

# Moses: earth's meekest man

## 16. Family ties

John Mitchell

*Following the defeat of the Amalekites, there is a reuniting of Moses with his wife and children, brought to him by Jethro, who gives him good advice regarding the institution of a system of judging cases brought by the people, thus taking some of the burden of leadership from Moses' shoulders.*

**M**OSSES' FAMILY TIES fall into two distinct categories; the one clear and unambiguous, and the other clouded by uncertainties. As regards his blood relations, their identities and their characters are open and clear cut, but his marital relations are anything but clear because of their backgrounds, their lesser roles in the story of the Israelites, and some textual difficulties.

Moses' father and mother, Amram and Jochebed, have been presented to us as Israelites of tremendous faith in their determination to preserve the life of their "fair to God" (Acts 7:20, mg.) baby son whom Pharaoh would have had drowned in the River Nile along with many other innocent boys. Then there were Moses' siblings whom we know so well from the Exodus story, both of them older than he. Miriam was the first-born, who was in at the grand scheme of things from its inception, waiting in the bulrushes while the servants of Pharaoh's daughter hauled out her brother in his little ark from the river. Aaron came in between the two and was destined to play an important role in supporting Moses in his struggle against the Egyptian authorities. Both sister and brother were, apart from one or two calamitous lapses of faith and conduct, worthy leaders of their fellow pilgrims on the wilderness journey.

### **Moses' in-laws**

The character and closeness to Israel's faith and practice of Moses' marital relatives is somewhat obscure. They were Kenites, although, since they were living in the territory of Midian, they are also called Midianites. Descended from Abraham and Keturah, Abraham's second wife (or concubine), they appear to have been cognisant of the God of Israel, alongside lesser deities. Reuel, or Raguel, head of the family, had a name intimating that 'God is friend', and he is designated "priest

of Midian" (Ex. 2:16), although the extent to which he strictly observed the beliefs and practices of Abraham's household, especially circumcision, is doubtful. He has already been introduced to us as the father of seven daughters, shepherdesses, whom Moses gallantly rescued from the hindrances of rival shepherds at the well when he himself fled from Pharaoh.

As a result, Moses joined the Kenite household and ultimately became one of the family by marrying one of the daughters, named Zipporah. Whether it was a love match, or perhaps a marriage of convenience on similar grounds to Laban's plea that the first-born had the first right of marriage, is unclear. Moses had by this time divested himself completely of any notion that his own people would have understood that God by his hand would deliver them from Egyptian slavery, and had settled down to the humdrum occupation of a shepherd in exile. Indeed, so far had he divorced himself from the faith of his fathers that, when his sons came along, he had not bothered to circumcise them. And it was the practice of circumcision and her apparent opposition to it that provides us with the only glimpse we get of the character of Zipporah and her marriage to Moses. This incident is recorded in Exodus 4:24-26 and was reviewed earlier in the series ([Dec. 2006, p. 424](#)). We now need to reconsider the marriage at this juncture in the story of Moses as we come to their reunion and the resumption by Moses of his family responsibilities.

### **Moses and Zipporah**

Although Zipporah's name means 'little bird', she had shown herself to be neither little nor birdlike in her vociferous antagonism to Moses over the circumcision of their two sons. Because of the threat of death, either to Moses or, more probably, to her eldest son, she herself took the knife and performed the rite of circumcision, casting what she had cut off at the feet of Moses and saying, "Surely a bloody husband [literally, a bridegroom of bloods] art thou to me", because of the circumcision.

Edersheim, usually a competent and compassionate commentator, draws severe conclusions from this incident, not only in reference to Zipporah's character and spiritual state, but also the atmosphere in the Kenite household during Moses' exile there:

"From her after-conduct we infer that Zipporah was a woman of violent, imperious temper, who had but little sympathy with the religious convictions of her husband . . . So little indeed does she seem to have had in common with her husband that, at the most trying and noble period of his life, when on his mission to Pharaoh, he had actually to send her away. Nor could there have been much confidence between Moses and his father-in-law. His very subordinate position in the family of Jethro (iii.1); the fact of his reticence in regard to the exact vision vouchsafed him of God (iv.18); and the humble manner in which Moses was sent back into Egypt (iv.20) all give a saddening view of the mutual relations. What, however, all this time were the deepest feelings and experiences of his heart, found expression in the names which he gave to his two sons. The elder he named *Gershom* (expulsion, banishment), 'for he said, I have been a stranger in a strange land'; the second he called *Eliezer*; my God is help (xviii.4). Banished to a strange land, far from his brethren and the land of promise, Moses longs for his real home".<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, to think of Moses as the only marriageable bachelor in the Midianite community is unrealistic; and, as the other sisters extended the Kenite household, this also must have put an additional feeling of isolation on the shoulders of the former prince from Egypt.<sup>2</sup>

### Moses and Zipporah reunited

There would therefore have been a feeling of liberation and great relief for Moses when God told him that all the men who had sought his life were dead and he must return to the land of his nativity. The journey began badly, as we have seen, with the turning back of Zipporah and their two sons, but that did not mark the end of their relationship. For shortly after the defeat of the Amalekites by Joshua and his young warriors, with Moses' rod as their banner under Yahweh (see the [previous article](#)), even as the children of Israel reached "the mountain of God",\* Jethro, Moses' relative by marriage,<sup>3</sup> suddenly appeared, bringing with him Zipporah and her two sons.

Moses, informed of their approach, went out to meet Jethro and actually did obeisance to him and kissed him, whereupon the meeting that ensued seems to have been not only sweetness and light, but reverential towards the God of Israel, for we read that "Jethro was delighted to hear about all the good things the LORD had done for Israel in rescuing them from the hand of the Egyptians". His next statement, however, revealed what had been his ambivalent attitude towards the God of his forefather, Abraham: "'Now I know that the LORD [Yahweh] is greater than all other gods; for he did this to those who had treated Israel arrogantly.' Then Jethro . . . brought a burnt offering and other sacrifices to God, and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with [Jethro] in the presence of God".

### Good advice from Jethro

Moreover, Jethro's goodwill extended even further, in giving wise counsel to Moses in his administration of the great host of people he was leading: "The next day Moses took his seat to serve as judge for the people, and they stood around him from morning till evening. When [Jethro] saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, 'What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?'" Moses replied, "Because the people come to me to seek God's will. Whenever they have a dispute, it is brought to me, and I decide between the parties and inform them of God's decrees and laws".

Jethro replied, "What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes

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1. *The Exodus and the Wanderings in the Wilderness*, p. 43.
  2. For alternative interpretations of the significance of the incident recorded in Exodus 4:24-26 see correspondence published in [February 2007](#) (p. 40) and [April 2007](#) (p. 127). For a much more favourable view of the character of Zipporah see "The Daughters of Keturah", Deborah Hurn, [Mar. 2006](#), p. 80, and [Apr. 2006](#), p. 130.—T.B.
  - \* Quotations from Exodus 18 are from the NIV.
  3. The exact relationship of Jethro to Moses is omitted from what follows to allow for the possibility advanced earlier in this series ([Oct. 2006](#), p. 355) that Jethro was Moses' brother-in-law, not his father-in-law.

to Him. Teach them the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform. But select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied”.

What an early example of advice to someone who has felt unable to delegate! It is as applicable today as when Jethro gave it. There have always been those unable to receive it, but not so Moses.

[\(To be continued\)](#)

# Your Letters



## Out-of-print writings

I am sure that many brethren and sisters of the older generation have been impressed over the years with some writings now out of print. I refer to some nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers. In their day these non-Christadelphians were champions of the Bible as the Word of God, contending with higher criticism and anti-Bible literature. It comes as no surprise that over the years brethren have cited copious extracts from these writings. This is a tribute to much of the material found in them, and indicates that many brethren have these works on their shelves.

A particular feature of these old writings is the long sentences, which do not make for easy reading. It is regrettable that no one, to my knowledge, has undertaken the task of rewriting these works in a simpler and more readable style. This would encourage more to read them, especially the younger generation.

It is a cause of regret by the present writer that he did not make copious notes from these works in earlier days. I wonder if some brethren have been wiser, and could be a source of benefit to others by contributing what they have extracted from these works to the pages of the *Testimony*. Some of these works are very supportive of the Scrip-

tures and a boost to our faith and enthusiasm. Take, for example, one outstanding statement by Henry Rogers: “the Bible is not such a book as man would have made if he could and could have made if he would”. To my knowledge this impressive statement has probably been recited more often than any other in support of the inspiration of the Bible. The truth of this statement is illustrated in nine lectures published as *The Superhuman Origin of the Bible*.

If it is felt that readers would benefit from the publication of suitable summaries from these old works, then it is advisable that an appeal be made to brethren to submit such material to the editor. The following are some other works I have in mind besides the one quoted above:

*Undesigned Coincidences* Blunt  
*Natural Law in the Spiritual World* Drummond  
*Theopneustia* Gausson  
*Horae Paulinae* Paley  
*Analogy and Sermons* Butler

I. T. Rees  
Llanelli

This is a good idea, and I would be pleased to hear from any brethren who would be interested in doing this, with a note of what book or books they would be prepared to tackle. At present,