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ZIPPORAH AND CIRCUMCISION AS A FORM OF PREPARATION: CUTTING AWAY AT THE COMFORT ZONE

Introduction

Growth in ministry, resulting from a clear understanding of God's call, compels one to discard life's non-essentials. Things, people, and experiences once terribly important become non-issues, irritants, or frivolous. In some respects, they are cut away. When God calls us to a work, often before we can responsibly complete the task, some things have to be excised—a circumcision of sorts. This essay explores the importance of circumcision as a form of preparation as seen in Exodus 4:24-26. Attention is given to Zipporah, the woman in the passage.

Importance of Circumcision

It is understandable that before we can do a great thing, some preparation is required. Our plan may not only include a building up, but also a breaking down. An athlete's muscle, confidence, and stamina must be built up, while body fat, poor self-image, and fear of failure must be cut away. Likewise, when God calls us to do and to be, there is always a period of "placing in order." During this time, some things are built up, and some things are severed. Some things have to be eliminated. Scripturally, this is

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evident in the story of Moses, the one called to deliver the people out of Egypt.

The story of the Exodus includes the Lord giving the yet-unsure Moses various signs of encouragement after calling him to deliver the Israelites from Egypt. In the third chapter of Exodus, God calls Moses to execute this task. Beginning in verse thirteen, Moses offers many objections to God's choosing him for the job. Finally, the Lord gives Moses specifics about his pending encounter with Pharaoh and the preparation period begins. Moses gathers his family and prepares to return to Egypt. The Bible records that "on the way, at a place where they spent the night, the Lord met him and tried to kill him. But Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin. . . . So he let him alone." (Exodus 4:24-26) In verse 27, Moses meets Aaron and they begin the work of deliverance. Before Moses could return to Egypt and "walk in his call" of delivering the people, a circumcision occurs. It is only after the circumcision experience that Moses fully "walks in his call" of deliverer. The circumcision is preparation.

The Requirement of a Circumcision

Historically, the physical circumcision served hygiene purposes, as well as distinctively marking the circumcised individual as part of a unique community. For the biblical Hebrews, in addition to serving as an initiatory act, the circumcision was performed as one entered a community of faith. The story of Abraham and the Exodus, illustrate this. Before Abraham "walked in his call" to be the father of many nations, a circumcision occurred (Genesis 17) before the birth of Isaac (Genesis 21). The circumcision predicated the fulfillment of the call. Before Abraham "walked in his call," something was cut away. It appears God required the physical cir-

cumcision as a form of preparation—thus the motif of circumcision as a form of preparation.

The Exodus 4 passage also illustrates this motif. Before Moses could fulfill his call to deliver the people, a circumcision took place. Although it is unclear why the Lord accosted Moses “along the way,” Geza Vermes asserts that the Lord was angry because Moses had not circumcised his son.¹ Exactly which of the two sons is immaterial. The critical element is that a circumcision was required. God needed the physical circumcision “on the way” as a form of preparation to fulfill the call to deliver the Israelites from Egyptian bondage.

The stories of Abraham and Moses demonstrate that circumcisions occur when God’s people are in preparation for God’s using them. John Goldingay agrees, observing that people are circumcised at moments when God is in the midst of fulfilling a creative purpose.² One year before Isaac’s birth, Abraham was about to become the father of many nations when he experienced circumcision. Moses was about to deliver the people from Egypt when the circumcision occurred “on the way.” In both cases, circumcision was a form of preparation.

Universality of Circumcision

A close reading of the Exodus account reveals a crucial facet of the preparatory circumcision in humankind. Before the exodus (Exodus 14), the Lord required the circumcision of the people as part of the Passover celebration (Exodus 12: 44-49). Here, the

¹Geza Vermes, “Baptism and Jewish Exegesis: A New Light from Ancient Sources,” *New Testament Studies* 4 (July 1958): 308-319.

²John Goldingay, “The Significance of Circumcision,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 88 (June 2000): 13.

call for a circumcision (Joshua 5) is seen as an effort to ensure the thorough "cutting away" has occurred throughout the community. There must be a "cutting away" of all—a comprehensive, exhaustive circumcision. Importantly, this all-encompassing circumcision includes those otherwise forgotten or overlooked, such as aliens and slaves. This suggests that not only might an individual overlook the need for a circumcision but also individuals may be overlooked who require a circumcision. Just as in Exodus 4, circumcision may have cut away problems and issues probably unknown to Moses himself; humankind requires a circumcision of things unnoticed.

God requires a circumcising of things of which humans may be unaware. The object of the circumcision then is significant. Biblical scholars continue to debate the object of the circumcision in Exodus 4. Because he was born a Hebrew and nursed by his Hebrew mother, Moses most assuredly was circumcised. Given the history of circumcision's importance for the Israelites as established in Abraham's time, it is reasonable to presume that Moses would have circumcised his son—even in a foreign land such as Midian. This writer argues that one of Moses' sons was the object of the circumcision. However, there is still no definitive answer. Of greatest concern then is not who was circumcised, but that there was a circumcision. Further, the ambiguity of the object of the circumcision in Exodus 4 literally universalizes the circumcision. The thorough inclusion of the people in the circumcision in Exodus 12 also universalizes the circumcision—it could be anyone.

Circumcision As a Form of Preparation

Given the universality of the need for circumcision, it is reasonable that as modern-day people in covenant with God through Jesus, a circumcision is a prerequisite for usefulness. Before Moses

could be the deliverer, a circumcision had to occur. Before Abraham could become the father of many nations, a cutting away took place. Before the people could participate in the Exodus, a circumcision had to result. Before Joshua could lead the people into the land of promise, a circumcision ensued. Throughout history, circumcision—cutting away—predicated the fulfillment of God's plan.

Even in contemporary culture, circumcisions result as a form of preparation. Consider the history of African Americans in this country. Before any formal proclamation of slave emancipation, a cutting away of those in power and acceptance of those not empowered had to occur. Throughout America white slave owners had to shed their oppressive opinions and activities. All this circumcising happened before any proclamation was signed by Abraham Lincoln.

Before any real progress in the Civil Rights Movement could be made, the notion that separate and unequal was acceptable had to be severed. A group of people had to acknowledge in their hearts and minds that some cutting away was necessary. As a seminarian, the writer watches circumcisions occur. Through the seminary preparation period, male colleagues struggle with the severing of their preconceived notions of ministry and church leadership. It is clear that God is working to prepare them to better serve diverse communities in the twenty-first century; God is circumcising their understanding of things like power, role of women, and ecumenism.

Although circumcision and women seem diametrical in our society, the motif is applicable. Female colleagues struggle with the circumcision of cultural concepts and denominational dictates that seem to depress the ministry of women. As God is working to prepare them to more passionately and confidently serve God's people, God is circumcising their understandings of dis-

allowed ordinations and disinterested friends and family. Nevertheless, the writer and her female colleagues are not the first set of women to share in a preparatory circumcision. Biblically, Zipporah serves as a foremother for us. Her role in the Exodus 4 circumcision is overlooked but nonetheless critical.

Zipporah: Cutting Away at the Comfort Zone

Scholars sensitive to the Black presence in the Bible confidently highlight Zipporah's African ethnicity. Cain Hope Felder³ and Charles B. Copher⁴ point to Numbers 12:1 as evidence of her Ethiopian heritage. Randall C. Bailey further asserts that Zipporah was not merely a Cushite, but specifically a Cush from Africa.⁵ Zipporah's message then is a universal message for all people of color. Uniquely, however, African-American women in America can most readily identify with Zipporah because she was a woman of African descent.

Despite her six sisters' distinctive dispositions, her father's priestly presence, and her husband's legendary legacy, Zipporah's presence and role in the Exodus passage is noteworthy. Zipporah's female presence in the recount of a decidedly male rite reiterates the universality of circumcision. In Zipporah, we find the universal or ubiquitous need to move beyond one's comfort zone. This movement is a critical element of preparing for a circumcision. Zipporah illustrates stepping outside of one's comfort zone in

³Cain Hope Felder, "Race, Racism, and the Biblical Narratives," in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 135.

⁴Charles B. Copher, "The Black Presence in the Old Testament," in *Stony the Road We Trod*, 156.

⁵Randall C. Bailey, "Beyond Identification; The Use of Africans in Old Testament Poetry and Narratives," in *Stony the Road We Trod*, 179.

order to participate in the preparatory circumcision—specifically, stepping outside of cultural, gender, and personal comfort zone.

To begin, Zipporah demonstrates stepping outside of the cultural comfort zone when she takes the flint in her hand and performs the circumcision. Scholarly data based upon her Midian culture, suggest that Zipporah would not have performed or even encouraged circumcision, which was commonplace among the Hebrews. Bernard Robinson offers that, culturally, this woman of color was not Hebrew; therefore, her son was not circumcised.⁶ For her to step outside of her cultural comfort zone and execute a circumcision is significant.

African-American women have stepped outside of their cultural comfort zones for years. Individuals like Marian Anderson, Patricia Harris, and Congresswoman Maxine Waters are strong examples of women finding themselves in places where cultural differences were problematic. Born in St. Louis, reared by a single mother, Congresswoman Waters stepped outside of the cultural comfort zone, after years as a Head Start teacher's assistant, she was elected to the California State Assembly. Fourteen years later, she ran for Congress and won. This woman of depressed social status now holds a leadership role in this country's elite legislative body. God moved her outside of her cultural comfort zone. Clearly, Waters' life and career have been peppered with cutting away and leaving things behind. In order for her to fulfill God's call on her life, she stepped outside of her cultural comfort zone, and God continues to use her mightily.

Secondly, Zipporah's act forced her to step outside of her gender comfort zone. As a woman during that period, Zipporah undoubtedly knew little about the physical act of circumcision. The

⁶Bernard P. Robinson, "Zipporah to the Rescue: A Contextual Study of Exodus 4:24 - 26," *Vetus Testamentum* 36 (October 1986): 453.

Bible does not indicate that her father had any sons, so Zipporah was one of many girls. Her exposure to and experience with the rite of circumcision, therefore, would have been limited. Again, for her to confidently perform a circumcision speaks loudly of her willingness to step outside of her personal comfort zone. Conversely, had Zipporah not acted so decisively outside of her gender comfort zone, the requisite, situation-correcting circumcision may not have occurred. Zipporah then demonstrates the need to step outside of one's gender comfort zone in order to respond to a move of God. This willingness to move beyond this gender comfort zone is part of the preparatory circumcision experience.

African-American women have stepped outside of their gender comfort zones repeatedly. Trailblazers such as Sojourner Truth, Joycelyn Elders, Madame C. J. Walker and Ruth Simmons are examples of this. As a divorced mother of two, the youngest of twelve reared in the rural poverty of Grapeland, Texas, what had to be cut away in the life of Ruth Simmons? Did "boys are smarter than girls" have to be cut away from her psyche? Did she have to sever guilt-ridden thoughts such as "I probably can't commit to that because I have kids to take care of?" Many times Simmons had to step outside of a gender comfort zone and circumcise, "They don't want to listen or understand me because I am a woman." Undoubtedly, when she became president of Brown University, she found herself outside of a gender comfort zone; not many women lead this nation's premier Ivy League institutions of higher learning. In stepping outside of her gender comfort zone, Simmons is responding to God's call.

Finally, Zipporah had no personal desire to participate in a circumcision. Under the most technologically advanced conditions this act is a painful enterprise. That she would take on this responsibility demonstrates her willingness to be uncomfortable. Throughout history, African-American women have found them-

selves outside of their personal comfort zones. Consider the career paths of individuals like Condeleezza Rice who seemed quite content in academia (professor and provost at Stanford University) and is now serving as National Security Advisor. She may be outside of her personal comfort zone, but God is using her greatly. Reflect upon Judith Jamison, who probably was happy to masterfully dance and now is outside of her personal comfort zone as the Artistic Director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre. God moved her out of her personal comfort zone of dancer in order for her to be and to do that which God called her to do and to be.

Intertextually, Zipporah joins the ranks of women like Jechobed, Miriam, and Pharaoh's daughter, each stepping outside her comfort zone to ensure the young, Hebrew Moses survived Pharaoh's decree to kill all of the Hebrew boys. Zipporah stands beside Rahab whose quick, decisive action saved her family as well as enabled the two spies, when sent to assess the strength of Jericho, to deliver the correct message to Joshua. How much of her concern about others' opinions of her or allegiance to Jericho civil leadership had to be cut away in order for her to courageously be used by God? How much was deleted before she could stand outside of her comfort zone?

Zipporah's actions are much like those of Deborah and Jael, respectively, who delivered and fulfilled the oracle for the victorious battle against the Canaanite army in the Jezreel Valley. How much pride, fear, or self-consciousness had to be cut from these two women before God could use them? How much was severed before they could stand outside of their comfort zones?

Finally, Mary ensured the birth of the Messiah, thereby greatly arresting any attempt to thwart God's ultimate plan of salvation and reconciliation when she stepped outside of her comfort zone into a pregnancy beyond the acceptable boundaries of marriage. How much doubt, condemnation, or immaturity had to be elim-

inated before God could use her?

Conclusion

Standing outside of one's comfort zone and participating in a preparatory circumcision is not easy. Just as Zipporah stepped outside of her comfort zone in the circumcision in Exodus 4, so must the twenty-first century church step outside of its comfort zone. In order to do this, some things must be cut away. The church must sever the fear and avoidance of change in order to embrace new opportunities to serve. It must cut away the propensity to focus on self and move to the uncomfortable place of focusing on others. This church must cut away the comfortable ritual of sending money to help fund various missions and begin executing the mission of the church. The twenty-first century church must follow Zipporah's example of circumcising the norm and reject denominational biases in favor of denominational neutrality. Passive worship must be circumcised and replaced with heart-felt, fully engaged participatory worship.

Individually, we involuntarily endure some circumcisions. We have no choice or voice in the matter. Sometimes we may not even be fully aware of the cutting away. There are other times in our lives when we are painfully aware of the circumcision. As maturing Christians, we often must volunteer for a circumcision of sorts. We submit ourselves to God's flint so that "isms" like racism, sexism, and classism, may be cut away. In the end, regardless of our degree of cooperation, the cutting away must and will occur. With this new understanding, God is calling us as individuals to the community of the Christian faithful to be greatly used in ministry by allowing a godly circumcision.