



# **ZIPPORAH: A HEROINE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

**MAREK HALTER**

**TRANSWORLD  
BOOKS**

## About the Book

Set over three thousand years ago, a sweeping historical adventure in the tradition of *The Red Tent*.

Her name was Zipporah. A black child, she was found on the shores of the Red Sea, and given a name that meant 'bird'. But, because of the colour of her skin, her fate was sealed; in the tribal lands where she lived, no man would want her.

Then, as she was drawing water at a well, she met an outcast like herself. His name was Moses, and Zipporah was to share his destiny.

Together they set out on an epic journey across the desert to Egypt, where they would confront the Pharaoh and beg him to set their people free.

But Zipporah's love for Moses condemned her too: for among the Hebrews of the Exodus her status as a black woman was to have catastrophic consequences . . .

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# The Days of Blood and Turmoil

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Also by Marek Halter

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*Zipporah*

MAREK HALTER

Translated from the French by  
Howard Curtis

If a stranger lives with you in your land, do not ill-treat him. Treat him as you would your native-born, and love him as you love yourselves, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Leviticus XIX: 33—4

Moses failed to enter Canaan, not because his life was too short, but because it was a human life.

*The Diaries of Franz Kafka,*  
19 October 1921

Are you not for me like the children of Cush, children of Israel? says the Lord. Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt, just as I brought the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?

Amos IX: 7

I am dark but beautiful,  
Daughters of Jerusalem,  
Dark as the tents of Kedar,  
As the tent curtains of Solomon.  
Do not stare at me because I am dark,  
It is the sun that made me so.

Song of Songs I: 5-6





## *Prologue*

Horeb, god of my father Jethro, accept my offerings.

At the north corner, I place the barley cakes I have baked. At the south corner, I pour the wine made from grapes I picked.

Horeb, god of glory, you who make the thunder rumble, hear me! I am Zipporah the Black, the Cushite, who came here from beyond the Sea of Reeds, and I have had a dream.

In the night, a bird appeared to me, a bird with pale plumage flying high in the sky. I laughed as I watched it. It circled above me and cried out as if it was calling me. I understood then that this bird was myself. My skin is as black as burnt wood, but in my dream I was a white bird.

I flew over my father's domain. I saw his houses of whitewashed brick, his tall fig trees, his flowering tamarisks and the canopy of vines beneath which he gives his judgements. Towards the gardens, I saw the servants' tents in the shade of the terebinths, the palm trees, the flocks, the paths of red dust and the great sycamore on the road to Epha. On the path that leads to your mountain, O Horeb, I saw the village of the armourers, with its circle of rough brick houses, its furnaces and its pits of fire. I flew far enough to see the well of Irmna and the roads that lead to the five kingdoms of Midian.

And I flew towards the sea.

Its surface was like a sheet of gold, so bright I found it impossible to rest my gaze on it. Everything was blinding:

the sky, the water and the sand. The air through which I flew had lost its coolness, and I wanted to cease being a bird and become myself again. I touched the ground with my feet and my shadow was restored to me. I shaded my eyes with my shawl, and it was then that I saw it.

A canoe was swaying on the water among the rushes. A beautiful, solidly built canoe. It was the canoe that had carried my mother and me from the land of Cush to the land of Midian, from one shore to another, keeping us alive despite the sun, despite our thirst and fear. And there, in my dream, it was waiting to take us back to the land where I was born.

I called to my mother to hurry.

She was nowhere to be seen, either on the beach or on the cliff.

I waded into the water. The sharp rushes cut my arms and hands. I lay down in the canoe. It was exactly the right size for me. It set off, the rushes parted, and the sea opened before me. The canoe advanced between two huge walls of hard green water, so close I could have touched them with my fingertips.

My stomach was tight with fear. I huddled in the canoe. Terror made me cry out.

Soon, I knew, the cliffs of water above me would come together like the edges of a wound and swallow me.

I was screaming, but I couldn't hear my voice, only the lament of the sea, like something broken and suffering.

I closed my eyes, sure I was about to drown. Just as the canoe was about to crash against the seabed, there, on the seaweed, wearing the pleated loincloth of the princes of Egypt, his arms laden with gold bracelets from wrist to elbow, a man stood waiting. His skin was white and his brow was covered with brown curls. With one hand, he stopped the canoe. Then, lifting me in his arms, he walked across the Sea of Reeds. On the opposite shore, he clasped

me to him and put his mouth on mine, giving me the breath the sea had tried to take from me.

I opened my eyes. It was night.

True night, the night of the earth.

I was in my bed. I had been dreaming.

'O, Horeb,' I asked, 'why send me this dream?'

Was it a dream of death or of life?

Is my place here, beside my father Jethro, the high priest of Midian, or is it in the land of Cush where I was born? Is my place among my white-skinned sisters, who love me, or there, beyond the sea, among the Neheyou, who are under the yoke of Pharaoh?

O Horeb, listen to me! In your hands I place my breath. I will dance with joy if you answer me, you who know my distress.

Why was the Egyptian waiting for me at the bottom of the sea?

Why erase my mother's name, and even her face, from my memory?

What path did the dream you interrupted indicate to me?

O Horeb, may my call to you be answered. Why are you silent?

What is to become of me, Ziporah the stranger?

No man here will take me as his wife because my skin is black. But my father loves me. In his eyes I am a woman worthy of respect. Among the peoples of Cush, what would I be? I do not speak their language, do not eat their food. How would I live there? Only the colour of my skin would make me similar to my countrymen.

O Horeb! You are the god of my father Jethro. Who will be my god if not you?

Part One  
*Jethro's Daughters*

## *The Fugitive*

That day, and all the days that followed, Horeb was silent.

The dream lingered in Zipporah's body, like poison left by an illness. For several moons, she dreaded night. She lay on her bed without moving, without closing her eyes, without even daring to touch her lips with her tongue for fear of finding the taste of the stranger's mouth on them.

She thought of confiding in her father Jethro. Who better to counsel her than the sage of the kings of Midian? Who loved her more than he did? Who better understood her torments?

But she said nothing. She did not want to seem weak, childish, too much like other women, who were always ready to believe their hearts rather than their eyes. He was so proud of her, and she wanted to show him that she was strong and held firm to all the things he had taught her.

With time, the images of the dream faded. The Egyptian's face became blurred. A season went by without her thinking of it. Then, one morning, Jethro announced to his daughters that the next day young Reba, the son of the King of Sheba, one of the five kings of Midian, would be their guest. 'He has come to ask counsel of me. He will be here before the end of the day. We shall welcome him as he deserves.'

The news provoked much mirth among the women of the house. All of them - Jethro's daughters, the handmaids - knew what was going on. For more than a year, barely a

moon had passed without Reba coming to seek Jethro's counsel.

While everyone bustled to make ready for the next day's banquet, some preparing the food, others the reception tent, the carpets and cushions that had to be laid out in the courtyard, it was Sefoba, the eldest of Jethro's daughters still living in their father's house, who, with her usual directness, said aloud what everyone was thinking: 'Reba has had more counsel by now than anyone needs in a lifetime - unless, behind his handsome face, he's the stupidest man Horeb ever created. What he really wants to know is if he still appeals to our dear Orma. He's hoping Father will think his patience a sign of wisdom and make him his son-in-law.'

Orma shrugged. 'We all know why he's coming,' she agreed. 'But his visits bore me. They're always the same. Reba sits down with our father, spends half the night chatting and drinking wine, then goes home, without speaking up.'

'I wonder why,' Sefoba said, and pretended to think hard. Then, 'Perhaps he doesn't find you beautiful enough.'

Orma glared at her sister, unsure whether she was joking. Sefoba laughed, pleased with her teasing. Zipporah sensed they might be building up to one of their customary quarrels. She stroked the back of Orma's neck to calm her, and received a slap on the hand by way of thanks.

Although Sefoba and Orma had the same mother, they could not have been more dissimilar. Sefoba was short and round, sensual and kind, with nothing dazzling about her. Her smile revealed her lack of guile, the honesty of her thoughts and feelings. She was completely trustworthy and Zipporah had confided to her more than once what she could not tell anyone else. Orma, on the other hand, was like a star that keeps its brilliance even when the sky is flooded with sunlight. There was no woman more beautiful

in Jethro's house, perhaps in all Midian. And certainly no woman prouder of this gift of Horeb.

Suitors had written long poems about the splendour of her eyes, the grace of her mouth, the elegance of her neck. In their songs the shepherds, although they did not dare mention her name, praised her breasts and her hips, comparing them to fabulous fruits, strange animals, and spells cast by goddesses. Orma savoured her fame, never tired of it. But she seemed content to inflame others while remaining aloof. No man had yet aroused in her an interest greater than her fascination with herself. She was the despair of Jethro, who saw her fuss over her robes, her cosmetics and her jewels as if they were the most precious things in the world. Although she was the youngest daughter of his blood and he loved her dearly, there were times when even he, who rarely lost his composure, could not restrain himself.

'Orma is like the desert wind,' he would rage, in Zipporah's presence. 'She blows first one way then another. She's like a bladder that fills with air, then bursts. Her mind is an empty chest. Even the dust of memory won't settle in it! She's a jewel, of course, and she grows more beautiful every day, but I wonder sometimes if Horeb is angry with me and using her to test me.'

'You're too hard on her,' Zipporah would protest gently. 'Orma knows what she wants and has a strong will, but she's young.'

'She's three years older than you,' Jethro would reply. 'It's high time she thought less about making hay and more about making babies!'

In fact, there had been no lack of suitors. But Jethro had promised Orma that he would not choose a husband for her without her consent so he was still waiting, just like the suitors. Now new songs were being sung across the land of Midian, saying that the beautiful Orma, daughter of Jethro the sage, had been born to break the hardest of hearts and

that Horeb would soon transform her, as virgin as the day she was born, into a rock on his mountain, caressed only by the wind. But now Reba had taken up the challenge, and came endlessly to pay his respects to Jethro with the impatience of a warlord before a battle. Nobody doubted that his persistence deserved its reward.

‘This time, little sister,’ Sefoba resumed, ‘you must make up your mind.’

‘Why should I?’

‘Because Reba deserves it.’

‘No more than anyone else.’

‘Oh, come!’ Sefoba said, warming to the argument. ‘Which other man would you prefer? Everything about him is pleasing.’

‘To an ordinary woman.’

‘To you, Princess. Do you want a man worthy of your beauty? Ask any of the women here, young or old. Reba is the handsomest of men – tall and slim, skin the colour of fresh dates, firm buttocks! Who wouldn’t want to take him in her arms?’

‘That’s true.’ Orma chuckled.

‘Do you want a rich man, a man of power?’ Sefoba went on. ‘He’ll soon be succeeding his father as king, and then he’ll own the most fertile pastureland and caravans so richly laden they’ll stretch from sunrise to sunset. You’ll have gold and fabrics from the East, and as many handmaids as there are days in the year.’

‘What do you take me for? Would I become a man’s wife because his caravans are impressive? How dull.’

‘They say Reba can sit on a camel’s hump for a week without tiring. Do you know what that means?’

‘I’m not a camel so I don’t need to be straddled every night – unlike you, who squeal loudly enough to keep the rest of us awake!’

Sefoba’s cheeks turned crimson. ‘How do you know that?’ she cried, as the other women laughed. ‘Well, perhaps it’s



true,' she admitted. 'When my husband isn't with his flocks, he comes to me every night! My heart isn't starved like Orma's - I enjoy nourishing it. And doing so every night,' she concluded, joining in with the laughter, 'isn't as easy as lighting a fire to bake cakes!'

'But the seasons are passing,' Zipporah said softly, when calm had returned. 'You've already rejected every other suitor, my dear Orma. If you send Reba away, who else will dare want you?'

Orma looked at her with surprise, and wrinkled her pretty nose. 'If Reba is only coming here to talk to Father, without declaring himself, then I shall stay in my room tomorrow. He won't see me.'

'You know perfectly well why Reba doesn't ask Father for your hand. He's afraid you'll refuse him. He has his pride. Your silence has become an affront. This may be the last time—'

'Tell them I'm ill,' Orma interrupted. 'Just look sad and worried, and they'll believe you.'

'I shan't say anything!' Zipporah protested. 'I certainly shan't lie.'

'It won't be a lie! I will be ill. You'll see.'

'Nonsense!' Sefoba exclaimed. 'We know exactly what we'll see. You'll paint your face until you glow and, as usual, you'll be more beautiful than a goddess. Reba will have eyes only for you. He won't touch the delicious food we serve him. That's the saddest thing about being your sister. The proudest, most handsome men come here and leave looking foolish!'

The handmaids, who had been all ears, burst out laughing, and Orma laughed with them.

Zipporah got to her feet. 'Let's take the sheep to the well,' she said decisively. 'We're late already. Forget about husbands for the moment - real or imagined.'

The well of Irmna was a good hour's walk from Jethro's domain. In the distance rose the great mountain of the god Horeb, its covering of petrified lava sparkling in the evening sun. Below it, between the folds of red rock, plains of short grass, which were sometimes green in winter, stretched to the sea. Such was the land of Midian, vast, harsh and tender, a land of burning sand and volcanic dust where scattered oases shimmered like oil in the desert heat. The wells at the oases were both a source of life and a gathering-place.

Every seven days, those who had pitched their tents less than two or three hours away by road, or who, like Jethro, owned gardens, flocks and brick houses were entitled to fill their goatskins at the well of Irmna. They were also allowed to let their flocks drink there, provided they finished in the time it took the shadow of the sun to move six cubits.

It was late summer, and the men had already left Jethro's domain with livestock to sell in the markets of the land of Moab, along with the iron weapons produced by the armourers. They would not return until dead of winter. In the meantime, the women led the remaining animals to the well. This was where Zipporah and her sisters were taking their sheep. As they tramped along in their clogs, the dust rose off the road like flour.

The tall shaft of the *shadoof* was already in sight when Jethro's daughters noticed a herd of long-horned cows pressing round the adjoining troughs.

Sefoba frowned. 'Look, they're drinking our water. Whose animals are those?'

Four men appeared, pushing aside the cows with their staffs. They all had thick beards, and were dressed in patched old tunics white with dust. They positioned themselves at the top of the track, and planted their staffs in the ground.

Orma and Sefoba came to a standstill, but their sheep went on. Zipporah, who had been walking behind, now

joined them and shaded her eyes from the sun. 'They're Houssenek's sons,' she said. 'I recognize the eldest, the one with the leather necklace.'

'Well, this isn't their day,' Orma said, and set off again. 'They'll have to leave.'

'They don't look as if they'll want to,' Sefoba observed.

'Whether they want to or not, this isn't their day, and they must go!' Orma retorted, angry now.

The sheep had sensed water. It was too late to stop them. They trotted towards the troughs, jostling each other and bleating.

Zipporah caught hold of Sefoba's arm. 'Less than a moon ago our father passed an unfavourable judgement on Houssenek. He and his sons are still angry.'

Eyebrows raised, Sefoba asked her to explain what she meant. But they were both interrupted by Orma shouting, 'What are you doing? Have you gone mad?'

Houssenek's sons were running towards the sheep, yelling raucously. Within a few seconds, the animals had scattered in all directions. Zipporah and Sefoba tried in vain to stop them. Some ran down the slope, risking breaking their necks on the rocks. Houssenek's sons laughed and swung their staffs.

Sefoba stopped running. Out of breath, eyes dark with rage, she gasped, 'If a single sheep is hurt, you'll regret it. We are Jethro's daughters, and this is his flock.'

The four men stopped laughing.

'We know who you are,' muttered the one Zipporah had pointed out as the eldest.

'Then you also know it isn't your turn to be at the well,' Orma snapped. 'Go away and leave us in peace. You stink of oxen!' She pulled a face to underline her disgust, adjusted her tunic, which had slipped from her shoulder, and walked towards Zipporah. Heedless of her insults, the men watched her, fascinated. 'It's our day today,' one said. 'And

tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, too, if we feel like it.'

'You know very well that isn't true,' Orma hissed.

Zipporah laid a hand on her arm to silence her.

The one who had spoken before was laughing again. 'It's our day whenever we like. We've decided this well belongs to us.'

Sefoba gave a cry of rage.

Zipporah stepped forward. 'I know you, son of Houssenek. My father passed judgement on you and your brothers for stealing a she-camel. If keeping us from the well is your revenge, you are foolish. This time your punishment will be worse.'

'We didn't steal any she-camel!' one of the brothers exclaimed. 'She was ours.'

'Who are you, black woman, to tell me what I can and can't do?' the eldest jeered.

'I am Jethro's daughter, and you are lying.'

'Zipporah!' Sefoba murmured.

It was too late. Brandishing their staffs, the men stepped between Zipporah and her sisters.

The eldest of Houssenek's sons jabbed a finger at her. 'Your father is only your father because he kissed the arse of a black ox.'

Zipporah slapped his cheek with such force that he staggered back. His brothers were no longer laughing. Zipporah took advantage of their surprise to run away. But one man was too quick for her: he threw his staff, aiming it at her legs, and she fell headlong.

Before she could get up, a heavy body, stinking of sweat and grunting, fell on top of her. She cried out, in fear as much as in pain. Rough fingers clutched at her, then tore the fabric of her tunic. A knee was shoved between her thighs. Her head throbbing, she could hear Sefoba and Orma screaming. Her gorge rose, and her arms felt weak. The man seemed to have a thousand hands, as he scratched

her thighs, mouth and stomach, crushing her wrists and breasts.

Then Zipporah, eyes closed, heard a sound like a watermelon bursting. The man groaned and rolled on to his side. She did not dare move, but she could hear heavy breathing, a struggle and pounding feet.

Sefoba cried out and Zipporah opened her eyes. Sefoba was dragging Orma towards the well. Close to her, Houssenek's eldest son seemed to be asleep, his cheek squashed against a rock, his mouth bloodied and his arm strangely twisted.

Zipporah leaped to her feet, ready to run. Then she saw him.

He was facing the three men who were still on their feet, holding his staff at shoulder height. It was no ordinary shepherd's staff but a weapon with a heavy bronze tip. He was dressed in a pleated loincloth, and his feet were as bare as his chest. His skin was very pale, his hair long and curly.

Suddenly he swung his staff in a perfect curve. With a dull thud, it struck the legs of Houssenek's youngest son, who toppled over with a cry of pain. The other two leaped back, but not fast enough to escape the weapon, which came down on their necks, forcing them to their knees.

The stranger pointed at the eldest, who still lay motionless. 'Take him away,' he said.

His voice was sharp, and his accent unfamiliar; it made the words sound odd. He's from Egypt, Zipporah thought.

As Houssenek's sons were lifting their injured brother, the stranger prodded them with the tip of his staff. 'Now go or I'll kill you,' he said, in the same tone, stumbling over the words.

Zipporah heard her sisters' cries of joy. She heard them calling her name. But she was incapable of turning to them and replying. The stranger was looking at her with eyes that seemed familiar. There was something about his

expression, about his mouth - self-confidence, perhaps. His arms were reaching out to encircle her waist and lift her, and she knew them, too, even though they were not covered with gold.

For the first time in many moons, the dream that had so troubled her came alive in her.

With the shepherds gone, there was a moment of awkwardness. Sefoba ran to clasp Zipporah to her, then set about repairing her torn tunic, trying to hold it together with her silver brooch.

'Are you all right?' she asked. 'They didn't hurt you? Oh, may Horeb strike them dead!'

Zipporah did not reply. She could not take her eyes off the stranger with his pale skin, burning eyes and wide mouth. The one thing that distinguished him from the Egyptian in her dream was that he had the beginnings of a beard. It was reddish and sparse, leaving his cheeks visible, the kind of beard that looked as if it was often shaved, unlike the beards of the men of Midian.

He was looking at her, too, still clutching the staff as if he feared he might have to fight again. It struck Zipporah that he must have seen black women before because there was no surprise in his expression - rather, she saw admiration. Nobody had ever looked at her so intently, and she found it unsettling.

Orma broke the tension. 'Well, whoever you are, we are in your debt!'

The stranger turned. It was as if he were seeing Orma for the first time. His lips quivered and his smile widened. Finally he released his grip on his staff and straightened his shoulders. His chest swelled. He was reacting like any other man when faced with a beautiful woman.

'Who are you?' Orma asked, in a voice as sweet as her gaze.

He frowned, turned his eyes from her and looked towards the shimmering hills, the flock climbing noisily up the slope to the well. He raised his staff and pointed towards the sea. 'I'm from the other side of the sea.' The words came with difficulty, one by one, as if he were lifting stones.

Orma laughed. The sound was both seductive and ironic. 'You crossed the sea?'

'Yes.'

'You're from Egypt, then.'

He's a fugitive! Zipporah thought.

Sefoba put her hands together in a respectful greeting. 'I thank you with all my heart, stranger. Without you, those shepherds would have taken my sister's honour. They might even have assaulted all three of us.'

'And then they would have killed us,' Orma said.

The stranger glanced at Zipporah, who stood rigidly, like a statue. With a modest gesture, he pointed to the coping of the trough, where he had left a water-skin of fine hide, which was flat. 'I came here by chance. I was looking for a well.'

'Are you travelling alone?' Orma asked. 'With no escort and no flock? Drinking water wherever you find it?'

The stranger looked embarrassed.

'Orma!' Sefoba said, coming to his rescue. 'Don't ask so many questions.'

Orma dismissed her sister's reproach with her loveliest smile. She stepped away from him, went to the well and observed that the water level was low. Zipporah was in no doubt that her sister was moving about to make sure that the stranger kept watching her, like a bee unable to extricate itself from a fig that has burst open in the sun.

Orma was now casting into the well the rope at whose end hung a little leather pouch. 'Zipporah!' she cried. 'Come and drink some water. You're so quiet - are you sure you're all right?'

The stranger looked at Zipporah again, and suddenly she became aware of the pain in her thighs and belly where Houssenek's son had scratched them. She went to the well and took the water-skin that Orma had brought up.

'We are Jethro's daughters,' she heard Sefoba say, behind her. 'My name is Sefoba. My sisters are Orma and Zipporah. Our father is the sage and judge of Midian . . .'

The stranger nodded.

'Did you know you are on the lands of the kings of Midian?' Orma asked, curling her lip.

The stranger did not seem to notice the irony in her voice. 'No, I didn't. Midian? I don't know your language well but I learned a little of it in Egypt.'

Orma was about to say more, but he raised his hand. It wasn't a shepherd's hand, any more than it was a fisherman's hand, or the hand of a man who works the land or kneads clay to make bricks. It was a hand that could hold weapons but also make the simple gestures of those accustomed to power who give orders, call for silence and attention.

'My name is Moses,' he said. 'In Egypt it means "pulled from the waters".'

He laughed, which made him seem curiously older. He glanced again at Zipporah, as if hoping she would speak, noted her waist, the slender thighs beneath the tunic, the firm breasts, but did not dare look into the luminous black eyes that stared at him. He pointed to the sheep. 'The animals are thirsty. I'll help you.'

They watched him in silence, sure that he was a prince. A fugitive prince. Everything about him indicated a mighty lord: his clumsiness as well as his strength, his fine hands and the quality of his belt. It was obvious he was not used to drawing water from a *shadoof*. He caught the cedar pole too high, then slid too close to the pivot. When the water-skins came up, dripping with water and as heavy as a dead