

# 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?

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**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?

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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?**

## *I Have to Teach Tomorrow . . .*

► **Key Text:** *Hebrews 11:24–29*

► **Teach the Class to:**

**Know:** God has His people in all ethnic groups.

**Feel:** How Moses felt when harangued by his siblings.

**Do:** Rid themselves of all jealousy and prejudice.

► **Lesson Outline:**

**I. Moses** (*Exodus 2–4*)

**A** Moses kills an Egyptian and hides the body in the sand. Even if no one had seen the act, the stench most likely would have given away the crime. What happens when we bury sin in our hearts instead of confessing it to God?

**B** Zipporah bears Moses a son whom he names Gershom, referring to his bitterness of exile. Yet, the Bible says that Moses was “content to dwell” with his new family. How does God provide for us the comfort of a family when we are torn from the one we have always known?

**II. A Bloody Husband** (*Exod. 4:19–26*)

On the way to Egypt, an angel of the Lord comes against Moses in a threatening manner for not circumcising his son. Not only does Zipporah save the life of her husband, her quick thinking in cutting off her son’s foreskin saves him from being cut off from his people. What does this say about the danger of neglecting to do the smaller things that God asks in the process of accomplishing the bigger task of His will?

**III. Miriam, Aaron** (*Exod. 18:1–27, Num. 12:1–3*)

**A** Jethro sees how overworked Moses is when he visits the wilderness encampment. What advice does he give his son-in-law, and what does this teach us about not taking too much burden on ourselves at the expense of our health and other duties?

**B** Aaron and Miriam resent Zipporah’s influence over Moses and criticize “that Ethiopian woman” to their brother. When does legitimate concern of family members spawn into outright interference, and how should spouses react to it?

► **Summary:** Zipporah’s story sounds like something right out of a fairy tale: She is rescued from local thugs by a foreign prince and later marries him. But his tender regard doesn’t end with the honeymoon. He leaves her with her father so that she won’t have to witness the terror of the plagues. And when the Israelites murmur against Moses, she looks for ways to relieve his burdens. Just as Aaron and Hur hold Moses’ arms up during battle, Zipporah and Moses strengthen each other in times of need.

## 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?

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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?

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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?**

## Learning Cycle

### ► **STEP 1—Motivate!**

**Just for Teachers:** A happy and lasting marriage is built on love, understanding, and support—not just between the couple but among the family members involved. Encourage your class members to freely discuss how this mutual respect and relationship between various members in a family can be developed.

With a beaming smile, Karen handed me the card. “In just over a month, I’ll be married. Just imagine—in another four weeks.” I looked over the card, then looked at her excited face. She seemed a picture of perfect happiness. I wished her well and promised to be at the wedding. Then in passing, I remarked, “I have been married for forty-four years, and it seems like forty-four days.”

“Forty-four years! To the same person? I can’t believe it,” she said.

“You can make it, too,” I assured her, “if mutual and unconditional love governs your marriage with Ron.”

“If it’s only Ron, I have much hope. But both of us have big families, and I hope they don’t cause us trouble.”

Karen touched a raw nerve in a marriage relationship. When you marry, you marry not just one person but his or her family, as well. Although the Bible says that in marriage “a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (*Gen. 2:24, NKJV*), it also commands, “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God is giving you” (*Exod. 20:12, NKJV*). Are these two commands contradictory?

For sure we know that God does not contradict Himself. So, what should Karen and Ron do as they contemplate their married life and the respect and care they need to show their parents? This week’s study provides some lessons as it deals with relationships between Moses and Zipporah, Moses and his father-in-law, and Zipporah and her in-laws.

Have the class members browse through 1 Corinthians 13 and invite them to share some principles that are essential for the survival of love in the complex relationships a marriage involves.

### ► **STEP 2—Explore!**

**Just for Teachers:** As you study the family of Moses, note how faith in God and love for one’s family assures a smooth home life.

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## Zipporah and Her Husband's Religion

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

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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.

*Learning Cycle* CONTINUED

**Living with family is as important as leading God’s family.**

## Bible Commentary

Shaped by faith and patience from birth through 120 years of tumultuous life, Moses stands as a model in almost any aspect of the Christian journey or vocation. However, this week we look at his life from the perspective of Christian leadership at home and in the community. His life with Zipporah, his respect for Jethro, and his affection for his siblings show us that God-guided inclusion of others in one’s life adds to one’s strength and makes one’s service more effective.

### Moses and Zipporah: A Man of Faith and a Woman of Love

**By faith Moses gave up Egypt** (*Heb. 11:23–28*). Believing, forsaking, and embracing are the essentials of a Christian journey. There is no compromise here. For 40 years Moses lived in Pharaoh’s palace, trained in the best of Egypt’s education, heir to the throne, with all the riches and pleasures at his command. But when the moment of realization dawned that he was meant for a higher purpose, he believed, gave up Egypt, and by faith embraced the not-yet clear call of God. He reached the desert of Midian where the wait lasted 40 years. Faith knows neither rush nor indifference, but only patient and prayerful waiting for the Author and Finisher of faith to act in His own time.

**“Moses was content to live with the man”** (*Exod. 2:21, NKJV*). Jethro was the man who gave Moses a place to live, a job as a shepherd, and his daughter Zipporah as wife. A lonely wanderer finds contentment because he chose to walk by faith. But it took another 40 years for God to reveal His call to Moses, assure him by the burning bush, and set him on his track back to his job. Service and leadership in God’s cause are not ours to grasp but God’s to give in His own way and time. In those years of waiting in Midian, Moses had to learn “not to rely upon human strength or wisdom, but upon the power of God for the fulfillment of His promises.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 247. Even as Moses took his family to Egypt, he was not quite ready for his role. In his love for Zipporah, he yielded to her persuasion (see *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 255, 256) and neglected to circumcise his son—a grievous indifference to the covenant. God was about to slay Moses (*Exod. 4:24*). No one is above the law, and certainly not even the most beloved of this world can be a hindrance to

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## 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?**

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

obeying God. But Zipporah saw her error and performed the rite herself. A wife of that kind who is ready to surrender to God is a noble asset to any man on the way to lead God's people.

**Discuss:** Can God ever tolerate a leader within the church who willfully lives in open disobedience to His command? Is there anything in your married life that gets in the way of total obedience to God?

### ► **STEP 3—Practice!**

**Just for Teachers:** Discuss the following and draw out lessons helpful to everyday Christian living.

#### Thought Questions:

- 1 Did God approve Moses' marriage to a Midianite woman? If so, why this exception?
- 2 What is the secret of good relations between Moses and his father-in-law?

#### Application Question:

John and Joseph are two brothers, both working in the church as pastors. John gets chosen as the conference president. Joseph's wife whispers to her husband that he should have gotten the job because he is better qualified. The whisper leads to distance and discord among family members. How would you bring about a reconciliation?

#### Witnessing

Marriage is a pre-Fall institution, like the Sabbath. It is sacred and holy and requires our utmost attention. Mention ways whereby a Christian home—husband and wife, in-laws, brothers and sisters, children—can make it a center of Christian love and witnessing.

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## 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?

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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.*

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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?

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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?**

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

► **STEP 4—Apply!**

**Just for Teachers:** Return to 1 Corinthians 13. Here are four great principles. Encourage your class to share freely their testimonies as to how they have kept or broken them.

- Love is not rude.
- Love is not self-seeking.
- Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.
- Love always protects, trusts, hopes, and perseveres.

**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:

**1** 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?

**2** 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.