

as well. There will be loud wailing throughout Egypt—worse than there has ever been or ever will be again. But among the Israelites not a dog will bark at any man or animal'. Then you will know that the LORD makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel. All these officials of yours will come to me, bowing down before me and saying,

'Go, you and all the people who follow you!' After that I will leave". Then Moses, now himself hot with anger, left Pharaoh.

And the king, brooding and vengeful, but with his heart hardened for the last time, went to bed, only to face a dawn of despair after the wrath of God had fallen upon him and his people.

(To be continued)

# Your Letters



## Zipporah and the circumcision

I would like to offer some comments on the above subject, following on from the letter published in February (p. 40). Although the incident recorded in Exodus 4:24,25 is certainly mysterious in itself, a couple of features of the wider narrative make it clear what the principal lesson is. The immediate context refers no less than three times to first-born sons:

"And the LORD said unto Moses . . . thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, Thus saith the LORD, Israel is My son, even *My firstborn*: and I say unto thee, Let My son go, that he may serve Me: and if thou refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay thy son, even *thy firstborn*. And it came to pass by the way in the inn, that the LORD met him, and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of *her son*, and cast it at his feet, and said, Surely a bloody husband art thou to me. So he let him go: then she said, A bloody husband thou art, because of the circumcision" (vv. 21-26).

This suggests to me that the "him" in danger of death in verse 24 is not Moses but Moses' first-born son, and that Moses and Pharaoh are placed in parallel positions. Each first-born lives or dies dependent on their father's obedience to God's command.

Looking at the wider context, we find the narrator deliberately 'confusing' the chronological and geographical locations. In verse 18 we are in Midian: "And Moses went and returned to Jethro his father in law, and said unto him, Let me go, I pray thee, and return unto my brethren which are in Egypt, and see whether they be yet alive. And Jethro said to Moses, Go in peace". In verse 19 we are still in Midian, but the Lord's statement to

Moses that is recorded here must have preceded Moses' request in verse 18: "And the LORD said unto Moses in Midian, Go, return into Egypt: for all the men are dead which sought thy life". Verse 20 describes Moses' journey to Egypt: "And Moses took his wife and his sons, and set them upon an ass, and he returned to the land of Egypt: and Moses took the rod of God in his hand". In verse 21 we are back in the wilderness, and this time the Lord's statement explains why verse 20 mentions the rod: "And the LORD said unto Moses, When thou goest to return into Egypt, see that thou do all those wonders before Pharaoh, which I have put in thine hand: but I will harden his heart, that he shall not let the people go". This brings us to the account of the incident itself in verses 22-26, already quoted, which takes place "by the way in the inn", neither in Midian nor in Egypt.

The following verses return to the wilderness, "the mount of God", in the place where Moses originally met Jethro's family: "And the LORD said to Aaron, Go into the wilderness to meet Moses. And he went, and met him in the mount of God, and kissed him. And Moses told Aaron all the words of the LORD Who had sent him, and all the signs which He had commanded him" (vv. 27,28). But note that the Lord's words to Aaron predate any of the verses we have quoted, for Moses had been told as early as verse 14 that Aaron was already on his way to meet him. Finally we arrive in Egypt: "And Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the children of Israel: and Aaron spake all the words which the LORD had spoken unto Moses, and did the signs in the sight of the people. And the people believed: and when they heard that the LORD had visited the children of Israel, and that He had looked upon

their affliction, then they bowed their heads and worshipped" (vv. 29,30).

The purpose of this dislocation, both in terms of time and place, is to play up the question, Are we in Egypt or not? In fact, when we think about Moses, the question is more pointed still: Is he an Egyptian or not? We might recall that Moses was first introduced to Jethro as "An Egyptian" (2:19), and the record gives us nothing to suggest that Moses ever denied this identification. In 4:18, when Moses asks to return to Egypt, his

words to Jethro are ambiguous still: "Let me go, I pray thee, and return unto my brethren which are in Egypt".

Is it any surprise that in the inn, on the way, Zipporah has to face the same question about Moses' son, her own flesh and blood: Is he an Egyptian or not? Why has not Moses protected his son with the sign of the covenant God has made with Israel?

*Trevor Nicholls*  
Wellington, New Zealand