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Rainer Kessler  
Psychoanalysis as a Hermeneutical Tool:  
the Example of Ex 4:24-26\*

- (24) At a lodging place on the way YHWH met him and sought to kill him.  
(25) Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it, and said: "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!".  
(26) So he let him alone. At that time she said, "You are a bridegroom of blood," because of the circumcision.

*Ex 4:24-26 — Isolated Story or Integral Part of the Narrative?*

The question how the short scene of Ex 4:24-26, which is usually discussed under the heading "Bridegroom of Blood", ties into its context has received widely diverging answers. Hugo Gressmann believes it is an isolated and detached story, which "stands out like an erratic block from its different surroundings".<sup>1</sup> Peter Weimar's observation is quite the reverse; he believes that the story is not isolated but integrated. He concludes that it has been "especially designed for this textual context".<sup>2</sup> Both positions are represented in several varieties, and both are supported by close readings of the text.

a) In actuality, Ex 4:24-26 comes as quite a surprise after what has been recounted earlier. In v. 24, the scene opens with YHWH meeting "him" and seeking to kill "him". The suffix probably refers to Moses, since YHWH addressed him last in v. 23 to explain to him his imminent appearance before the Pharaoh. The story previously recounted how YHWH himself chose Moses and promised him physical safety during the return from Egypt to Midian that he had ordered (4:19). Now suddenly he wants to do what even the Egyptians have shrunk from: kill Moses. At the same time, however, the death of Moses is said to jeopardise God's declared intention of saving Israel.

However, if we assume the suffix refers to Zipporah's son, whom YHWH would thus attack, the aggression does not come as less of a surprise. According to the narrative logic of the preceding passages, YHWH first called

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\*. The German version of this article will appear under the title "Psychoanalytische Lektüre biblischer Texte — das Beispiel von Ex 4,24-26" in the review *Evangelische Theologie* vol. 61 (2001).

1. H. Gressmann, *Mose* 1913, p. 57 ("ragt wie ein erratischer Block der Urzeit aus ihrer anders gearteten Umgebung hervor"); cf. also J. Morgenstern, "Bloody Husband" (?) 1963, p. 43: "our passage has no primary narrative connection whatever with either what immediately precedes or follows in the biblical text"; H.F. Richter, "Blutbräutigam" 1996, p. 433: "Der Text ist an dieser Stelle völlig deplaziert."

2. P. Weimar, *Berufung* 1980, p. 284 ("selbst erst für den vorliegenden Textzusammenhang gestaltet".)

on Moses to return to Egypt (v. 19). Moses then took his wife and children and began preparations for his journey (v. 20). In the next verses, YHWH addresses Moses again (v. 21-23) — and is said to resolve to carry out a lethal attack on the son. Whether the victim of the attack is Moses or the son, the attack is unprovoked. No motive is given for YHWH's resolve. Indeed, any conceivable motive would bring up the question of why YHWH, who has often talked to Moses, should not be able to get rid of whatever problems have arisen by giving Moses an order. On the narrative level, where God is simply one agent among many, one cannot but speak of the “quasi-schizophrenic behaviour of the Deity”.<sup>3</sup>

Besides this intrinsic tension created by a situation in which God saves and liberates while resolving to commit lethal aggression, literary considerations must also be taken into account. The whole of Ex 3 and Ex 4 achieve narrative cohesion through a dense network of cross-references. By contrast, the passages that follow do not mention the incident reported in Ex 4:24-26 again. This leads to the question: “Could not v. 24-26 be omitted without interrupting the course of events?”<sup>4</sup>

b) Authors who stress the integrity of the narrative within its narrative context certainly have a point. The opening, “At a lodging place on the way”, already assumes the situation of 4:18, which says Moses is heading from Midian towards Egypt. Ex 4:24-26 is often compared to the story of Jacob's fight with God at Peniel (Gen 32:23-33), but it has no local reference point allowing us to read a local aetiology between the lines.

The locale, then, only becomes clear through the context. The same is true for the characters in the narrative. The text goes on to say “YHWH met him and sought to kill him”, but who is “him”? Whether we decide that “him” refers to Moses or Zipporah's son, the suffix still refers to the context. Zipporah is mentioned by name and presented rather matter-of-factly as Moses' wife from Midian. Their marriage was reported in 2:21, and we met Zipporah's son in 2:22.

Finally, when the text is viewed from a literary perspective it is not as completely isolated as it may appear to be at first glance. The preceding verses, 4:22 and 23, mentioning Israel as YHWH's first-born son also refer to Pharaoh's first-born son, and then go on to include Zipporah's first-born son in v. 24-26. The scene that follows depicts the meeting between Moses and Aaron, and opens with the same vocabulary and construction: “And he met him”.<sup>5</sup>

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3. Cf. W.H. Propp, *Bloody Bridegroom* 1993, p. 505.

4. W.H. Schmidt, *Exodus* 1988, p. 219 (“Könnte man nicht v. 24-26 herauslösen, ohne den Gang der Dinge zu zerstören?”).

5. On these observations, cf. also U. Cassuto, *Exodus* 1967, p. 59, and B. P. Robinson, *Zipporah* 1986, pp. 450f.

c) The result of our preliminary discussion may be summed up as follows: the narrative cohesion of Ex 3 and Ex 4 is left intact without episode 4:24-26. If the passage is omitted, the text does not falter – on the contrary, it becomes even smoother and more consistent because an alien element has been removed. Ex 4:24-26, however, cannot exist without its own narrative cohesion. While the narrative is already rather mysterious in itself, removing it from its context would make it disappear in a plethora of open questions.

### *The Ambivalence of Isolation and Integration*

If literary exegesis cannot unequivocally resolve the ambivalence of a text — that is, the tension produced by its simultaneous isolation and integration in a context – it usually discusses it in terms of adherence to tradition on the part of the author of the text. Let me take as an example the interpretation put forward by Werner H. Schmidt in his Exodus commentary: Schmidt explains the strange feel of the text as an effect of the distance of time and place. According to Schmidt, several motives in the text testify to “an ancient stage of tradition in Ex 4:24-26, harking back to a primordial time that is almost impossible to penetrate”.<sup>6</sup> Schmidt says the theme of the story is very old, and alien to the Israelites, because “the view that the theme derives from the Midianites has a certain degree of scholarly probability to it”.<sup>7</sup> Though Schmidt explains the isolation of the text in this way, he also feels that the verses not only do appear in context, but are also intricately tied in with that context. The explanation, ultimately, leaves one with the following statement: “From a literary perspective, the narrative thus belongs to the Yahwist’s presentation which picks up a similarly primordial tradition in Gen 32:23ff”<sup>8</sup>.

This statement leaves more questions open than answered. Why does the Yahwist include such a story? Why does he include so few of such stories? If he incorporates the story in his narrative, why not do so more fluently? Why does he use the words “cutting off the foreskin” instead of “to circumcise” (*mûl*), a moment of strangeness also noted by Schmidt? Probably one shall imagine in Schmidt’s opinion that the Yahwist feels bound by tradition, knowing that it is not his prerogative to transform it more drastically. But why, then, does he deliver more fluent and intricate pieces of narrative

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6. W.H. Schmidt, Exodus 1988, p. 219 (“ein hohes Alter der Überlieferung von Ex 4,24ff., die in eine kaum mehr durchdringbare Frühzeit zurückreichen wird”).

7. W.H. Schmidt, Exodus 1988, p. 226 (“so hat die ... Ansicht, ‘daß der Stoff der Sage von den Midianitern stammt’ ..., eine gewisse Wahrscheinlichkeit für sich”).

8. W.H. Schmidt, Exodus 1988, p. 220: “So gehört die Erzählung literarisch zur jahwistischen Darstellung, die in Gen 32:23ff eine ähnlich urtümliche Überlieferung aufgreift.”

elsewhere, as in Ex 3 and 4? Were those stories less ancient and venerable, allowing the Yahwist to treat them in a much more unrestricted way?

The line of argument does not change when the supposition is of a well-known narrative which only needs oblique reference because of its familiarity,<sup>9</sup> rather than a venerable tradition. The question remains, however, why this author speaks so succinctly in this passage, while he offers other stories in such a way that they can be understood without any knowledge of the oral tradition. I will not discuss these explanatory models any further, or attempt to refute them in any fundamental way. I freely admit that the answers they provide do not satisfy me. I would like to put forward an alternative model of explanation that relies on psychoanalysis.

Most of us are familiar with the phenomenon of the slip of the tongue, from the field of individual psychoanalysis. Prompted by the author who first gave a full description of the phenomenon, we usually refer to it as a “Freudian slip”.<sup>10</sup> There are plenty of examples of this phenomenon. There is the young woman who, in the volatile situation of a party conversation, suddenly refers to her husband, who is 25 years her senior, as “my father” instead of “my husband”. When in control of her consciousness, the woman knows very well that the man is indeed her husband. In an oedipal situation, however, she has indeed married her father, or a substitute for her father; and now this has slipped off. Another example would be the man who refers to his lover by his wife's name. He is obviously well aware that his lover has a different name. He also knows that she is a different and autonomous person. However, he sometimes wants from her what he cannot get from his wife, and therefore produces this Freudian slip in a moment of excitement.

A Freudian slip is not the same thing as a mistake. Were I to address one of my female students by a wrong name in one of the first tutorials, this would usually be a simple mix-up. The cause might be my weak memory or perhaps even my lack of interest in my students. At any rate, there is no secret truth behind this wrong name. There is, however, a secret truth behind a Freudian slip. The secret truth is that the woman has married her father and that the man is looking for his wife in his lover. This secret truth is brought to light by signals from the unconscious and the repressed consciousness. The Freudian slip is thus not simply a mistake; it is just the opposite: it is the unintentional emergence of a hidden truth.

People are often unaware of producing a Freudian slip. When their slip of the tongue is pointed out to them, they will usually deny it: “I didn’t really call Keith ‘my father’, you must have misunderstood me.” If the person con-

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9. Cf. for example N.M. Sarna, *Exodus* 1991, p. 24: “the account here is only a truncated version of a larger, popular story that circulated orally in Israel. Its details were well known and were expected to be supplied by the audience.”

10. Cf. S. Freud, *Psychopathology* 1901.

cerned becomes aware of the slip of the tongue, he or she will not only feel embarrassed, but also try to undo it in some way. Strategies of denial include ignoring it, treating the whole thing as a joke, or saying that the slip of the tongue was intended to point to something other than the secret truth revealed. Thus in the next sentence, the woman will simply say “my husband” again, and in the one after that she will add more emphasis. Perhaps she will cleverly add that she was once actually mistaken for her husband’s daughter, ... and wasn’t that hilarious? Such strategies aim to integrate the Freudian slip into the common, conscious discourse, to neutralise the disclosure of a secret truth. For this reason, the Freudian slip always includes the utterly surprising, strange and isolated moment, as well as the subsequent attempt to include it in ordinary discourse. However, it is often easy to spot the fault lines between the slip of the tongue and the subsequent cover-up.

This brief digression about the Freudian slip as a phenomenon in the “Psychopathology of Everyday Life” indicates the aim of my proposed interpretation of Ex 4:24-26. I want to describe the text as a Freudian slip. The text is my concern, not the author, so I do not intend to describe the text as a Freudian slip on the Yahwist's part. One should approach a text such as Ex 4:24-26 not as the product of an individual — or, in other words, as the product of an author in the modern sense of the word — but rather as the result of a long history of passing on a story right up to its eventual canonisation. Stated otherwise, the text is the expression of a collective consciousness, not of an individual one.<sup>11</sup> For the moment, I will not answer the question of whether I use the category of Freudian slip — which has been obtained from the psychoanalysis of individual consciousness — as simply an analogy, or whether it can actually be applied to episodes of the collective consciousness.

Clearly, the Exodus passage and the Freudian slip share the element of surprise and the more or less successful integration into another discourse. In taking this hypothesis as our starting point, we face the double task of finding out the secret truth behind the surprise and uncovering the mechanism through which it is integrated. This means, of course, that we will first have to comprehend this discourse itself. For practical reasons, however, I shall not deal with these points in their successive order, but discuss four thematic aspects of the text. These aspects will be examined from the perspective of the surprising

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11. In a sense, this is also true for modern literature, for which we do not assume a long history of stories being passed on, and where the author is usually known. In literature, the object is “the presentation of *supra-individual* forms” (“eine Präsentation *überindividueller* Formen”) which is not the case in individual analysis, whose aim is “to clarify the structure of *individual* forms of interaction” (“Herausarbeitung des Gefüges *individueller* Interaktionsformen”); “in the literary presentation *collective-typical* forms of interaction are debated” (“in der literarischen Darstellung werden *kollektiv-typische* Interaktionsformen zur Debatte gestellt”; A. Lorenzer, “Der Malteser Falke” 1981, p. 35 (italics R.K.)).

truth that emerges and the attempts to integrate that truth into the narrative discourse.

*Ex 4:24-26 as a “Freudian slip”*

a) YHWH as Aggressor

The text opens with the sentence “At a lodging place on the way, YHWH met him and sought to kill him” (v. 24). In my introductory remarks about the apparent isolation of the text, I already pointed out that the sentence hardly fits in with the narrative mode of Ex 3 and 4, regardless of whether either Moses or the son is seen as the target of the aggression. However, neither does the text fit in with the rest of the Exodus discourse. For Israel, YHWH of Exodus is a good God who helps and saves. The part of aggression against Israel and Moses, on the other hand, is represented by Egypt. The Pharaoh orders the killing of the new-born sons of Israel's women (“to kill” in 1:16 and 4:24). He “seeks” to kill Moses (2:15, “to seek” with an infinitive, as in 4:24); Moses is only able to return when all those who have threatened his life are dead (4:19, again “to seek”, as in 2:15 and 4:24). The oppositions are also clear elsewhere in the text: tiny Israel is facing the oppressive might of Egypt, and YHWH is firmly on Israel's side.

This view of the world is quite simple, and this simplicity is its main function. It is of course not the whole truth. One need merely look at things from an Egyptian perspective, and one will soon ask the same question as that posed by Leszek Kolakowski: “The psalmist says that the LORD has struck down Egypt through its first-born — because his steadfast love endures forever; he has driven Pharaoh and his army into the Red Sea — because his steadfast love endures forever. The question is, what do the Egyptians and the Pharaoh think about the LORD's mercy?”.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, YHWH also appears as an aggressive God in the clear world view of the Exodus discourse. While Egypt is the sole target of his aggression, the Passover narrative suggests that his aggression might also be aimed at Israel. YHWH says that he will pass through the land of Egypt and “smite all the first-born in the land of Egypt” (Ex 12:12). Only the blood of Passover protects the Israelites from having their first-born killed as well (12:13, 23).

At this point, we are presented with an opportunity to integrate the representation of YHWH as an aggressor against Moses and Israel, which is so

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12. L. Kolakowski, *Himmelsschlüssel* 1969, quotation 36 (“Der Psalmist sagt vom HERRN ...: er habe Ägypten an ihren Erstgeburtten geschlagen – denn seine Güte währet ewiglich; er habe Pharaon und sein Heer ins Schilfmeer gestoßen – denn seine Güte währet ewiglich. – *Die Frage*: Was denken Ägypten und der Pharaon über die Barmherzigkeit Gottes?”).

strange in the context of the Exodus discourse. Moshe Greenberg argues that Ex 4:24-26 has been integrated into the context in the sense that Ex 12 also presented YHWH as an aggressor and Israel could only protect itself from him through a blood rite.<sup>13</sup> It is hard to deny, however, that this integration succeeds only with great difficulty. For in Ex 12, the target of aggression is clearly Egypt, and YHWH himself shows the Israelites how they can protect themselves from “collateral damage”. In Ex 4, however, the target is the appointed liberator, who must then wrest his salvation from God by a sleight of hand.

It may be convenient at this point to call attention to a peculiarity not mentioned before, a peculiarity to be aware of while interpreting the text as a slip of the tongue in the Freudian sense. Whether something is a Freudian slip is first borne out by the context in which it occurs. Our young woman with the older husband may very well speak to a woman friend about her role as a young wife, about the age of her husband, and also about his role as father or father-substitute. In such a context, this would not constitute a Freudian slip, but be a part of the ordinary discourse. It is the other context, that of social convention, which turns the woman's mistake into a Freudian slip. I mention this because YHWH as aggressor without cause is often the subject of extensive discourse in the Bible. One example that springs to mind is the Book of Job. The point is not so much whether it is inconceivable that the Scriptures contain an image of YHWH as an aggressor against Israel or against individuals who worship him. The point is rather that such an image stands out as an alien element within a specific context — the Exodus narrative in this case — in order to bring to light a hidden truth that can only be integrated in the narrative discourse with great difficulty.

#### b) Moses the Failure

The first thing that strikes one about Ex 4:24-26 is that the three verses do not mention Moses by name. The only three characters named in the passage are “YHWH”, “Zipporah” and “her son”. The text does not only fail to mention Moses, but he is not given any action either. Of the four characters in the text, including Moses, only two act and speak, YHWH and Zipporah. If one assumes that the suffixes of v. 24 refer not to the son but to Moses — an assumption supported by the contextual cohesion<sup>14</sup> — he only appears as the

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13. M. Greenberg, *Exodus* 1969, p. 117: “We find here an unmistakable foreshadowing of the last plague and the simultaneous saving of Israel's firstborn through the paschal blood-rite”. Cf. also P. Weimar, *Berufung* 1980, p. 289: “Aufgrund der Bedeutung des Blutritus steht damit Ex.4:24-26a\* in einem deutlichen Bezug zu Ex.12,21-23\*.” Also W.H. Propp, *Bloody Bridegroom* 1993, pp. 510-513.

14. Admittedly, a “first-born son” is mentioned twice immediately before our scene in v. 22 and 23, which may lead one to conclude that the attack of v. 24 is directed against Zipporah's “first-born son”; cf., among others, H. Kosmala, “Bloody Husband” 1978, pp. 60f, and M. Greenberg, *Exodus* 1969, pp. 112-114. However, vv. 22f are on the level of speech and not on the level of the narrative like v. 24. Moses was last named on this level in v. 21, so that the suffix can only refer

object of YHWH's aggression and his wife's act of salvation. The text makes clear that he would not have survived the divine aggression if it had not been for his wife's intervention.

This observation offers us a chance to integrate the text in the Exodus discourse. It has been clear from Ex 3 and 4 that Moses is not at all enthusiastic about his appointment as saviour. His first reaction is, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?" (3:11). Moses then realises that he does not know the God of Israel's fathers by name (3:13) and that the Israelites may not believe him (4:1). After pointing out his lack of eloquence (4:10), Moses continues to resist YHWH's patient attempts at persuasion, and when he finally bursts out "Oh, my LORD, I pray, send some other person", YHWH becomes angry with him (4:14). YHWH's aggression in Ex 4:24-26 can clearly be linked with the narrative thrust of these verses. Scholars have also called attention to the mode of expression in Ex 6:12, 30, where Moses repeats his earlier argument that he does not possess the necessary rhetorical skills. However, he now says that he is "a man of uncircumcised lips". Since 4:24-26 deals with a circumcision, we can safely assume that there is a relationship between the two passages.<sup>15</sup>

Moses may not yet be the glorious hero and saviour, but his own lack of action and YHWH's aggression against him in 4:24-26 are quite different from the rest of the narrative in chapters 3 and 4. Moses is far from passive in these chapters, but puts forward very sensible queries and understandable objections to his appointment as saviour. What is more, at no time does YHWH intend to kill him for his behaviour. When YHWH is angry with Moses, he sends for Aaron to act as a mouthpiece for Moses, and tells the latter, "You shall be to him as God" (4:16). The Moses acting as God to Aaron and the helplessly passive Moses of 4:24-26 — this, too, is difficult to integrate.

The Freudian slip of Ex 4:24-26 thus shows that the saviour and hero does not only vacillate in the beginning, but in at least one life-threatening situation also falls prey to a passivity bordering on paralysis. We may perhaps echo the psychoanalytical considerations on God's masculinity made by

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to him; cf. R. and E. Blum, *Zippora* 1990, p. 42; cf. also B.P. Robinson, *Zippora* 1986, p. 455: "in the extant text the victim cannot ... be the son ..., but only Moses himself". Also W.H. Propp, *Bloody Bridegroom* 1993, p. 499.

15. M. Buber, *Moses* 1948, pp. 78f suspects as the reason for YHWH's attack on "den eben erst von ihm Entsandten": "offenbar weil dessen Hingabe, nachdem er seinen Widerstand überwunden hat, ihm noch nicht vollkommen genug erscheint", and then establishes a relationship with "dem Bild, mit dem die Bibel im Folgenden, auffallenderweise zweimal (6,12.30), in denselben Worten, Mose von neuem auf die Schwerfälligkeit seiner Rede hinweisen lässt, 'Ich bin ja vorhätig an Lippen' ...". Cf. also I. Pardes, *Countertraditions* 1992, p. 81: "Moses' arguments with God in these accounts" — his refusal in Ex 3ff and the reference to his "uncircumcised lips" in Ex 6 — "become an eerily physic combat in the 'Bridegroom of Blood' ...".

Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, and say that “another story emerges”. According to Eilberg-Schwartz, the official discourse holds “that in the culture of ancient Israel a masculine God does authorize male domination in the social order ...”. By contrast, the “other story” that “emerges” in Ex 4:24-26 would suggest that “The divine male can be seen to compete with and threaten the role of human males”.<sup>16</sup>

This image of a human hero driven to complete passivity by a divine male leads to the next point.

### c) Women as Saviours

The real hero in Ex 4:24-26 is Zipporah. She does what is right and saves Israel's saviour from death. This motive again contradicts the hegemonic discourse of the Exodus narrative. Right from his walking on to the stage as an adult, Moses is the hero of the narrative. He kills an Egyptian overseer and is forced to flee (2:11-15). When he meets his future wife Zipporah for the first time, it is Moses who protects her and her six sisters from shepherds who try to chase them away from the drinking basin (2:15-17).<sup>17</sup> Having accepted the assignment given to him by YHWH, Moses leaves for Egypt, where as a steadfast leader of his people he takes on the Pharaoh during the many trials and tribulations recounted in the plague narratives.

Women certainly appear in the exodus narrative, and they play a decisive role. The midwives make survival of Israel's boys possible (1:15-22) and Moses' mother and sister, together with the Pharaoh's daughter, make it possible for little Moses to grow up (2:1-10). However, these women have been relegated to the margin of the narrative in the truest sense of the phrase. They have a role to play until the hero has “grown up”, as 2:11 puts it. This role is no different from that of the women in Luke's account of the birth and childhood of Jesus. Later on in the narrative, we are introduced to Miriam, but her song in Ex 15:21 is first given to Moses himself in 15:1. Moses, Aaron and Miriam are only mentioned in one breath in the extraordinary word of Micah 6:4.<sup>18</sup>

The only woman to play a decisive role in the narrative, at least until the transgression from the sphere of the Midianites to that of the people of Israel in Egypt, is Zipporah. Not only as a child Moses depends on midwives, mothers and sisters, but also as an adult he owes his life to the astuteness of

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16. H. Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus* 1994, p. 140.

17. I. Paredes, *Countertraditions* 1992, p. 84: “Moses was surely on a safer road to conventional heroism when he rescued Zipporah and her sisters from the shepherds in Exodus 2.”

18. About the ambivalence of Ex 1-2, where women characters, shown in their strength, are also shown their place and subordinated to patriarchal discourse, cf. J.Ch. Exum, *Plotted* 1996, pp. 80-100.

his wife. This is another repressed truth that comes to light in Ex 4:24-26.<sup>19</sup> In her search for “Countertraditions in the Bible”, Ilana Pardes even says Zipporah’s story is the single truth of the text. She expounds on an idea expressed long before, that the demonic representation of YHWH refers to a polytheistic background: “What most biblical scholars have overlooked is that the representation of Zipporah comes strikingly close to representations of guardian goddesses in polytheistic texts. Such goddesses are frequently the primary caretakers of striving young heroes.” As examples, she mentions Inanna and Ishtar from the Mesopotamian tradition and Athena and Venus from the stories of ancient Greece and Rome. She continues: “What is more, the protection these goddesses offer often entails struggles with other deities (usually male deities) on behalf of their chosen heroes.”<sup>20</sup> One of the text’s hidden truths that emerges as a Freudian slip would thus be the representation of Zipporah as Moses’ guardian goddess.

#### d) The Circumcision

The story of the aggressive God, the helpless hero and the saving woman has been realised with a very simple device of narrative suspense. The scene opens with “YHWH met him and sought to kill him” (v. 24) and closes with “so he let him alone” (v. 26). Verse 25 narrates the decisive change, when Zipporah circumcises her son and with the foreskin touches “his feet”. The question of whose feet can be left open.

The decisive moment in the narrative is thus a circumcision. The theme of circumcision does not play a very important role in the Hebrew Bible, at least not quantitatively. Qualitatively, however, it is hugely important. The repeated qualification of the Philistines as “they who have foreskins”<sup>21</sup> (Judg 14:3; 15:18; 1 Sam 14:6; 17:26, 36; 2 Sam 1:20; 1 Chr 10:4; cf. also 1 Sam 18:25, 27; 2 Sam 3:14) shows that for the Israelites, circumcision is an ethnic-cultural feature that sets them apart from the Philistines. The story of Dinah’s rape in Gen 34 presupposes that the Canaanite people of Shechem are also uncircumcised. The ethnic-cultural feature of distinction then becomes the

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19. S.D. Kunin, *Bridegroom* 1996 describes Zipporah’s role as “inversion of the women’s role”, but he sees this “inversion” as a set pattern in the Moses narrative: “In the text we find a woman, Zipporah, performing a male role; that is, circumcision. This action is clearly part of a general pattern of inversion of the role of women found throughout the Moses myth” (p. 12). “The structural and narrative role of Zipporah is explained through the overall pattern of inversion” (p. 15). Kunin’s textual proof, however, consists of the side-texts to Ex 1-2 and Ex 15, and with the contention of an “overall pattern of inversion”, the strangeness of this text is rendered smoothed out.

20. I. Pardes, *Countertraditions* 1992, p. 88f.

21. Martin Buber’s translation of “they who have foreskins” (“vorhäutig”) is preferable to the “uncircumcised” (“unbeschnitten”) of dictionaries and traditional bible translations. Since ‘*arel*’ derives from ‘*orlah*’ = “foreskin”, the phrase assumes the presence of the foreskin and not the lack of circumcision; cf. M. Buber, *Schrift* 1964, p. 1102.

religious symbol of the covenant with God that is established in Gen 17. According to Gen 17:11, circumcising the flesh of the foreskin shall be “a sign of the covenant between me and you”. The circumcision is to be performed on the eight-days-old boys (v. 12). Slaves that belong to the house must also be circumcised (v. 12ff). The uncircumcised who refuse to be circumcised shall be considered unfaithful to the covenant and must be cut off from the people (v. 14).

The Exodus narrative also takes up this hegemonic discourse about circumcision as a religious sign and ethnic-cultural feature of distinction. This is important for our interpretation of Ex 4:24-26. Ex 12:43-49 says that all non-Israelites, such as slaves and foreigners, must be circumcised before they can take part in the Passover celebrations. The image of a killing God whom the Israelites can only appease by a blood rite was already referred to in the Passover text of Ex 12. Could there also be a connection between the circumcision in Ex 4 and the general demand of circumcision in Ex 12? Ruth and Erhard Blum take up this route of interpretation. They say that in Ex 4, “Absence of circumcision is the (visible) expression of the mother and the son not belonging to the people of Israel, the community of Moses”.<sup>22</sup> According to them, the point of the text is “the derivation/legitimacy of Moses' wife and son belonging to Israel”.<sup>23</sup> Ruth and Erhard Blum prefaced their study by saying that they would consciously engage with “the given form of the text and its context”.<sup>24</sup> They end their work with the observation that they have realised this intention: “It is not only possible, but also inescapable to read the story within the context of the Moses narrative”.<sup>25</sup>

Arguing from the psychoanalytical concept of the Freudian slip, one must add that this is just one way of reading, that of the official discourse. Something else surfaces from underneath it. In official discourse, there is a technical term for “circumcising”, the verb *mûl* with its derivatives, one of which occurs in Ex 4:26. Why, then, does it not occur in the decisive passage in v. 25, which uses the unique expression “she cut off her son's foreskin”? In official discourse, the uncircumcised who refuses to be circumcised must be killed (Gen 17:14), but there is no place in that discourse for the reverse notion, namely that circumcision can be used as an apotropaic measure against

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22. R. and E. Blum, Zippora 1990, p. 50: “Das Fehlen der Beschneidung ... ist (sichtbarer) Ausdruck der Nicht-Zugehörigkeit von Mutter *und* Sohn zu Israel, der Gemeinschaft des Mose.”

23. R. and E. Blum, Zippora 1990, p. 49: “die Herleitung/Legitimierung der Zugehörigkeit von Moses Frau und Sohn zu Israel”.

24. R. and E. Blum, Zippora 1990, p. 42: “die gegebene Textgestalt und ihr Kontext”.

25. R. and E. Blum, Zippora 1990, p. 53: “Man kann nicht nur, sondern muß wohl das Ganze im Kontext der Moseerzählung lesen.” — Other differently accentuated interpretation variants of the narrative from the perspective of integration can be found in: G. Richter, Studien 1921 and B.J. Diebner, Blutsverwandter 1984.

a divine murder attempt.<sup>26</sup> The unusual fact that the circumcision is carried out by the mother may be explained with reference to the emergency situation (cf. 1 Macc 1:60; 2 Macc 6:10), even though the father is present in Ex 4:24-26. However, what is the significance of this woman also becoming a bride at the same time? How should we interpret the combination of the idea of the blood, which refers to blood relations, with the word *hoten*, which always means family-in-law, not blood relations?

Before dealing with the question of what truth about circumcision hidden in the official discourse possibly emerges in Ex 4:24-26, I must first discuss some methodological considerations. Signals of the repressed consciousness and the unconscious that surface in slips of the tongue, in dreams and also in analytical memory sessions do not emerge in a clear code. Slips of the tongue, dreams and memories must first be interpreted. One of the established rules of Freudian psychoanalysis says that such interpretation must only be undertaken in an interaction between the analyst and his subject. It is the analyst's task to help the subject. If the isolated, alienated and contradictory signals in the patient's narrative resist interpretation, further sessions are necessary until the patient has found his interpretation.

One cannot proceed with texts in this way, let alone with ancient texts. One cannot lay them down on a couch and ask them to associate on some theme or other. In a critical discussion of "Psychoanalysis and Historical-Critical Exegesis", Van Ruiten and Vandermeersch say that "A text is ... not a patient lying on a couch ... The act of interpretation (sc. in an analytical session) is not the same as giving information to fill out a hiatus in the patient's knowledge. A psychoanalytical interpretation presupposes a complex and regulated interaction in a specific cultural context".<sup>27</sup> Such regulated interaction is not possible with a text, and the text analyst must resist the temptation to identify with the text and explain its mysteries from the perspective of the text. The analyst would then engage in something that is not allowed in psychoanalysis, namely wanting to know more than the patient himself. The interpreter knows the true meaning of the text, its secret message. The whole enterprise of the so called "tiefenpsychologische Bibelinterpretation" is based on this unsound method. Van Ruiten and Vandermeersch say the following on this subject: "Whoever believes he can

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26. E. Blum, who does acknowledge the apotropaic aspect in Ex 4:24-26, in an offhand manner places it besides the representation of the entry into the "Verwandschaftsbund Moses": "*zugleich* wird eine apotropäische Wirkung des B[eschneidungs]blutes vorausgesetzt" (E. Blum, Art. Beschneidung 1998, p. 1355; italics R.K.).

27. J. van Ruiten/P. Vandermeersch, *Psychoanalyse* 1994, p. 272: "Een tekst is ... geen patient die op de bank ligt ... Interpreteren valt niet zomaar samen met het mededelen van een stuk informatie om een lacune in de kennis van de patient op te vullen. Een psychoanalytische interpretatie veronderstelt een complexe, gereguleerde intersubjectieve interactie in een specifieke culturele context".

explain texts directly by imposing his own interpretation is engaged in what Freud called 'wild' psychoanalysis".<sup>28</sup>

However, critically-minded Van Ruiten and Vandermeersch also admit that "the different factors that are artificially activated in an analytical session also occur ... and function in daily life".<sup>29</sup> They refer in particular to "all kinds of situations in which people are engaged in attempts to make sense of things and interpreting them, for example when they are reading, writing, teaching or taking classes".<sup>30</sup> This is true for the act of reading texts and, indeed, an important branch of psychoanalytically oriented exegesis focusses on reading strategies.<sup>31</sup> It is also true for the act of text production, the results of which have been laid down in our present text. Let us therefore take such factors into account as they appear in our text of Ex 4:24-26, without prematurely claiming to have found the true story that emerges from the narrated text. I believe that there are three main indications.

(1) The circumcision by Zipporah and the touching of "his feet" — regardless of whether they are the feet of the son, Moses or those of YHWH himself, regardless also of whether literally the feet or metaphorically the genitals are meant — causes the deity to abandon his attack. The blood of the circumcision thus has an apotropaic effect, as has been established many times before. This makes perfect sense from the perspective of our story. One should not forget, however, that in the Bible, circumcision "is usually discussed within the context of extensive covenantal affirmations ..., and its apotropaic character — with the exception of our curious story — is relegated to the background...".<sup>32</sup> The circumcision, as it appears in the discourse shaped by Gen 17, has been sublimated into a covenantal sign, but its violent character emerges from Ex 4:24-26. Only blood can appease the deity. The question remains, however, why animal blood does not suffice, as it does in the apotropaic Passover sacrifice of Ex 12. And if it has to be human blood, why should it not be blood from the tip of the finger or the lower arm?<sup>33</sup>

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28. J. van Ruiten/P. Vandermeersch, *Psychoanalyse* 1994, p. 272: "Wie teksten rechtstreeks duidt met de bedoeling er trefzeker zijn interpretatie aan te kunnen opleggen, doet wat Freud bestempelde als 'wilde' psychoanalyse."

29. J. van Ruiten/P. Vandermeersch, *Psychoanalyse* 1994, p. 273: "... dat de verschillende factoren die in een analytische zitting op kunstmatige wijze geactiveerd worden, ook in het dagelijkse leven bestaan en ... functioneren".

30. J. van Ruiten/P. Vandermeersch, *Psychoanalyse* 1994, p. 273: "... allerlei situaties waarin mensen bezig zijn met zingeving en interpretatie, door te lezen, te schrijven, te doceren of onderrecht te volgen".

31. Special mention must be made here of the works of Hartmut Raguse, cf. esp. H. Raguse, *Psychoanalyse* 1993 and especially the title of the 4th section: "Lesen und klinische Psychoanalyse als dialogische Situationen".

32. I. Pardes, *Countertraditions* 1992, p. 88.

33. E. Kutsch, "Blutbräutigam" 1980, p. 123: "Warum aber ... ist das Blut für diesen Ritus nicht einfach aus einem Schnitt etwa in den Arm genommen worden ...?".

Why should it be blood from the foreskin? These questions lead to the next observation.

(2) Since Zipporah circumcises her son, he must until then have been uncircumcised. If one does not want to attribute the lack of a circumcision to an inexplicable negligence on the part of Moses, one must accept that in the Midianite community to which Zipporah belongs and in which Moses lives, circumcision was carried out at a later point in time, probably in puberty or on the occasion of a wedding, which were at any rate much closer in time in pre-bourgeois times than they are in our present-day culture. The mysterious words “bridegroom of blood” clearly refer to the connection between wedding and circumcision.

Whom Zipporah touches with the foreskin may again remain an open question, as was the case with our observation about the apotropaic effect of the blood of circumcision. The same is true for the question of whether she touches the feet or the genital organ, and whom she calls “bridegroom of blood”. In addition, we should not stylize the narrative into an aetiology of infant circumcision, since there is no evidence for this.<sup>34</sup> We also may renounce the fantastical reconstruction of an “original” narrative often undertaken in secondary literature.<sup>35</sup> It is enough to observe that in the narrative, “the original connection between circumcision and the initiations of puberty or wedding shines through”.<sup>36</sup> This means that there is a connection between circumcision and sexuality.<sup>37</sup> This also seems to go without saying, simply because circumcision involves the male genital organ. However, this apparent statement of the obvious has been sublimated in the official discourse, which has reduced circumcision to an asexual covenantal sign. Gen 17 presents the circumcision in such a way that the cutting off of an earlobe could also be a

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34. B. Baentsch, *Exodus – Leviticus* 1900, p. 36 already wanted to explain the narrative of the circumcision of Zipporah's son as “die Verlegung derselben aus den Jahren der Mannbarkeit in das Kindesalter”.

35. Perhaps the best known is the reconstruction by E. Meyer, *Israeliten* 1906, p. 59 which says that originally, a demon claimed the *ius primae noctis* with Zipporah, whom she then proceeded to hoodwink into believing that he has actually deflowered her by circumcising Moses and applying the circumcision blood to the demon's penis. This reconstruction was worked out by H. Gressman, *Mose* 1913, pp. 56-61. It was also taken up by E. Auerbach, *Moses* 1953, pp. 54-56. This reconstruction has come in for much ridicule. Cf. J. Hehn, “Blutsbräutigam” 1932, p. 1, who finds it “geradezu grotesk”. H. Kosmala, “Bloody Husband” 1978, p. 54 finds it “so phantastic, not to say ridiculous”, and B. Jacob, *Exodus* 1997, p. 101 says that of all interpretations, it is “am gewissensten falsch”.

36. H. Holzinger, *Exodus* 1900, p. 16: “der ursprüngliche Zusammenhang von Beschneidung und Pubertätsklärung oder Hochzeit.”

37. To redeem the above-cited reconstruction by Meyer and Gressmann, it must be said that it does take this connection of circumcision and male sexuality seriously. It also shines through in other biblical narratives, as for example in the story that tells how the extended family of Dina's rapist is forced to circumcision of the male genitals (Gen 34). Another example is when David has to bring along the foreskins of slain Philistines in order to win his wife (1 Sam 18: 17-30).

sign of the covenant between YHWH and the people of Israel. By contrast, Ex 4:24-26 keeps the memory alive that circumcision not only involves the genital organ but also has a causal connection with male sexuality. But what exactly is that connection?

(3) The practice of circumcision is of course not restricted to the Israelites. It is found in cultures all over the world, excepting non-Semitic peoples in Asia, Indo-Europeans, Babylonians and Assyrians.<sup>38</sup> Since circumcision is carried out on the genital organ — and in many cultures not just on the male genital organ — one might generally say that, “the original meaning remains present in the common notion that it is the circumcision that first makes someone a man or a woman”.<sup>39</sup> This does not explain much, however. If one explores the question of what connection there is between manipulation of the genital organ and becoming a man or a woman, one is forced to say with some scepticism, “many hypotheses have been formulated to try and garner at least some main motives from the complex rationale behind these strange practices, or even one main motive and to isolate its world-wide significance; the difficulty of this enterprise is illustrated by the fact that so many contradictory explanations have been offered”.<sup>40</sup>

As we saw earlier, the point of my approach is not to reconstruct the “true” or “original” story behind Ex 4:24-26. The same is true for the phenomenon of circumcision. It is not my intention to reconstruct its “true” or “original” meaning. We should not overlook, however, that the short text leaves a track that leads us away from the official discourse, with its asexual sublimation of circumcision into a covenantal sign. Zipporah's phrase of “cutting off the foreskin” is a very strange expression. The Hebrew word for “cutting off” (*krt*), appears in Lev 22:24 as a passive participle in a series of participles. These participles always refer to the testicles of animals: they are “bruised”, “crushed”, “torn” or “cut”. In the Leviticus text, however, the phrase concerns non-sacrificial animals. Deut 23:2 then refers to male humans: “He whose testicles are crushed or whose male member is cut off shall not enter the assembly of YHWH”. This does not involve circumcision ritually channelled, but rather mutilation and emasculation. When Ex 4:24-26 uses the word *krt*

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38. Cf. H. Wissmann, Art. Beschneidung 1980, p. 714.

39. M. Schuster, Art. Beschneidung 1998, p. 1354: “Das urspr[ünglich] Gemeinte bleibt in der geläufigen Vorstellung präsent, erst die B[eschneidung] mache jemanden wirklich zum Mann bzw. zur Frau.”

40. H. Wissmann, Art. Beschneidung 1980, p. 714: “Es sind zahlreiche Hypothesen aufgestellt worden, um aus dem komplexen Begründungszusammenhang, der hinter diesen so... befremdlichen Praktiken zu vermuten ist, wenigstens Hauptmotive, wenn nicht sogar ein Hauptmotiv und dessen weltweite Geltung zu isolieren; es erhellt die Schwierigkeit dieses Unterfangens, wenn häufig einander widersprechende Deutungen das Ergebnis sind.”

meaning “to cut off”, it establishes a connection between circumcision and castration.<sup>41</sup>

The establishment of this connection is not an invention of modern psychoanalysis. Paul already sarcastically called on his Galatian adversaries who demanded circumcision for Christians to let themselves be “mutilated” (Gal 5:12). Even if psychoanalysis did not invent the connection between circumcision and castration, it does deal with the subject. Freud embeds it in his myth of the primal horde in which the primal father wields power over the sons:<sup>42</sup>

But the father's will was not only something which one might not touch, which one had to hold in high respect, but also something one trembled before, because it demanded a painful instinctual renunciation. When we hear that Moses made his people holy by introducing the custom of circumcision we now understand the deep meaning of that assertion. Circumcision is the symbolic substitute for the castration which the primal father once inflicted upon his sons in the plenitude of his absolute power, and whoever accepted that symbol was showing by it that he was prepared to submit to the father's will, even if it imposed the most painful sacrifice on him.

Ilana Pardes stays close to Freud's construction of a primal horde, but she reproaches him for totally neglecting the role of women in this constellation. She finds traces of an active role for women in Ex 4:

What Freud neglects to take into account ... in his depiction of the primal horde ... is that women (and mothers in particular) — despite, or rather because of, their powerlessness — may 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.<sup>43</sup>

Howard Eilberg-Schwartz introduces the homo-erotic element in the relationship between God and man into this constellation of Freud, and subsequently of Pardes, who devise the relationship with God as one of father and son (while only defining the role of women in a different way each time). A man who loves a male God finds himself in a homo-erotic relationship. Since it may be surmised that “the desire of heaven was nearly always imagined as male and heterosexual, Israelite women theoretically should have been the appropriate objects of divine desire. The insertion of Israelite men into this equation required their unmanning”.<sup>44</sup> This is exactly the story that Ex 4 tells: “If it is Moses' genitals that she (sc. Zipporah) touches, then Moses'

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41. Remarks by W. Burkert, *Kulte* 1998, pp. 64-67 also deserve to be mentioned, which say that in ancient shrines found “von Babylonien bis Syrien und Kleinasien”, “wo Kastraten einer Grossen Göttin dienten” (p. 64f), “die Kastration mit einem steinernen Messer durchgeführt wurde” (p. 67) — just as Zippora uses a firestone.

42. S. Freud, *Moses* 1939, p. 122. — For a discussion of psychoanalytical positions on Freud's views on circumcision, cf. A. Caballero Arencibia, *Psicoanálisis* 1993, pp. 539-548.

43. I. Pardes, *Countertraditions* 1992, p. 83.

44. H. Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus* 1994, p. 138.

manhood must already be exposed. God's attack on Moses is in part an attack on his masculinity. This is why circumcision appeases God. The blood of circumcision is a symbolic acknowledgement that a man's masculinity belongs to God".<sup>45</sup> This is true in a general sense: "... circumcision was for the ancient Israelites a symbol of male submission. Because it is partly emasculating, it was a recognition of a power greater than man".<sup>46</sup>

However, since in the "*ménage à trois*: God/Israelite man/Israelite woman",<sup>47</sup> in which it would be natural for the male God to love only the woman and see the man as a rival, the factual earthly dominance of men over women must not be jeopardised; circumcision, according to Eilberg-Schwartz, is given a second, positive meaning that relates to the male genital organ as an instrument of reproduction: "It is the father who dispenses the rights of reproduction to the son. This control over the son's reproductive success is one of the reasons why the male genital organ is marked with the sign of circumcision. It signifies the Father's blessing of the son's reproduction".<sup>48</sup> I believe that one can find support for this interpretation in the Bible. Gen 17 first introduces circumcision as an affirmation of several promises, including that of reproduction. After it has been introduced, the promise is added that the sterile Sarah will give birth to a child. If this connection is not coincidental, then it means that circumcision of the male is a prerequisite for a couple's fertility.

As an exegete, I must leave it at this. I can only report about the position of psychoanalysis and indicate the exegetic findings. Yet I cannot say anything definite about these positions because even though the text does contain traces of the repressed consciousness, it does not lead to immediate conclusions about what is repressed. This situation is similar to that in the interpretation of dreams.<sup>49</sup> Freud distinguishes between the manifest dream content — what I can recount as my dream after waking up — and its latent content, which can only be recovered by analysis (*Analysearbeit*).<sup>50</sup> Written texts only give us their manifest content, and an "analysis" along the lines of what can be done with a patient is not possible with a text, as I said at the beginning of this section of my paper. For this reason, the exegesis must be confined to the indication of traces and a consideration of possible interpretations. It is not able to offer anything more conclusive. Psychoanalysis can in turn, however, help exegesis to gain the insight that phenomena such as the isolation and integration of a text, whether it is open or closed to under-

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45. H. Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus* 1994, p. 160.

46. H. Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus* 1994, p. 161.

47. H. Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus* 1994, p. 138.

48. H. Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus* 1994, p. 141.

49. Ex 4:24-26 has very plausibly been compared to a dream. Cf. W.H. Propp, *Bloody Bridegroom* 1993, pp. 496-498.

50. S. Freud, *Traum* 1901, pp. 654f.

standing, its logical cohesion and seeming lack of cohesion are not necessarily the result of literary manipulations, editorial clumsiness or historical mishaps in the way the narrative was passed on orally. They may also mirror different levels of consciousness.

### *Collective Memory and the Crypt*

Until now I have left a final question open: when we discuss similarities between a text such as Ex 4:24-26 and phenomena such as repression and the Freudian slip, are we only discussing an analogy to phenomena of the individual memory, from which these concepts were gained? In other words, are we using these concepts metaphorically? Or is repression and its re-emergence in slips a real manifestation of what is known as collective memory? Can we conceive of repression and the Freudian slip as phenomena that belong to the collective memory?

Traditionally, a distinction is made between two manifestations of collective memory. The first one is “communicative memory”, the everyday memory in which blocks of information are stored in an unorganised manner. Most people, when asked about their ancestors, will generally be able to go as far back as their grandparents, perhaps even their great-grandparents, but that is usually where it ends. This means that communicative memory has a wandering temporal horizon of about 80-100 years. So-called “cultural memory” is different, however. It objectifies and organises memory, either orally, in rituals or celebrations, or monumentally in architecture and memorials, or in written form in inscriptions or books. It does not have a wandering temporal horizon, but rather is fixed in the past.<sup>51</sup>

At first glance, there does not seem to be any place for phenomena such as repression and the Freudian slip in this description of collective memory. However, I contend that repression and the Freudian slip are a reality in both individual and collective memory. Following Assmann, I would like to use the phrase “cryptic memory”. In his book on Moses, Assmann puts forward the hypothesis that all memories of Pharaoh Akhenaton, successfully erased from cultural memory in the ancient world, live on in the story of the lepers passed on by Manetho. “The story of the lepers can thus be explained as a conspicuous case of distorted and dislodged memory. ... To use a term of psychoanalysis, they [i.e. the recollections of Akhenaton's monotheistic revolution] became ‘encrypted’, that is, inaccessible to conscious reflection and processing”.<sup>52</sup> Assmann distinguishes between “crypt”, representing

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51. For this description of collective memory, cf. for example J. Assmann, *Gedächtnis* 1988.

52. J. Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian* 1997, p. 39.

repressed memory passed on through generations, and “repression”, which is a phenomenon in the psychology of an individual.<sup>53</sup>

How, then, should we imagine the operation of cryptic memory through generations? By definition, cryptic memories are not processed by cultural memory, and they would soon disappear from communicative memory, with its limited temporal horizon. However, this is only true for conscious memories, such as the grandparents' names, where they lived, what they did for a living, and so on. By contrast, repressed material may be passed on through longer periods of time, precisely because it has been repressed. We know from family therapy that problematic behaviour caused by the family constellation is passed on through generations, and that it is very hard to correct if the persons concerned are not made aware of their behaviour. As long as a certain type of behaviour is allowed to remain unconscious, it is continually passed on from parents to children. The same is true for prejudices we might have against, let us say, Jesuits or perhaps Jews. Especially if prejudices are politically incorrect, that is, if they may not be professed openly, and can therefore not be openly addressed, they are passed on all the more successfully. Non-verbal behaviour signals to the next generations what they should think about such people: they are not included in the circle of friends, they are not invited, they are greeted in an ill-mannered way, etc. Nothing is expressed on the conscious level, but children sense that these groups must be rejected, and they will pass this on in much the same way. Another possibility is that not the true stories are passed on, but the distorted ones, as in Assmann's example of the outcasts.

“With the edification of the crypt completed, it must now be sealed. ... No crypt without edification: an edifice, an edifying speech”.<sup>54</sup> I would like to argue in favour of reading the Bible not only as “edifying discourse”, as a document of cultural memory, but also to examine it for clues that lead us into the crypt, into cryptic memory. Several prominent stories, all dealing with gods, sexuality and violence (Gen 6:1-4; Gen 32:23-32; Ex 4:24-26), show that looking for these clues need not be pointless.

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53. In the German version of the book, J. Assmann, *Moses der Ägypter* 1998, p. 292, n. 94 (“Krypta” and “Verdrängung”).

54. J. Derrida, *FORS* 1986, p. xliv.

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