

The daughters of Keturah (2)

Deborah Hurn*

THE **FIRST PART** of this two-part article put forward the view that Zipporah, Achsah, Jael and Abigail were all descended from Keturah, Abraham's slave wife. All five lived on the fringes of the Promised Land, and the Scriptural record concerning them centres on a crisis each faced in her life.

Husbands and fathers

Keturah's husband, Abraham, was a great and faithful master who nonetheless had to discriminate against her and her sons. Although this decision was necessary to preserve the seed of promise as a chosen race for future inheritance, to Keturah it could have been bewildering and alienating. She may have wondered what was 'wrong' with her six fine sons that they were rejected in favour of Isaac, and whether exile was a fitting reward for the best years of her life in faithful service. Despite their eviction and isolation, she suppressed her resentment and did not reject the faith and hope of the Hebrews. She taught her children well, so that the Truth was preserved among the Sons of the East, while in the west the Sons of Jacob were forgetting their God and turning to idols (Josh. 24:14; Ezek. 20:7,8).

Zipporah also had a good and faithful husband, but it appears that Moses was under-confident and indecisive during his time in Midian. His reluctance to return to Egypt as deliverer arose from his fear of persecution as a Hebrew, and thus he put himself and his son at risk of Yahweh's wrath by not obeying the commandment of circumcision. In alarm and frustration, Zipporah was forced to provide back-up, and rescued them with incisive action.

Achsah conducted a businesslike transaction with a distracted father, but she was also respectful, as was fitting, for Caleb was undoubtedly and primarily a faithful man and a brave warrior. Her husband, Othniel, at this stage of his life, may have been in his formidable brother's shadow and too fearful to ask for further favour. Achsah knew that this was the time of opportunity to improve her inheritance, for it would be too late when all the land and water sources had been allocated. Therefore she proceeded in faith, making the approach and putting forward the request herself. Alighting from the ass signalled

both her submission to her father and a pending request; compare Abigail (1 Sam. 25:23). Caleb's guarded response,¹ "*Ma lakh?*", is equivalent to our 'What's [up] with you?' and is very far from, "What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom" (Est. 5:3,6; 7:2; Mk. 6:22,23).^{**}

Of **Jael** we read: "Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed" (Judg. 5:24). At the crucial time in which we meet her, Jael's husband, Heber, is both absent from home and in league with Canaanites. Thus Jael had to deal with the issues of loyalty and loneliness in the same moment. Whose side would she take, the allies of her husband or her adopted brethren of Israel? Who would help her? No one—at least no one on earth. In these circumstances she is the first of the five to provide encouragement to those sisters whose husbands have left the Truth or are unavailable when important decisions are to be made and support is needed.

Despite her wealthy household, **Abigail**, of all her sisters, was in the worst case by far. Her husband was not just unwittingly heartless or fearful, thoughtless or even disloyal, but foolish and ill-natured. Unlike Keturah, Zipporah and Achsah, who had godly husbands to father their children and lead the house, Abigail was bound to a wicked man. Whereas Keturah, by the time of her trial, had already borne and raised her children in a God-fearing household, Abigail faced the miserable prospect of living out the days of her womanhood with a man she did not love and who loved only himself and his wealth. She comforted and strengthened herself with her hope of the coming age, when the Messiah would judge the poor, save the needy and break in pieces the oppressor (Ps. 72:4).

* Thanks to Sister Faith Erickson-Gini for research support, and to Brother Roger Lewis and Sister Maxine Linden for comments and changes.

** All Scripture quotations are taken from the RSV unless otherwise indicated.

1. This vexed approach is also found in Jonah 1:6, where the ship's captain challenges Jonah for sleeping through the storm: "What do you mean, sleeper?" (NKJV).

“Of good understanding”

Of Abigail it is specifically written that she was a woman “of good understanding” (1 Sam 25:3), and it appears that this was true of each of her predecessors. As well as their Kenite derivation, lifestyle and culture, these women had in common their faith and purpose.

Although her sons were personally disadvantaged by the passing of the inheritance to Isaac, we may assume that **Keturah** understood the necessity of this. She accepted that Isaac and his seed were the subjects of Divine promises through which “all nations of the earth” would ultimately be blessed. But for now she faced the rest of her life without her sons (if she stayed in Canaan) or without her husband and friends (if she went with them eastward). Her sons were all she had lived and worked for, the very reason for her presence in Abraham’s household, and without them the prospect of old age as a slave seemed purposeless.

On the other hand, she faced the loss of the familiarity and companionship of a God-fearing home in which she had spent all the years of her life since a young woman. We do not know whether she made this choice herself or whether the choice was made for her, but we can be sure that in either case there was the pain of loss and the potential for alienation and resentment. Keturah was the only one of the five women who was unable to ‘do’ anything to relieve her crisis, other than submit to the force of circumstance and choose a positive attitude. She was sustained by her “good understanding” of a greater, higher purpose and a future when all slaves would be freed and inherit their reward.

Zipporah knew exactly what the problem was when the ‘angel of death’ arrived at the inn as they were on the way to Egypt.² She recognised that Yahweh has certain non-negotiable requirements, and for the people of promise the circumcision of its sons was one. She understood the necessity for a leader to be an example, to “manage his own household well” (1 Tim. 3:4) and “charge his children and his household after him” (Gen. 18:19). She was not deterred, although much distressed, at the pain and alarm of her young son, knowing that in cutting off the flesh and casting it away they would ‘enter into life’ (Mt. 18:8). At the last minute her quick intuition and “good understanding” saved the day.

We might also ponder Zipporah’s part in her reconciliation with Moses (Ex. 18:2,6), for it could appear that this was arranged between Jethro

and Moses without any concern for her feelings. In the nine months since Moses sent them away, her anger and frustration had probably subsided. She had time to think about forgiveness and cooperation, and may well have been wisely counselled in this vein by Jethro. Moses’ successful return, and the boys’ need to be with their father, helped her to participate in a smooth and happy reunion. Those who are married must often choose to reconcile, no matter what unresolved issues or hurtful memories remain. It takes “good understanding” to quell resentment and overcome a rift.

Achsah’s “good understanding” devolved upon her strong desire both to inherit a share of the land of promise and also to retain the simple sojourning lifestyle of her faithful ancestors. She had persistence towards a goal that was by no means assured. As a daughter with several brothers, she did not have a right to inherit land of her own. Her husband, moreover, had secured a city and its environs for them to administer,³ and some might think that with this she should have been well content. But Achsah had a desire and an assumption that were not unreasonable. She wanted to own the pastoral land on which she roamed, and she expected that it would be her father’s good pleasure to give it to her—with bonus water sources! We also have no ‘right’ to our inheritance, but we have been assured that our heavenly Father will abundantly reward the earnest seeker with “good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over” (Lk. 6:38).

Jael accepted that Yahweh’s enemies were her enemies, and that no alliance was permitted between Israel and unconverted Canaanites. She looked past Sisera’s human desire for survival to his true value to God—none! She weighed the pull of her ‘Bedouin’ tradition of unconditional hospitality and protection against her loyalty to the Hebrews, finding in favour of her adopted identity. When she had to choose between worldly connections and ecclesial duty, she made a firm and heroic decision. Sisters, particularly, may be tempted to continue to offer the benefits of ‘fellowship’ to those who reject or unreasonably delay conversion, or who do “not abide in the doctrine of Christ” (2 Jno. vv. 9,10). Jael’s clear thinking

2. See [“Zipporah and the circumcision”, Sept. 2004, p. 350.](#)

3. No sooner were the cities of Hebron and Debir in Calebite possession than they were allocated to the sons of Aaron (Josh. 21:11-13).

is a reminder to us all that ecclesial refuge is a privilege available only to believers.

Abigail's competent command and wise use of the household provisions is echoed in Proverbs 31. Even with a foolish husband she had this access and power. Her intense but gentle speech of appeal to David reveals, by its Scriptural and historical allusions, a "good understanding" by which all the others are measured. Let us suppose for a moment that Keturah was sometimes prone to depression, Zipporah to anger, Achsah to independence and Jael to austerity. All of these would be taking excellent characteristics of submission, action, purpose and resolve in an unwomanly or unworthy direction. Abigail, however, manifested no hint of an 'Achilles heel', for despite the extreme stress of her crisis she retained her yielding but persuasive spirit and preserved the favour of all parties throughout. "Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all" (Prov. 31:29, AV).

Women of the wilderness⁴

Keturah and her 'daughters' were not city women but resilient and resourceful women of the wilderness. They lived in black goats-hair tents and roamed in wide semi-arid spaces. They slept on reed mats on the hard ground, wrapped in rough woollen rugs. Each morning they lifted the flaps of their tents to reveal the bare horizons of the wilderness, and swept their earthen floors with brushwood. They cooked flat bread on open fires of twigs and animal dung and, where there was no well, dug for water in the gravel of the wadi beds.

In sun and wind they picked their way over endless rocky hills, following flocks as they browsed on scratchy, stunted shrubs and grasses. They milked goats, and they made yoghurt and cheese in skins of animals they had slaughtered and butchered themselves. They bore and raised children in the elements and provided traditional desert hospitality to all passers-by. Skilled with tent-pegs and mallets or flintstone knives and scrapers, they could pitch the tent . . . or execute the enemy; tan a hide . . . or amputate a foreskin.

They soothed chapped hands and lips with wool-fat, and steeped the leaves of aromatic shrubs for medicine and tea. Where possible they terraced and dry-farmed a wadi near their tents, relying on just two or three unreliable rainfalls a year to grow a spindly crop. Their resources were restricted and their tools were primitive



PICTURE: © Israel National Photo Collection/KLUGER ZOLTAN

Bedouin women with a water jug.

compared with those of the virtuous city-woman of Proverbs 31. They could not consider and buy a field or plant a vineyard or orchard, for the land on which they roamed was neither arable nor saleable.

The women of the wilderness were not to be found in soft raiment. Instead of fine linen, purple and scarlet, they dressed in coarse wool as black as the tents of Kedar. Unless their husbands were wealthy, like Nabal, they could not bring their food from afar, but subsisted on the yield of the flock and the meagre fruits of the desert. The merchants did not receive from their hands fine linen garments and girdles, but the rough products of the wilderness—meat, hides, mats and charcoal, prepared at the cost of their complexions.

All the daughters of Keturah were at home and fearless in the wilderness. They rode on donkeys and traversed long distances alone by this means. Achsah rode from Debir to Hebron, some fifteen kilometres, and back again, to petition her father for water (Josh. 15:18). After parting with Moses on the way to Egypt, Zipporah took herself and her young sons home to her father Jethro without an escort (Ex. 4:26; cf. 18:5,6). Abigail saddled her ass and hurried to intercept David and his men (1 Sam. 25:20). Keturah, if she left with her children when Abraham sent them away, returned far across the Negev and the Aravah to her ancestral home.

4. This section is based on the present way of life of the Bedouin.

Exhortation

How can we apply these examples today, in a community of believers where we are all technically Gentiles?

Some sisters have reason to feel that they are not in the centre of things in the ecclesia, but 'fringe-dwellers', 'Cushites' amongst 'Hebrews'. In most ecclesias there are sisters who have become alienated from the community; when some trouble comes upon them—for example, their spouse leaves the marriage or their children fail to accept the Truth—they may be unhappy with how little their brethren do to help, and resentful over heavy-handed treatment. Feeling they do not belong in a community which is so couple- and family-based, they become embittered and drift to the edges.

They may then begin to see their brothers and sisters as 'them', a group with whom they have connections but of which they are not part. Like the 'Cushite' women, they may think of the ecclesia (the nation) as 'somewhere over there', beyond the wilderness where they dwell in hardship. Over there in the heart of the country, they imagine, are fruit trees and vineyards, houses and gardens, wells where elegant city-sisters gather in comfortable companionship, city gates where their esteemed husbands administer the affairs of the nation, passing judgement on matters of law and where their children have status and prospects.

Because of their own location, origin, culture or difficult circumstances, the women of the wilderness may feel excluded and overlooked by their adopted nation. As their resentment against their brothers and sisters grows they may also become alienated from their own hope, rejecting the Truth because of its association with the people who have let them down. For a while they may find common ground with others in similar situations, but eventually lose even this connection with the ecclesia and return to the 'gods of Edom'. Or, like the Kenites during the Israelite period, they may drift ever further southwards in Judah until at last they are overwhelmed by Assyrian invaders (Num. 24:21,22).

To sisters in troubled circumstances or isolation of any kind: have courage and loyalty to the faith, even under discrimination and disadvantage. You will only harm and deprive yourself and your children if you reject the only hope. Relieve your disappointment, frustration or despair by turning to Yahweh, finding guidance, strength and peace through reading and prayer. Do what you can to convert crises into opportunities, whether for spiritual growth by taking a positive attitude, or as a gateway to a better outcome for all, both in this life and the life to come.

To all sisters: the truth of the matter is that we are all 'daughters of Keturah', Bedouin women, strangers and pilgrims. It is an illusion that some of us are 'in the heart' of the ecclesia while others who are alone, in difficult situations, in broken marriages or with spouses and children out of the Truth are somehow 'less' connected than we. We must be aware of, accept and include all our 'tent-dwelling' sisters. Like our 'mother', Keturah, we are all waiting for a better, fairer time. Like Zipporah, we all know right from wrong. Like Achsah, we all want an inheritance. Like Jael, we are all loyal to God's people. Like Abigail, we all submit to the future King.

For now, we all wander in desert places outside the Land of Promise, and deal with the dust, the rocks and the sparse vegetation of this weary sojourn. The fine colourful garments that some of us wear, the wealthy households that we may administer, the respect and influence that we and our husbands may enjoy within the ecclesia, or the compliance and integration of our children, should not become barriers between us, or be seen as evidence that some are personally approved and blessed while others are not. Yahweh saw fit to include Canaanite, Hittite, Midianite, Moabite, Kenite and Kenezite women in His collection of faithful saints. He even wove them into his Son's own blood-line, showing us that with God there is no respecting of persons. Like Him, we must generate enough love, inclusion and encouragement for all.

(Concluded)

Every true woman in Israel . . . if rightly instructed by her parents . . . would realise that her conduct must be such as to grace her privileged position as one of God's "firstborn" nation. The evidence of such an upbringing and instruction in their Law, their history and the promises made to their fathers, is clearly seen in such women as Hannah, Mary the mother of Jesus and . . . Abigail.

Gladys Blake, *Women of the Bible*, pp. 102-3