

Why would God kill Moses?

In Exodus 4:24-26 we have a drastically abbreviated account of an episode that occurred when Moses started back to Egypt to rescue the Israelites. It is so abbreviated that readers down through the centuries have been puzzled by it. It is necessary to analyze the larger context, all relevant considerations.

We must go back to Genesis 17:9-14, where God imposed circumcision as the 'sign of the covenant' between Himself and Abraham, and his descendants. Especially to the point is verse 14; the uncircumcised male "shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant". In ordinary English, he was to be executed; the penalty was death.

Moses had certainly been circumcised by his parents on the eighth day, but at three months he was adopted by Pharaoh's daughter and was brought up as an Egyptian. Well, not quite; the baby was returned to his mother to be nursed, and we are not told his exact age when he was taken back to Pharaoh's daughter. So we don't know how much his parents may have taught him. In any case, all his schooling was Egyptian. However, he obviously knew where he came from and had made it his business to learn about the Israelites. "When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the sons of Israel" (Acts 7:23).

Moses was forty years old when he fled to Midian and married one of Jethro's¹ daughters, Zipporah, and had two sons by her. After another forty years (Moses is now eighty), God appears to him at the burning bush and commissions him to return to Egypt and deliver the Israelites. So Moses sets out, taking 'his wife and his sons' (Exodus 4:20). **However**, Moses' sons had not been circumcised!

Well now, Moses certainly knew about circumcision, and may even have tried to circumcise his sons, but Zipporah, not an Israelite, evidently stamped her foot and said "No way!" From her reaction (Exodus 4:25), it seems clear that at least part of the fault was hers, and she knew it. And Moses did not insist. But now Moses has been commissioned to lead the people of the covenant, but he himself had not kept the covenant! According to Genesis 17:14, it was the sons who should have been killed, but Moses, the father, was the one at fault for not having circumcised them when they were eight days old. By now they were doubtless grown men (when the procedure is far more painful).

God evidently determined that the situation had to be corrected, and the means He chose was dramatic! The Text does not tell us what form God used to make His presence known, or just what He did to Moses, but the man evidently was immobilized, because the woman had to perform the operation. Obviously there was a conversation, which is why Zipporah knew what she had to do. She was not happy, but

¹ He is also called Reuel.

she obeyed. The grown sons had to cooperate as well. Verse 25 has 'son' (singular), but presumably both had to be circumcised. Verse 26 begins by saying that then God let Moses go, which He presumably would not have done until the condition was met. Note that she used a stone (flint), and Joshua 5:2 speaks of 'flint knives'. Iron rusts and can carry tetanus, so a stone knife was definitely safer.

As a side benefit of this episode, Moses evidently sent his wife and sons back to Jethro. Then he met Aaron at Mt. Horeb and the two went on to Egypt. I say 'benefit' because the following days and weeks would be very intense, and Moses was free from domestic concerns. Exodus 18:2 states plainly that Moses had sent his wife back, and verse 5 says that Jethro took Zipporah and the two sons to Moses at Horeb. So at that point the family was finally together again. (This is the last mention of the sons, except in Chronicles—their main claim to fame was a negative one.)