

Bible Study # 31 Exodus 18.13–27 03–15–2021

Moses' tried to do it all himself. That is always a dangerous way for a leader to function. There is no recognition that he was formally appointed to the position of judge, as depicted in this section. It may be that the people were acknowledging that his Egyptian training qualified him to act in this way, as well as the fact that he had dynamic leadership gifts.

Jethro, having confessed his faith in the Lord, was prepared to offer good advice to his son-in-law, which was taken up and acted upon by him. On the next day, Moses took what appears to be have been his usual seat and engaged in judging. All day long, from morning till evening, the people were gathered around him.

Jethro was watching and questioned him about the process: 'What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all the people stand around you from morning till evening?' His concern, spelt out more fully a few verses later (see vv. 18-23), revolved around the fact that Moses was single-handedly exercising the judicial role among the people.

Moses' response was not a defense of his actions, but simply a statement of the practice in the patriarchal period of revelation. When people were in a disputing with one another, they needed to seek God's will. The normal ways of doing this was by going to a place of worship (Gen. 25:22; Num. 27:21) or to a prophet (1 Sam. 9:9; 1 Kings 22:8).

Moses was fulfilling the latter role, determining cases and also giving instruction in 'God's laws and decrees'. This statement is important, for it shows that even before the giving of the law on Sinai, God's decrees were being brought into some coherent document (see the reference in 15:25-26), and from it Moses was able to teach the people. Judgment in disputes was not given arbitrarily, but on the basis of revelation.

Jethro's summary (v. 17) of the situation was in few words: 'What you are doing is not good'. He could see the weaknesses in the situation, and the following verses record the various reasons that lay behind this statement.

The first reason that Jethro gave was the task that Moses had taken on himself was too heavy a burden for him as well as for those who came to him. This may be saying that the people were wearied by their long wait for a hearing, so that judge and people were finding the current situation overly tiresome.

Jethro's proposal was recognition of Moses' role as representative of the people before God, and also of him as their instructor in relation to God's statutes and laws. His position was unique in Israel, for no one else had the relationship he had with God, who spoke to him face to face (Num. 12:7-8).

In regard to this whole matter, Jethro expressed the desire that God would overrule so that his will would be done ('may God be with you'). An unusual word for 'teach' or 'instruct' is used in verse 20. It occurs twenty-one times in the Old Testament, of which fifteen are in the book of Ezekiel in passages speaking of Ezekiel's role as a watchman.

His task was to warn the people, pointing out to them the danger they were in. A comparison with 2 Chronicles 19:10, where the word is used of the task of the newly appointed judges to warn the people lest they incur God's wrath, suggests that a similar meaning is quite appropriate here (esv, 'you shall warn them about the statutes and the laws').

'Statutes' is a regular term for specific instructions and at times equivalent to 'covenant' (cf. Pss. 25:10; 132:12), while 'laws' covers a broader sweep of God's revelation. The aim was to reinforce instructions on how to live ('the way in which they should go') and the duties they had to perform ('the work they should do').

The qualifications of those to be judges stressed the fact that they had to be morally upright in order to fulfil this role. They had to have innate ability (lit. 'men of worth'), be living reverently before God, be trustworthy, and not attempt to achieve dishonest gain by taking bribes.

The concept of reverent living ('fearing God') becomes an important idea later in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms and the book of Proverbs (see, Pss. 34:9; 111:10; 112:1; Prov. 8:13). These selected men were to be placed over a graduated series – over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens.

Their role was to serve as perpetual judges, but only dealing with less important cases, for anything more serious was still to be dealt with by Moses himself. If according to God's will all this came to pass, then the people would be satisfied that justice had been executed fairly. They would go to their homes satisfied (lit. 'in peace').

No mention is made of the number of these judicial officials, but the same type of divisions in the nation operated after the entry into Canaan (Josh. 7:16-18).

Moses' wisdom and humility showed (vs. 24–25) in his acceptance of the advice that his father-in-law gave him, implicitly carrying out his plan to ease his burden while still providing efficient legal administration. The only difference in the distinction between the cases is that in verse 22 they are called 'the big matter' and 'the small matter', while in verse 25 they are described as 'the hard matter' and 'the small matter'.

The chapter ends with a note that balances the opening of the chapter. There Jethro arrives with his family to meet Moses at the mountain of God (v. 5). Now his departure is noted (v. 27) as he returns to his own land.

We continue tomorrow with Exodus 19:1–25.