



Exodus - Chapter Eighteen

I. Exodus 1:1-18:27 - The Exodus of Israel from Egypt (continues/concludes)

I.e Exodus 15:22-18:27 - The Journey (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Eighteen

While camped at the mountain of God, Moses is joined by his father-in-law Jethro, who had travelled out into the wilderness with Moses' wife Zipporah and their two sons. Moses recounts all that had befallen the Israelites in Egypt and on their journey, and how God had always been there to protect them. Jethro praised God for this and offered a sacrifice.

Jethro then observed Moses' heavy workload as he sat all day arbitrating for the people in their disputes and dealing with their problems. Jethro realised this was an unsustainable burden for one man and he advised Moses to implement a hierarchical structure of leadership, God-fearing men who could take on the role of leading their people and resolving daily issues, leaving Moses only to deal with the most difficult of circumstances. Moses accepted the council of Jethro, who then departed and returned to his own land.

I.e.v Exodus 18:1-27 - Jethro's Advice

After all of Israel's difficulties, this section highlights Jethro's peaceful relationship with Moses (vv.1-6), his response to what the Lord has done (vv.7-12), and his wise counsel to his son-in-law Moses (vv.13-27).

¹ Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moses and for his people Israel, how the Lord had brought Israel out of Egypt.

Exodus 18:1

Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law; refer also to 3:1 and 4:18. Although it would have been possible to refer to him simply as 'Jethro' after v.1, the narrative highlights his relationship to Moses. He is referred to as Jethro, Moses' father-in-law repeatedly in the opening verses and then most often as 'his/Moses' father-in-law'. The greatness of God's work through Moses and for the people of Israel became known to surrounding peoples, especially those with an interest in Moses such as Jethro had. In light of the difficulty of both Egypt and the journey to Rephidim, Jethro's coming to meet Moses displays a relational posture of peace and encouragement, similar to when Aaron met Moses 'at the mountain of God' on his return from Midian; refer to 4:27-31.

Jethro was the priest of Midian, most likely a descendant of one of Abraham's other children through Keturah named Midian, as recorded in Genesis 25:1-2. Because of this connection with Abraham, there is good reason to believe that he was a true priest, and worshipped the true God. Some think that Jethro was the brother-in-law of Moses since the word is equally capable of this rendering, with Reuel being his father (3:1).

² After Moses had sent away his wife Zipporah, his father-in-law Jethro took her back, ³ along with her two sons. The name of one was Gershom (for he said, 'I have been an alien in a foreign land'), ⁴ and the name of the other, Eliezer (for he said, 'The God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh').

Exodus 18:2-4

Moses was here re-united with his wife Zipporah and his two sons Gershom and Eliezer. Zipporah was last mentioned travelling with Moses on the way to Egypt, refer to 4:20-26, and the narrative does not include a description of the situation in which Moses had sent away his wife, probably for her safety during Moses' confrontations with Pharaoh and the subsequent plagues that followed them. The interchange between Jethro and Moses appears to signify a relationship of peace and goodwill.

In contrast to the place names that have marked Israel's grumbling with Moses and testing of the Lord, refer to 15:23 and 17:7, this aside in the narrative mentions the names of Moses' sons. This serves to remind Moses of his time as an alien (2:22) in another land and that Yahweh, the God of his father, was his help, as he was for all Israel: <<*Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the Lord, the shield of your help, and the sword of your triumph! Your enemies shall come fawning to you, and you shall tread on their backs*>> (Deuteronomy 33:29).

God would similarly remind Israel that they had been aliens and how they should treat such people who come to share their land with them: <<*The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God*>> (Leviticus 19:34).

⁵ Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, came into the wilderness where Moses was encamped at the mountain of God, bringing Moses' sons and wife to him. ⁶ He sent word to Moses, 'I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you, with your wife and her two sons.'

Exodus 18:5-6

Since the provision of water from a rock takes place at Horeb (17:6) while Israel is camped at Rephidim (17:1), the reference to Moses being encamped at the mountain of God seems to indicate that the events of this chapter occur at the same place. It is from here that Israel will make the short trip to the base of Mount Sinai (19:2).

I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you. Moses had a special relationship with Jethro. Even though he was raised in all the wisdom and education of Egypt, Moses perhaps learned more about real leadership from the priest and shepherd Jethro whose flocks Moses tended until his call at Sinai.

⁷ Moses went out to meet his father-in-law; he bowed down and kissed him; each asked after the other's welfare, and they went into the tent. ⁸ Then Moses told his father-in-law all that the Lord had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardship that had beset them on the way, and how the Lord had delivered them. ⁹ Jethro rejoiced for all the good that the Lord had done to Israel, in delivering them from the Egyptians. ¹⁰ Jethro said, 'Blessed be the Lord, who has delivered you from the Egyptians and from Pharaoh. ¹¹ Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods, because he delivered the people from the Egyptians, when they dealt arrogantly with them.' ¹² And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt-offering and sacrifices to God; and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses' father-in-law in the presence of God.

Exodus 18:7-12

Moses went out to meet his father-in-law; he bowed down and kissed him. Although he was the leader of a nation, Moses honoured Jethro both as his father-in-law and as a legitimate priest of God. His position of leadership did not make

Moses proud. The whole scene is typical of eastern courtesy. Both men are now great chiefs in their own right and behave accordingly.

All the hardship that had beset them on the way, and how the Lord had delivered them. Moses gave Jethro an honest report, describing both the hardships and the deliverance. After simply hearing about what the Lord had done on Israel's behalf, Jethro's words and actions represent a more faithful response than came from many of those who had experienced the events in Egypt, not to mention Egypt itself, or the defeat of the Amalekites.

When he says Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods, he echoes the purpose that the Lord said the plagues were to have for both Israel (6:7) and Egypt (7:5 and 7:17). When Jethro brings a burnt-offering and sacrifices and eats in the presence of God with Moses, Aaron, and all the elders, he prefigures the pattern of life that the Lord will reveal further at Mount Sinai: <<*But you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes as his habitation to put his name there. You shall go there, bringing there your burnt-offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and your donations, your votive gifts, your freewill-offerings, and the firstlings of your herds and flocks. And you shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your households together, rejoicing in all the undertakings in which the Lord your God has blessed you*>> (Deuteronomy 12:5-7).

Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods. It is possible Jethro knew this before, because he was the priest of Midian. However, when he heard of God's great works over the gods of Egypt, it brought this truth to Jethro more clearly than before. This may not be true monotheism, i.e. the belief that there is only one god, but it certainly leads to monolatry, that is, the worship of one god to the exclusion of others, as a logical sequence.

¹³ The next day Moses sat as judge for the people, while the people stood around him from morning until evening. ¹⁴ When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, 'What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, while all the people stand around you from morning until evening?' ¹⁵ Moses said to his father-in-law, 'Because the people come to me to inquire of God. ¹⁶ When they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make known to them the statutes and instructions of God.' ¹⁷ Moses' father-in-law said to him, 'What you are doing is not good. ¹⁸ You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. ¹⁹ Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you! You should represent the people before God, and you should bring

their cases before God; ²⁰ teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do. ²¹ You should also look for able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain; set such men over them as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. ²² Let them sit as judges for the people at all times; let them bring every important case to you, but decide every minor case themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. ²³ If you do this, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people will go to their home in peace.'

Exodus 18:13-23

Moses sat as judge for the people. Among such a large group there would naturally be many disputes and questions of interpretation to settle. Apparently Moses was virtually the only recognised judge in the nation, and the job of hearing each case occupied Moses from morning until evening. Jethro noted this and asked Moses about it.

Moses sat, while the people stood around him. These are technical terms of Semitic law, denoting 'judge' and 'litigant' respectively. Later, Jesus would sit while the people he taught stood to listen: <<***Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach***>> (Matthew 13:2).

In his advice Jethro upholds Moses' role as the one through whom Israel would know the statutes and instructions of God while also helping him find a faithful and workable way to have others bear the burden of judging the people, thus ensuring the people's well-being.

The people now expected Moses to judge their disputes, which is a complete reversal of their attitude to him when he lived with them in Egypt: <<***The next day he came to some of them as they were quarrelling and tried to reconcile them, saying, "Men, you are brothers; why do you wrong each other?" But the man who was wronging his neighbour pushed Moses aside, saying, "Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?"***>> (Acts 7:26-28). However, ultimately it is not man who judges man: <<***For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our ruler, the Lord is our king; he will save us***>> (Isaiah 33:22).

What you are doing is not good. It was not that Moses was unfit to hear their disputes; it was not that he did not care about their disputes; it was not that the job was beneath him, and it was not that the people did not want Moses to hear their disputes. The problem was simply that the job was too big for Moses to do.

His energies were spent unwisely, and justice was delayed for many in Israel. Moses needed to delegate, even as in Acts 6:2-4 when the apostles insisted they needed to delegate so they would not leave the word of God to serve on tables.

For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Much to Moses' credit, he was teachable; when Jethro said the thing that you do is not good, Moses listened to Jethro. Moses knew how to not bow to the complaints of the children of Israel (17:3), but also knew how to hear godly counsel from a man like Jethro. People called by God to lead are always in danger of attempting to encompass more than they are able. Such people should never have the attitude that only they can do the work and need to build a team of gifted people to assist them.

You should represent the people before God. This was the first essential step in effective delegation for Moses. He had to pray for the people; Moses had to bring their cases before God, as he would continue to do: <<*Moses brought their case before the Lord*>> (Numbers 27:5). Prayer was the essential aspect of Moses' leadership of the people.

Teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do. For Moses to effectively lead and delegate, he had to teach the Word of God not only to those who would hear the disputes, but also those who might dispute. If the people knew God's word for themselves, many disputes could be settled immediately. Also, if the people knew God's word for themselves, they would not be discouraged if they could not bring their case to Moses himself for they would know one of Moses' delegates was able to give them counsel from God's wisdom.

There is a clear analogy between the leadership of Moses for Israel and the leadership of a pastor among God's people. The analogy does not fit at every point, but in many aspects:

- God was recognised as the true leader of the people.
- The leader could not do the work of leadership alone.
- The leader had a special responsibility for prayer and teaching.
- The leader must select, train, and give authority to others to help in the work.
- The people had a definite role in all this: <<*Choose for each of your tribes individuals who are wise, discerning, and reputable to be your leaders*>> (Deuteronomy 1:13).

Look for able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain. This was the next step in effective delegation for Moses. Delegation fails if the job is not put into the hands of able, godly men. Only particular men were fit for this job:

- Men of ability: able men.
- Men of godliness: such as fear God.

- Men of God's word: men of truth.
- Men of honour: hating covetousness.

Above all else, Moses had to ensure that the men he chose would serve God faithfully and administer justice without favour or partiality. Later, Samuel would become an example of a just judge: *<<Here I am; testify against me before the Lord and before his anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Or whose donkey have I taken? Or whom have I defrauded? Whom have I oppressed? Or from whose hand have I taken a bribe to blind my eyes with it? Testify against me and I will restore it to you>>* (1 Samuel 12:3).

In the culture of the day all such community leaders in general would have been men. However, this does not mean that only men can lead in a different culture and time.

Paul gave the same counsel of delegation to Timothy: *<<and what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well>>* (2 Timothy 2:2).

Let them bring every important case to you. For Moses to effectively delegate, he must still have oversight and leadership over those under him. Delegation is the exercise of leadership, not the abandonment of it.

If you do this, and God so commands you. Jethro knew that his advice came from outside the community of Israel, and was perhaps more from a school of management than from existing Holy Scripture. Therefore he was careful to tell Moses that he had to be sure that God commanded this approach, and not Moses. All too often people accept or aspire to leadership roles through their own thought processes and only pay lip service to seeking God's will in such matters.

Then you will be able to endure. This was the first reward for effective delegation. Moses would enjoy life more and be able to do his job better than ever, avoiding the exhaustion of having to settle every dispute.

All these people will go to their home in peace. The second reward was that the people would be effectively served. It is said that justice delayed is justice denied, and disputes in Israel could be both prevented or settled by the parties themselves through the teaching of God's law, or settled by the leaders appointed by Moses. This method also had the advantage of settling problems quickly because people did not need to wait in line for Moses. The longer a controversy lasts, the worse the tangle becomes, the more hot words are spoken, the more bystanders become involved. Jesus said one should agree with one's adversary quickly: *<<Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison>>* (Matthew 5:25).

²⁴ So Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said.
²⁵ Moses chose able men from all Israel and appointed them as heads over the people, as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. ²⁶ And they judged the people at all times; hard cases they brought to Moses, but any minor case they decided themselves. ²⁷ Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went off to his own country.

Exodus 18:24-27

Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said. God taught Moses by someone from the outside, and Moses listened. Moses wisely followed Jethro's counsel, and surely this extended his ministry and made him more effective.

Officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. In Moses' method of administration, some had a higher position than others. Yet God honoured the faithful service of the rulers of tens as much as the service of the rulers of thousands. This was good for Moses. He could focus on the most important things and not be overwhelmed and overstressed by many smaller tasks. This was good for the leaders Moses chose.

And they judged the people at all times. Capable men were given real responsibility and had the opportunity to serve God's people in meaningful ways and further God's work. This was good for the congregation. Prayed for and taught by Moses, they were able to settle more things themselves. When they did need a dispute settled, they received quicker attention and better attention from the delegated leaders than from Moses himself.

This would become a model that would serve Israel well: <<*You shall appoint judges and officials throughout your tribes, in all your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, and they shall render just decisions for the people*>> (Deuteronomy 16:18), <<*Jehoshaphat resided at Jerusalem; then he went out again among the people, from Beer-sheba to the hill country of Ephraim, and brought them back to the Lord, the God of their ancestors. He appointed judges in the land in all the fortified cities of Judah, city by city, and said to the judges, 'Consider what you are doing, for you judge not on behalf of human beings but on the Lord's behalf; he is with you in giving judgement'*>> (2 Chronicles 19:4-6), <<*And you, Ezra, according to the God-given wisdom you possess, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River who know the laws of your God; and you shall teach those who do not know them*>> (Ezra 7:25). **Paul saw the appointment of elders in the church to perform a similar function for the people of God:** <<*And after they had appointed elders for them in each church, with prayer and fasting they entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe*>> (Acts 14:23), and: <<*I left you behind in Crete for this reason, that you should*

put in order what remained to be done, and should appoint elders in every town, as I directed you>> (Titus 1:5).

Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went off to his own country. Jethro's work was done and he returned to his own ministry in Midian. It is not clear if Moses had requested Jethro to stay as he would later do with another member of the family: <<*Moses said to Hobab son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law, 'We are setting out for the place of which the Lord said, "I will give it to you"; come with us, and we will treat you well; for the Lord has promised good to Israel.' But he said to him, 'I will not go, but I will go back to my own land and to my kindred'*>> (Numbers 10:29-30).