

Exodus 18

Just prior to Israel reaching Mount Sinai, Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brings Moses' wife, Zipporah and their two sons, to Moses at the "mountain of God" (ver. 5). When they meet, Jethro sees that Moses is burdened with the leadership of Israel and he gives Moses advice on sharing the responsibilities. God gives His agreement and Moses listens to his father-in-law.

TRANSLATION - 18:1-6:

1 And he heard, Jethro, the priest of Midian, father-in-law of Moses, all which God did for Moses and for Israel his people, that Jehovah brought up Israel from Egypt. **2** And Jethro, father-in-law of Moses, took Zipporah, the wife of Moses after his sending her away **3** and her two sons, the name of one [was] Gershom because he said, "A stranger I was in the land of foreigners." **4** And the name of the one Eliezer because "God of my father [is] my help and he delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh."

5 And Jethro came, the father-in-law of Moses, and his sons and his wife to Moses to the wilderness where he was camping there, the mountain of God. **6** And he said to Moses, "I [am] your father-in-law Jethro coming to you and your wife and her two sons with her."

HEBREW WORDS:

"To hear" (ver. 1) was used earlier at 2:15, 24. It could be translated "to obey." "Jethro" is mentioned only in Exodus, 9 times (3:1; 4:18). Seven times are in Exodus 18. "Priest" was used earlier at 2:16; 3:1. "Father-in-law" was used earlier at 3:1; 4:18. Jethro is identified as the "father-in-law" of Moses 13 times in this chapter. "Zipporah" (ver. 2) was seen earlier at 2:21; 4:25. Along with 18:2, these are the only places where Zipporah is mentioned in the Bible. "Sending away" is a noun; it could suggest the idea of "divorce," but not here. It refers to her departure from Moses in 4:24-26. "Gershom" (ver. 3) is mentioned 14 times in the OT, first at 2:22. The word is related to "stranger," used earlier at 2:22; 12:19, 48-49. "Foreigner" was used earlier at 2:22. "Eliezer" (ver. 4) is mentioned only here in Exodus. The name is found 14 times; the "Eliezer" in Genesis 15:2 was Abraham's servant. The name is related to the word "help," which is used 43 times. "To deliver" or "to rescue" is used 213 times. It was used earlier at 2:19; 3:8, 22. "Sword" was used earlier at 5:3, 21.

"To camp" (ver. 5) was used earlier at 13:20. "Mountain" was used earlier at 3:1, 12. "Mountain of God" is used 8 times: Exodus 3:1; 4:27; 24:13; 1 Kings 19:8; Psalm 36:6; 68:15; Ezekiel 28:14, 16.

REFERENCES AND ALLUSIONS TO GENESIS:

The Midianites had bought Joseph in slavery in Genesis 37:28.

ARCHAEOLOGY:

"Midian" (ver. 1) was used earlier at 2:15-16.

COMMENTARY:

Jethro (ver. 1), who was seen earlier at 3:1 and 4:18, was a priest in the nation of Midian. Israel does not have priests yet. We were introduced to Melchizedek who was a priest of the "Most High God" in Genesis 14:18-24. Jethro appears to also be a priest of God for the nation of Midian. While in Midian, Jethro heard what Jehovah God did for Moses, his son-in-law, and the people of Israel and how He brought Israel out of Egypt through the Red Sea.

Subsequently, Jethro brought Moses' wife, Zipporah (ver. 2), and their two sons to see him at the "mount of God." The last we had seen Zipporah was in chapter 4 when she circumcised one of the boys, apparently Gershom (4:24-26). After that event, she is not mentioned again until now, which suggests that after the circumcision, she returned to Midian and her father's house. This was about one year earlier. Apparently Eliezer was born during the interim period. It could also be that Zipporah and Gershom traveled with Moses to Egypt, but

they are simply not mentioned. At some point, however, Moses “sent her away” - perhaps it was when she became pregnant with Eliezer. We do not know the details.

“Gershom” (ver. 3) is named from a play on the word “foreigner,” as Moses was a foreigner either in Egypt or in Midian. The second son, who is not mentioned in any other passage is “Eliezer” (ver. 4) whose name is a play on the word “My God is help.” Moses named him such, believing that Jehovah God, the God of Moses’ ancestor (perhaps having in mind Abraham) was his help in bringing him and Israel out of Egypt, from the “sword of Pharaoh.” The “sword” refers to Pharaoh’s ability to put Moses to death on various occasions.

Jethro came to Moses at the “mountain of God” (ver. 5) with Zipporah, Gershom and Eliezer. He introduced himself to Moses in a semi-formal way (ver. 6). Or it also might appear from verse 7 that Jethro had sent a messenger first, who introduces Jethro’s arrival. Then in verse 7, Moses meets Jethro personally.

APPLICATION:

Later Jewish writers - The concept of “help from God” is also found in the name “Ebenezer” for an altar built by Samuel (1 Sam. 7:12) and the psalmist identifies God as a “help” (Psa. 46:1). The Midianites will later cause problems for Israel: Judges 6-7.

TRANSLATION - 18:7-12:

7 And Moses went up to call his father-in-law and he bowed before him and kissed him and inquired of him, each his companion for peace and they came to his tent. **8** And Moses related to his father-in-law all which Jehovah did to Pharaoh and to Egypt for the sake of Israel, all the weariness which they found in the way and Jehovah delivered them. **9** So Jethro rejoiced over all the good which Jehovah did for Israel whom He delivered from the hand of Egypt.

10 And Jethro said, “Bless Jehovah who delivered you from the hand of Egypt and from the hand of Pharaoh who delivered the people from under the hand of Egypt. **11** Now I know that great [is] Jehovah above all the gods because by this thing which they treated wrongly His people.

12 So Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, took a burnt offering and sacrifices to God and Aaron came and all the elders of Israel to eat bread with the father-in-law of Moses before Jehovah.

HEBREW WORDS:

“To bow before” (ver. 7) was used earlier at 4:31. It can be translated “to worship.” “To kiss” was used earlier at 4:27. “To inquire” was used earlier at 3:22. “Friend” or “companion” was used earlier at 2:13. “Peace” was used earlier at 4:18. “Tent” was used earlier at 16:16. It will be used 62 times in Exodus, largely in reference to the tent of worship. “To relate” (ver. 8) was used earlier at 9:16; 10:2. The verb is related to the noun “book.” “Weariness” is only used four times in the OT: Exo. 18:8; Num. 20:14; Lam. 3:5; Neh. 9:32. “To find” was used earlier at 5:11; 9:19. “To rejoice” (ver. 9) is used three times: Exo. 18:9; Psa. 21:7; Job 3:6.

“To bless” (ver. 10) is only used here in Exodus. It is used 327 times in the OT. “To know” (ver. 11) was used earlier at 1:8; 2:4, 14. “To treat wrongly” is used 10 times in the OT; only here and 21:14 in Exodus. “Burnt offering” (ver. 12) was used earlier at 10:25. “Sacrifices” was also used earlier at 10:25. “Elders” of Israel were seen earlier at 3:16, 18; 4:29; 10:9; 12:21; 17:5-6. “Bread” was used earlier at 2:20; 16:3-4, 8, 12, 15, 22, 29, 32.

REFERENCES AND ALLUSIONS TO GENESIS:

There were meals associated with a covenant (treaty) ceremony in Genesis: 26:30; 31:54.

COMMENTARY:

Moses met Jethro (ver. 7) and knelt before him and kissed him, a customary greeting in that culture. They inquired of each other and wished “peace” on each other, another aspect of their greeting, and then they went into Moses’ tent to talk. Moses related to his father-in-law everything that Jehovah God had done for them against Pharaoh and Egypt (ver. 8). He defined some of the events as “weariness” or “hardship.” This likely refers to the slavery in which Israel labored while in Egypt. Jehovah “delivered” them; notice this use of this verb four times in three verses: 8, 9, 10 (twice).

Moses’ father-in-law rejoiced (ver. 9) when he heard what Jehovah God had done for them. In verse 10, Jethro blessed (or “praised”) Jehovah for delivering Moses and Israel from the “hand” of Egypt and from the “hand” of Pharaoh. In verse 11, we have what appears to be a statement of faith or confidence in the nature of Jehovah God: “I know that great [is] Jehovah above all the gods because by this thing which they treated wrongly His people.” Since the purpose of the exodus was for Egypt and Israel, and other nations, to know who is Jehovah God, that purpose was fulfilled in the person of Jethro here. If he was not a believer in Jehovah God before, he appears to come to that conviction at this point. He likely had not had a relationship with “Jehovah” God; here, it appears he does. Monolatry is the worship of *one* God, but not the *denial* of the existence of other gods. Henotheism is the faith that there is one God, but not the *denial* of others who might deserve worship. Monotheism, which is what the Bible teaches, is the existence of *one* God who *alone* deserves to be worshipped.

Based on the confession of his convictions, Jethro, as a priest, leads Moses in worship (ver. 12). He offers a burnt offering, which was completely consumed, and “sacrifices” to God which were partially consumed and partially eaten. This is what Moses told Pharaoh that they were supposed to do (10:25). Aaron was also present and all the elders of Israel and they ate this meal (literally “bread”) together with Moses and Jethro in the presence of Jehovah God.

APPLICATION:

Moses’ contemporaries - There will be later meals associated with the covenant at Mount Sinai, in the presence of God: Exodus 24:5, 11.

Later Jewish writers - The sailors in the ship with Jonah made a similar confession to Jethro in Jonah 1:16.

NT writers - While meals are not an act of worship, they can be enjoyed together with fellow believers in company with one another (cf. the “love feast” in Jude 12) and in the presence of God, if those meals are not combined with the Lord’s Supper. See Paul’s extended discussion of this question in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. We call them “potluck meals” or “fellowship meals.”

TRANSLATION - 18:13-23:

13 And it was the next day that Moses sat to judge the people and the people stood before Moses from morning until evening. **14** And the father-in-law of Moses saw all which he was doing for the people and he said, “What [is] this thing which you are doing for the people? Why [are] you sitting alone and all the people are standing before you from morning until evening?”

15 And Moses said to his father-in-law that “the people will come to me to inquire of God. **16** Because it will be for them a word will come to me and I will judge between a man and his friend and I will know the statutes of God and His laws.”

17 And the father-in-law of Moses said to him, “Not good [is] the thing you are doing. **18** To wither you will wither, both you and this people who [are] with you because heavy on you [is] the matter. You will not be able to do by yourself. **19** Now listen to my voice, I will advise you and it will be God [will be] with you and you will be for the people in place of God and you will bring the matters to God. **20** And you will warn them of the statutes and laws and will make known to them the path they will walk in it and the things which they will do. **21** And you will perceive from all the people men of virtue, fearers of God, men of truth, haters of bribes, and

you will put over them princes of thousands, princes of hundreds, princes of fifty, and princes of tens. **22** And they will judge the people all the time and it will be all the big matters they will bring to you but every small matter they themselves will judge and you will lighten from on you and they will carry with you. **23** If this thing you will do and God commands you, then you will be able to stand and even all this people at their place they will come in peace.”

HEBREW WORDS:

“To judge” (ver. 13) was used earlier at 5:21; it is related to the noun “judgments.” “To stand” was used earlier at 3:5; 8:18; 9:10-11, 16, 28. “To inquire” (ver. 15) is used 165 times in the OT, only here in Exodus. “Statutes” (ver. 16) was used earlier at 5:14; 12:24. “Laws” was used earlier at 12:49; 13:9. “To wither” (ver. 18) or “to fade, decay, wear out” is used 20 times in the OT, only here in Exodus. “Heavy” is used earlier at 4:10; 7:14; 8:20. “To listen” (ver. 19) is the same verb translated “to hear” in verse 1. “To advise” is used only here in Exodus, out of 80 uses. “To warn” (ver. 20) is used 20 times in the OT, only here in Exodus. “Path” is used earlier at 3:18; 4:24.

“To perceive” (ver. 21) is used 55 times in the OT; in Exodus here and 24:11. “Virtue” is used 246 times in the OT, earlier at 14:4, 9. The word is used in Proverbs 12:4 relative to the ideal wife. There is the only place where “fearer” [of God] (a noun in Hebrew) is used in Exodus. It was used at Genesis 22:12. It is used 44 times in the OT. “Truth” is used here and 34:6 in Exodus, from 127 uses. “Hater” was used earlier at 1:10. “Bribe” is literally gain, but we have translated here as “bribe” since it denotes dishonesty. It is used 23 times, only here in Exodus. “Prince” was used earlier at 1:11; 2:14. The word is related to “Sarah.” “To lighten” (ver. 22) is used 82 times, only here in Exodus. “To carry” was used earlier at 1:11; 2:14. “To command” (ver. 23) was used earlier at 1:22; 4:28; 5:6. “Peace” was used earlier at 4:18.

HEBREW GRAMMAR:

Moses is emphatic in verse 17: “Not good [is] the thing you are doing.” “To wither you will wither” (ver. 18) translates an emphatic expression in the Hebrew language, the infinitive absolute followed by the same verb in the imperfect tense.

COMMENTARY:

The following day (ver. 13), Jethro was present to see the process of Moses solving Israel’s problems and questions. Moses sat and the people stood, waiting for a decision on their questions, from morning until evening. The wise father-in-law stepped in (ver. 14) and asked Moses, “Why?” Moses was judging “alone.”

Moses told his father-in-law what was happening (ver. 15). The people come to Moses to inquire of God from him. God would share a “word” with Moses (ver. 16) and then Moses would judge the disputes between men and their “friend” so that they would understand the “statutes of God and His laws.” Some scholars suggest that since the “Law” had not been revealed yet (it will be revealed beginning in chapter 20), that this scene is out of chronological sequence. But, that’s not a necessary conclusion. The law itself could simply be the codification of God’s “statutes and laws” which He is revealing to Moses at this time. Additionally, there might have been questions regarding circumcision and observing the Sabbath and observing the Passover, all of which had already been revealed.

Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, stated to Moses that what he was doing was not good (ver. 17). In verse 18, Jethro emphasizes that Moses would certainly wear himself out (“wither”) if he kept doing what he was doing. The matter was “heavy” because of the workload. Moses could not do that work alone. So, Jethro calls on Moses to “listen” to him (ver. 19) and, if God accepts the plan (ver. 23), Moses will be in the place of God when he judges God’s people. Thus Moses will inform Israel of God’s “statutes and laws” (ver. 20) and make known to them the way in which they should walk and what they should do.

In verse 21, Jethro gives Moses some qualities he should look for in men who can help assist him in the leadership of Israel. He should look for men of “virtue.” They should be

“fearers of God.” They should be “men of truth.” Finally, they should “hate bribes.” Moses should then set up an “appellate court system” with judges over groups of ten, then fifty, then 100, then 1,000. If a case could not be resolved in the smaller courts, eventually it would find its way to Moses, who would then serve as the intermediary with Jehovah God Himself (ver. 22). These judges would decide “all the time” and in smaller matters. The “big matters,” they would leave to Moses. In this way, Moses’ burden will be lightened.

The end result of this advice, Jethro says (ver. 23), will be “peace.”

APPLICATION:

Moses’ contemporaries - Moses refers to this event again in Deuteronomy 1:9-18.

Later Jewish writers - In Psalm 82:6, Asaph refers to human judges as “*elohim*,” the Hebrew word for God. This is because judges serve in the place of God and under His watchful eye; compare Exodus 18:19; 7:1.

NT writers - In John 10:34-38, Jesus refers to Psalm 82:6 in which human rulers are called “*elohim*,” the Hebrew word for God. Jesus uses this text to show that if human rulers can be identified as “*elohim*” without committing blasphemy, then He should not be accused of blasphemy when He identifies Himself as the Son of God (see John 10:30) and has been sanctified by the Father and given power to perform miracles. God gives qualifications for men to serve in the church in Acts 6:3. God gives qualifications for men to serve as deacons in His church (1 Tim. 3:8-13) and elders (1 Tim. 3:1-7 & Titus 1:5-9). These are non-negotiable qualifications.

TRANSLATION - 18:24-27:

24 So Moses listened to the voice of his father-in-law and did all which he said. **25** Then Moses chose men of virtue from all Israel and set them as heads over the people: princes of thousands, princes of hundreds, princes of fifty, and princes of ten. **26** And they judged the people in every matter of difficulty they brought to Moses and every small matter they themselves judged. **27** Then Moses sent away his father-in-law and went to his land.

HEBREW WORDS:

“To choose” (ver. 25) was used earlier at 17:9. “Difficulty” (ver. 26) is used 36 times, earlier at 1:14 and 6:9. “To send away” (ver. 27) is related to the word translated similarly in verse 2.

COMMENTARY:

This short paragraph summarizes Moses’ submission to Jethro’s advice (ver. 24). The text reflects Moses’ obedience almost exactly word-for-word to Jethro’s advice (ver. 25-26). Once the pattern was established, Jethro returned to Midian (ver. 27).

APPLICATION:

Moses’ contemporaries - For more on Jethro’s family and their relationship with Moses and Israel, see Numbers 10.

Later Jewish writers - King Jehoshaphat also appointed judges throughout the land of Israel: 2 Chronicles 19:5-8.

NT writers - Jesus calls on Christians to help one another resolve their difficulties, even before they bring their problems to the elders of the church; see 1 Corinthians 6.