

Moses *and* Zipporah: Relating With Relations



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exodus 2–4, 18:1–27, Num. 12:1–4.*

Memory Text: “By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter; Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season” (*Hebrews 11:24, 25*).

Moses is one of the best known of all Old Testament characters; Zipporah, his wife, is one of the lesser known. Being a foreigner and from a despised nation, she obviously remained as much in the background as possible. However, as we’ll soon see, she turned out to be a faithful wife who remained with Moses during the trials of the Exodus. At the same time, his marriage to her brought Jethro into the family of Moses, and this turned out to be a great blessing, not just to Moses but to the children of Israel as a whole. Though we can learn many lessons from their story, perhaps the most important one is this: The right family relations can be wonderful; the wrong ones, unfortunately, can bring terrible results.

The Week at a Glance: When Zipporah married Moses, she had no idea what she was getting into. Yet, she and her family were a great help to Moses and aided him in his divine mission. This week we’ll see just what blessings a good wife and good in-laws can bring.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 4.*

Chivalry at the Well

Like Jacob centuries earlier, Moses, after hiking a few hundred miles, arrived at a settlement in the wilderness, which revolved around a well. Both had run for their lives—Jacob from his brother Esau and Moses from Pharaoh. What a difference, though, in the reasons for their flight!

Why did Moses flee? *Exod. 2:11–15*. What does this incident tell us about his character? What does this tell us about his allegiance to his own people, despite his great privileges in the house of another nation?

Read Exodus 2:15–17 (see also Acts 7:23–29). From what we know about the character of Moses, why were his actions at the well not surprising?

Sitting by the well, Moses observed that rough shepherds had not merely chased away the seven daughters of Jethro but had waited till the daughters had drawn water for their flock and then drove them away so that they could water their own sheep with that water (*Exod. 2:17*). Moses, apparently, could not bear to see injustice. This is what had gotten him into trouble in Egypt.

According to Exodus 2:19, the daughters described Moses to their father as an “Egyptian,” probably on the basis of his dress, which showed the degree that the culture had influenced Moses. Moses was not only alone but clearly a foreigner. Though the text doesn’t say how, he was obviously able to wield enough power and authority to drive the shepherds away.

Reuel, another name for Jethro (see *Exod. 2:18, 3:1*), chides the girls for not inviting their hero in for supper. Zipporah, probably the eldest, is promised to Moses in marriage, and in return Moses takes charge of his father-in-law’s flock, just as Jacob did for Laban centuries earlier (*Exod. 3:1*).

It was one of Moses’ own people who endangered his life. What does this tell us about how careful we need to be with those who are closest to us, lest we inadvertently hurt them?

Moses and His Father-in-Law

Moses' father-in-law is referred to by at least two names—Reuel (*Exod. 2:18*) and Jethro (*Exod. 3:1*). However, Reuel means “friend of God” and could be a title that he held as a priest. There are several examples of Old Testament characters having more than one name (Esau/Edom, Jacob/Israel).

Jethro's immediate response to the report of Moses' chivalry was to chide his daughters for leaving behind such a man. He bade them invite him for a meal. Moses, on his part, was happy to stay with such a man; indeed, he spent 40 peaceful years in his home.

Read carefully Moses' words to his father-in-law about his returning to Egypt (*Exod. 4:18*). What reasons does he give; what reasons does he not give? Was he being dishonest?

Jethro doesn't appear in the Bible again until Exodus 18:1–12. Imagine the surprise he must have had. His son-in-law leaves on what was supposed to be a family visit and comes back the leader of several million people! He was obviously impressed by what happened and gave praise and sacrifice to the Lord (*vss. 10–12*). How much Jethro knew about the Lord is not known; however impressed, he apparently still believed in the existence of other gods (*vs. 11*).

Read over Exodus 18. What evidence do we find here of Moses' great respect for his father-in-law, despite whatever theological weaknesses the man had? What evidence of the great wisdom of Jethro do we see here?

How interesting that it was his father-in-law, someone not even of Moses' own blood, someone who was still (apparently) a polytheist, who gave Moses such good advice in the governing of these people. Moses obviously believed that it must have been God's will, otherwise he wouldn't have consented.

How easy it could have been for Moses to brush off the advice of this “pagan.” Instead, he listened. What's the lesson? How open are you to good advice, even when it comes from unexpected sources?

Zipporah and Her Husband's Religion

Read Exodus 4:19–26. What is happening here? Why did Zipporah do what she did?

Several peoples of the ancient Near East practiced circumcision. So it was not a new custom that God invented for His people. He just gave it new meaning. For many it was a sign of marriage, performed when a man was wedded, but God used it as a sign of His special link with His chosen people. God instructed Abraham to circumcise every male in his household on the eighth day (*Gen. 17:9–14*). Abraham was 99 when this was carried out.

The context sheds light on the severity of Moses' neglect to circumcise his son. God tells Moses to demand that Pharaoh release Israel, “‘my firstborn son’” (*Exod. 4:22, NIV*). As a consequence of not releasing His “firstborn son,” Israel, God threatens to kill Pharaoh's firstborn son (*vs. 23*). In the next verse (*vs. 24*) we are informed that God intended to kill Moses for not circumcising his son, most likely his firstborn (*Exod. 2:22*).

By answering the following questions, attempt to see the matter from God's point of view:

(1) Did Moses know that Israelite male children were to be circumcised? (2) Did Moses know about the significance of circumcision? (3) How might the Israelites respond if they knew that Moses had not circumcised his son? (4) How would God feel about His messenger living in open disobedience to His command?

Moses was on the threshold of a mission that is a matter of life and death for the Egyptians, as well as for the Israelites. His own life might be sought by the Egyptians, or by the Israelites if their rescue was frustrated. Moses' personal safety lay completely in the hands of God. No detail of God's instruction for personal life must be overlooked.

We are not told why Zipporah called Moses a “‘bridegroom of blood’” (*Exod. 4:25, NIV*). Most likely circumcision was to Zipporah a “bloody” ritual. The custom was probably repulsive to her. It could be that she had objected to the circumcision of her son and therefore felt responsibility for what was happening. Nevertheless, sensing God's displeasure, she took it upon herself to do what Moses, God's man, should have done himself.

Zipporah With Miriam and Aaron

Read Numbers 12:1–3. There is a suggestion that this Cushite wife is not Zipporah, because Zipporah was a Midianite; instead, the woman here was a new wife that Moses might have taken after the possible death of Zipporah. There is no biblical evidence for a second marriage of Moses, which would have been a big event had there been one. Besides, Zipporah the Midianite might be referred to as a Cushite (*Hab. 3:7*). Cushan is used as a parallel term for Midian and is perhaps even an older poetical term for Midian.

Read Exodus 2:1–9; Exodus 15:20, 21; Micah 6:4. What can we learn about the character, gifts, and privileges of Miriam from these texts? See also Patriarchs and Prophets, p. 382.

What horrible traits do we see revealed in both Miriam and Aaron in Numbers 12:1?

Human prejudice remains one of the enduring and damnable results of the Fall. Even people as gifted and honored and blessed as Miriam and Aaron weren't immune. What made matters worse here was that Zipporah had proved herself loyal and faithful to Israel through all the trials of the Israelite nation. According to Exodus 4:20, she and their children went with Moses back to Egypt. She saved Moses' life (*vs. 26*). Who knows what would have happened to Israel had Moses died. Even worse was that this kind of prejudice should come from leaders of people who themselves were the objects of scorn from another nation.

What was the real issue in the attack on Moses' wife? *Num. 12:2*.

Miriam and Aaron felt their authority decline. They connected this trend to the wife of Moses. It is her father who influenced Moses to appoint scores of leaders who reported to Moses when they had difficult cases. The attack on Zipporah may not have been an innocent pretext to discredit Moses. Aaron and Miriam may never have accepted their brother's wife, and after seeing her family in the wilderness, they may have despised her even more.

Why is racial or ethnic prejudice repugnant in those who profess to follow Christ? What concrete steps can you take to help purge your heart of this sinful disease?

Moses and His Brother-in-Law

It's been said that when you get married, you don't marry just the spouse; you get his or her family, as well. Moses was no exception either.

Read Numbers 10:29, 30. What's going on here? Why did Moses make this offer?

According to Moses, if Hobab agreed to come, he and his family would partake of God's blessings promised for Israel. At the same time, Hobab's presence would provide family for Zipporah, Moses' wife.

What symbolism is found in this idea, that of Gentiles partaking of the blessings of Israel? *Isa. 56:1-7, Rom. 11:17-19.*

From the stories of Moses it was clear that God had His hand over the Israelites. The future held great promise. But it was a tough life being on the move. While Moses, their leader, was Hobab's brother-in-law, it was not an easy decision for Hobab to leave his people and cast his lot with another. Maybe that's why Hobab, at least at this point, said No.

What does Moses say in Numbers 10:31, 32 that shows some ulterior motives for the invitation of Hobab?

Moses' actions are not totally understandable in light of the pillar of the cloud. On the day the tabernacle was completed and erected, the cloud settled over it (*see Numbers 9*). The cloud provided the signal when to stop moving and when to get going again. Certainly Hobab couldn't compete with the cloud in knowing the best spots to camp, could he? Or maybe Hobab's knowledge of the area was simply meant to complement the Lord's leading; that is, to show them certain things about the area that might be helpful to them as they followed the cloud.

What are some decisions you need to make soon? As you plan, ask yourself, *What are my motives?* After thinking about those motives, might you need to change your plans? Is doing the right thing for the wrong reason still doing the "right" thing?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “The Aged Parents,” pp. 360–364, in *The Adventist Home*.

“Though not an Israelite, Zipporah was a worshiper of the true God. She was of a timid, retiring disposition, gentle and affectionate, and greatly distressed at the sight of suffering; and it was for this reason that Moses, when on the way to Egypt, had consented to her return to Midian. He desired to spare her the pain of witnessing the judgments that were to fall on the Egyptians.

“When Zipporah rejoined her husband in the wilderness, she saw that his burdens were wearing away his strength, and she made known her fears to Jethro, who suggested measures for his relief. Here was the chief reason for Miriam’s antipathy to Zipporah. Smarting under the supposed neglect shown to herself and Aaron, she regarded the wife of Moses as the cause, concluding that her influence had prevented him from taking them into his counsels as formerly.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 383, 384.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What kind of prejudices are prevalent in your own society? Ethnic, religious, national, gender, economic? What have been the baneful results? How can we learn to recognize prejudice in ourselves? Most important, what can we do to help purge this from society, the church, and ourselves? As a class, what can you do to help alleviate the suffering of others brought about by prejudice?
- ❷ As we saw earlier, the daughters of Jethro initially believed that Moses was an Egyptian. This shows the power of culture over our lives. What culture are you living in? How does it impact your faith? As a class, talk about the things in your culture that jive well with your faith and the things that are in conflict with it. Identify together some of the problem areas and then talk about whatever things you can do to help yourselves and other church members work through these challenges.

Summary: When Zipporah married Moses, she had no idea what was coming. Yet, from the little said about her, we can see that she and her family were a blessing to Moses and a great help in his divine mission.

Watching God Work: Part 2

Maria left the room wondering whether her refusal to serve the men alcohol would mean the end of her employment. She prayed and left the results to God.

A little while later her boss's brother called her back into the room where the family was gathered. "I thought you were a religious fanatic," he said. "But I went on the Internet and found that Seventh-day Adventist Christians are a well-known group. The Web site explains why you keep Sabbath instead of Sunday, and why you do not drink or smoke." He smiled and said, "You made us feel ashamed because we are Muslims, and we should follow these principles, but we don't. You are so different from other Christians we have met. I want to learn more about your religion."

Maria smiled. God had blessed her efforts to share her faith and brought glory to His name, even though she could not explain her reasons in their language.

"God has allowed us Adventist Christians to be in this country for such a time as this," Maria says. "One day it may not be possible to witness to these important people, but what we share with them now will stay with them." Hundreds of families in this country are learning about what Adventists believe right in their own homes.

One day Maria's boss brought her a piece of meat and asked her to cook it for him. She realized it was pork and gently told him that it was unclean and she would not touch it. He was surprised and asked her, "How do you know that this meat is not good to eat?" Maria's language was too limited to explain what she knew, so she pulled a Bible from her bag and turned to Leviticus 11 and asked the man to read the passage. As he read the chapter, she explained that this book is part of the Torah, which Muslims recognize as part of their holy writings. Her boss and his wife read it together and found other things they should observe. They talked together, and she later heard him say, "These Adventists are more Muslims than we are."

Maria knows that she has more than a job; she has a mission to share God's love and His promises with people she meets, people who say they believe but know nothing about their beliefs. "Every action, every step we take, shows in whom we believe," she explains. "Every day is a testimony of God's love."

Our mission offerings help supply materials that make it possible to share God's love with all people.

MARIA lives and shares her faith in a large city in the Middle East.