

Jethro Pays a Visit (Ex. 18)

The passage.—Jethro has heard “how the Lord had brought Israel out of Egypt.” Jethro has evidently been keeping Zipporah, Moses’ wife, and their two sons, Gershom and Eliezer. Thus we have a kind of family reunion.

Special points.—Whether Jethro was a “believer” at this point is not quite clear. But in this review of the mighty acts of God it is reported he was “astonished.” So if Jethro did not know God before this, he has now learned something decisively new about Yahweh, Moses’ God and leader. Through this account of the insolence of Pharaoh and the marvelous deliverance of the Israelites Jethro seems convinced of the power of this their God.

The people who so recently have been disorganized slaves need organization and administration. They will need laws and regulations. But first they will need leaders who can give guidance and administer justice. And real leadership always begins with the delegation and distribution of responsibility.

Truth for today.—Moses, caught up in the monumental task of emancipating his people, has been doing too much and delegating too little. An outsider can sometimes see this better. Jethro did, and tactfully suggested an organizational change to make for effective management and administering of justice. The father-in-law was concerned both for Moses’ health and the dignity of his leadership under the burdens. Out of this modest family setting and concern was born the political organization of a new nation, God’s Israel.¹

JETHRO’S ADVICE TO MOSES, AND ITS ADOPTION. The office of ruler in ancient times, whether exercised by a king, a prince, or a mere chieftain, was always understood to include within it the office of judge. In the Greek ideal of the origin of kingly government (Herod. i. 96), the able discharge of judicial functions marks the individual out for sovereignty. The successors of Moses, like the chief rulers of Carthage, bore the title of “Judges” (*shophetim, suffetes*). Moses, it appears, had from the time when he was accepted as leader by the people (ch. 4:29–31), regarded himself as bound to hear and decide all the causes and complaints which arose among the entire Israelite people. He had not delegated his authority to any one. This can scarcely have been because the idea had not occurred to him, for the Egyptian kings ordinarily decided causes by judges nominated *ad hoc*. Perhaps he had distrusted the ability of his countrymen—so recently slaves—to discharge such delicate functions. At any rate, he had reserved the duty wholly to himself (ver. 18). This course appeared to Jethro unwise. No man could, he thought, in the case of so great a nation, singly discharge such an office with satisfaction to himself and others. Moses would “wear himself away” with the fatigue; and he would exhaust the patience of the people through inability to keep pace with the number of cases that necessarily arose. Jethro therefore recommended the appointment of subordinate judges, and the reservation by Moses of nothing but the right to decide such cases as these judges should, on account of their difficulty, refer to him (ver. 22) On reflection, Moses accepted this course as the best open to him under the circumstances, and established a multiplicity of judges,²

¹ Langley, R. (1972). Exodus. In F. H. Paschall & H. H. Hobbs (Eds.), *The teacher's Bible commentary* (F. H. Paschall & H. H. Hobbs, Ed.) (65–66). Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers.

² *Exodus Vol. II*. 1909 (H. D. M. Spence-Jones, Ed.). The Pulpit Commentary (91). London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company.