

## Did Moses Have Two Wives or Just One?

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Many of us have a brief familiarity with Zipporah, Moses' wife from Midian. Perhaps we encountered her in *Prince of Egypt*, or read about her in [Scripture](#). But some theologians surmised that Moses had married a woman before her, a woman from Cush named Tharbis.

Scripture never lists Tharbis by name, and the closest evidence we have to her comes from [Numbers 12:1-10](#).

*"Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite. "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses?" they asked. "Hasn't he also spoken through us?" And the Lord heard this. (Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.) At once the Lord said to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, "Come out to the tent of meeting, all three of you." So the three of them went out. Then the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud; he stood at the entrance to the tent and summoned Aaron and Miriam. When the two of them stepped forward, he said, "Listen to my words: "When there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, reveal myself to them in visions, I speak to them in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?" The anger of the Lord burned against them, and he left them. When the cloud lifted from above the tent, Miriam's skin was leprous—it became as white as snow. Aaron turned toward her and saw that she had a defiling skin disease."*

So did Tharbis exist, this Cushite woman? Or was Zipporah the woman they were referring to in these [verses](#), even though Midian is nowhere near Cush?

We'll explore the possibility of Moses' second wife Tharbis, the evidence against it, and why this matters to us today.

## **Who Was Tharbis, and Did She Exist?**

Sadly, because Scripture never lists the Cushite woman by name, we don't have anything to go off of biblically. We can go to extrabiblical sources like Josephus who claim that Moses made a pit stop in Cush before he got to the land of Midian, where he married Tharbis. Here's what [Josephus](#) has to say:

"However, while Moses was uneasy at the army's lying idle, (for the enemies durst not come to a battel,) this accident happened; Tharbis was the daughter of the King of the Ethiopians: she happened to see Moses, as he led the army near to the walls, and fought with great courage: and admiring the subtilty of his undertakings, and believing him to be the author of the Egyptian success, when they had before despaired of recovering their liberty; and to be the occasion of the great danger the Ethiopians were in, when they had before boasted of their great achievements, she fell deeply in love with him: and upon the prevalency of that passion, sent to him the most faithful of all her servants to discourse with him upon their marriage. He thereupon accepted the offer, on condition she would procure the delivering up of the city; and gave her the assurance of an oath to take her to his wife: and that when he had once taken possession of the city he would not break his oath to her. No sooner was the agreement made, but it took effect immediately: and when Moses had cut off the Ethiopians, he gave thanks to God, and consummated his marriage, and led the Egyptians back to their own land."

Apparently, Moses, before he flees to Midian, makes war with the Ethiopians. There, Tharbis falls in love with him, and they get married.

We don't know if Tharbis followed Moses when he fled from Egypt and toward Midian, but the marriage was well-known enough to make Miriam and Aaron question Moses' leadership. Although God did use Gentiles throughout the Old Testament as part of his plan (Ruth, [Asenath](#), Rahab, etc.) the Israelites were not always so keen on these unions happening. Especially since those of other nations were known to lead God's people astray, such as King Solomon.

We can assume that if Tharbis did exist, she was of high standing. She likely received a great education, and because those in the land of Cush had unmatched beauty, she was likely very easy on the eyes as well.

## **Are Tharbis and Zipporah the Same Person?**

Others have surmised that Zipporah and Tharbis are the [same person](#). That sometimes the biblical language about foreign lands like Cush and Midian gets blurred. Let's take a look at what the Bible says about Zipporah.

[Exodus 3:1](#): *"Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God."*

Moses watches the flocks of his father-in-law. The [Midianites](#) did descend from the Israelites originally, but eventually, they became enemies of Israel (much like the Edomites). They, at this time, retained knowledge of Yahweh, but they stray from that later on. The Israelites likely considered them to be foreign peoples, in the same way they considered the Samaritans to be, even though the Samaritans did have Israelite blood.

[Exodus 2:1](#): *"And Moses was content to dwell with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah."*

Moses marries Zipporah during his time in Midian. He spends several decades there before he returns to Egypt to tell Pharaoh to release the Israelites.

All in all, we can't say. We do trust Josephus as a historical source, but we don't know if we can corroborate everything he says. Perhaps Moses married two women, perhaps he just married Zipporah, and Aaron and Miriam referred to her as a Cushite. But we can learn a few lessons from both Zipporah and Tharbis.

### **What Lessons Can We Learn from Zipporah and Tharbis?**

First, we need to know that God has had a plan for the Gentiles all along. Even before the early church spread the Gospel to the Gentiles and allowed Gentiles to be grafted into the family of God, we see God using Gentiles in the Old Testament to fulfill his plan for salvation. Zipporah, and perhaps Tharbis, played a role in this as they furthered the generations of Moses and gave the Gentiles hope for the future.

Secondly, conflict within the religious community about [interracial relations](#) has gone on for thousands of years. It breaks my heart whenever the Christian community gets mad about two people of different nations or ethnicities marrying. God has created us all in his image. There is no Jew and Gentile for those who are in Christ ([Galatians 3:28](#)).

We see that God rebukes Aaron and Miriam for them questioning Moses on this matter. In fact, to the point where Miriam gets a nasty skin disease as punishment.

Finally, it's important to look at the minor characters in the Bible. The ones where, if you blink, you might miss them. God can use even the smallest story to transform the hearts of men.

### **Further Reading**

[Was Zipporah a Great Woman Behind a Great Man?](#)

[20 Things You Didn't Know about Moses in the Bible](#)

[The Bible Story of Moses: 10 Things That Make His Life and Calling Relatable](#)