

Exodus 18: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 11 March 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Exodus chapter 18 Jethro the priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moses and for Israel, his people, how the Lord had brought Israel out of Egypt.

Now Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, had taken Zipporah, Moses' wife, after he had sent her home along with her two sons. The name of the one was Gershom, for he said, I have been a sojourner in a foreign land, 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.

Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, came with his sons and his wife to Moses in the wilderness, where he was encamped at the mountain of God. And when he sent word to Moses, I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons with her, Moses went out to meet his father-in-law and bowed down and kissed him.

And they asked each other of their welfare and went into the tent. 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 come upon them in the way, and how the Lord had delivered them.

And Jethro rejoiced for all the good that the Lord had done to Israel, in that he had delivered them out of the hand of the Egyptians. Jethro said, Blessed be the Lord who has delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and out of the hand of Pharaoh, and has delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians.

[1 : 35] Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods, because in this affair they dealt arrogantly with the people. 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 before God. The next day Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood around Moses from morning till evening.

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, and all the people stand around you from morning till evening?

And Moses said to his father-in-law, Because the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have a dispute, they come to me, and I decide between one person and another, and I make them know the statutes of God and his laws.

Moses' father-in-law said to him, What you are doing is not good. You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone.

[2 : 41] Now obey my voice, I will give you advice, and God be with you. You shall represent the people before God, and bring their cases to God. And you shall warn them about the statutes and the laws, and make them know the way in which they must walk, and what they must do.

Moreover, look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people, as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens.

And let them judge the people at all times. Every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you.

If you do this, God will direct you. You will be able to endure, and all this people also will go to their place in peace. So Moses listened to the voice of his father-in-law, and did all that he had said.

Moses chose able men out of all Israel, and made them heads over the people, chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. And they judged the people at all times.

[3 : 52] Any hard case they brought to Moses, but any small matter they decided themselves. Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went away to his own country.

In Exodus chapter 18, there's a reordering of the nation of Israel as a structured polity. This occurs after the fight with Amalek, where we saw Aaron, her, and Moses on the mountain with Joshua fighting the battle.

There, the relationship between Aaron, the high priest, her, a chief character in the royal tribe, and Moses, represented something of the structure of the nation as a whole, the way that the different offices within it should support each other.

In this chapter, we see an elaboration of this, a filling out of this fundamental pattern, as there are elders and leaders established for each tribe and each group, the nation being broken down into administrative groups that could be overseen by particular persons.

Some have suggested that this narrative is out of chronological sequence, and I think there's a good argument for this. They're already camped at the mountain of God, and there seems to be a functional altar there, as the way it's described in the chapter.

[5 : 06] In Numbers chapter 10, we read something similar. In the second year, in the second month, on the twentieth day of the month, the cloud lifted from over the tabernacle of the testimony, and the people of Israel set out by stages from the wilderness of Sinai.

That's verse 11 of chapter 10. In verses 29 following, And Moses said to Hobab, the son of Reul, the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law, We are setting out for the place which the Lord said, I will give it to you.

Come with us, and we will do good to you. For the Lord has promised good to Israel. But he said to him, I will not go. I will depart to my own land and to my kindred.

And he said, Please do not leave us, for you know where we should camp in the wilderness, and you will serve as eyes for us. And if you do go with us, whatever good the Lord will do to us, the same will we do to you.

The reordering of the people of Israel is also mentioned in Deuteronomy chapter 1, verses 9 following, At that time I said to you, I am not able to bear you by myself. The Lord your God has multiplied you, and behold, you are today as numerous as the stars of heaven.

[6 : 14] May the Lord, the God of your fathers, make you a thousand times as many as you are, and bless you as he has promised you. How can I bear by myself the weight and burden of you and your strife?

Choose for your tribes wise, understanding, and experienced men, and I will appoint them as your heads. And you answered me, The thing that you have spoken is good for us to do.

So I took the heads of your tribes, wise and experienced men, and set them as heads over you, commanders of thousands, commanders of hundreds, commanders of fifties, commanders of tens, and officers throughout your tribes.

And I charged your judges at that time, hear the cases between your brothers, and judge righteously between a man and his brother, or the alien who is with him. You shall not be partial in judgment.

You shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not be intimidated by anyone. For the judgment is God's. And the case that is too hard for you, you shall bring to me, and I will hear it.

[7 : 14] And I commanded you at that time all the things that you should do. Then we set out from Horeb, and went through all that great and terrifying wilderness that you saw.

Etc. Putting this passage together with the passage from Numbers chapter 10, it suggests that the reordering of Israel occurred at the very end of their time at Sinai.

It was followed by their leaving Horeb. Now, why is it out of sequence? Well, one of the first things that it does is it highlights the contrast between the Midianites and the Amalekites.

Jethro is an example of one of several leading Gentiles who supports and sponsors God's people. Maybe think of a Melchizedek, of Hiram, of Tyre, the Queen of Sheba, of Cyrus, or the wise men in the story of Matthew chapter 2.

In 1 Samuel chapter 15 verse 6, there's some weight given to this theory by the connection between the Kenites, or the Midianites, and the Amalekites.

[8 : 15] Then Saul said to the Kenites, Go, depart, go down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them. For you showed kindness to all the people of Israel when they came up out of Egypt.

So the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites. There we see a contrast between the Amalekites and the Kenites, or the descendants of Midian. The Kenites showed mercy and showed compassion and concern for the people of Israel, whereas the Amalekites are judged and under the ban as a result of their hostility and inhospitality towards the Israelites.

The other thing to ask is, if this is out of chronological order, where else would it go? If it were actually placed in its chronological sequence, it would either be dropped out of the book of Exodus altogether, or would disrupt the climax of the book, which is about the tabernacle.

By putting it at this particular point, it highlights the larger structure of Israel, the way that Israel is being established as a polity at Sinai. It also connects some other themes, and I think we'll see some of these as we go through.

Jethro comes with Moses' wife, who seems to have departed from him. The last we saw Zipporah, she was involved in the circumcision of, presumably, Gershom at the end of chapter 4.

[9 : 34] It seems likely then that she went back to her father when the plagues were going on in Egypt. It was not a pleasant time to be within Egypt, and the wife of Moses, the liberator, would be someone who would be under threat, presumably, by Pharaoh and others.

And so being out of the land, avoiding the impact of the plagues, and having a bit more security with her father would make sense. At this point, she's brought back, and there's no suggestion that there was a divorce or anything like that, as some people have seen within this text.

She's brought back as his wife by his father-in-law. There's no angry words. They're completely at peace, and so it seems very unlikely that we are dealing with a situation of divorce here.

It might also be worth contrasting the character of Jethro with the character of Laban. Laban is a bad father-in-law, whereas Jethro is the good father-in-law. In the story earlier on, Jethro welcomed the man who met his daughter at the well, and then they got married, and the son-in-law served the father by looking after the sheep, and finally left to return back to the land from which he had come. All of this is similar to the pattern of the story of Jacob and his sojourn with Laban. And at this juncture, much as there was in chapter 31, there's a covenant formed between the two, a covenant made with Jethro and the leaders of Israel.

[11 : 00] A covenant was formed with Abimelech in Genesis chapter 26 verse 30, and with Laban in chapter 31 verse 54. After the arrival of Jethro, having this special meal, which presumably creates some sort of covenant arrangement between the two people, and being reunited with his family, Moses faces a problem.

Day by day, he's having to judge the people, and the people are coming to him with all their problems, looking for him to adjudicate in their situations. They come to him to inquire of God. Moses has to make known to them the laws and the teachings of God. Now this sets things up for the event of Sinai. It begins with Moses judging the people alone, and it's a movement towards the nation being judged by wise judges, by a law that has been revealed to them by God.

The burden of judgment will be spread out throughout the people, and also the gift of judgment. It will no longer be for Moses alone, as a prophetic revealer of God's law, to be the one who judges. No, the work of judgment will be spread among the elders and the rulers, and the various chiefs of the people. It will be something that can be borne more generally. It's not good for Moses to be alone.

[12 : 15] Notice some of the subtle creation themes that have been playing throughout the story of the Exodus to this point. In the whole account of the plagues, there's themes of decreation, but then, following the plagues and the release from Egypt, there are themes of new creation, evening followed by morning, division and provision of water, the light, all these sorts of things.

And here, we may think back to the story of Genesis chapter 2. It's not good for Moses to be alone. And that same sort of language occurs here, in Jethro's mouth, as was found back in Genesis chapter 2, as God declared concerning Adam, that it was not good for him to be alone.

And just as Adam had a woman brought to him to be his helper, to assist him in his task, so Moses has people from Israel brought to him to assist him in his task.

There are ways in which this account might make us think back to the earlier encounter with Jethro in chapter 2. There Moses fled from Egypt and Pharaoh and sat down by a well.

He encountered the daughters of the priest of Midian and delivered them from the shepherds. And they went home and told their father that they had been delivered by an Egyptian and that he drew water for them and that he watered the flock.

[13 : 34] And once again, we're seeing something very similar here. As Moses recounts to Jethro, how God has saved them from the hand of Pharaoh, how God has defeated the shepherds that were troubling the people and how God has brought, as it were, this bride out and delivered her, provided water for her in the wilderness.

After that event, Jethro gave Moses his daughter Zipporah and here maybe we're having something similar that's being set up. There was a marriage back then and there's a marriage coming up, a marriage between God and his people, a marriage where God will take his people for himself. And this will change the relationship between Moses and the people too. To this point, Moses has been related to God. Moses has been as God to Aaron and representing God to the people. When the people want to relate to God, they have to go to Moses and Moses has to inquire of God for them. But God is going to take Israel as his bride at Sinai. It's going to be a new form of relationship and that new form of relationship is maybe hinted at by the presence of Jethro at this point.

The establishment of judges among the people and the giving of the law will establish a new intimacy between God and his people. They will no longer just have to go to Moses and learn from him.

[14 : 55] Each one of them, as they receive the law and learn from the law, will be able to know God for themselves in a new way. This is moving us towards the event of Sinai and all that that represents.

A question to consider. There is a prudential ordering of the people here. An ordering of the people according to the wisdom of a foreigner. Nevertheless, this wisdom and this reordering of the people is placed within the context of the story of God's deliverance of the people and his establishment of them as a new polity.

What are some of the lessons that this might have for us in the ordering of Christian societies in the present day, where we're trying to bring together divine instruction and establishment and also the wisdom that we can find in the world?