

Bible Study # 30 Exodus 18.1–12 03–13–2021

This chapter relates something that happened after the giving of the law at Sinai. However, it is inserted here because it ties in with the theme of the previous chapters. Such linking by subject matter rather than chronology occurs elsewhere in the Old Testament. The story about Jethro must follow 19:1 chronologically, as at the end of chapter 17 Israel had not yet reached Mount Sinai.

Moreover, the account dealing with a Gentile both complements Israel's praise of the Lord (15:1-21) and contrasts with the unbelief of Israel demonstrated in the incidents recorded in 15:22–17:7. It also contrasts sharply with the attempt of other pagan Gentiles (the Amalekites) to destroy Israel by force (17:8-16).

Clues are given early in the Old Testament that Gentiles – non-Jews – were going to be incorporated within God's people. Examples are the provision for foreign slaves to be circumcised (Gen. 17:12-14), and the place of Moses' second wife, a Cushite, in the family of Israel (Num. 12:1). Later, other examples are provided of Gentiles like Rahab, Ruth, and Naaman who showed believing faith in Israel's God.

Here, then, is a significant account of Jethro that demonstrates that non-Jews could profess that the Lord was truly the savior God (18:10-12). Placing the chapter here forms a fitting hinge between the preceding narrative (the unbelief of Israel and the Amalekite antagonism) and the following chapter that asserts the saving activity of Israel's God (see especially 19:3-6 and 20:2).

News of God's intervention on behalf of both Moses and the people of Israel reached Jethro, his father-in-law, in Midian. He was fully acquainted with what had transpired since Moses had returned from there to Egypt, and what 'God had done for Moses and his people Israel'. He also knew that the exodus was indeed a demonstration of God's power, for freedom from Egypt's yoke was not achieved by Moses but by the Lord.

The time when Moses sent his wife Zipporah back to Midian is not stated. She was last mentioned at 4:24-26. While the Hebrew verb 'sent' can later have the meaning of 'divorce', there is no need to import that meaning here. All that the text says is that at an unspecified time Zipporah and her two sons returned to Midian, where Jethro received them.

Gershom's name was already given in 2:21-22, while the second son was given a significant name relating to salvation, Eliezer ('my God is helper'). Moses related it to the fact that his father's God had been his deliverer from the sword of Pharaoh. Name-giving is linked to a specific period of his life. Whereas 'Gershom' is a reminder of alienation in foreign territory, 'Eliezer' refers to the salvation from Pharaoh and his troops.

Moses and the children of Israel were encamped at the mountain of God. Accompanied by Zipporah and her two sons, Jethro came to Moses in the desert, though first probably sending him notice that they were coming. The MT simply has, 'and he [Jethro] said'. The NIV expands this to, 'and Jethro had sent word to him', which, while not a literal translation, may be a legitimate inference.

When Moses and Jethro meet again, Moses showed due deference to his father-in-law, bowing down and kissing him. The NIV paraphrases the words in the MT regarding greeting another. The Hebrew idiom for asking someone how they are is, 'Is it peace (shâlôm) with you?' Literally the Hebrew text reads, 'And they asked each other concerning peace', that is, they went through the normal ritual of greeting.

In the tent Moses related three things to Jethro: first, what the Lord had done to Pharaoh and his people on account of Israel; secondly, the hardships they had experienced on the way, doubtless including the problem caused by the people's unbelief; and, thirdly, the Lord's saving activity. Redemption from Egypt was by the sovereign power of the Lord, and hereafter this became the model for God's salvation on later occasions.

Moses' account brought joy to Jethro as he heard of God's intervention on Israel's behalf, delivering them from the power of the Egyptians. Again, as in verse 4, the same Hebrew verb is used. Probably the reference to 'all the good things' God had done requires emphasis, as the term 'the good' (hattôvâh) was part of the covenantal language of Israel denoting the blessings bestowed by God. In rescuing Israel from slavery God had fulfilled covenantal promises made long before (Gen. 15:13-15; Exod. 2:23-25).

Verses 10–11 consist of a doxology that Jethro proclaimed. It is a declaration in honor of Israel's God (yhwh) who rescued both Moses and the people from Pharaoh and the Egyptians. 'Praise be to the Lord' (bârûch yhwh) is a standardized form of adoration expressed to God, though often in the Old Testament, especially in the book of Psalms, there is added 'Israel's God', ('elohê yisrâêl; see, for example, Pss. 41:13; 72:18; 106:48).

Jethro went on to state his conviction concerning the superiority of the Lord over all other gods, for he had seen how the Lord had punished those who had treated his people in such a contemptuous and arrogant fashion.

Clearly there was deepening faith on Jethro's part and he had come to the point of confessing the exclusive claims of Israel's God. At some point, undesignated in the text, Jethro became a true follower of Israel's God. The fact that his descendants went up with the people of Judah to live near Arad confirms his commitment (Judg. 1:16).

The priest of Midian then proceeded to bring sacrificial offerings, 'burnt offerings and other sacrifices'. While the text does not explicitly say who actually performed the sacrificial ritual, if it was Jethro then this would be an indication that he had come to real faith in Israel's God, confirming the impression given in verses 10-11. \

The terms used of the sacrifices are well known from elsewhere in the Old Testament. Burnt offerings denoted bringing an offering that was totally consumed on the altar. They were often offered on occasions of joy, usually accompanying another sacrifice. 'Other sacrifices' was a term often used in connection with peace offerings, but sometimes a distinction is drawn between them (Num. 15:8; Josh. 22:27).

What followed was a meal, shared by Jethro with Aaron and the elders of Israel whom he brought with him. While there is no mention of a covenant, yet the account is very similar to what is related in Genesis 26:31 and 31:54, and it may be that there was a formal agreement between Jethro and the Israelites. Likewise, Exodus 24:11 records how the elders of Israel 'ate and drank' with God on the mount, illustrating a regular practice associated with making treaties.

We will continue our study with 18:13–27.