readers are not actually encouraged to consider the son's embodied experience of the pain and its effect on Tsipporah—the passage clearly serves other rhetorical purposes for the redactors, as Eilberg-Schwartz has indicated. Nevertheless, as readers we can resist the rush of the narrative and the control of the rhetoric and allow ourselves the uncomfortable luxury of slowing enough to encounter the bodies in the text, as well as to notice the visceral effect of the affects in the text on our own reading bodies.

Glick's contemporary view of circumcision and the pain it induces can help our reading. He states that "a growing list of publications attest to what any witness to a circumcision well knows: that the surgery is exceedingly painful . . . One of the most striking revelations is that infants undergoing circumcision cry—more accurately, scream—in a distinctive manner . . ." Based on his survey of the literature on anesthesia for circumcision (which of course Tsipporah did not have at her disposal), pediatrician Robert S. Van Howe warns parents that "... currently available pain relief techniques may blunt the pain, but even with these, neonatal circumcision is extremely painful and stressful, and produces long-term alterations in neurological response to painful stimuli" (Glick 2005, p. 277).

The rhetoric controls the reading, and we as readers are given no description of what the effect of the likely circumcision-caused pain is on Tsipporah. However, Brennan helps in proposing that any emphasis on "the privacy of pain" is "deeply misleading" and that "people are never more alike than when they are in the grip of pain" (Brennan 2004, p. 167, n. 14). If we can recover our once-known perspectives about the transmission of affect, then, "it would be fair to assert that the experience of pain, like anxiety, can be at least inflected if not produced in the same way [via entrainment]" (Ibid.).⁴¹ The son is not experiencing the pain alone, individually, via his own central nervous system; Tsipporah, via entrainment, is moved by it as well.

Meyers recognizes that none of the interpretive possibilities made through anthropology "is particularly compelling" (Meyers 2005, p. 65). What she does see in the passage is the possibility of "something of a wake-up call, apparently involving the importance of circumcision—perhaps an object lesson for later generations who wavered at the use of circumcision as an ethnic marker" (Ibid., p. 63). The angry deity in this particular interpretation of 4:24–26 might be used in a rhetorically effective way to inspire the fear of reprisal for second thoughts: Don't even think about it or YHWH will "encounter" you! However, this paper asserts that the ones whose second thoughts also might lie behind the passage—who waver at the use of circumcision—can be made visible for readers who turn their attention to the bodily and affective consequences of the apparently efficacious practice and its potentially troubling effect on the mother (and son). In addition, this wrathful, death-dealing deity also might be seen as projecting into the swirling cauldron of negative affect in this little family scene an anger matched by and revealed in the words of Tsipporah.

³⁹ Meanwhile, Genesis 17:12 is the only biblical text that sanctions infant circumcision as a "religiously mandated requirement," says Glick. The sealing of the covenant with Abram in Genesis 15 involves only animal sacrifices—no cutting of infant penises. (Glick 2005, p. 16.)

⁴⁰ Glick questions modern reactions: "What are we to make of the near-taboo against even discussing circumcision, let alone questioning it? What should we conclude from the course jokes, the ridicule of unaltered penises in television sitcoms, the language of avoidance evident in otherwise cheerful books on Jewish parenting? What does this semisubterranean evidence tell us about how most Americans, Gentile and Jewish alike, really feel about circumcision?" (Glick 2005, p. 10.)

⁴¹ Brennan defines entrainment as "a process whereby one person's or one group's nervous and hormonal systems are brought into alignment with another's" (Ibid., p. 9). "The phenomenon of entrainment encroaches directly on perceptual registration, through sight and hearing and the modulated frequencies involved in both. Perception in turn impinges directly on, and to a large degree is, the sympathetic nervous system. If entrainment means that certain responses are transmitted from person to person, or from the social order and social pressure to all people, then it would be fair to assert that the experience of pain, like anxiety, can be at least inflected if not produced in the same way" (Brennan 2004, p. 167, n. 14).

4.3. The Threatening Deity and Justified Anger

"And YHWH encountered him and he sought to put him to death." The shocking reality is that even arm's-length scholars are willing to give this YHWH character—their omnipotent, benevolent, merciful god of יְהוָה—the benefit of the doubt. Says Meyers, "the God who so clearly wants to save lives here inexplicably wants to take a life; yet God only 'tried' to do this. We may not ever know God's motivation, despite the many hypotheses offered by commentators since antiquity. But a powerful god could easily have succeeded . . . , so clearly, Meyers implies, YHWH didn't really *intend* to kill "him" (Meyers 2005, p. 63). From the perspective of affect theory, we can see the scene differently.

Without even looking back at Ex 4:14, where YHWH's anger burned, we can see this deity is the originating force of the nature of the environment in which the scene is set. This YHWH, in what we might presume to be a fit of rage, "encounters" one of Tsipporah's family members.⁴² Through a lens by which we can presume bodies are affected and passions inspired by the affects of other "bodies," Tsipporah would not be mildly compliant or complacent in response to YHWH's threatening, angry presence and its effect on the environment. Brennan's theoretical proposals on the transmission of affect are helpful, but not even necessary, in allowing readers to recognize that aggression and rage, projected at and into another, are potentially met in kind. Brennan notes that, unlike interlocking relationships in which "the energy and capacities of the one are enhanced at the expense of the other," relationships in which physical violence or intimidation play a role show a different pattern (Brennan 2004, p. 196). In these "simple affective transfers," "your aggression communicates itself and I become aggressive in consequence" (Ibid., p. 49). We can also presume, then, that Tsipporah's words communicate and intone neither a sense of "lighthearted relief," as Glick suggests,⁴³ or an exultant celebration of "her triumph over death, her successful restoration of her beloved [Moshe?!?] to life, her power to make blood mean life and protection," as Pardes (1992, p. 86) recounts. Instead, the words reveal the anger and aggression transmitted to the environment and to her through YHWH's death drive. Conveying that anger, and directed to YHWH (and to the priestly redactors seeking to inculcate into Israelite identity the ritual of circumcision), Tsipporah's words—"a bridegroom of blood you are to me"—express her returned aggression toward a deity who would be so bloodthirsty.⁴⁴ In this reading, Tsipporah's negative affects serve an important purpose, according to Brennan: "they have a function in self-preservation. As the (good) ego they literally keep us alive, in that . . . aggression can save one's life [or the life of a loved one] when deployed in defense" (Brennan 2004, p. 133). "She is the kind of mother," says Gafney, "who will even stand up in the face of God if that is what is called for to save the life of her child" (Gafney 2015, p. 148). Tsipporah perhaps opted for the lesser of two evils in acting quickly to circumcise her son⁴⁵; her words, meanwhile, might communicate the life-saving aggression that rejects a relationship with a death-dealing god. Through a lens influenced by affect theory, readers

⁴² Another "encounter" in which YHWH is the subject, Hos 13:7–8, provides a description that we might use to support an imaginative rendering of the way YHWH "encounters" in Exodus: "So I am become like a lion to them, Like a leopard I lurk on the way; Like a bear robbed of her young I attack them, And rip open the casing of their hearts; And I will devour them there like a lion, The beasts of the field shall mangle them" (Berlin and Brettler 2004, pp. 1163–64). A full rendering of the intertextuality here might reveal implications for handling the unspecified pronoun indicating the one YHWH attacks or encounters in Exodus, but the issue is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁴³ Surprisingly, given his seemingly critical perspective of circumcision, Glick suggests in his description of the "peculiar tale" that when the Lord's wrath subsided, "[Tsipporah's] final comment would have expressed lighthearted relief: She had made Moses her 'bridegroom' again by recalling the blood of marital consummation" (Glick 2005, p. 23).

⁴⁴ In her disagreement with Talmon—that the words express a covenant between Tsipporah and Moshe, rather than between Moshe (as the bridegroom) and YHWH, as Talmon suggests—Pardes notes that "it is God who traditionally plays the role of the bridegroom in the Bible." However, her reading does not take into account that YHWH might be playing his traditional role in this passage as well (Pardes 1992, p. 86). Gafney, on the other hand, suggests the possibility that the phrase *does* represent Tsipporah's speech to and naming of YHWH, akin to Hagar (Gafney 2015).

⁴⁵ To scholars surprised and impressed by Tsipporah's quick, efficacious action, Brennan might simply point out the continuing influence of a cognitive bias: "The difficulties in understanding that the senses and the flesh embody a logic that moves far faster than thought are tied to Western schemas that degrade the body and bodily intelligence" (Brennan 2004, p. 136).

might hear the anger in Tsipporah's words and begin to formulate answers to Abarbanel's questions, cited earlier: "What happens to Zipporah after this story, and why are we not told about it?"

Spinoza, the great ancestor who begat the current proliferation in affect theory, as "midwifed" by Deleuze and Guattari, seems to agree with Tsipporah: "no deity, nor anyone else unless he is envious, takes pleasure in my lack of power or misfortune; nor does he ascribe to virtue our tears, sighs, fear, and other things of that kind" ([de Spinoza 2004](#), p. 224).⁴⁶ That Spinoza's thinking about the deity veered from the orthodoxy of his time is recorded in his *Ethics*, where God is described as "a being absolutely infinite, that is, a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence" (*Ibid.*, p. 91); perhaps not coincidentally, Spinoza was excommunicated ([Frampton 2006](#)).⁴⁷ From an affectively influenced reading—one that reveals the bodies in the text and the transmission of affect among them—Tsipporah seems, literally, to have seen a similar fate.

5. Assessing the Effects of Affect Theory

Affect theory, and especially Brennan's work on the transmission of affects, are of particular interest to this embodied reader, not just because of what is revealed in the text as a result but because it recognizes a truth (about the foundational fallacy) for contemporary readers as well—even readers who are biblical scholars. Our bodies have the capacity to affect and to be affected as we read, write about, and attend to the bodies in the text. Such attention (Brennan would suggest we aim for living attention, or love, rather than the proliferation of negative affects) means we finally can notice the ways that Tsipporah and her son are related materially and emotionally; the ways that circumcision might have affected the body of this infant (and to question that effect); and the ways that (some) portrayals of YHWH take as normative godliness the destructive projection of negative affects.⁴⁸

For this particular body, a reading that recognizes bodies—and the deity's (better, traditions') attempted control over them—is undoubtedly helpful. As an example of the possibilities that affect theory offers in biblical studies, its application to this particular text has only scratched the surface. The beauty and potential of the theory is in its capacity to multiply exponentially the questions inspired in and by the relationship between readers and biblical texts. To the degree that the reading, as it considers the body's capacity to affect and to be affected, then offers lines of flight and movement—becomings, emergence, process, change—among readers of the text, we can say that affect theory's lens has served its purpose.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

⁴⁶ "Midwifing" language is used by McLean to indicate how biblical scholars, as producers of present sense-events, are not "speaking in our own name" but are participating in various changing rhizomatic structures that make that sense-event possible. The same can be said of Deleuze and Guattari ([McLean 2012](#), p. 273).

⁴⁷ Frampton states that "no one knows much with any degree of certainty the reasons for Baruch's excommunication from the Talmud Torah in the summer of 1656." However, after his review of the evidence, Frampton suggests that Spinoza ultimately came to the conclusion that he would have to search "on his own" for the "true good" because he did not expect it to be found using the methods offered by his Marrano tradition. Although the *ma'amad* would have tried to bring him back into the fold when he corrected his "unruly behavior," which likely prompted the excommunication, Spinoza was no longer interested ([Frampton 2006](#), pp. 19, 157–58).

⁴⁸ Future interpretive projects via affect theory might begin to see and articulate how transmissions and projections recognized among embodied humans influence the portrayals of the deity in the text. For purposes of this paper, the transmission of affect in relation to the deity was articulated as proceeding in one direction only. However, the scene potentially includes a description of Tsipporah's effect on the body of the deity: Then he sank down/went limp/relaxed from him or from a masculine "it." (Again, the pronouns are ambiguous. "He" might refer to the deity, Moshe, and the son.) Although the phrase is certainly worthy of affectively related attention, my analysis of the passage ended prematurely, before considering this phrase. My appreciation goes to David Gunn for pointing out the rich possibilities of giving attention to this last bodily affect in the pericope.

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