

## **Jethro and Moses**

### **(Exodus 18:1–12)**

This section presents an antithesis, or contrast, to the preceding block of material. In it we see one of the leaders of a neighbouring people not seeking to destroy Israel, as had the Amalekites. Instead here is one who honours the unique and wonderful redemption that God had accomplished for his people.

18:1. And Jethro, the priest of Midian, the father-in-law of Moses, heard all that God had done for Moses and for Israel his people, that Yahweh had brought out Israel from Egypt.

The last mention of Jethro was in 4:18, where he gave Moses leave to return to Egypt. Because it has been so long since Jethro has been referred to in the text, the author details his status, as a reminder to the reader: he was ‘the priest of Midian and the father-in-law of Moses’ (see 3:1). Thus Moses is taking us back to a situation and relationship that preceded all the events which took place in Egypt.

Jethro had heard about Yahweh’s redemption of Israel out of Egypt. He probably received reports in the common manner from caravans travelling through his land into and out of Egypt. In addition, Zipporah and her sons would have brought news to Jethro because they had originally accompanied Moses on his journey to the land of the pharaohs (see 4:20).

18:2–3. And Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, took Zipporah, the wife of Moses, after he had sent her back, and her two sons, of whom the name of one was Gershom, for he said, ‘I was an alien in a foreign land.’

Now we read about an episode about which nothing further is known. Apparently Moses had sent his family back from Egypt to live with Jethro. The cause of the separation is uncertain. It may have been related to the incident concerning the circumcision of his son described in 4:24–26. That was the last time that Moses’ family has been mentioned up to this point. The incident at the inn was a distressing one, and it may be that his family went no farther into Egyptian territory. It has also been frequently proposed that once matters began heating up in Egypt with the plagues, then Moses sent his family away for their protection.

Some Rabbinical writings, such as Mekilta, understand the sending away of Zipporah as a divorce. The verb ‘send back’ in rare instances can mean the judicial separation of a marriage (see Deut. 24:1). Yet Jethro refers to Zipporah as Moses’ ‘wife’ in verse 6. ‘Send back’ seems to carry its basic, common meaning here; in other words, Moses sent her back to her father for safe-keeping.

Moses’ two sons had accompanied Zipporah on her return to Midian. The author, here and in the next verse, provides the names of the children and the meaning of their names. The names are given because they apply to the recent and present circumstances of Moses and Israel. The naming of Gershom is a word-for-word duplication of 2:22, in which Gershom was first named by his father (see commentary on that verse). The name is a word-play. ‘Gershom’ means ‘a sojourner/stranger there’.

The verbal form used in the naming of Gershom is a perfective, and it reads, ‘I was an alien in a foreign land.’ It is likely this is a reference to Egypt, from where Moses had recently fled with Israel.

18:4. And the name of the other was Eliezer, for [he said], ‘The God of my father was my help, and he delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh.’

The name of the second son was ‘Eliezer’, which means ‘God is help.’ His name reflects God’s deliverance of his people from the foreign land of verse 3—that is, Egypt. Moses explains that God is his helper. The phrase ‘the sword of Pharaoh’ is unique and curious. It may perhaps be a reference to Egyptian literature. In numerous inscriptions from the New Kingdom, the reigning pharaoh is accorded the title ‘lord of the sword’. This is particularly true of Rameses II, who may well have been the pharaoh of the exodus. The sword is a metaphor for military prowess, power and victory. It is from that dazzling force that Yahweh has delivered Israel.

18:5. And Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, and his sons, and his wife came to Moses, to the wilderness, where he was camping at the mountain of God.

Jethro brings Moses' family to meet him at 'the mountain of God'. In Exodus 3:1, the 'mountain of God' is identified as Horeb, another name for Mount Sinai. It is here that God called Moses at the burning bush. Camping and worshipping 'at this mountain' was also the sign and fulfilment of the promise God had given that he would be with Moses (see 3:12).

The miraculous event of bringing water from the rock near Rephidim occurred at Horeb (17:6) and the war with Amalek also took place in the vicinity of the mountain (17:8). Finally, this was to be the site where Israel received the law of Yahweh (19:2ff.).

18:6. And he said to Moses, 'I, Jethro, your father-in-law, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons with her.'

In the light of verse 5, translators have had difficulty understanding this verse. It begins, literally, 'And he said to Moses, "I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you."' How could Jethro be speaking these words to Moses? The Septuagint and Syriac alter the reading of the verse to: 'And it was said to Moses, "Behold, your father-in-law Jethro, is coming to you."' The two changes made are, first, to read the verb 'said' passively rather than actively, and, secondly, to substitute *hinneh* ('Behold') in place of 'ni ('I'). These modifications signify that a third party, a messenger, came to Moses announcing the imminent arrival of his family.

The problem is that the Masoretic Text makes perfect sense as it stands, and is in no need of emendation. It is clear from verse 7 that a messenger is employed—but, as any good messenger does, he speaks the exact words of the patriarch who sent the message. The herald thus speaks in the first person. He is a mere instrument, or tool, of the sender.

18:7. So Moses went out to meet his father-in-law, and he bowed down and he kissed him. And they asked each other concerning their welfare. Then they entered the tent.

The meeting between Moses and Jethro takes priority over the return of Moses' family. That is because Jethro is the one with the highest station, even above that of Moses. The formal courtesies that Moses gives to Jethro underscore the homage due to the elder, the one of greater authority. First, Moses travels to meet his father-in-law on the way, an act of humility and obeisance (see Gen. 33:3). And, secondly, Moses greets Jethro by bowing before him and kissing him, also common acts when meeting a person of higher status (e.g., 2 Sam. 14:33).

Other formal civilities of the ancient Near East then occur. Literally, they 'asked each of his comrade as to peace/welfare'. This is a Hebrew idiom of greeting, that is, finding out how the other person has been faring in life (see its use in Judg. 18:15; 1 Sam. 10:4; 17:22; 25:5). And, finally, after the formalities, the two men retire to a tent for more serious discussions.

18:8. And Moses recounted to his father-in-law all that Yahweh had done to Pharaoh and to Egypt for Israel's sake, all the hardship they had found on the way, and how Yahweh had delivered them. This verse opens the general discussion that the two men had in the tent. It begins with the testimony of Moses. The prophet first tells Jethro about what Yahweh had done in and to Egypt, i.e., the events of the plagues and the Red Sea. Then he describes the various troubles and difficulties Israel had faced in leaving Egypt and travelling through the wilderness—lack of water at Marah, grumbling over food in the Wilderness of Sin, the rebellion over the water shortage at Massah/Meribah, and the battle against the Amalekites. Finally, he declares how Yahweh had delivered Israel from all their trials and tribulations. Moses gives all the glory to Yahweh. He talks to Jethro about 'everything Yahweh did' and 'how Yahweh saved them'. The prophet takes no honour to himself.

18:9. And Jethro was delighted about all the good which Yahweh had done for Israel when he delivered them from the hand of the Egyptians.

Jethro is greatly moved by the testimony of Moses. And he displays a similar enthusiasm and excitement to his son-in-law; in fact, he uses similar vocabulary to that used in Moses' recitation in the previous verse.

The opening verb, translated 'delighted', is rare (it comes from *hdh*, see Job 3:6). The Septuagint translates it as if it derives from the verbal root *hrd*, which means 'to tremble/shudder'. The Jewish

Midrash B. Sanhedrin 94b renders the verb as ‘He felt cuts in his body.’ No matter how one views it, the word reflects a heightened response on the part of Jethro.

18:10. So Jethro said, ‘Blessed is Yahweh, who delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of Pharaoh, who delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians!’

The next two verses constitute Jethro’s confession. He begins his benediction with, literally, ‘Blessed be Yahweh.’ A blessing beginning this way becomes a recognized formula in Israel’s history. In addition, this is by no means the only blessing upon God and Israel invoked by non-Israelites (see Gen. 26:28–29; Josh. 2:9–11; 1 Kings 5:2). It is also important to note that Jethro does not employ a generic name applying to any deity, but he specifically names ‘Yahweh’ as the blessed one. Here is a Midianite calling on the personal name of the God of the Hebrews!

The Septuagint, apparently sensing an example of dittography, does not include the second half of the verse in its translation. In agreement, the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia notes a lacuna at the end of verse 11, and thus places the second half of verse 10 at the end of verse 11. All this is unnecessary literary gymnastics. What we have here is a poetical confession, in which the second line basically repeats the first line for emphasis (the essence of Hebrew poetry). It is an incomplete synonymous parallelism, looking like this:

a

b

c

Blessed be Yahweh

who delivered you (plural)

from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of Pharaoh

b

c

who delivered the people

from under the hand of the Egyptians.

8:11. ‘Now I know that Yahweh is greater than all the gods because they acted arrogantly against Israel.’

‘Now I know’ is an expression commonly used in the Old Testament (e.g. 1 Kings 17:24; 2 Kings 5:15). In the majority of its appearances the formula is used of a person being convinced of a truth by an event. It reflects conviction on the part of the recipient. Whether or not it signifies the conversion of Jethro to follow the Hebrew God is uncertain: that may have happened earlier, in which case he now has greater belief in the Lord or firmer conviction. It does appear, however, that at some point Jethro became a devotee of Yahweh.

The second half of the verse is difficult. It literally reads, ‘because of the way in which they acted arrogantly against them’. Who is meant by ‘they’? Some argue it is a reference to the Egyptians of verse 10. On the other hand, it is more likely that it represents the ‘gods’ of the earlier part of the verse 11. Indeed, the two halves of the verse are tied together by a word that serves to introduce a causal clause (‘because’). Thus, the entire verse signals another mockery of the gods of Egypt—it is they who acted presumptuously and arrogantly against the people of God. This is a confirmation of Exodus 12:12.

18:12. Then Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, took a whole burnt offering and other offerings before God; and Aaron and all the elders of Israel came to eat food with the father-in-law of Moses before God.

Jethro offers sacrifices to God as expressions of joy, thankfulness and devotion. The first sacrifice is the ‘burnt offering’. This type of animal offering had existed since the time of Noah, when the patriarch sacrificed victims immediately after the Flood (Gen. 8:20). It was later used in the temple/tabernacle morning and evening as a symbol of unceasing communion with God (Exod. 29:42). The Hebrew word literally means ‘that which ascends’, implying that the offering goes up heavenward to the great God. The sacrifice ‘makes its meaning plain enough, impressing on the thoughtful worshipper the desire of God for

‘truth in the inward parts’, and for a disciplined devotion. It depicts a general self-dedication which is worked out in careful and painstaking detail.’

The other ‘sacrifices’ refer to an extremely ancient type of sacrifice, of which we first read in the Scriptures in Genesis 31:54 and 46:1. The word reflects a class of sacrifices. However, normally the rite included the eating of the flesh of the victim at a feast held in honour of God. Often it was an offering of thanksgiving.

After the ritual of sacrifice, ‘Aaron and all the elders of Israel’ had a meal with Jethro. It may be that the meal consisted of the remains of the sacrificial animals: the term ‘bread’ used here in the original is often a synecdoche for food in general.

The content of the verse may actually ‘portray the making of a covenant between the Israelites and the Midianite Jethro’. The constituent parts of the scene find parallels with sacrificial events that are part of covenant-making (see Gen. 31:54, in particular). The sacrificial meal shared by Jethro and the Israelite leaders is the strongest point in favour of this interpretation.

### **Application**

What a wonderful family conversation we are witnessing! Moses and Jethro are not talking about the weather, sheep-herding, or the latest caravan gossip or news. No, but they are talking about the wondrous works of God. Moses is telling Jethro of the marvellous deeds of Yahweh—it is Moses’ testimony, his sharing of the good news with his father-in-law. How profitable is this type of conversation! Each of us ought to consider the manner in which we deal with our families—what do we talk about around the dinner table? In what do we rejoice when we hear of it? I believe Moses’ evangelistic efforts put many of us to shame.

Jethro’s response to the good news is also astounding. Whereas the Israelites murmured and grumbled throughout their wanderings, here is a Midianite rejoicing over God’s goodness to Israel! The faith of the Gentile is putting to shame the faith of the Hebrew. What Jesus says about the Roman centurion in Matthew 8:10 could be said about Jethro: ‘Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel.’