

(the mysterious phrase 'you are a bridegroom of blood to me'). God then accepted her act as equivalent to circumcision for Moses, and left him alone! Now, all this sounds very odd, but it does fit with what we know of ancient practice, and it does not (like other explanations found in commentaries) require any alteration of the Hebrew text of Scripture in order to make sense. It is not easy reading, but this is the closest we can get to what it may have meant.

Moses meets Aaron, and goes on to Egypt (vv27-31)

The last two elements of this passage are brief and to the point. Firstly, we are told about Aaron's meeting with Moses. Earlier, (4:14) we were told that Aaron was being called out of Egypt to meet Moses, so it is natural that here we have the story of the actual meeting. Most of the people of Israel at that time were under slavery, so most scholars reckon that Aaron was already an elder within Israel, holding some kind of office. This would have given him the time and opportunity to come and meet Moses in advance of his arrival in Egypt, and also accounts for his ability to speak well, mentioned earlier (4:12f.).

The rest of the book of Exodus is now set up by the faith expressed by the people of Israel when they received Aaron and Moses (4:31). Certainly, if we are right about Aaron, he smoothed the way to Moses' ready acceptance into the life of the people of Israel, something he had not achieved earlier in his life (2:11-15). We now wait to see what happens!

Application

This passage certainly has its fair share of difficulties, and verse 24-26 are reckoned to be amongst the most difficult to interpret in all Exodus. Nevertheless, it helps us connect between the early stories of Moses and his encounter with God, and all that follows in the book of Exodus. It speaks to us of God's extraordinary providence and guidance, even through disturbing and troublesome events (see 4:24), and if we can put aside our apprehension about the details of some of the obscure cultural issues which we do not understand today, then we can be inspired by the way in which the Lord works to achieve His purposes, even though it may not seem like it to the individual people concerned!

Certainly, at the end of the text, we are in a place of relative comfort, after the torrid nature of Moses' journey from Midian and the disturbing message about the killing of Pharaoh's 'firstborn'. When God's people come together to express faith, then He is able to work for them in powerful ways. The story is not over yet, of course, but starting points such as these are essential for any spiritual endeavour or for any mighty work of God. How many times have we all said today that God will surely work a wonder of renewal in our midst when His people come together to worship Him, in the 'spirit and truth' of Jesus Christ in whom we all believe? The events in this story all happened in Old Testament times, but they still connect with us today.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group the analysis of the incident in verse 24-26. Do you find this explanation helpful or does it make the passage more difficult for you?
2. Which of the five stories most helps you to understand the rest of the book of Exodus?
3. Is faith essential for the Lord to do any great work of power amongst His people, in Old or New Testament times?

Discipleship

How easy do you find it to handle difficult passages of Scripture? Do you feel an urge to investigate it, or to simply leave it as it is and accept it as a mystery? It is an important point, for it is quite possible to go too far and presume too much into texts which are mysterious precisely because we know little of their background. However, the reason why most people like to explore difficult texts is because God has placed them in His Word, and has presumably done so for a purpose, and this purpose is what the disciple should always seek to discover!

Final Prayer

My life is hidden with You, Jesus Christ, my Lord and my God. I am Yours, for better or worse, when I feel good and when I feel bad, when I am happy and when I am dispirited. You, O Lord, understand all this when I do not. Make sense of it all to me: AMEN

Prayer

We offer You thanks and praise, Holy Spirit, for You reveal sin for what it is and give us the courage to repent, You heal those who are broken and restore what has been destroyed, You enliven the spirits of men and women to great acts of kindness and generosity, and You give visions and dreams which reveal God's purposes to young and old alike. Praise You, Holy Spirit; who with the Lord Jesus Christ and the Almighty Father, are God eternal. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Media and the World

Pray today for the way in which photographs dominate the presentation of news. Large sums of money are used for the procurement of the images we see each day; some of them helpful, but many of them exploit the power of images to shock and control our responses. Pray about this matter, but consider objecting to images you believe to be misleading or manipulative.

Meditation

Holy Lord, place me under the challenge of Your discipline;
So that my whole being may rejoice, and respond to Your call.

If I am impatient, give me respect for Your gift of time;
So that I do not miss the Gospel perspective of life.

If I am unsettled, touch my life with Your peace;
So that I do not affect others by my anxiety.

If I am distressed, calm my feelings by Your presence;
So that I do not grieve others by my self-centeredness.

If I am intemperate, moderate my heart by Your love;
So that I do not compromise Your Gospel by my excesses.

If I am stubborn, challenge my inflexibility in every way;
So that I do not miss the opportunity to serve others.

If I am wilful, break me down by Your power;
So that I may be built up and liberated, through You!

Bible Study - Exodus 4:18-31

¹⁸ Moses went back to his father-in-law Jethro and said to him, 'Let me return to my own people in Egypt and see whether they are still alive.' And Jethro said to Moses, 'Go in peace.'¹⁹ Now, the LORD had said to Moses in Midian, 'Go back to Egypt; for all those who were seeking your life are dead.'²⁰ So Moses took his wife and his sons, mounted them on a donkey and went back to the land of Egypt. Moses took with him in his hand, the staff of God.

²¹ And the LORD said to Moses, 'On your return to Egypt, consider all the wonders I have enabled you to do, and perform them in front of Pharaoh. However, I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.'²² Then you will say to Pharaoh, 'This is what the LORD says: Israel is my son, my firstborn,²³ so I told you to let my son go, that he might worship me, but you refused to let him go. Now I will kill your firstborn son.'

²⁴ On the journey, at a place where they spent the night, the Lord met him (Moses) and sought to kill him.²⁵ Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched his (Moses') private parts with it, and said 'you are a bridegroom of blood for me!'²⁶ Then God let him go (when she said 'a bridegroom of blood', with reference to circumcision).

²⁷ The LORD said to Aaron, 'go into the desert to meet Moses.' So he went, and he met him at the mountain of God, and kissed him.²⁸ Moses told Aaron about everything the LORD had sent him to say, and about all the signs He had commanded him to do.

²⁹ Moses and Aaron gathered together all the elders of the Israelites. ³⁰ Aaron told them everything the Lord had said to Moses, and did the signs in the sight of the people. ³¹ The people believed, and when they heard that the LORD was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down in worship.

Review

This reading is a series of five short incidents around the theme of Moses' return to Egypt. They are simple and descriptive, and add to our picture of God's work through Moses. Clearly, the writer is keen to move the story on to what comes next, the story of the great spiritual battle between Moses and Pharaoh to obtain the freedom of Israel. Two of the incidents are significant, however; firstly the description of what Moses had to say to Pharaoh, including the threat against Pharaoh's 'firstborn' (4:21-23), and secondly, the strange story that combines the Lord's attempt to kill Moses and Zipporah's circumcision of her son on the way back to Egypt (4:24-26). After this, the last two incidents each have a clear purpose (4:27,28 and 4:29-31), indicating the Lord's control of what would be a crucial time for Israel. Moses and Aaron meet, and God's message is accepted by the elders of Israel.

Moses dutifully asked his father-in-law to allow him to go back to Egypt, once he was sure about the death of those who sought his life (4:19). He started by taking his wife Zipporah and sons with him (4:20, Gershom, the eldest, and Eliezer – 18:2), but we know from later in the story that Zipporah and her sons must have turned back. Later Scripture relates that after Israel escaped from Egypt, Moses was reunited with them in the Midianite desert (18:2) where they had remained under Jethro's protection.

The strange story recorded in 4:24-26 is almost unexplainable. Certainly, something was wrong; God and Moses were not at one. We are not told directly why, and shortly after the beginning Moses' journey back to Egypt, the Lord sought to kill him (4:24). This comes as something of a shock to us, but it is possible that this was something to do with the rite of circumcision, because after Zipporah circumcised her son, the Lord left off his attack on Moses (4:26). It may be that Moses was unworthy of embarking on the task without being obedient to the historic covenant command to circumcise his sons (see Genesis 17), but there are other things to be considered in a deeper study. Nevertheless, it is understandable to us that it would have been cruel for the young child to continue an arduous journey having just been circumcised, and Exodus 18:2 suggests that Moses sent the mother and sons back home.

The Lord's summary of Moses' message to Pharaoh (4:21-23) is relatively straightforward, but it raises a number of interesting issues. The Lord told Moses that he would make Pharaoh obstinate. This sounds ominous, but this was perhaps a form of re-assurance, for if the Lord was controlling Pharaoh's response, then the outcome would surely be according to His will. After this, the threat to Pharaoh's 'firstborn' has a chilling tone (4:23), because it warns us about the Lord's intended action against Pharaoh in order to break his resistance to God's will (4:23 – see chapter 11). We find the talk of such atrocity very difficult, especially from the Lord, but we have to realise that our story is about the survival of nations and the presence of God's covenant people in the world. The social conditions of the day were such that the very stability of society rested upon rights of inheritance that were passed on through 'firstborn' sons. This subject dominates the stories of all the patriarchs in Genesis, for example. So here in Exodus, God describes His own people as His 'son' for the first time in Scripture (4:22), and the threat against Pharaoh's 'firstborn' must be read in contrast to this. These verses outline the confrontations to come in the book of Exodus.

Remarkably, when Moses and Aaron arrived in Egypt the elders of Israel received their message from the Lord. The passage even says that the people had 'faith' (4:31) in God when they knew that He was concerned for them, and they bowed down in worship. This was exactly the right start for Moses and his God-given mission; but things were to get worse before they were to get better, as we shall discover when we study the next chapter of Exodus.

Going Deeper

Each of these five passages adds to the gradual build up of the Exodus story, but some are far more interesting to us than others. The more mysterious of the stories all concern first-born sons; Israel as God's firstborn, Pharaoh's 'firstborn', and Moses' firstborn, Gershom. Fitting

these together in order to get a sense of what was really happening at this critical time is quite a challenge!

Setting out on the journey (vv18-20)

The journey Moses embarked upon was an act of faith. Up to this point of time, Moses had prevaricated and argued with God about what he had been asked to do, but now he accepted the role God had given him and began to put into action what he had been told. He was polite in asking the permission of his father-in-law (4:18), but really only seeking the proper permission to take Zipporah and their sons. Moses did not tell Jethro what God had told him, nor anything about his work to set the people of Israel free. It is possible that they had talked about this because the text of Scripture tells us so little about what really happened, but the probability is that they had not, for Jethro was hardly likely to let his daughter go on such a dangerous mission, if he knew what it was!

In leaving, verse 20 notes that 'Moses took with him, in his hand, the staff of God.' Earlier this staff had been described as Moses' staff, but the change of description indicates the change of heart that had taken place, for Moses now accepted that he was doing the things of God, and not pursuing his own will. The staff will play an important role in the rest of Exodus, and we will come across it in several different episodes of the great story of the Exodus.

The Lord's words to Moses (vv21-23)

A distinction is normally made between the miracles and wonders Moses was ordered to perform to make the Israelites believe (4:1-9), and the great plagues which Moses brought on Egypt as signs and wonders to persuade Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go. In this passage, Moses is called upon by the Lord to consider the first of these, and then do them in front of Pharaoh; so there is an overlap between the two. Certainly the first of the signs has a resemblance to the first plague (7:8f.), and the third sign resembles the second plague (7:17f.), but there is no clear parallel to the second sign given to Moses, the sign of the leprous hand.

Some believe that this instruction gave Moses a starting place for his confrontation with Pharaoh, and that the last part of this speech gave the final one, the death of Pharaoh's 'firstborn' (see above). For the Lord, this confrontation was personal, and He was going to control it. Pharaoh pretended to be a 'god', so God would treat him as an equal in a battle for their respective firstborn which God alone would win. In this way, the warning from God to Pharaoh was that if he really was a god, he would be able to protect his inheritance (his 'firstborn'), but that when God obtained the victory, He would necessarily destroy the inheritance of Pharaoh because he sought a divine status to which he was not entitled. This is not language we readily understand, but it is the language of the culture of Moses and Pharaoh.

Circumcision, Moses, Zipporah and God (vv24-26)

Along with the surprise that the Lord might want to kill Moses, you might be surprised at my translation of these verses, particularly in the section which describes what Zipporah did after removing Gershom's foreskin, and it does not make easy or pleasant reading today; 'Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched his (Moses') private parts with it ...' (4:25). However, it is now well established that the Hebrew word for 'feet' was a euphemism for genitals (see also Isaiah 7:20, Ezekiel 16:25, Deut 28:57), which explains why I have translated the verse in this way.

What could possibly explain such strange actions? There are a number of possibilities, but I will explain only one which I consider reasonable. When Moses was born and adopted into Egyptian society, there is no record of his circumcision; however, if Moses was to join his own people in Egypt, the people of Israel, this would certainly be an issue. Moses had most likely been circumcised as an Egyptian with a cut in the foreskin rather than the removal of it, something which the Israelite people regarded with abhorrence. God had commanded circumcision as a sign of the Covenant, and those who were not circumcised were to be 'cut off' from God's people (Gen 17:14); and this may explain the sentence in this passage which says that the Lord sought to kill Moses.

Zipporah, realising what was going on, proceeded to circumcise her son, Gershom immediately, touching Moses' private parts with the blood and saying what she would have known from her Midianite background as the right 'ritual' thing for a woman to say to a circumcised husband