

Moses' sons, Gershom and Eliezer

<http://www.jewishrhody.com/stories/the-story-of-moses-second-son.6119>

The children of great men and women are often swallowed up in the greatness of their parents. It is the rare son or daughter who survives unscathed growing up in the shadow of a parent who is always in the spotlight. It is not surprising, then, that we know next to nothing about Moses' two sons.

Early in the book of Exodus, we learn of the birth of Moses' first child: "*Moses agreed to stay with the man [Reuel/Jethro, priest of Midian], and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah in marriage. She bore him a son; and he named him Gershom, saying, 'I have been a stranger [ger] in a strange land.'*" (Exodus 2:21-22.)

According to our biblical text, Moses, who becomes a shepherd, was living in Midian with his family for a long time before his transforming encounter with God at the burning bush.

Soon after meeting the One Who instructs him to return to Egypt in order to lead his Israelite brethren out of bondage in Egypt, "*Moses took his wife and his sons, put them on a donkey, and went back to the land of Egypt.*" (Exodus 4:20.)

Notice that the text says "sons," not "son."

So Gershom had a younger brother. We don't know when he was born; we don't even know his name, yet. All we do know is that the second son of Moses and Zipporah, like his older brother, was born during the family's extended stay in Midian.

Event follows event, crisis follows crisis. The first nine plagues – blood, frogs, lice, swarms of flies, disease of livestock, boils, hail, locusts, thick darkness. Then the celebration of the first Passover while still in Egypt, followed by the 10th and final plague: the death of Egyptian first-born males.

Then, the beginning of Exodus. Flight from the Egyptian army. The splitting of the Red Sea. The celebratory song of Moses and Miriam upon reaching the other side. The sweetening of bitter waters. Manna from heaven. Water from the rock. The defeat of Amalek.

All this, and not a single additional word about Gershom or his nameless brother.

Finally, in Exodus 18:3, 14 chapters after we first learn about the existence of Moses' second son, we learn his name: "*... and the name of the other [son], Eliezer; for he [Moses] said, 'The God of my father was my help...'*" (Eli, my God; ezer, help.)

What else does our Bible tell us about Eliezer or his older brother, Gershom?

GERSHOM

While we learn nothing about Gershom himself, we do learn that his son, Jonathan (also identified as Shebuel), becomes an apostate priest, leading the tribe of Dan in the worship of an idol.

The book of Judges, Chapter 18, concludes with these astonishing verses, *“Then the Danites set up branding the grandson of Moses as an idolater: an idol [from the home of Micah] for themselves. Jonathan, son of Gershom, son of Moses, and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the time that the land went into captivity. So they maintained as their own Micah’s idol that he had made, as long as the house of God was at Shiloh.”* (Judges 18:30-31.)

ELIEZER

While we learn nothing about Eliezer himself, it seems safe to say that his progeny did not become idolaters who led others into idolatry. We find this snippet in Chapter 23 of I Chronicles: “... but as for Moses, the man of God, his sons were to be reckoned among the tribe of Levi. The sons of Moses: Gershom and Eliezer. ... The sons of Eliezer: Rehabiah the chief; Eliezer had no other sons, but the sons of Rehabiah were very numerous.” (I Chronicles 15, 17.)

So what else is there to say about this second son of Moses? We know that he died sometime during the 40 years the Israelites were wandering in the midbar, that forbidding desert wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula and the desolate stretch of land east of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea. We know this because, with the exception of Joshua and Caleb, all those born before the Exodus, spiritually deadened by the slave mentality, were doomed to die in the wilderness, never setting foot in the Promised Land.

On the other hand, we can assume that Eliezer’s son and grandsons, members of the tribe of Levi, did serve as some sort of religious functionaries once the Israelites settled in Canaan.

We don’t know if Eliezer ever managed to forgive Moses for being an absentee father, entrusting all parenting duties to Zipporah. Where in his father crowded world of crushing responsibilities was there room for him?

Perhaps, as Eliezer matured, he came to value Moses’ total engagement in the historic mission of leading his people from bondage to freedom, from darkness to a great light. Maybe, even though wounded by his father’s neglect, Eliezer came to take pride in Moses’ enormous accomplishments.

I would like to think that Eliezer lived out his life in the desert satisfied with his lot. Yes, he was understandably disappointed with Moses as a father, but he quieted his discontent with the hope that through his tireless efforts, his father would ensure the future of the Jewish people l’dor vador, from generation to generation.

Moses’ second son does have a name, Eliezer, but he does not have a story...except in the imaginations of those who wonder what happened to him, his unnamed wife, his one son and his many grandchildren. It could be that if we were able to trace our lineage back far enough, we would discover that Eliezer, son of Moses, is a root in our own family tree and, as such, a humble participant in an ancient chapter of our own stories.

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