

Two-part article

## The daughters of Keturah (1)

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*This two-part article explores the possibility that Zipporah, Achsah, Jael and Abigail were all of Kenite descent from Keturah, the slave-wife of Abraham. Closely connected in culture and circumstance, they also shared many aspects of trial and attitude. Each and all of them model unique lessons, particularly on how to deal with alienation and disadvantage in ecclesial life.*

**B**ETWEEN THE eras of Abraham and David we read of five tent-dwelling women who lived at the fringes of the Promised Land. Their stories surface at signal times in Israel's history, and, as with many people of the Bible, one event in each life illustrates the whole. When considered alone, some of their stories are brief and obscure, but, as this two-part article shows, together their examples form a pattern of exhortation to courage and faith during crisis. The exhortation of this article is addressed primarily to sisters, but may also be of interest to brethren.

### Kenites all?

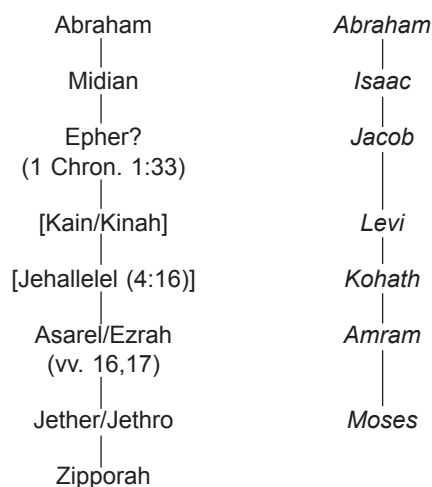
Of **Keturah**,<sup>1</sup> Abraham's concubine, we know little, and must deduce her origin and guess her end. She bore Abraham six sons, one of whom was Midian (Gen. 25:1,2). Jethro the Kenite was a descendant of Midian (Num. 10:29)<sup>2</sup> and gave his daughter, **Zipporah**, to be Moses' wife (Ex. 2:21) (see [genealogy](#)). Moses' sister, Miriam, despised his "Cushite" wife (Num. 12:1).<sup>\*\*</sup>

In the absence of the mention of any wife or children to Moses other than Zipporah and her two sons, we may deduce that the Midianites, through Keturah, were descended from Cush, the son of Ham (Gen. 10:6). As both Cush and Keturah had grandsons called Sheba and Dedan (1 Chron. 1:9,32), a strong link between them is indicated.<sup>3</sup> Keturah, therefore, was probably a Cushite, and her children to Abraham became founders of Arabian tribes. The tents of Cushan and Midian are mentioned in parallel in Habakkuk 3:7.

The five-strand 'Keturah' theme of this article relies on a novel suggestion: that **Achsah**, daugh-

### Proposed genealogy of Jethro

(With the genealogy of Moses for comparison)



ter of Caleb the Kenezite, had a Kenite mother.<sup>4</sup> This idea is rooted in the 'Caleb conundrum': how could an Edomite, descended from Kenaz,<sup>5</sup> rise to prominence as a prince in Judah? The Jews

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1. Try saying her name correctly as 'Ket-oorah' not 'Keturah'.

2. We may presume that Midian had a grandson called Kain or Kinah who was the progenitor of the Kenites.

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

3. It is possible that Keturah's 'Sheba' and 'Dedan' married into and took over existing Cushite Arabian tribes of the same names. This was also the case with the tribe of Amalek, which predated by many generations Amalek the grandson of Esau (see "[The Amalekites](#)", [Part 1, Nov. 2003, p. 423](#)).

4. This theory was more fully developed in "[Kenezites and Kenites](#)" ([Sept. 2005, p. 348](#)).

5. Neither Esau's son Eliphaz nor his grandson Kenaz entered Egypt with Jacob's family, for they were both "chiefs" in Edom and dwelt "in the land of their possession" (Gen. 36:15,16,43).

seem to hold that the Kenezites, like the Kenites, joined with Israel in the wilderness.<sup>6</sup> In that these tribes were neighbours, both in the Negev (Judg. 1:10-16) and in the Promised Land (Gen. 15:19), this theory is feasible.

As Caleb's family members are the only Kenezites who appear in the record, it may be that Caleb married one of Jethro's younger daughters and joined his household in a similar arrangement to that of Moses and Zipporah. He could then have integrated with Israel at Sinai as Moses' young brother-in-law and a leader of his adopted Kenite clan. The Kenites were allocated to the tribe which led the nation on its march, Judah, and not to Levi, presumably because of their native experience in desert navigation. One year later at Kadesh-barnea, Caleb—faithful, skilled and well connected—would have been an obvious choice to represent Judah as a spy.

Of Jael's life and history we also know little except that she was married to Heber, one of the Kenite descendants of "Hobab the father-in-law of Moses" (Judg. 4:11; see [panel](#) below). After the Conquest, the Kenites "went up with the people of Judah . . . into the wilderness of Judah, which lies in the Negev near Arad" (1:16). Heber's name recalls 'community', but he severed that fellowship, moving about as far away from his brethren as was possible while still in the Land, and became a 'companion' to Canaanites.

We may only speculate about his reasoning. Perhaps, like the people of Dan, he sought unallocated territory in a lush environment, where "they dwelt in security, after the manner of the Sidonians, quiet and unsuspecting, lacking nothing that is in the earth, and possessing wealth . . .

### Moses' father-in-law

Judges 4:11 refers to "Hobab the father-in-law to Moses". Compare this with the reference in Numbers 10:29 to "Hobab the son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law". One way to harmonise these descriptions is to suggest that "Reuel", meaning 'friend or shepherd of El', and used of Jethro in Exodus 2:18, was the priestly title of both Jethro and his father, the former priest of Midian. Comparing Numbers 10:29 with Judges 4:11, we may deduce that Hobab, meaning 'cherished', was also a title, possibly secular, used of the chieftain of the clan. Jethro, or Jether (*cf.* 1 Chron. 4:17), was therefore his birth name.

and [having] no dealings with anyone" (18:7). There, in the picturesque north, water and vegetation in great abundance provided an easy and aesthetically satisfying lifestyle. The warning for us may be this: if the 'better' suburbs or the long desired 'acreage' are so far away that we cannot maintain our connections with the ecclesia, we are in danger of making 'peace with Jabin'. It is better to subsist with our brethren than prosper amongst unbelievers.

**Abigail** could have been of Calebite (Kenezite) descent like her husband, Nabal (1 Sam. 25:3), but for the sake of the theme of this article and her 'Bedouin' sisterhood with Keturah, Zipporah, Achsah and Jael, I am proposing that she also was a Kenite, which tribe had close relations with the Kenezites. It seems likely that there was intermarriage among the Kenezites and the Kenites because of their shared history and territorial proximity in both Patriarchal and Israelite times.

In nomadic cultures it has often been the case that only older men can afford to 'buy' and keep wives, while younger men like Jacob and Moses may have wives only 'on credit' while they work off the debt to their fathers-in-law. Keturah, a young woman, was married to a man at least 100 years old! Othniel was probably between twenty and forty years older than his niece Achsah. That Nabal was old enough to 'die of fright', while Abigail was as yet not a mother, indicates that this also was a marriage between an old man and a young woman. We do not know the details of Heber's and Jael's union, but of the five 'Bedouin' women, only Zipporah certainly married a 'young' man, Moses being forty when he arrived in Midian.

Abigail clearly had been given no choice in her marriage to Nabal, for his ignorance and arrogance are of the type that cannot be disguised for a moment. In cultures where an older wealthy man could have his pick of the youngest and fairest women by offering an exorbitant bride-price, the reluctance of the bride was often overlooked. In this sense, Abigail was not a free woman, but a slave, and her life with this objectionable man must have stretched bleakly before her. Some might dispute that Abigail was a slave, for she was Nabal's wife and mistress of his household. She was, however, owned by him just as surely as

6. *Shelach: A Case Study in Jewish Leadership*, Bayme S., posted 23 June 2003, WHF Electronic Beit Midrash, [www.wexnerheritage.org](http://www.wexnerheritage.org).

any of his servants. In type, Abigail represents us in our slavery to the "old man of the flesh", who must die before we can be released, and David represents Christ our Redeemer and rescuer.

### **Fringe-dwellers**

All five 'Cushite' women lived at the fringes of Israel, more or less outside the Promised Land. **Keturah**, with Abraham, was a sojourner, and spent her married life in the wilderness areas south of Hebron that were later given to the Kenites and the Kenezites.

**Zipporah**, her descendant, was born in Midian and presumably finished her days during the Wilderness Wanderings having never set foot within the borders of Canaan. **Achsah** spent her childhood in the Wilderness of Zin with the people of the Exodus and, after the Conquest, dwelt in the Negev between Debir and Arad.

**Abigail** lived nearby, on the eastern slopes of the Hebron–Arad ridge overlooking the Salt Sea and the mountains of Se'ir, from where her ancestors had come. Only **Jael** lived in the north (Judg. 4:17,18), but in the furthest reaches near the border with Lebanon, outside the heart of the Land.

It is certain that Keturah, Zipporah and Jael lived out their days in tents. Achsah and Abigail became seasonal dwellers in Calebite towns, retaining their connections with their nomadic heritage for at least half of each year. After Nabal's death, Abigail left the management of a wealthy pastoral household for life on the run, living in caves with David.

Between them all, these women fell on the 'wrong' side of all three classic divides in regard to advantage: free/slave, male/female and Jew/'Greek' (Gal. 3:28). Although Abraham was their father, Keturah their mother was a slave-wife (Gen. 25:6), and, despite their adoption into Israel, they were considered by Miriam (Num. 12:1) and other Israelites to be Gentiles still.

### **Keturah**

Keturah was with Abraham for a long time. Her child-bearing spanned at least twenty years, more if she also bore daughters amongst her six sons. As Abraham spent many years of seasonal wandering in the Negev, it is possible that he procured a young slave-wife (concubines were usually foreigners) from a neighbouring Cushite nomadic encampment, and she bore children to him for the duration of her fertile years. Like Jacob's concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah, her death

is unrecorded and the place of her burial is unmemorialised.

It is a matter of some speculation as to when Abraham 'married' Keturah. Hagar bore no more sons to Abraham after Ishmael, so we may assume that she was out of favour until her exile thirteen years later. Perhaps Sarah, still not believing that she would ever have a son of her own, saw the need to replace her. Keturah's children, therefore, may have started to arrive between Ishmael's and Isaac's births. After that, even though Abraham no longer 'needed' sons, he may have decided, having already fathered several children to his concubines, that some more could not hurt. For this to be the case, Keturah must have been pleasant and submissive to Sarah and done nothing to inflame her jealousy.

On the other hand, Abraham's name was not changed from Abram until Isaac was born. Yet the inspired record says that "Abraham took another wife" (Gen. 25:1), which detail could, therefore, rule out the period between the births of Ishmael and Isaac. The next possibility is the long period after Abraham banished Hagar and Ishmael. At that time, Sarah's own child of promise, Isaac, was already born and weaned, which makes this an unlikely time for Abraham and Sarah to attempt to raise seed by another concubine.

The story of Keturah and her sons appears in the record after the death of Sarah. It is astonishing to think of Abraham fathering children after the age of 140 years, when the birth of Isaac was deemed remarkable at 100 years (18:11; Rom. 4:19). This would require the revival of his fertility until close to his death at 175 years, even though at the ages of both 100 and 140 he was "old, well advanced in years" (Gen. 24:1). Nonetheless, if we 'allow' his sustained fertility, it is likely that Abraham was lonely after Sarah's death and Isaac's marriage, and needed someone to care for him in his old age. Keturah's continued child-bearing without incident indicates that she was a faithful woman, so that Abraham saw no need to end the arrangement for many years.

Whatever the timing of Keturah's 'era', Abraham eventually decided that even the sons of an agreeable concubine could not inherit with Isaac: "Abraham gave all he had to Isaac. But to the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts, and while he was still living he sent them away from his son Isaac, eastward to the east country" (25:5,6). It is likely that the sons of Keturah were sent away late in Abraham's life when he was setting his affairs in order. Jacob and Esau were

fifteen years old when Abraham died (vv. 7,26; 17:17), and perhaps Abraham waited until the line from Isaac was established before he decided the final division of his household and assets.

Here came Keturah's crisis, her time for alienation, for not only had she been a slave-wife, she was now an exiled 'single mother'. (If Abraham took Keturah late in life, it seems certain that she also was sent away with her children, for some of them would still have been young.) She could have reacted with resentment, rejecting not only Abraham personally for his 'heartless' decision, which counted her and her children as outsiders, but also everything he stood for, his faith and way of life. She could have lost interest in the Promises, for if they excluded her in this life she had cause to doubt her inclusion in the life to come. In revenge (that would harm only herself and her children) she could have reverted to the worship of the gods of her ancestors, to whose land she had returned.

As the Truth survived in Midian without Divine revelation or promise through four or five generations to Jethro, we may deduce that Keturah's influence was strong and positive. Unlike Hagar, she took the Truth with her and finished raising her sons in Abraham's tradition, encouraging them and their families to continue in faith and the worship of the one true God. To have sustained her commitment to the Truth she must have had a deep and personal relationship with Yahweh that went beyond simply holding to 'correct doctrine'. Keturah lived out her days thinking of the age to come and her hope of ultimate inclusion and inheritance forever.

Keturah is memorialised in Har (Mount) and Eyn (Spring) Keturah,<sup>7</sup> in the Keturah Reserve in the Southern Negev close to the Aravah escarpment. Coincidentally, this may be along the way by which she and her sons travelled to "the east country", for the Keturah descent is the ancient pass by which travellers entered the Aravah from the Southern Negev.

### Crises!

Each of these women faced a crisis, and the accounts of these moments are the only fragments of their lives we have been given to contemplate. The crises were all caused by others very close to them, whether husband or father, and it even seems that they appear in sequential order of increasing culpability, from little to total.

- **Keturah's** was a crisis of *circumstance*. Abraham made the best judgment he could in

imperfect circumstances when he sent her children (and her?) away. He did what he had to.

- **Zipporah's** crisis was caused by *procrastination*. Moses knew that he should have circumcised his eldest son, but delayed.
- **Achsah** was 'let down' by both her husband's *reticence* in asking for more territory and her father's *thoughtlessness* in not having given it. Othniel was afraid to do what he could and Caleb did not think to do what he should.
- **Jael's** crisis occurred when Sisera turned up at her tent in her husband's *absence* after he had committed *treachery* towards Israel in allying himself with the Canaanites. Heber avoided doing what he should, and also did what he should not.
- **Abigail's** crisis was caused by *folly*. Nabal was reckless, selfish and belligerent, and he put the lives of his family and servants in great danger when he curtly turned away David's men. He did nothing he should and everything he should not.

Husbands and fathers, whether brethren or not, may sometimes make hurtful decisions, or may be fearful, reticent or distracted. They may be absent, having 'separated themselves from their brethren', or even foolish and badly behaved. In the sisters above we have a selection of possible responses and the results, and it is the work of wisdom to choose aright. There are, of course, many marriages and families in which such problems are few and ill effects are temporary, as seems was the case for Zipporah, Achsah and Jael at least. This is due to the goodwill and discipline of all concerned, sustained over time by the desire to live godly lives and develop a close relationship with Yahweh.

Of each of the lives of these 'Bedouin' women we have only a single glimpse, revealing women who were proactive and decisive in the face of trial. At the hands of their men they lacked status (Keturah), leadership (Zipporah), consideration (Achsah), protection (Jael) or several of the above (Abigail). In pressing circumstances they had to act wisely, swiftly, resolutely, bravely or cleverly, having no other person to turn to as advocate or adviser.

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7. The Arabic name as shown on the Mandate map is Qatar, which probably did not originally refer to the woman. The Israel Names Committee chose to adapt the present name in Keturah's memory.

All had to seek what they would rather have been given, and endure or remedy a problem that ensued from the decisions or neglect of those in whose care they rested. During crisis, these women, although 'weaker vessels' (1 Pet. 3:7, AV), were strong in faith and action. Each one of them rested in Yahweh, their true and unfailing 'Husband and Father', trusting in Him for strength, direction and security.

Because these and other such women's stories appear favourably in Scripture, we may deduce that strong women are approved by God, who supports them and records their faith and achievement. Notably, all five 'daughters of Keturah' are named, as are the five daughters of Zelophehad (Mahlah, Tirzah, Hoglah, Milcah and Noah) and

five women in the line of Christ (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary). In different ways, all fifteen were disadvantaged, whether as Gentiles, married to Gentiles, or otherwise unacceptable in their ancestry, culture or social standing.

All of the 'women of the wilderness' were deliverers. Achsah 'delivered' herself, Zipporah delivered her husband, Abigail delivered her household, Keturah delivered her tribe and Jael delivered Israel! A woman may be able to save only herself out of a bad situation, or she may save her husband, children, tribe or whole nation. We cannot know the extent of godly influence, but we must apply it anyway, with faith that "in everything God works for good with those who love Him" (Rom. 8:28).

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