

Acknowledging One's Dependence: the Jethro story of Exodus 18

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The two narratives in Exodus 18, in which Jethro joins the Israelites in a sacrifice (vv. 1—12) and counsels Moses on how to organize the Israelites (vv. 13—27), appear to some highly esteemed commentators to have 'no substantive relation to each other' (Noth, 1972:136) except for the prominent role played in both by Moses' Midianite father-in-law. I hope to show, however, that the two episodes go well together. I hope too that the reader will agree that, as so often is the case with OT material, Ex 18 has light to shed, if only obliquely, on an issue that preoccupies us still; in this case, that of authority.

The two accounts are doubtless very ancient; are, indeed, in substance probably historical, for the nation would scarcely without historical warrant have credited a foreigner with the important role given to Jethro in Ex 18 (Welch, 1932:192). It looks, however, as though a redactor has made a conscious choice to insert the story at a different point from that at which it was found in the tradition as it came down to him.

The picture of Moses declaring God's 'statutes and laws' (18.16) and using them to resolve judicial disputes implies that the Sinai-revelation has already taken place (cf. Dt 1.9—18), and indeed at 18.5 the location for the episode is specifically stated to be 'the mountain of God'; yet the redactor has elected to tell the story *before* the arrival at Sinai (19.2). We can just about make sense of the resultant itinerary, if we suppose that the events of Ex 18 are to be thought of as happening at the foot of Sinai-Horeb, and that 19.1—2 speaks of a one-day trek ('in the third month, on this day', 19.1, an odd phrase, will mean—so Ibn Ezra—on the same day as 18.13—27 speaks of) round to the *East* of the mountain (some ancient Jewish commentators took 19.2 to mean this). But one cannot avoid the impression that the tradition originally had a simpler itinerary. What then, has led the redactor to date the Jethro-story before the Sinai-revelation?

I have drawn attention elsewhere (Robinson, 1985: 16—17) to striking similarities between the three narratives that go to make up Ex 17—18: (1) 17.1—7: Massah and Meribah; (2) 17.8—16: Amelek; (3) 18. 1—27: Jethro. Linked together by numerous key-words, the episodes seem to share, I have argued, the theme of the inadequacy of Moses. In each story he takes (17.5) or chooses (17.9; 18.21) helpers. He is unable to provide

water (17.4), unable too to keep his hands aloft unaided (17.12), for they are too *heavy*, just as the task of judging the people is too *heavy* (18.18) unless he appoints, as Jethro recommends, assistants to share the burden with him. The intention of the redactor in placing these narratives before the Sinai-revelation was, I contended, to stress, immediately before Moses steps into the full glare of the limelight, that there is no human hero in the story of Israel: it is not Moses' story but YHWH's, and, important as Moses was, he had to acknowledge the need for a degree of what we might call collegiality.

Let us look, then, at the two parts of Ex 18 in a little more detail.

The first scene, in which Jethro affectionately greets Moses and is joined by 'Aaron and all the elders of Israel' in a sacrificial meal (Moses' own presence, which is not mentioned, is presumably taken for granted), may originally have told of a covenant-making between Israelites and Midianites: 'he took' the sacrifices, 18.12, is an odd way of speaking, which stems perhaps from a tradition which spoke of Jethro's *acceptance* of covenant-sacrifices offered by Moses. But in the story as we have it, which is what I am trying to expound, the idea is certainly that of Jethro's *offering* sacrifices to God. To God, mind, not to YHWH: this is, as Cassuto notes (Cassuto, 1967:216), the only biblical reference to sacrifices being offered to God rather than to YHWH, so presumably the text implies that Jethro, despite his conviction of the superiority of YHWH to other gods (18.11), is not to be thought of as a convert to Yahwism. The text thus implies a remarkable *communicatio in sacris* between Israelites and Midianites. That, though, is not, I think, its main emphasis. The stress is rather on the idea of togetherness.

Israel is a people whom YHWH has liberated from Egypt (18. 4, 8, 9, 10a, 10b) to be a *united family*. In the dangerous days of the escape, Moses had had to send his family away (18.2), but he is now re-united with his wife and children (18. 5,6) and with his father-in-law (in Ex 18, we may note, the word *father-in-law* occurs no fewer than thirteen times, the name Jethro only seven times: the story is *about* family relationships). The narrator could not have brought out more effectively the importance for him in this passage of the idea of the *family-reunion* than he has done by having Jethro send in advance a message to Moses: 'I, your *father-in-law* Jethro, am coming to you, and your *wife*, and her two *sons along with her*' (18.6) and by then including Moses' brother Aaron (18.12) in the scene round a common altar. That the narrator really believed in shared liturgical celebrations with non-Israelites, I take leave to doubt: he was prepared, I suspect, to countenance it in his story in the interest of having as many members as possible of the family of Moses present in the scene. Moses, he wishes to say, is a great leader, but he is also a brother, a husband and a father. Perhaps in this episode we should discern a corrective to the chilling narrative found later in Exodus where the Levites

show that they are on the Lord's side by running amok among kith and kin and putting to the sword such as have worshipped the Golden Calf (Ex 32. 26—29). The two narratives complement each other: there are times when one needs to be reminded of one's dependence on others, and times when one has to stand alone. Our present story stresses dependence, but it may also hint at the other motif, for the chapter ends with another *sending away* (18.27): as earlier he had had to send away his wife (18.2), so now, before ascending Sinai, Moses has again to sacrifice family-ties by parting from Jethro (Zipporah and the children presumably remain with Moses).

The second episode in Ex 18 happens on 'the morrow' (just as the second part of the Amalek episode does: 17.9) and lasts all day (like the battle against Amalek: 17.12). Jethro observes the fact that Moses sits alone as law-giver and judge. He had been unable to sit alone in 17.12 without support, and here too he is in need of assistance. 'The thing that you are doing is not good', says Jethro (18.17). An instance this, said Rupert of Deutz (*PL* 167. 671), of the children of this world being wiser than the children of light. Moses, said Augustine (*PL* 34.619), in accepting Jethro's counsel, showed that one should accept good advice from whatever quarter it comes. Quite so. Jethro recognizes the truth hidden from Moses that it is not possible for one man alone to exercise the government of the people: it is too *heavy* a matter for him (18.18). He needs to share the burden with others (cf. Num 11.14—17: seventy elders are appointed to help Moses). Does the narrator, I wonder, perhaps expect us to catch, as we read Jethro's words, an echo of an earlier occurrence in the Pentateuch of the phrase 'It is not good', when YHWH had used it of Adam's *being alone* (Gen 2. 18)?

The administrative arrangements that Moses is said to have set up seem to correspond to the situation neither of Moses' day nor of later times. It could not have been like this while Moses lived, for a number of post-Mosaic features—the institution of elders sitting at the city-gate to hear civil cases; the appointment by Jehoshaphat (2 Chr 19) of royal judges; and the establishment of a standing army with units of thousands, hundreds and fifties (1 Sam 8.12; 2 Sam 18.1)—all these, as B.S. Childs notes (Childs, 1974: 331), have left their imprint on the story. After Moses' death, on the other hand, there was no one in Israel who continued his role of giving divine oracles (18.15) and proclaiming laws in God's name (18.16). The passage, it seems, is not concerned to describe a state of affairs that once obtained, but only to enunciate the principle of shared government. We may note that Jethro advises Moses (18.21) to appoint leaders not only of units of a thousand, a hundred, and fifty, but also of units of ten, and Moses does so. De Vaux (de Vaux, 1961: 226) thinks that the ten accomplices of Ishmael in the murder of Gedaliah (Jer 41; 2 Kgs 25) may have constituted a military unit, but this is pure supposition. We have no firm evidence of the existence of units of ten anywhere in the

judicial, civil or military organization of Israel, and there must be a strong suspicion that the leaders of ten in Ex 18 are a literary construct designed to stress the importance of delegation by making it go beyond what was in fact practised.

One final thing about 18. 13—27. Jethro tells Moses that the leaders that he appoints should have four attributes: they should be (as NEB happily renders the Hebrew) 'capable, God-fearing, honest and incorruptible' (18.21). When, however, the narrator comes to the implementation of this counsel he only says (18.25) that Moses selected 'capable men'. Men could not, said the Jewish commentator Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno (c. 1475—1550), be found in sufficient numbers to meet all four requirements. Perhaps some such idea was indeed in the narrator's mind. I suspect that he wished to imply that if the ruler is prepared to share power only with ideal candidates, he will have a long search ahead of him; but one cannot justify hugging one's power to one's chest by dwelling on the deficiencies of all the applicants.

Thus Ex 18. 1—12 stresses that even Moses is no island, but part of the main, namely his family; while 18. 13—27 says that Moses's role is not to be that of unaided ruler. The two passages go well with each other and with the two narratives in Ex 17, which similarly warn the reader, before he comes to read the stories of Moses' solitary grandeur in Ex 19 seq., that, whatever prominence Moses may enjoy, he needs the assistance and support of others in his high calling.

The Pentateuch, as a literary entity, is a product of the Exile. This fact may help to explain the way in which Ex 17—18 seeks to, as it were, cut Moses down to size. No longer, in the post-exilic age, had Judah self-government: she had no king, still less a theocratic leader in succession to Moses. That fact, however, Ex 17—18 implies, is no cause for despair. Human leaders, even the greatest of them, have always been imperfect and dependent on others, and in any case all authority is ultimately in the hands of YHWH. Even if political control of the country is now exercised by a foreign power, one can find a topical relevance and assurance in the tradition telling how in days gone by YHWH had used a foreigner to put Israel back on the track when Moses had made the mistake of thinking that all depended on himself. The God who had worked through Jethro (and Ruth and Cyrus) would find no difficulty in working through foreigners still.

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