

# Moses: earth's meekest man

## 5. His family\*

John Mitchell

*Moses' journey back to Egypt, accompanied by his wife and sons, is dramatically interrupted by an incident which exposed Moses' neglect of his responsibilities under God's covenant and threatened his eldest son's life. Zipporah's quick action resolved the situation but resulted in Moses going to his confrontation with Pharaoh on his own.*

**O**CCASIONALLY in the Scriptures we come across an unsavoury passage that we can find embarrassing when read aloud in company or in the family. Examples are Judah's relationship with Tamar, Amnon's behaviour towards his half-sister (another Tamar) and David's wicked and disgraceful conduct in the matter of Uriah the Hittite and his wife Bath-sheba. They are 'black sheep' episodes such as have besmirched the family records of men since Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden, but they are part of the veracity of the Holy Scriptures nevertheless.

Now, in the story of Moses, we come to an episode, not in the lustful mode of the incidents just cited, but embarrassing all the same, though needed in the Divine record. It concerns his relationship with his wife Zipporah, and something that had obviously been lacking between them. Obedient to the call of Yahweh, "I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth My people the children of Israel out of Egypt" (Ex. 3:10, AV), Moses had bidden farewell to Jethro the Midianite and, taking his wife and two sons with him, had set off for Egypt.

From the southeast corner of Sinai to the Nile Delta where the children of Israel were living was a distance of at least 250 miles, which would necessitate lodging places along the way. As has already been noted in a previous article, no indication is given in the Scriptures as to the ages of Moses' sons, but the circumstances suggest that they were young. Evidently Moses left with as few of this world's goods as when he arrived among the Midianites forty years previously; in fact not much else besides Jethro's valedictory "Go in peace" (AV). All Moses had by way of transport was one donkey, fully loaded, or so it

would seem, with Zipporah and their two sons, while Moses walked beside them, pack on back and staff in hand. How far they had travelled before they were challenged in no uncertain manner by the angel of Yahweh is not revealed; one suspects it was not very far.

### Bridegroom of blood

The NIV narrates it as follows: "At a lodging place on the way, the LORD met Moses and was about to kill him. But Zipporah took a flint knife, cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it. 'Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me,' she said. So the LORD let him alone. (At that time she said 'bridegroom of blood,' referring to circumcision.)"

The meaning of the passage is generally admitted to be obscure, both as regards the Hebrew text and the interpretations that can be put upon it. For one thing, the name of Moses does not appear in the original, he being assumed to be the person represented by the pronouns 'him' and 'his'. This makes the meaning that it was Moses whom the angel sought to kill, and is the line that is generally followed by the commentators. For example, *Speaker's Commentary* says:

"The expression [met him, and sought to kill him, as in the AV] is obscure, but is understood to mean that Moses was attacked by a sudden and dangerous illness, which he knew was inflicted by God. The word 'sought to kill' implies that the sickness, whatever might be its nature, was one which threatened death had it not been averted by a timely act. We are not told for what cause the visitation came; but from the context it may be inferred that it was because Moses had neglected the duty of an Israelite and had not circumcised his son. From the words of Zipporah it is evident that she believed the illness of Moses was to be thus accounted for; the delay was probably owing to her own not unnatural repugnance to a rite, which . . . was not adopted gener-

\* Scripture quotations from the NIV unless stated otherwise.

ally in the East, even by the descendants of Abraham and Keturah. Moses appears to have been utterly prostrate and unable to perform the rite himself".

*Ellicott's Commentary* follows a similar line, saying:

"God met Moses, *i.e.*, visited him with a sharp attack of illness, which threatened to be fatal. Both he and his wife seem at once to have concluded that the visitation was a punishment, on account of their having neglected to circumcise their new-born son. Perhaps Moses had an intimation from God to that effect".

### Back to the covenant

Surprisingly, neither of the commentaries mentions the interpolation in the text that occurs between Moses' setting out and the time when he was challenged by the angel. It reads, "When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do. But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go. Then say to Pharaoh, 'This is what the LORD says: Israel is My firstborn son, and I told you, "Let My son go, so that he may worship Me." But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son' ". Yahweh's words would take Moses back to the sign of the covenant when the nation of Israel was born and was singled out from all other nations:

"This is My covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised . . . My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant" (Gen. 17:10-14).

Moreover, the covenant was immediately followed by an intimation of the first-born of the nation that was to come:

"God also said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her'" (vv. 15,16).

The covenant, and the birth of the nation whose sign it would be, went together, for "in Isaac shall thy seed be called" (21:12, AV). How then could

Moses have ignored the implications of the sign of the covenant when he, by God's providence, was setting out to champion the cause of the circumcised Israelites against the uncircumcised, idolatrous Egyptians?

The explanation can only be that, in his unhappiness and feeling of dereliction during those forty seemingly aimless years of wandering with another man's sheep up and down the wilderness of Sinai, he had lost the impetus that once drove him, a circumcised Hebrew, to suppose that through the strength of his own arm the covenanted 'sheep' of his own nation could have accepted him as their shepherd. So much so that, when he, in nature's turn, had his own "firstborn son", he felt unable to withstand his wife's abhorrence of circumcision as a necessary rite to be carried out on her child. The eight days for the circumcising of the boy were long past, and a second son had come into the family by the time Moses and Zipporah began the journey to Egypt. Moses received the instruction to tell Pharaoh that, if he refused to let Yahweh's "first-born son", namely the covenanted nation, go, then the God of Israel would kill Pharaoh's first-born son (and, as it turned out, all the first-born sons of the uncircumcised nation of which he was the representative head).

For Moses to have missed the implications of all this for his own family is almost incredible when his two sons did not have the sign of the covenant in their own bodies. The giving of the sign to Abraham and his household had stressed, in the kind of verbal parallel that is used in Scripture, that "Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant". From this it would appear that, although it was through the negligence of Moses that his sons had not been circumcised, the inherent guilt lay with them. They were deemed to have broken the covenant and were liable to be cut off.

When therefore the angel of the Lord appeared the second time, at the lodging place, whose life was the more likely to be in danger, that of Moses or that of his first-born? Surely the boy must have been the one whom the angel sought to kill, while Moses, conscious of his woeful negligence, stood helplessly by. It was Zipporah, who must have been cognisant of the principle she had opposed, who reacted speedily to the threat to her son's life, took a flint knife, and circumcised him on the spot. Edersheim, because only one circumcision is recorded, assumes it was that of

the younger son, but this does not fit the tenor of the passage which, as we have seen, was in the context of the first-born. The other may also have been circumcised, once the principle had been established, and Zipporah's bitter taunt to her husband that he was to her a "husband of bloods" (plural), as she cast the evidence at his feet, may have signified that fact.

### A split family

So what could the family do now? The convalescents were in no fit state to continue the journey, and the assumption must be that it was at this point that Moses sent Zipporah home to Midian, for she and her two sons do not feature again in the Divine record until the children of Israel had been brought out of Egypt and were encamped near the mountain of God. Jethro had received them and taken care of them until he sent the message that he was coming to Moses and bringing with him his wife and her two sons (Ex. 18:2-5).

Out of all the uncertainties in the narrative concerning the incident at the lodging place, and

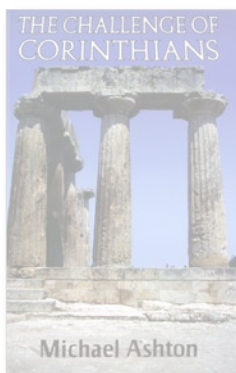
the possible explanations of it (of which what has been set out in this article is but one), some of the details are incontrovertible fact. The first is that the covenants God makes are inviolate and cannot be ignored, or bent, or broken. They were for all generations of the children of Israel. The second is that Moses had been weak in the face of his wife's objections to the circumcision of their two sons. And the third is that Zipporah was driven to the extreme before she would relent. "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3, AV). The outcome was that Moses was relieved of further family distractions as she went back to her kith and kin, and he went forward to be helped and supported by those of his own flesh and blood in the great struggle with the forces of darkness in Egypt, even a "darkness that can be felt". He himself had left a prince, learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and mighty in words and deeds (Acts 7:22). He was to return a pauper, but with the wisdom and power of God in his hands.

(To be continued)

Two-part review

## Bible letters for today (1)

John Nicholls



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