

EXODUS

THE GOD WHO RESCUES

SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 18:1-12

To understand more about Moses' family dynamics.

Read the Text:

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. 2 Now Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, had taken Zipporah, Moses' wife, after he had sent her home, 3 along with her two sons. The name of the one was Gershom (for he said, "I have been a sojourner 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"). 5 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. 6 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," 7 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. 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 come upon them in the way, and how the LORD had delivered them. 9 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. 10 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. 11 Now I know that the LORD is greater than all gods, because in this affair they dealt arrogantly with the people." 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 before God. (Exodus 18:1-12, ESV)

Study the Text:

Family Dynamics

Chapter 18 takes a brief pause in the Exodus narrative at large and focuses in on some of the important family dynamics of the prophet Moses. We learn more about his father-in-law, the names of his sons, and how Moses cared for his wife and children throughout the events of the Exodus. Below is a breakdown of some of the key words and concepts in this passage with special attention to the members of Moses' family.

THE PRIEST OF MIDIAN

Exodus 18 begins by re-introducing "the priest of Midian," a character that first made an appearance in chapter 2. If you recall, it is this priest who eventually became the father-in-law to Moses. Moses married one of the priest's daughters, a woman named Zipporah (Ex. 2:21), and together they had a son named Gershom (Ex. 2:22). However, chapter 18 complicates our understanding of Moses' father-in-law due to a naming discrepancy. In Exodus 2:18, he's referred to as "Reuel," and yet in Exodus 3:1 and here in Exodus 18:1, his given name is "Jethro." Why the change in names? There have been two compelling explanations. One explanation suggests that Reuel and Jethro are not the same person. In this argument, Reuel is actually the grandfather of Zipporah, and the father of Jethro. Being the head of the house, it would not be out of line to refer to him as Moses' father-in-law. Though he is actually the grandfather, he would have operated functionally as the father-in-law since he was head of everyone in the home. By the time Exodus 3 occurs, some years had passed along with Reuel, leaving Jethro now in charge of the home. This would also mean that Jethro had a brother named Hobab, mentioned in Numbers 10, who was also then the son of Reuel, and could have also taken over as head of the household after the death of Jethro. This argument has warrant.

The better explanation (in my opinion) is that Reuel and Jethro are the same person, and that Reuel is likely his actual name while Jethro is an honorific name given to him in his role as “priest of Midian.” Honorific names as titles were common in the Old Testament, and thus it makes good sense that he was known by both, but likely more by Jethro given his priestly role. But how did Jethro even learn of Moses’ success in Egypt? It seems as if there was some kind of network of travelers who would have carried news concerning things happening in the region. Travelers to and from Egypt would certainly have been aware of the happenings there. Moreover, we know there must have been some kind of route close to where Jethro (and Zipporah and her sisters) lived before meeting Moses. Old Testament scholar Douglas Stuart notes: “Zipporah and her sisters readily recognized Moses as an Egyptian when they first encountered him at a well (Ex. 3:19). This would hardly have been possible had they not been used to seeing Egyptians and hearing news about Egypt from time to time. Thus through the oral news network of the ancient world, Jethro eventually had ‘heard everything God had done for Moses and for his people Israel, and how the LORD had brought Israel out of Egypt’” (Ex. 18:1).¹

GONE THIS WHOLE TIME

One puzzling detail is how Zipporah and Moses’ children are with Jethro when he arrives. The text never mentions their departure. She has, however, noticeably been missing from the narrative since chapter 4. A couple of suggestions have been made. One is that Moses divorced Zipporah. While that may seem like a pretty extreme conclusion to come to, there is some evidence that supports this argument. The terminology, for example, in verse 2 (“after he had sent her home”) is sometimes used to convey divorce. That Jethro comes with her and the children also could be seen as the head of his household seeking to reconcile the marriage. Proponents of this argument also point out that while Moses greets and embraces Jethro by “bowing down and kissing him” but never actually interacts with Zipporah (Ex. 18:7). However, this is not convincing. While the terminology sometimes can refer to divorce, it often doesn’t, but instead means simply to just send someone home. Jethro’s presence with Zipporah and the children does not necessarily convey an attempt at reconciliation. If Moses sent Zipporah and the children home prior to the showdown with Pharaoh in Egypt (an action that makes sense in its own right given the danger that it would entail), Jethro would be their protector as they traveled from Midian to Sinai, where Moses and the Israelites were currently residing. Jethro is also referred to as “Moses’ father-in-law” three times in this passage, a title that would be strange if in fact he no longer were married to Zipporah. Moreover, Zipporah is called “Moses’ wife.” Though the children are referred to as “her son,” their names indicate that Moses was the one who named them, since they reflect his experiences with the LORD throughout his journey. And that Moses only interacts with Jethro simply highlights that this particular “scene” in the narrative is focused on Jethro, not Zipporah. It does not mean that Moses didn’t greet them or embrace them, but simply that these actions weren’t highlighted so as to spotlight Jethro in this passage. There is no explicit evidence of any kind that Moses divorced Zipporah, and given the stature of Moses and the importance he played in the Old Testament, it would be almost inconceivable for this detail to not be mentioned anywhere.

A SUBTLE MESSAGE

The placement of the Jethro narrative is also important, given that it immediately follows the war with the Amalekites. The Midianites are descendants of Midian, the fourth son of Abraham and his concubine Keturah (1 Chr. 1:32). Old Testament scholar Duane Garrett points out: “In the Old Testament, there is some mixture of the usage of the terms Amalekite, Midianite, Moabite, and Ishmaelite, or else a mixture of the peoples

¹ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, eds. E. Ray Clendenen and Kenneth A. Mathews, vol. 2 of The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 404.

themselves.”² In Judges 6, Gideon fought against “the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East” (Jdg. 6:3). The Midianites also fight against the Israelites in Numbers 22 and Numbers 31, alongside the Moabites. The Midianites are overwhelmingly cast in a negative light throughout the Old Testament. They are more often at odds with Israel than at peace. And yet, Moses’ sons are half-Midianite, born through a Midianite woman in Zipporah, and grandchildren to the Midianite priest, Jethro! This portion of the story is a great reminder to the future generations of Israelites who read the Torah that the Midianites are not all bad people, but are in fact, a part of their own story. Garrett continues: “In later narratives, we see the positive side of the Israelite-Midianite relationship in the treatment given to Hobab the Midianite, who serves as a guide for Israel (Num. 10:29-31). Heber the Kenite is a descendant of Hobab (Jdg. 4:11), and his household figures prominently in the narrative about the war with Sisera (Jdg. 4-5). In Judges 1:16, Moses’s father-in-law is designated “the Kenite.” Saul shows kindness to some Kenites during his war with the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:6) on account of the kindness done to Israel during the exodus.”³ It’s a beautiful reminder of the complexity of the human experience. Even our sworn enemies are sometimes also family.

What About Now?

One of the chief takeaways is the importance of understanding that we often have more in common with our enemies that we realize. The Midianites are cast as enemies of Israel throughout the Old Testament, and yet the Midianites and Israelites converge into the family of Moses, the greatest prophet to ever live in the Old Testament (Deut. 34:10-12). Before we make judgments against people because of the family, social group, or people group they come from, we would do well to remember three things. First, “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Whatever imperfection we find in other people, we must also acknowledge in ourselves. Second, every human being is created in the image of God and therefore fully deserving of dignity and respect (Gen. 1:27). Third, whatever dividing walls of hostility exist between people, Christ knocks them down (Eph. 2:14). There is no conflict between people that cannot be brought to peace through the blood of Jesus Christ.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Exodus 18:1. Who is Jethro? What did he hear about?

2. Read Exodus 18:2-4. Who did Jethro take with him to go to Moses? What were her sons names? What did they mean?

Day Two

1. Read Exodus 18:5. Where did Jethro bring Moses’ wife and sons? Where was Moses encamped?

² Duane A. Garrett, *A Commentary on Exodus*, Kregel Exegetical Library (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2014), 443.

³ Garrett, *A Commentary on Exodus*, 444.

2. Read Exodus 18:6-7. How does Jethro identify himself in his message to Moses? How does Moses greet him? What do they each ask of each other?
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Day Three

1. Read Exodus 18:8. What did Moses tell Jethro?
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2. Read Exodus 18:9. How did Jethro respond to Moses' news of the exodus from Egypt?
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Day Four

1. Read Exodus 18:10. What does Jethro say?
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2. Read Exodus 18:11-12. Why is it significant for the priest of Midian to say what he says in verse 11? What does Jethro do in light of Moses' news? Who joined them to eat?
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Discuss the Text!

Week 43 Discussion: The Testimony of God's Work

Moses' testimony of God's work leads the priest of Midian to declare, "Now I know that the LORD is greater than all gods" (Ex. 18:11). Testimonies can play a powerful role in leading people to acknowledge the one, true God. Talk as a group about your own testimony and what fruit has come from sharing it with other people.

1. Icebreaker: Have you ever shared your testimony before?
2. Has anyone ever come to eventually believe the Gospel because of your testimony?
3. Has anyone's testimony ever had a profound impact on you? Share how, if so.
4. How do testimonies change through the years?
5. If you're willing, briefly share your testimony with your group.
6. Why are testimonies so powerful?

Takeaways:

1. Jethro comes to Moses at Sinai with Moses' wife Zipporah and their children after hearing of Egypt's defeat.
2. Jethro rejoices at the news of the LORD's work, and makes a burnt offering and sacrifice to God.
3. Jethro, Moses, Zipporah, Aaron, and the elders of Israel share a meal together.