

Moses: earth's meekest man

3. The years of chastening*

John Mitchell

When Moses was observed killing an Egyptian officer, it bought about a dramatic change in his life. From being a prince he became a fugitive, then a shepherd in Midian. But in all this the hand of God was at work, preparing him for the time when he would lead his people out of bondage to the Promised Land.

WHEN MOSES FLED from the face of Pharaoh after he had killed an official of the Egyptian state, he made his way out through the Goshen 'gate', skirted the western tongue of the Red Sea, and then struck southeastward in the Sinai peninsula until he reached the territory of Midian. No clue is given in Scripture as to his intentions except to get away to safety and to become incognito in a strange land. God, however, had not forgotten him, and in His providence had prepared a reception for him. By that unseen guiding hand, Moses, when he found himself among the descendants of Abraham through Keturah, was introduced, in what seemed a purely coincidental kind of way, to a local chieftain and priest of the tribe, called Reuel. Even so, their meeting was far from formal.

Forty years in Midian

Like Abraham's loyal servant, and also Jacob before him, Moses sat down by a well towards evening, no doubt hoping to quench his thirst, just as Reuel's daughters—all seven of them—brought their flocks to the watering place. In the competition for the precious fluid, however, the sisters were being nudged aside and driven away from filling the troughs from which the animals drank by itinerant shepherds who were stronger than they. It was a situation that Moses immediately felt to be unfair, and he gallantly decided to intervene on behalf of the shepherdesses.

Already we have had hints that Moses was, as he later proved to be, a very strong man, and it was probably a combination of this and the commanding appearance of this 'Egyptian' stranger that persuaded the shepherds to back off and leave the women alone. Whereupon Moses

rounded off his good deed by helping the maidens to fill the troughs with water from the well and water the sheep. That done, the daughters of Reuel took their charges away and went home, leaving Moses where they had found him.

But when they returned to their father, he asked them, "Why have you returned so early today?", for evidently interference by shepherds had been a common occurrence at the well. They replied, "An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds. He even drew water for us and watered the flock". "And where is he?", demanded Reuel, "Why did you leave him? Invite him to have something to eat", which they did, and thereafter Moses agreed to stay with the man.

Thus began another period of forty years in the life of Moses that is well-nigh glossed over in the Scriptures, being covered by just two short sentences. They tell that Moses became part of the family of Reuel, who gave one of his daughters named Zipporah to Moses in marriage, and that she bore him two sons. Exactly when the marriage took place, and what length of time preceded it, is not given. Was there, for example, competition between the seven daughters for the hand of Moses, the Egyptian in their midst, such as occurred between Rachel and Leah in Laban's household? And, if so, was the issue decided purely on the basis of seniority, as Laban said it was in the case of Leah?

Moreover, did Moses serve for his wife in that same calling of a shepherd, as Jacob did for his? Like Jacob, Moses had arrived penniless with no dowry to offer. And there is no doubt that he suffered much in the same lifestyle as his forefather, who said, "in the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night; and my sleep departed from mine eyes" (Gen. 31:40, AV). In those long watches when Moses was guarding the sheep from the predations of ravenous beasts, as David also was later to do, what could his thoughts have been about the past, and his expectations for the future? Some clues to them are provided in the names he gave to his sons. The first-born he called Gershom, which means, 'A stranger there',

* Quotations from the NIV unless stated otherwise.

saying, "I have become an alien in a foreign land", which suggests at the very least the sadness he felt at being separated from his own people. The second son he named Eliezer, which means, 'God is helper', for he said, "My father's God was my helper; He saved me from the sword of Pharaoh" (Ex. 18:2-4).

Both names, be it noted, looked only to the past, and neither carried any implication that the expectations Moses had in Egypt regarding himself in the purpose of God were still cherished as awaiting fulfilment in God's good time. Nor is there even a mention as to what exactly his relationship was with the family into which he had married, or their spiritual state, although later contact with them showed fellowship in worshipping the same God, and mutual respect.

Preparation for the future

Midian was one of the six sons that Abraham had by Keturah, all of whom became heads of tribes after Abraham separated them from Isaac, his 'son of promise', and sent them away to the land of the east. Having been born in the patriarch's household, they were brought up to worship *El Shaddai*, or 'God Almighty', whatever the inclinations of most of them were later towards other gods. That the influence of Abraham still persisted in the case of the descendants of Midian is shown by the name of Reuel, which means, 'The friend of God'; and his title, "priest of Midian", suggests some kind of sacerdotal office that was probably hereditary within the tribe. But the later conduct of Zipporah, Reuel's daughter and wife to Moses, in the matter of the circumcision of their two sons hardly suggests adherence to the Abrahamic code, or a very happy relationship with her husband.

So from what little is written concerning Moses during his exile we might well assume that his stay in Midian was lived through in a dead-end kind of way, without great happiness. The perceptive Edersheim writes that "the life of Moses in the house of Reuel must have been one of humiliation and loneliness".¹ For a man of Moses' background and disposition, this backwater of life must have affected his state of mind as he fulfilled his lonely vigils on the hillsides looking after his flocks.

Inevitably there would have been disillusionment at first, following his rejection by his own people and the blighting of his expectations to be their leader under God. Now what was there left for him to do in the vast spaces of the wilderness? Whereas before he had supposed his brethren

would have understood his mission, now he supposed nothing as one day followed the next and he moved around seeking new pastures. One wonders how often he looked at his horny hands and remembered the softer days he had known as a prince in Egypt.

Yet all was in the purpose of God to prepare him mentally, physically and by way of experience for his great work to come. Mentally he no longer regarded himself as a person of consequence destined for great things; physically he was being hardened to the realities of life, and his stamina was being built up by shepherding. By way of experience he was being prepared for travelling through that same wilderness, leading, not the sheep and goats of the Midianites, but the sheep of God's own nation, the very same that had already rejected him.

The time for deliverance

Amidst the day-after-day dreariness of it all, there came one day that must have started like any other, but was marked out by God as the time to begin anew His purpose with Moses. During Moses' many years in Midian, the king of Egypt who had first reduced the children of Israel to slavery had died, but apparently without a change of régime as far as the slaves were concerned. Perhaps it was the death of one pharaoh without relief from the next that caused the Israelites to cry out more fervently to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob for help: "The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and He remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them" (Ex. 2:23-25).

As with Moses the man, so also with the nation, for there was sonship even in nationhood, as the prophet Hosea wrote: "When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called My son out of Egypt" (Hos. 11:1, AV). Even before the call there had to be a chastening, "for whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the Father chasteneth not?" (Heb. 12:6,7, AV). The Hebrews had had over forty years in which to learn abundantly the lesson that their only saviour was the God of their fathers. Now the time was approaching for them to be delivered, and for the

1. *The Exodus and Wanderings in the Wilderness*, p. 43.

new pharaoh and his tyrannical people to learn lessons they would never forget.

The process began as far as Moses was concerned when he was leading the flock of "Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian" on the far side of the desert as he came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And here comes the problem as to exactly who this Jethro was. The commonly accepted interpretation among the translators of the Old Testament is that 'Jethro' was another name for Reuel, on account of the phrase that he was Moses' "father-in-law". But, as *Speaker's Commentary* and others have pointed out, the term "father-in-law" is not an exact designation in the original Hebrew; rather is it a looser term signifying any relative by marriage. And this opens up the possibility that Jethro was not the same person as Reuel, but was in fact Reuel's eldest son, who had inherited his father's flocks, his title and his office. The period of forty years was a long time, during which Reuel, already father of seven daughters (and who knows how many sons) when Moses arrived, could, like the Pharaoh who had menaced Moses, have passed from the scene, leaving Jethro, as Moses' brother-in-law, in charge of family affairs. Such an interpretation provides satisfactory explanations for the change of name, and still allows for the respected relationship that Moses had with Jethro later on in the Exodus story.

Howbeit, Jethro's was the flock; and Moses was its shepherd in the region of "the mountain of God", where so much of significance for the children of Israel was later to be enacted, when his sharp eyes saw a bush on fire in the middle distance, and he gazed at it for a while. That a thorny acacia should catch fire in the heat of the sun in a dried-up wadi could not have been all that unusual, and the flames would quickly consume it. But this one differed. It went on burning and burning, and was not consumed. His curiosity aroused by the phenomenon, Moses decided to go and have a closer look at "this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up". Then, "When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And Moses said, 'Here I am'. 'Do not come any closer', God said. 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground'. Then He said, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob'. At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God".

What followed was not just the commissioning of Moses to become the leader of the children of Israel in the most significant migration of any nation in the history of mankind, but also the revelation of God's eternal Self towards the salvation of all men.

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

Your Letters



A sign we may have overlooked

Over the course of the years we have all become quite well informed about the 'signs of the times' contained in the Word. The thoughts which follow raise the question, Have we overlooked a very significant one?

The sign we refer to is to be found in several chapters in Isaiah. It concerns a time in Israel's history when the nation, which should have been putting its trust in God, chose rather to put its trust in its neighbour the Assyrian. Both King Ahaz and later King Hezekiah's governors, if not the king himself, were guilty of this, only to discover that they had chosen treacherous friends. The events of those times, we suggest, provide the pattern for a further and final fulfilment of the

prophecy involving the fulfilment of the names of the prophet's two sons, those men of sign, Maher-shalal-hash-baz, meaning 'Speed the spoil, haste the prey' (8:1-4) and Shear-jashub, meaning 'The remnant shall return' (7:3).

It is from considering the record of these events as a pattern of things to come that we propose that a major sign today will be that Israel will, as in Isaiah's time, again put its trust in the Assyrian instead of God. The Assyrian in its latter-day manifestation will, it appears, again be the 'speedy spoiler'. Micah 5:5 reads, "this man [Christ in context] shall be the peace, when the Assyrian shall come into our land", and it will be by Christ's intervention that the prisoners taken captive by the enemy will be able to return to their land, thus fulfilling the Shear-jashub prophecy. This