



This month we are looking at Exodus 4:18-26, in which we are told that God 'sought to kill' Moses.

The Septuagint version of this passage, in common with several others such as the Arabic versions, says that it was '*an angel of the Lord*' who met Moses and sought to kill him at the resting-place on the way to Egypt. Probably the translators found it uncomfortable to have to think that the Lord Himself might have '*sought to kill*' his servant Moses. Our English versions are true to the Hebrew text, and therefore we must

take it that it was, indeed, God Himself who was involved in this remarkable Old Testament event.

Did God truly 'seek' to kill Moses?

Do we not find the language rather strange? Surely, if God had *really* wished to kill him, He could very easily have done so. I suggest that what occurred was of the nature of an ominous warning, and what is there described was an illness, serious enough to be life-threatening, inflicted on Moses by God as a punishment for some offence or other. But, a question now arises.

What was the reason for the punishment?

What had the prophet done – or failed to do – that merited such a stern judgement? I believe we find the answer in the exclamation of Moses' wife, Zipporah, which suggests that the reason for this divine act of judgement was the failure of her husband to have their newly born, second son Eliezer circumcised. She said to Moses, "***You are a husband of blood to me!***" v.25.

Zipporah was a Midianite, not an Israelite, and, apparently, it was not a custom of her people to practice the rite of circumcision. Consequently, she regarded the religion of her husband as cruel, and, although she personally performed the crude surgery, after the child had been circumcised, she re-acted very vigorously (v.20). Customarily this would have been performed by the father, and only in exceptional circumstances by the mother, and the implication is that Moses was, at that time, too ill to fulfil his responsibility.

However Zipporah's angry outburst reveals that she had no sympathy for a religion that demanded the shedding of the blood of children, by means of a ceremony which was, in her mind, both incomprehensible and cruel. It was after the child had been circumcised that we read, "***He let him go***", v.20. This sounds rather puzzling, but it simply means that, after the deed was done, God allowed Moses to recover.

Notice, also, that it was *after* the ceremony had been performed that Zipporah explained to Moses why she had called him, '*a husband of blood*'. She declared that it was "***because of the circumcision***", v.26.

Circumcision - before Sinai.

It is sometimes mistakenly thought that the rite of circumcision was first imposed on the Israelite as an essential part of their religion, when God made His covenant with

them at Sinai. But this is not true. The earliest biblical reference to this ceremony is found in Genesis 17:10. There it is recorded that God commanded Abraham and his descendants to practice circumcision, and in Acts 7:8, Stephen reminds the Jews of this occasion. From that time, long before the time of Moses, the Hebrews faithfully obeyed God's command.

Moses would – *or should* – therefore, have circumcised his first son, Gershom many years earlier, and the life-threatening illness with which God later inflicted him, was a punishment for what appears to have been ongoing neglect on the part of the great man.

Can anything be said on his behalf?

We cannot *excuse*, but we may try to *explain* this neglect. Remember Moses' background. Although he was a Hebrew, we must not forget that only his infant years had been spent with his Hebrew family in Egypt. Whilst still a child he had been taken by the Egyptian princess and raised and educated as an Egyptian, groomed to take a high place in Egyptian society.

Until he finally decided to leave Egypt, his entire life-style and, probably, even his mind-set,, shaped by an Egyptian education, (Acts 7:22), had been Egyptian rather than Hebrew, and we may say with absolute certainty, that his rank as the '*son of the daughter of Pharaoh*' would have been given little opportunity of associating with Hebrew slaves, whom the Egyptians scarcely regarded as human! Remember that he was 40 years old before he displayed interest in his Hebrew ancestry, and, for the following 40 years the people with whom he associated, were the Midianites, a nomadic people who later declined the invitation to join the Israelites. (Numbers 14)

So, until he received God's call, Moses had had very little contact with the Hebrews. I think we must take these facts into account before judging him too harshly.

Why, then, did God judge him so severely?

Because later, at Sinai, Moses was to bring to the people the Covenant which he would receive from God. In the Covenant, circumcision would once again be declared obligatory for God's chosen people. It would be, in fact, the rite that secured entry into the Covenant, guaranteeing to the obedient Hebrew the promises that God had earlier made to Abraham, the federal head of the race, who was known as '*Abram the Hebrew*', Gen. 14:13.

Since Moses was to fulfil this important role, he must not be seen to be in disobedience of the command of God. He must be made ready for his task, and, as preparation, he must learn that the higher the office and the honour, the greater the responsibility. Regardless of his Egyptian upbringing, Moses *was* a Hebrew, and, as a Hebrew, not even he was excused from the obligation to practice circumcision. He had been in disobedience until God shocked him into an awareness of this fact in this drastic manner.

We need to remember that when God issues a general command, no-one is granted exemption.

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