

Moses Flees to Midian

“Now when Pharaoh heard of this matter, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from the presence of Pharaoh and stayed in the land of Midian; and he sat down by a well.”
(Exodus 2:15)

This passage explains the turning point at which Moses ended forty years of life in the Egyptian palace and began another forty years of life in the wilderness. When the text is examined closely, it is notable that the events that occurred during the forty years Moses lived in the palace—between verses 10 and 11—are entirely omitted, whereas the incident that led Moses to begin his life in the wilderness of Midian is described in relatively detailed fashion through five verses, from verses 11 to 15. This is because the event in which Moses abandoned the secure life of the Egyptian palace and, through life in the wilderness of Midian, was unknowingly trained to become the leader of the Exodus was of great importance.

Killing an Egyptian

Moses, who had received the education of a prince in the royal palace, went out to his own people when he had grown up, to the Israelites who were suffering under forced labor. At that time, he saw an Egyptian striking a Hebrew. Seeing this, Moses killed the Egyptian. Moses likely acted not out of personal emotion toward the Egyptian or personal acquaintance with the Hebrew, but out of national loyalty and a sense of justice. Because the Egyptians treated the Hebrews who were subjected to forced labor with extreme cruelty, Moses’ anger would have been all the greater.

Hebrews Fighting One Another

The next day, Moses saw Hebrews fighting among themselves and rebuked them, telling them not to fight one another. It was painful enough to see his people suffering under Egyptian oppression, but seeing them fight among themselves was another kind of agony. Moses showed solidarity with his brothers, but among the brothers themselves there was no such solidarity; instead, they fought one another. Moses stepped forward for the rights of the oppressed Hebrews, but gained no result and instead provoked distrust. One accusation against Moses was that he had killed an Egyptian without being instructed to do so by anyone. Although this statement was technically correct, as a result Moses had no choice but to flee from the palace.

Meeting Reuel in Midian

The land of Midian was the region inhabited by the descendants of Midian, the fourth son born to Abraham through his third wife, Keturah (Gen. 25:1–2). This region is generally thought to have been along the eastern coast of the Gulf of Aqaba, though it is difficult to determine its exact boundaries because the Midianites were nomads who did not settle permanently in one place. There Moses met Reuel, a priest of Midian. Reuel is another name for Jethro, who later became Moses’ father-in-law. He was not a priest of the one true God, the LORD, but a priest of the foreign gods worshiped by the Midianites. Moses worked for Reuel and lived there.

Marriage to Reuel's Daughter

When Reuel met Moses face to face, he likely took a favorable interest in him upon seeing his natural handsomeness (v. 2) and the noble demeanor and refined speech that had become ingrained in him as a member of Egyptian royalty. When Reuel proposed that Moses marry his daughter, Moses accepted. His wife's name was Zipporah, which means "little bird." God had prepared a truly good helper for Moses in an unexpected place. When Moses returned to Egypt with her, and God sought to kill Moses because he had not circumcised his son, Zipporah circumcised the child and touched Moses' feet with the foreskin, thus averting disaster (4:24–26). Moreover, out of concern that she and her children might hinder Moses' mission to deliver his people, she returned to Midian, and later rejoined Moses when he led his people out to the wilderness of Sinai (18:1–5), showing herself to be a devoted wife.

The Birth of His Son Gershom

Moses' son was named Gershom, meaning "sojourner" or "foreigner." Although Moses had taken a wife in Midian, a land of the same Semitic people, and had even gained a son to carry on his family line, he still did not regard Midian as his homeland, but as a foreign land. This sense of being a "sojourner" reflects Moses' firm awareness that he was unchangeably a "Hebrew" and one of the "sons of Israel," a chosen people. Even though his life in Midian became long, Moses did not assimilate into Midianite culture and become a Midianite. This quality was one of the reasons he was chosen as the leader to deliver Israel from Egypt and lead them to Canaan.

Reflection

This "burning love for his people" that Moses possessed is a virtue that every Christian ought to have. Just as God saved Israel through Moses, who had a fervent love for his people, God is pleased to save this nation through believers in this land who have the same fervent love for their people.

At the same time, the fact that Moses married Zipporah, the daughter of a Midianite priest who was a foreigner, shows that even in the Old Testament era, from the time of the wilderness church (Acts 7:38), the door of salvation was already wide open to the Gentiles, and that in every age salvation comes not by lineage but by faith alone (Heb. 11:1). Although believers build homes and live with their families on this earth, we must not forget that this earth can never be our true homeland and that we are merely sojourners. When believers live with such a sense of being pilgrims, they are finally able to enjoy true freedom, released from all the bondage and threats of this world (Acts 7:29).