

**Action speaks louder:
Zipporah in the wilderness**

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The role of women has been obscured in society and across various faith communities for many years throughout history. I was born and raised in Burma, where women are always second-class citizens in Burmese Buddhist culture and among ethnic minorities. Christian Churches are also influenced by our cultural norm of male dominion. For many centuries, women have not been appointed to church leadership roles or decision-making positions or ordained as pastors. Although today, several women have been ordained as ministers and pastors, very few have been appointed to be in lead pastoral positions and to serve as key decision-makers. While coming out of the situation of a male-dominant culture from Burma and residing in the United States as an immigrant female faith leader, I have found that women's leadership and rights are always vulnerable in many places and many countries.

However much women are dominated and oppressed, women keep expressing their resilience and pushing for equality by breaking through their barriers. Since the Civil Rights movement in 1954, women like Rosa Parks (also known as the mother of the Civil Rights movement in Montgomery bus boycott in 1955) and Coretta Scott King (the author, singer, and wife of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.) in United States, Aung San Suu Kyi (the State Counsellor of Myanmar has been detained by Myanmar military since February 1, 2021, following a coup d'état) and many women have been actively defending the rights of the people, whether recognizably or unrecognizably.¹ Women have always been part of history-making, not only back to the Civil Rights movement in the United States or the current situation in Burma, but also in ancient Old Testament times.

This short essay argues that Zipporah, the wife of Moses, plays a decisive yet often overlooked role in ancient Israelite history. Exodus 4:24–26 says:

On the way [from Midian to Egypt], 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, touched his feet with it, and said, "Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me!" So he let him alone.

Without her resilient act of circumcision of her son, Moses would have been killed and would have never become a leader of the nation and the people of Israel. Zipporah's declaration to Moses—"Truly, you are a bridegroom of blood to me"—occurs within a critical life-and-death moment associated with Moses's divine commission. Prior to uttering this statement, Zipporah had already performed a ritual act directed toward Yahweh, "the Lord, the God of [Moses's] ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." As a Midianite woman and the daughter of a Midianite priest, Zipporah possessed ritual knowledge that enabled her to respond appropriately to the crisis. Her actions suggest an awareness of the specific covenantal obligation that had not been fulfilled within her family, and she intervened by performing a ritual act that Moses had neglected: circumcision.

Three central questions emerge from this narrative: 1) To what extent did the Midianites know of Yahweh and participate in rituals associated with Yahwistic worship prior to the development of Israelite religious identity? 2) Were women's ritual acts and forms of religious participation legal and recognized within ancient Near Eastern cultures? If so, 3) why do many contemporary religious traditions—particularly Christian Churches—continue to resist the full acceptance of women's leadership and participation in religious practices?

To explore these questions, this study examines the tradition of the name of Yahweh and its ritual as practiced among surrounding ancient Israelites. In addition, a feminist reading of Exodus 2–4 illuminates how the figure of Zipporah functions within these evolving traditions and how her role has been variously preserved, marginalized, or reinterpreted throughout history. There are numerous recent studies arguing that Yahweh was worshiped as one of many gods among the Midianites, even before he was made known to the Israelites in the ancient Near East.²

Zipporah, the worshipper of Yahweh

During his experience on the call by Yahweh, Moses was sure which God he would serve by asking many questions. Yahweh answered Moses, “I am who I am...the Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob...” (Exod. 3:13–15). Although Moses grew up under his mother until he was brought to Pharaoh's daughter at the Egyptian palace, he did not seem to have known the God named Yahweh and his ritual practices (see Exod. 2:10). In Exodus 6:3, Yahweh again said to Moses that “[he] appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty (*El Shaddai*), but by my name ‘the Lord’ (*YHWH*), [he] did not make [himself] known to them.” Therefore, in his earlier life, Moses did not know his ancestors' God as Yahweh, nor did he know the religious practices associated with Yahweh. On the other hand, Zipporah, his wife, was the daughter of the Midianite priest Jethro, who seems to know Yahweh well enough to know how to deal with Yahweh's wrath.

Our biblical narrative expresses that Zipporah was given by her father to Moses in marriage after Moses helped their flocks by the well (Exod. 2). So, the marriage was announced by Jethro the priest, whether there was consent by Zipporah or not. This is just a usual act in ancient patriarchal times, and it is also practiced in the modern period in cases of marriages arranged by the father or the parents.³ When Moses was called by Yahweh by the burning bush, he was alone; however, when he decided to go back to Egypt, Zipporah and their two sons were also taken by him. Again, there was no consultation mentioned by Moses with Zipporah, although he asked his father-in-law for permission to depart from Midian. Even knowing that it would be a difficult journey and task for Moses, Zipporah and their two sons went to Egypt with him, where the Israelites were oppressed in slavery. Up to this point, the life of Zipporah seems to be subjected to her father or her husband and the decisions they made; additionally, she was treated by the author in the narratives as a completely silent character.

However, Zipporah was not silent anymore when her family faced a life-and-death situation on the way to Egypt. The action of Zipporah, the Midianite wife of Moses, dealing with the wrath of Yahweh speaks louder and clearer that she knew Yahweh, without asking many questions as Moses did previously in the text. Yahweh was widely worshiped in the South Transjordan region in a very early period, which was before the Israelites had known him. In his book, *Yahweh: Origin of a Desert God*, Robert D. Miller mentions that shepherders, musicians and smiths from the Kenites or Midianites (i.e., Cain's descendants) brought Yahweh “in name at

least” and religious practice into Israel in their migration and influences. Miller argues that as early as 700 BCE, Israelites believed that there were non-Israelite worshipers of Yahweh who lived around the Gulf of Aqaba;⁴ therefore, he concludes that Israelites had known Yahweh just before the 9th century BCE. In accordance with Miller that Yahweh came from the south, some biblical passages, such as Deut. 33:2 and Judges 5:4–5, express that Yahweh came from Sinai, Seir, Mount Paran, and Edom. Therefore, the Israelites had known Yahweh and his ritual practices much later than the Kenites or the Midianites had known and practiced them around the Gulf of Aqaba. We can assert that Zipporah had known Yahweh even before Moses had known him, and she might have been a Yahweh-worshipper throughout her life under her father, the Midianite priest, Jethro.

Zipporah’s action speaks louder in the wilderness

On the way to Egypt, which is the same route taken when the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness, Moses, Zipporah, and their two sons spent a night at a certain place, where Yahweh “met” Moses and “tried to kill him.” Zipporah, without any hesitation, “took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin” (Exod. 4:24). In circumstances like this, women’s actions become louder in the wilderness, and that was not a new thing in biblical narratives. We have already seen Hagar, who also encountered God in the wilderness in Genesis 16 and 21. Both Zipporah and Hagar are non-Israelites. Hagar initially and actively named God as *El Roi*, which is “the God of my seeing,” in the wilderness. Likewise, Zipporah initially and actively took the action of circumcision for her firstborn son, Gershom, to save her husband, Moses, in the wilderness. The silent Hagar from Abraham’s household spoke to God in the wilderness and named him; likewise, the silent Zipporah performed the ritual of circumcision to Yahweh in the wilderness. Both are mothers and protect their families in the wilderness.

Was it possible for Zipporah, the woman, to perform circumcision in ancient times? By following Carol Meyers,⁵ Susan Ackermann,⁶ and Meir Bar-Ilan,⁷ Thomas R Blanton IV argues that, since infants were always under the care of mothers until they were weaned (cf. Isaac under Sarah in Gen. 21:8; and Samuel under Hannah in 1Sam 1:22), mothers were able to circumcise their infants legally. In ancient times, Blanton argued that mothers, midwives, and wet nurses were always associated with infants and children, and mothers performed circumcisions.⁸ Therefore, Zipporah’s circumcision of her firstborn son, Gershom, in the wilderness was not only possible, but also reflects the standard cultural practice; however, the biblical narrative does not mention the age of Gershom at that time. Carol Meyers credited Zipporah’s action to her apparently extensive priestly and ritual knowledge in this situation, which gave her the ability to intervene and turn away the attack of Yahweh, knowledge she had gained since she had grown up under her father, a priest in Midian.⁹ Furthermore, “cutting of the foreskin” itself is an important ritual for ancient Israelites—a ritual that Zipporah properly performed in the wilderness; “Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin” in Exod. 4:25.

In this wilderness, Zipporah’s action was not only circumcising her firstborn son, Gershom, but she also ritually and symbolically transferred that circumcision from her son to her husband, Moses. Exodus 4:25 says, “Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin, touched his feet with it...” in which “his feet” is used as a euphemism for Moses’s genitals, and for that reason many scholars have argued that Moses was never circumcised and Zipporah knew it. Since we do not have any evidence that women circumcised adult men, circumcising Moses by Zipporah at that age and at that time in the wilderness was unlikely; therefore, she symbolically

transferred the circumcision of her firstborn son, Gershom, to her husband, Moses. Zipporah took the bloody foreskin of her son and touched it to Moses's genitals, forcing her husband into the covenant of Yahweh with the sign of circumcision.

Silence broken, Zipporah spoken

After performing the circumcision ritual, Zipporah announced her marriage that "Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me! So, [Yahweh] let him alone," in which Yahweh saw the blood of the circumcision transmitted to Moses; therefore, Yahweh let Moses live; Moses was saved. After Moses was saved, Zipporah announced again that he was "a bridegroom of blood by circumcision." Zipporah's announcement of marriage by circumcision made Moses to be included into her family at this time. Although Moses lived in Midian for such a long time, he was always a stranger there; in Exod. 2:22 says, "[Zipporah] bore a son, and [Moses] named him Gershom; for he said, 'I have been an alien residing in a foreign land'." Gershom connotes a stranger or an alien (Hebrew *ger*) in a foreign land. Zipporah's saying "a bridegroom of blood by circumcision" to Moses recalls the circumcision in Shechem in Gen. 34:8–24, in which as for the marriage between Dinah the daughter of Jacob and the son of Hamor from Shechem, every male in Shechem came to be circumcised. The people of Shechem wanted to be included in Jacob's family (although after raping Dinah, the daughter), but marriage by itself could not make two communities as one; marriage with the sign of circumcision could create two groups to become "one people."

In the wilderness, Zipporah made her own decision to announce the marriage by the blood of the circumcision. We might recall her marriage mentioned in Exod. 2:21, that she was given by her father to Moses without her consent in her father's household; and she was silent in the narrative, since Exodus focuses only on Moses and his actions. Her silence, however, was broken in the wilderness, first by her action, then by her double announcement of her marriage, "a bridegroom of blood." In his blog post entitled "A Bridegroom of Blood," Rabbi Dov Linzer discusses the "blood" addressed by Zipporah twice in her statement. Linzer says:

What often goes without notice is that this is actually the first time in the Torah, the only time in the Torah, that blood is associated with circumcision. When Avraham was commanded to circumcise himself and his children, the Torah only mentions the removal of the foreskin. Similar to when the Torah commands the mitzvah in the book of VaYikra. In those verses, the focus is on cutting and on removing the foreskin. Here, the focus is on the blood.¹⁰

The focus on the blood in circumcision here is linked to the blood of the Passover, which saved the Israelites in Egypt at the end of their slavery. Exod. 12:7 says:

They shall take some of the blood (of the Passover Lamb) and put it on the two doorposts and lintel of the houses in which they eat it. [The blood needs to be seen.]

Exod. 12:13 says:

The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live; when I (Yahweh) see the blood I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. [The blood is a sign to protect against the wrath of Yahweh.]

The blood had saved not only the first-born sons of Israelites, but also the whole people who were in slavery in Egypt. Shifting our attention from Zipporah to Moses, it becomes possible that when Yahweh instructed him to explain the process of this first Passover, and the way Yahweh would save them from his wrath and their slavery, Moses might have already understood the saving power of blood through the experience he had in the wilderness. The concept of saving power by blood has developed over time.

Zipporah, out of her father's household and being in the wilderness on the way to Egypt, broke her silent knowledge to make a move of being a head of the religious covenantal family possessing crucial ritual knowledge, and a lead protector and decision maker to save the family from Yahweh's destruction. Her saving action speaks powerfully and loudly to the inclusiveness of becoming "one people" in the family, rather than maintaining divisions, such as Israelites versus Midianites, alien versus native, foreigners or strangers versus domestics, and outsiders versus insiders. We could even imagine that Moses's family, led by Zipporah from this stopping point onward, would have journeyed joyfully and happily together as one until they reached the mountain where Aaron came out to meet them.

Conclusion

Throughout the Bible, the name Zipporah is mentioned only in the book of Exodus 2:21; 4:24–26; 18:2. Without her name being mentioned in Numbers 12:1, some scholars believe that the Moses's wife, the Cushite woman, may have been Zipporah (even if this is unlikely: Cush refers to Ethiopia, not Midian); moreover, 1 Chronicles 23:15–17 also mentions her two sons (Gershom and Eliezer), but not their mother. Among the three passages in Exodus, Zipporah speaks only in 4:24–26; the remaining passages do not portray her adequately. Although only two verses in the entire Bible portray Zipporah's action of performing a religious ritual to avert Yahweh's wrath and speaking out twice about her marriage to Moses (who seems to neglect her in Exodus 18), her action speaks louder for us to notice that without her, Moses and her firstborn son Gershom would have been killed in the wilderness. Her courage and familiarity with religious rituals associated with Yahweh saved the leader of the Israelite people.

There are many women like Zipporah in our time whose actions speak louder than words; however, the faith communities—especially Christian Churches—often neglect their actions and voices. When women attain leadership positions, society hesitates, raises questions, and becomes ready once again to silence them. However, like Zipporah, women empower themselves and remain resilient to the violence directed against their families, their communities, societies, and finally, themselves. Women should also have more opportunities to question and challenge the prevailing cultural beliefs, practices, and power structures that have kept them in subordinate positions. Finally, it is hopeful that women's leadership will be fully recognized and well credited.

¹ Although I have mentioned only three women as political icons, this paper honors every woman, who is defending the rights of the people, protecting families, communities, and societies.

² Marta Luciani, "Archaeology in the Land of Midian: Excavating the Qurayyah Oasis" *BAR* vol 49.4 (2023), 32–39, in which the ancient Semitic god *Šalm* was widely worshiped across North Arabia. Daniel Royo, "The Faith of

Jethro: Polytheist or Monotheist? *JATS* vol 32.1-2 (2021), 150-170. Royo addresses several gods worshipped in the Midianite religion and even their practice of magic and divination. Several gods include Baal of Peor, Šalm, a moon god (see Judges 8:21, 24-26), and Yahweh.

³ There are still so many women in Burma whose marriages were arranged by their parents; they were given away to men whom they did not know in their lives, as marriage-wives. In her book, Ninu said, “while some young women themselves were willing to [marry the men that they never met in their lives], some accepted only because they were not strong enough to defy their parents’ will.” Ninu (Women in Action Group), *Women as the Others: Chin Customary Laws and Practices from a Feminist Perspective* (Yangon, Myanmar: Women in Action Group, 2017), 73–75.

⁴ Robert D. Miller II, *Yahweh: Origins of a Desert God* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH & Co. 2021), 40.

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/robert-d-miller-ii-yahweh-origin-of-a-desert/id426138594?i=1000682216231>

For a more recent discussion with critique of the older Kenite-Midianite hypothesis, please see Juan Manuel Tebes, “The Archaeology of Cult of Ancient Israel’s Southern Neighbors and the Midianite-Kenite Hypothesis,” *Entangled Religions* 12.2 (2021), n.p. <https://er.ceres.rub.de/index.php/ER/article/view/8847/8453>

⁵ Carol Meyers, “From Household to House of Yahweh: Women’s Religious Culture in Ancient Israel,” in *Congress Volume: Basel 2001*, ed. Andre Lemaire, VTSup 92 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 277–303.

⁶ Susan Ackermann, “Why is Miriam also among the prophets? (And is Zipporah among the priests?)” *JBL* 121, no. 1 (2002): 74.

⁷ Meir Bar-Ilan, *Some Jewish Women in Antiquity* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 17–18.

⁸ Thomas R. Blanton IV, “Did Jewish Women Circumcise Male Infants in Antiquity? A Reassessment of the Evidence,” *JJMJS* No. 10 (2023), 38–66.

⁹ Carol Meyers discusses the fact that Zipporah demonstrates priestly knowledge; Carol Meyers, *Exodus: The New Cambridge Bible Commentary* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 12, 63–66.

¹⁰ Rabbi Dov Linzer, “A Bridegroom of Blood,” in <https://library.yctorah.org/2013/12/a-bridegroom-of-blood/>