

The Book of Exodus



12. Meet the In-Laws! Exodus 18

If you're married or have been married then you've all met them – the in-laws. Some people have very good relationships with mother-in-law or father-in-law, but sometimes the relationship can be fraught because of clashes of culture and clashes of loyalty.

Moses seems to have had a pretty good relationship with Jethro/Reuel his father in law. "Jethro" is a title, not a name. It is best translated as "his honour or his majesty. Reuel is the proper name of Moses' father-in-law (see Exodus 2:18). Reuel was the "priest of Midian." It is hard to determine what this means. He was apparently a local "holy man" who worshipped a variety of local gods including YHWH, but not exclusively. News had reached him of Moses' success in bringing Israel out of Egypt. (after C H Jensen) In fact it looks as though Zipporah and the boys had gone back to Midian whilst Moses was having his showdown in Egypt and now, a few months on, his family are reunited. (Ex 4:20 tells us that Moses took his family to Egypt originally).

The names of his sons are interesting. Gershom means stranger or cast out and we read in an earlier chapter that this reflected how Moses had cast himself out of Egypt and was a stranger in Midian. Eliezar was his other son. That name meant God is my help. He must have been born in and around the time Moses was going to Egypt. What a change, from an outcast stranger to one who found all his help in God. That's what God did to him and that what God has done to us in Christ – changed us from strangers and outcasts, helped us and made us His friends!

Commentators are divided on just who Jethro was a priest of. His statement in v11 that Yahweh was the greatest of all the gods suggested that he was a man who hedged his bets with deities but ended up building an altar and worshipping Yahweh.

Jethro is a good example of "two-timing religion" - common then, common today and common in our society. People hedge their bets by giving respect to more than one kind of deity. This is common in countries with multiple religions and some are more formalised such as Baha'i and Spiritualism. A lot of New Age stuff follows this pattern. And still common for Christians as well – materialism and Christ. Also roots of witchcraft run deep even in church that reflects past syncretism e.g. Easter is names after the Saxon goddess of fertility Oestra.

Moses obviously had a good relationship with his father in law and we see Jethro offering Moses some advice in the second part of the chapter. Just a minute – Jethro at least had some dodgy views – should he be taking advice from him, when Moses clearly had a better understanding of who Yahweh was? What could he possibly have learned from a man whose theology was at least questionable?

But actually, just because someone doesn't have the same faith as us doesn't mean that they have no wisdom or common sense. Jethro's advice was simple, practical and obvious. He's years of experience running his tribe and family. He knew how to organise people it would seem. And just because it was not directly from Yahweh mouth, didn't mean that the Holy Spirit couldn't teach Moses something through it.

The advice Moses took for a system of eldership and the spreading of the load was one of the first pieces of social organisation that preceded the Law and was not altered after it was given. It became part of the social fabric of Israel. . God can still honour things that have worldly origins – can even be part of His will. Spiritually mature and responsible people should be selected to assist in the administration of the people of God. In other words, it was a godly solution from an unusual source.

Some people have used it to say that the consequences down the line of taking worldly advice was ultimately bad because it led to the Sanhedrin in Jesus' day which was dodgy. Actually though, there were many things that were given in the law that were misused badly too in later years. It's not how we've got what God has given us, but how we use it. The Bible is good but for 2000 years Christians have used it to promote all sorts of heresy!!

What do we learn from this story we can apply to ourselves now?

- God can use anyone or anything in His purposes and there are many stories of how God used the deeds and misdeeds of some really quite marginal people to serve His purposes – Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, Caiaphas. We need to look at things on their merits and see if we can discern the mind of God in it. Moses was too busy doing the work of God to discern that and Jethro as the outsider coming in could see the whole thing in context and the solution was simple and practical rather than being deeply spiritual. Sometimes the obvious answers are the obvious answers rather than being deeply profound and discerned after many hours of prayer and fasting!
- Be prepared to listen to advice, particularly when it is given with good spirit. "A wise person listens to advice and gets wiser." Proverbs 1:5 "The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise person listens to advice." Proverbs 12:15. Moses knew Jethro and knew instinctively that the advice was right. In the end it was Moses' job to discern if the advice was right and choose the spiritual people to lead, not Jethro.
- Sometimes it just takes the careful, loving observation of an outsider to help us to see what is up too close for us to see for ourselves. Sometimes that outside voice can spot the problem. Then the issue becomes, will we listen to the solution or become defensive. It is so easy to be defensive and to take offence at a word of constructive criticism, even when it is offered from someone who loves us and who wants the best for us, even when it is couched in the most diplomatic of terms. It is a measure of Moses' character that he is able to listen to what Jethro suggests without becoming defensive and come to his own conclusion that Jethro is right; there is a better way.

This passage also shows us the importance of delegation. Imagine Jethro's response as he saw the expanse of people when he arrived with Moses' family - as far as his eye could see – PEOPLE EVERYWHERE! Jethro had to think of his son-in-law – how do you handle all of these people!

Moses, what are you thinking? are you nuts? you can't take care of all of these people by yourself! Jethro's advice was simple and practical and an obvious use of the gifts and skills in a shared system of government. It was also hierarchical as well, with different levels of leadership and responsibility. The principles have been followed through in scripture over the years. Leadership was collective with God as king up until Saul and after the exile, Jews never had a king in control but collective leadership was characteristic of Jewish towns and the synagogue. Arguably, politicians would put it as an important root of democracy although that's more tenuous.

Shared leadership and responsibility is a characteristic of church because it recognises the headship of Christ with leadership being delegated downwards. There was delegation of responsibility in Israel and that has actually passed to the church. Christianity is not a "lone star" faith. I've come across a lot of lone stars in my time – people who never ask for help – and burn out. People who don't trust people because they might fail. Yes they will fail and you do have to pick up the pieces. But they'll never learn to do something properly unless they do it and fail sometimes – that's the nature of mentoring people and that's part of what delegation is about. But delegation must also be realistic – with the right people in the right job. Matter also not just of delegation, but allowing oneself being delegated to – Community Day. I know of lots of Christians who never achieve their potential because they can't work in an environment where they have to delegate, be delegated to or share responsibility with others. That's the nature of church, that's the nature of society. Church works when load is spread not on the basis of lone stars.

What do we conclude? Firstly avoid a two-timing faith and look to avoid ways by which we stumble into it inadvertently.

Secondly – no room for lone stars in the Church – we are a body with Christ as the only head. Leaders – delegate but those who are not leaders – be ready to be delegated to.

Thirdly – be prepared to listen to the advice given by others, even if you think that you are older and wiser. You may be in many respects, but each of us is not the sole repository of all wisdom (only God is!). Human wisdom comes from shared experience and we must learn from others and not act like teenagers! Let me finish with a quote from A.W. Tozer – *“A state of heart that rejected rebuke was characteristic of Israel at various periods in her history, and these periods were invariably followed by disaster. Churches and individual Christians often fall into this same error that destroyed Israel with the same sad result. Keep your heart open to the correction of the Lord and be willing to receive it, regardless who holds the whip. The great saints all learned how to take a licking gracefully - - and that may be one reason (why) they became great saints.”*

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