

There are some Old Testament scriptures that are strange. Odd. Simply straight-up weird to people of today.

I live in the time when the Israelites have been enslaved in Egypt for many years. I am the daughter of Ruel, also named Jethro, a priest of Midian. That statement itself is a little weird. What does it mean to be a priest of Midian? My name is Zipporah, and probably that name is a little weird, too.

I will tell you of one of the weirdest Old Testament Scriptures. From the beginning of time, people have wanted to be safe and prosperous. And then safer, and more prosperous. In an effort to continually increase their safety and prosperity, people all over the world have worshiped things. Things that are worshiped are called gods.

Gods take many forms. The most common in my time are aspects of nature: animals, the sun and moon, water, earth, and so on. We live so close to nature that these things have the most effects on our lives, and are the most obvious to try to appease and control.

Gods might also be represented by meteorites or misshapen trees, or other quirks of nature. We often make our own gods out of wood, metal or rocks. Since we make these things, they clearly have no spiritual power, although we tell ourselves, and thereby fool ourselves, into hoping they do.

Over time, our gods become very dear to our communities, our families, individuals. Our societies often revolve around worshiping gods. Yours do, too. Professional sports, social media, even your children. Don't believe me? Let's talk come football season. In our society, we think nothing of swapping gods or incorporating other gods into our worship if we think it might help us better survive and thrive.

The first example of household gods in the Bible is when Rachel, the wife of Jacob, stole her father's household gods.¹ These were apparently figurines small enough to hide under a saddle, and valuable enough for Laban to want them back. Now, this story in itself is a little weird, because the God of Abraham protects Jacob and Rachel so they can steal Laban's household gods. Rachel will continue to worship these household gods until Jacob makes her quit.²

¹ Genesis 31:19-55

² Gen. 35:2-5

Let's go back only a few decades in time to see why this is weird. Abraham lives in Harran, in modern Turkey. His God tells him to move from there to Canaan, in modern Israel. Genesis 1 through 9 makes it clear that Abraham's God is the one who created the universe in Genesis 1.

Abraham is so faithful to God, that God promises to make him a great nation, to make his name great and make him a blessing to all the families of the earth. Essentially, this means God will make him extremely safe and extremely prosperous, although the timing of when that will happen is not known. It is also not known how much of this will happen in Abraham's lifetime.

I've been setting a trap for you, let's see if you have avoided it. I've told you that the God of Abraham is very powerful. And I described household gods and other gods in such a way that they seem entirely powerless. But nothing could be further from the truth. Even the God of Abraham acknowledged that other gods had power. Weird, right? Sometimes they had power only through Satan, but it seems they may have had innate power as well.

Many people think of the Exodus as a time when the Hebrews completely quit worshiping other gods and worship only the God of Abraham. But it's not that clear cut. While the Hebrews were enslaved in Egypt, they started worshiping the Egyptian gods, along with the God of Abraham. Over time, the God of Abraham becomes more and more of a distant memory, while the Egyptian gods become more and more real.

The first job of Moses is to convince the Hebrews that the God of Abraham remembers his covenant with Abraham and wants to bring them out of slavery. His next job is to convince the Hebrews and the Egyptians that the God of Abraham is much more powerful than the Egyptian gods. Moses and God prove this through the famous ten plagues.

Moses' next job is to convince the Hebrews to give preeminence to the God of Abraham in their worship. Notice what the first of the Ten Commandments says: "You shall have no other gods before me."³ In the Song of Moses, he acknowledges that other gods exist.⁴ My own father, Ruel, said, "I know that the Lord is greater than all other gods."⁵

This time period is followed by the transition to where Hebrews are to worship only the God of Abraham, and not worship any other gods at all! You can see that this transition takes many years by hearing Joshua's speeches more than half of a century later. He acknowledges that many of the Hebrews continue to worship other gods. In one of Joshua's most famous statements, he says, "Choose this day whom you will serve: whether the gods which your

³ Exodus 20:3

⁴ Exodus 15:11

⁵ Genesis 18:11

fathers served in Egypt or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you live: but as for me and my family, we will serve the Lord.”⁶

It boils down to this: much of the Old Testament is the story of God trying to lead the people to see he is the ONLY god people should worship. God is a jealous god and will not allow anyone to worship any god but himself. Though they are supposed to be the people who follow and defend the one true God, the Hebrews are continually drawn to worship other gods in addition to the one true God, and sometimes to the exclusion of the one true God. That is the sad story of the Old Testament. It’s kind of the same sad story today, it seems to me.

Now, the weird scripture. In Abraham’s time, his one true God is so powerful that many people around Abraham start worshipping his God. Abraham’s God became incorporated into the worship of many people outside of Abraham’s family. The practice of circumcision becomes well known for those people willing to endure it who desire to be protected, become safer, and more prosperous.

Fast forward a few hundred years. Abraham’s direct descendants through Isaac become the enslaved Hebrews of Pharaoh. They barely remember the God of Abraham, but are very familiar with the gods of Egypt. However, many other people around the Middle East still have the God of Abraham incorporated in their worship, and still remember the rite of circumcision.

My father, the priest of Midian, worships the God of Abraham and many other gods, too. That explains what a priest of Midian does. My family doesn’t practice the rite of circumcision for a very simple reason...my father has seven daughters, no sons. Ok, OK, here’s the weird scripture.

One day, my sisters and I are taking care of our family flocks, and we go to water them at the community well. As we begin, some mean shepherds come to drive us away so they can water their flocks first. We are used to this because it happens nearly every day. They are afraid to hurt the daughters of the priest, but not afraid to bully them.

A handsome Egyptian shows up from out of nowhere, he protects us and we go first. You can only imagine that all seven of us fall for this handsome, powerful man.

We thank him and take our sheep home, earlier than normal. Our father asks why we’ve returned so early and we tell him the story of the Egyptian, leaving off the part of how handsome he is. Our father is incensed at our rudeness, and makes us go find him to invite him to dinner. We are thrilled.

This handsome stranger turns out to be Moses. He stays with our family, and he eventually becomes my husband. We have a firstborn son named Gershom, and later have other sons. We live as a very happy family for about four decades.

⁶ Joshua 24:15

When Moses is nearly eighty years old, he encounters the God of Abraham in the burning bush. After a long negotiation, God assigns Moses the task of rescuing the Israelites from Pharaoh, and leading them to the Promised Land.

Moses comes home that night and tells my father and me all about the burning bush, his new assignment, and his fancy staff. As a priest of Midian, Jethro is very familiar with God and sends Moses and our family back to Egypt with his blessing. Moses, our sons, and I leave on a donkey and start back to Egypt, taking along the staff of God.

Now, here is the weird Scripture that I will explain to you. Not fully, but I will enlighten you a little. The Bible says that we were at a lodging place on the way back to Egypt.⁷ All of a sudden, the Lord meets Moses and is about to kill him. But I take out a flint knife, cut off my son's foreskin and throw it at the feet of Moses, and say, "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me." So...God lets Moses live.

Now really, that is some pretty weird stuff, right? We were all familiar with the rite of circumcision, and how Abraham had circumcised his son, and mandated that all of the male descendants of Abraham were to be circumcised. I knew that Moses had been circumcised.⁸ But, we had not circumcised our own son! We were being disobedient but not aware of the penalties for doing so. I knew exactly what to do, and did it immediately. My poor son. He was in extreme pain, but at least we saved the life of Moses. We could have saved ourselves a lot of trouble if we had obeyed much earlier. In a way, this is a foreshadow of what the Israelite nation as a whole will have to endure before they enter the Promised Land.

With this act of circumcision, Moses is ready and qualified to face Pharaoh. And...the gods of Egypt. Not so weird after all.

⁷ Exodus 4:24-26

⁸ Exodus 2:6. How did she know Moses was a Hebrew baby? He had been circumcised!