

“Exodus”

Fall Series 2

Lesson 3

“Exodus 18”

Objective: To examine the account of the exodus from Egypt and to learn as much as we can about the nature of God, His mercy and what He desires for His creation. We will seek to do this by examining the historical background of the Exodus account, the interpretive history of Exodus amongst both Jewish and Christian scholars, where helpful. We will seek to understand the message of Exodus for us as Christians living in the 21st century American context.

Materials: The Bible, Ancient translations, Commentaries, both ancient and modern, Books, journal articles, dictionaries, the internet, and other resources as may be appropriate.

Procedures

1. To explore the message God of hope that the original audience will have understood from this text.
2. To understand how this text has inspired, challenged, and educated people down through the centuries guiding them not only in their personal lives, but the destinies of governments and nations.
3. We will seek to find out how these beliefs have played a role in the history of Christianity and how they continue to impact our existence and service to Jesus Christ today.
4. We will provide a sheet to take home as a reminder of what has been examined and to provide additional opportunities for consideration of these truths and their application in our daily living out of our eternal destiny beginning now. This sheet can be used as a discussion guide for small group discussion. We have several groups using this effectively.

In this chapter we come once again to Jethro, priest of Midian, the father-in-law of Moses. This account seems out of order here, to some, and this has generated a Talmudic dispute among the Jewish sages. Some say that Jethro arrived before the giving of the Torah while others claim he came after the giving of the Torah. There is a lot of discussion back and forth, but ultimately no decisive resolution of the timeline has been agreed.¹ A part of the reasoning for wondering about the timeline is that some have wondered on what basis Moses was making judgments before the giving of the law, but the basis could have been found in the direct consultations that Moses had with God.² This section is an extremely important chapter as it sets out a core system within the society of the Israelites, that of the judiciary. The judiciary of the Israelites was not only linked with their faith and their religion it was dominated by it. Their conceptual framework was based upon the premise that what was right and true and good originated with God and not with the wisdom or truth of men.

¹ Rabbi Nosson Scherman and Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz, eds., *The Chumash*, The Stone Edition (New York NY: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 2000-2014), p. 394.

² Exodus 18:19.

This different conceptual framework can either cause us to dismiss this material as antiquated and backward, or to misunderstand it altogether. We often have the tendency to dismiss things from the Old Covenant because we see them as having been replaced by the New Covenant and therefore as being irrelevant. Such a perspective fails to see the wisdom of God who realizes that we as human beings must be told things many times before they become familiar enough for us to both recognize them and to accept them. The Apostle Paul is a man who was steeped and saturated with the words and ideas of the Old Covenant and he never found the words of the Old Covenant and especially of Exodus as irrelevant. He found in them the roadmap to what God was doing in the Messiah and what He would do in the future. The themes from Exodus would be interpreted by Paul in the light of the coming of a Messiah who was crucified and rose again from the dead, ushering in the new era of the Kingdom of God.³

As one might expect there is a great deal of dispute among scholars regarding the dating and origin of the material we have here in Exodus 18 as there is for all of Exodus. I do sometimes

³ N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, in the Christian Origins and the Question of God series, vol 4, Book I and 2, Parts I-IV (Minneapolis MN: 2013).

wonder if these scholars actually believe that anything has a beginning if they believe anything is new and unique and not tied to something that has happened before. They seem to think that everything must evolve from something more primitive and that it cannot come into existence as it were without having to trace its origin to something simple and microbial. They seem infected with the evolutionary virus through their entire thinking process. Recognizing this infection I would recommend great caution when referencing commentaries as they seemed to be fully infected with this viral cancer that prohibits them from seeking the meaning that these texts would have had for their ancient audience.

In 18:1, we are informed that Jethro has heard what God had done for Moses and his people Israel. It would certainly be hard to keep news of such great and powerful happenings from being talked about extensively by people of the region. There seems to me to be nothing incredible about Jethro hearing of these things, indeed it would seem incredible, if he had not heard. In 18:2 we are informed that Moses had sent away his wife Zipporah back to his father-in-law Jethro. As one might expect this sending away has been the source of a great deal of speculation, but in

truth all of it is just that, speculation. There are a great many questions that we seek to have answered that are not answered definitively in the text of Scripture. The focus of the Biblical text here passes right by the question of what it means that Moses send Zipporah and her two sons (18:2) back to Jethro. It could have been for safety, or because he needed to remain undistracted, it could have been for a variety of reasons, but the fact is we are not told.

Moses seems eager to see his wife and children and Moses (18:7) went out to meet Jethro and greeted him very warmly. We are not really told about the greeting that Moses gave to his wife and children. This does not mean it did not happen, but it does mean that the focus of the story here is upon Jethro and what will occur with him. At 18:8 we are told that Moses recounts what *YHWH* had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians and the other things that had occurred along the way in their journey. We are then told that Jethro “rejoiced” at what *YHWH* had done to, or for, Israel. In the response of Jethro, we see something that would have been very important for the Jews. When the law was given it would be made clear that the Israelites were not to take “foreign”

women as wives.⁴ For the lawgiver to have been married to someone of foreign descent may have created questions in the minds of the people. It certainly did in the case of Joseph, who married the Egyptian, the daughter of a priest of Heliopolis, her name was Asenath.⁵ The fact that Jethro was, or became a worshipper of *YHWH* would seem to ally those questions and concerns. This may in part be the reason this section of Exodus was so important.

At 18:10 we have Jethro proclaiming a “blessing” (בְּרָכָה) to *YHWH* for His deliverance of Israel from the Egyptians. We then have this tremendous proclamation that now Jethro knows (יָדַעְתִּי) that *YHWH* is “greater” (גָּדוֹל) than “all of the gods” (מִכָּל־הָאֱלֹהִים). The word used here for “gods” is the same word that is normally translated as “God” in the singular (the word is in fact in the plural masculine form) when it refers to *YHWH* and it is the context here that means we translate *Elohim* as a plural form (gods), when we normally would translate this plural form as the singular “God.” It is to be noted that our English

⁴ Deuteronomy 7:3.

⁵ cf. *Joseph and Asenath* a Pseudepigraphical writing meant to address Joseph’s marriage to this foreigner who was the daughter of a pagan priest.

translations often clarify and simplify things that are not as clear nor as simple in the original language texts. It is of interest to me that Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and Neofiti substitute the divine name (י״י) for the word God (אלקיא) in this verse. The Greek, the Septuagint text, uses the singular of God (θεῶ) when it refers to YHWH. All of these changes would seem to reflect a sensitivity with regard to this issue.

In verse 11 Jethro indicates that the Egyptians were delivered over to their fate through their arrogance. They felt that they did not have to answer for their ill treatment of the Israelites. This was meant to convey that the Egyptians were justly punished for their arrogance. This is taken to mean that the Egyptians were punished measure for measure. They perished by drowning, the very fate that they had intended for the Israelite male infants (Exodus 1:22).⁶ In verse 11 some of the Rabbis see this exclamation made by Jethro as an exclamation of conversion from idolatry and uncertainty to monotheism and certainty of allegiance to YHWH. It is said that, “Jethro exclaimed that he had experimented with every manner of idolatry, but now he was

⁶ Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary Exodus* (Philadelphia PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), p. 99.

throughly convinced that *Hashem*⁷ is superior to them all for he continued ... For in the very matter in which [the Egyptians] had conspired against them ...!"⁸

At verse 12 we have Jethro offering a burnt offering and sacrifices to God. It is most likely the case that this ceremony possessed a juridical function of some sort rather than just being a fellowship meal. In the Ancient Near East treaties and pacts were often ratified with the parties involved participating in a solemn meal.⁹ It was seldom the case that animals were slaughtered and sacrifices were made that this did not have some form of ceremonial aspect to it. They were not like we are today where we have meat at most meals just because we like meat. Meat was precious and the taking of the life of the animal was not just slaughter, there was a sense in which the life of the animal had deeper and fuller meaning for the people, especially for a people that was almost totally dependent upon their livestock. Life was not cheap nor taken for granted. For most of those in the Ancient

⁷ Hashem is a way of not using the divine name *YHWH*.

⁸ Rabbi Nosson Scherman and Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz, eds., *The Chumash*, The Stone Edition (New York NY: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 2000-2014), p. 396.

⁹ Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary Exodus*, p. 99.

Near East there was a sacred connection with their God, or gods.

For the Jews the sacred connection was to *YHWH*.

Notice that this meal is eaten with the father-in-law of Moses, with the elders of Israel, and in the presence of God, or if you are reading from the ancient Targums (the Aramaic translations of Exodus) it is the presence of *YYY* (יְיָ *YHWH*). The rabbis think this meal represents the moment that Jethro converted to Judaism, through circumcision and immersion and that the dignitaries of Israel came together to celebrate this event.¹⁰ To be honest there is considerable conjecture here. Especially as earlier we have Jethro described as the priest of Midian, but this could be the point in history when Jethro moved from being a polytheist to a monotheists, expressing his singular devotion to the one and only true God. There is much that is left unclear and often assumptions seem more solid and real than can be safely supported as solid by what is in the text. It may be the case here that the stage is being set for Jethro to give advice to Moses as a believer in *YHWH* rather than Moses taking advice from someone of uncertain credentials with regard to their

¹⁰ Rabbi Nosson Scherman and Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz, eds., *The Chumash*, p. 397.

devotion to *YHWH*. Others have speculated that Jethro all along worshipped *YHWH* and that we have here a measure of reassurance that *YHWH* was even greater and more powerful than Jethro had previously realized.

At 18:13 we have the events of the following day highlighted where Moses sat to “judge” (דָּן - Hebrew; κρίνειν - Greek) the people. He did this from morning until evening. At 18:14 we have Jethro questioning what Moses is doing here and asking him why he sat alone with all the people standing around him from morning to evening. The reply is that the people come to him in order to inquire of God. This is the reason he has taken on this work alone. The people that come to Moses have an inquiry that they wish to have answered with regard to what God requires of them for life in the covenant. God is the origin of the requirements and so it from Him that they seek answers. The people seek for an explanatory application of the requirements of God (18:16).¹¹

This interpretation is once again why some of the rabbis perceived that this text should come after the giving of the covenant rather than before it.

¹¹ John I Durham, *Exodus*, Vol 3 in the Word Biblical Commentary series (Waco TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1987), p. 250.

The reply back from Jethro is that what Moses (18:17) is doing is “not good” (לא־טוֹב). The first time, and the only other time that this expression of being “not good” (לא־טוֹב) is used in the Torah is at Genesis 2:18 when *YHWH* indicates that it is “not good” (לא־טוֹב) for the man to be alone. The indication at 18:18 is that if Moses keeps doing things in this manner he will wear himself and also he will wear out the people who are standing around and waiting all day long for Moses to give them the answers from God. We might here have expected that such advice might have come from *YHWH*, Himself rather than from another human being: after all Moses has a direct line to God. Perhaps there are a number of lessons that we are meant to learn from this incident and the advice here. One, and perhaps the most important is that God gives us a level of what might be termed “common sense” and expects us to use it. Secondly, we are not to stand alone, even in such a position as Moses has here where he stands in this unique position of being a mediator between God and the people.

The task is too heavy for Moses to bear alone and yet God appears to allow Moses to come to understand this fact in some

way other than just telling him. Here Moses accepts the “counsel” from Jethro who advises him to continue to stand in the role of mediator, but to teach the people “the statutes” (הַחֻקִּים - *Huqim*) and “the instructions” (הַתּוֹרָה - *Torah*) (18:20). Moses is to become a teacher, an instructor in the teachings of God for keeping the covenant. At 18:21 Moses is instructed by Jethro to look for “strong” men among the people who have the trait of fearing God. Men that are trustworthy and who hate “dishonest gain.” Such men are to be set above the others in a way that is very much reminiscent of the way an army is set out. These men are to sit to “judge” (שָׁפְטוּ - verb - “let them judge) the people. These are to be people that judge the minor, the small cases and then they will still bring every “large,” or important case (גְּדוֹלָה) to Moses. Such cases then would still be decided in consultation with YHWH. This way the load will be shared and it will be easier on Moses.

It may be that Paul has this passage in Exodus 18 in his mind as he writes to the people of Corinth regarding disputes between believers (1 Corinthians 5:9-6:6). Paul tells them that if they have “ordinary” cases they still appoint those from outside the church (1 Corinthians 6:4) to settle the dispute rather than

appointing those of wisdom from within the church. A central tenet of wisdom would be that they would “fear God.” Those that fear God will not be subject to bribery, or corruption, because they know they stand under the scrutiny of God in what they do and in what they decide (cf. Exodus 18:21). In many ways the position of Paul among the Corinthians bears many similarities to the position of Moses among the newly freed slaves making up the newly formed nation of Israel. It seems natural that Paul would look to the past for answers to help him in his current predicament. Human nature remains the same through the centuries.

At 18:23 Jethro makes it clear that this proposal should be put to God and if He commands it then it will allow Moses to endure the load that he needs to bear and it will also allow the people to have their cases decided much more quickly and they will be able to go to their homes in “peace” (שָׁלוֹם - *in Shalom*). Moses here demonstrates his wisdom and his humility and he listens to Jethro (18:24). Moses chooses men to stand in this position (18:25) and they doing exactly as described by Jethro bringing the “hard” cases to Moses while they dealt with the

“minor cases” (18:26). At 18:27 then we are told that Moses let Jethro depart and go back to his own country.

There is much that we can learn in this chapter about the right path before God and what it takes to stay on that path. There will always be disputes among people. We sometimes need help in settling such disputes and it is important that those who would stand in such a position of helping to settle such disputes would be concerned first and foremost with what is right before God. Having the recognition that God is watching and that He will hold us to account creates in us an honesty and an integrity that is based outside of ourselves. We do what is right because we know that it is right before God; it is what He would do. It is not possible to separate our lives into segments and have different rules and different behaviors for different parts of our lives. We have one life and it is to be lived under one God. We are to live every moment understanding our place before God. He calls us to be His image-bearers not just at church, not just on Sunday, but all of the time, in all circumstances. This is especially the case at home when we are alone, or with family. We are to be genuine people, to be people devoted to God in every aspect of our lives.

Synopsis

In this chapter we are given a recounting of the reuniting of Moses with his wife and children and with his father-in-law Jethro. There is some dispute among the sages as to whether this reunion took place before, or after the giving of the Law, but it matters little either way. We have here a record of the initial stage of the judiciary system developing among the people of Israel. Their system has at its core a desire to retain covenant status with *YHWH* and it is on this basis that decisions about right and wrong find their starting point.

We can learn much from the Exodus account regarding the nature of people, the nature of God, and the nature of keeping covenant. Paul seems to use the exodus account in many places to help the newly founded church find its way in the world as kingdom people. We must be aware that the wisdom of the Exodus is not a product of evolution, but of revelation from God. It is in this account that we find people directly interacting with God and learning to live in covenant relationship with Him. There are many wonders done by God that are worthy of our praise and our worship. God comes into the realm of human history and affects

change and intercedes on behalf of the downtrodden and the powerless.

This new revelation and new way of living life creates many questions and many areas of conflict. The people seek guidance from God in navigating these new waters and in this environment the judiciary system for the Israelites begins to take form. The basis for right and wrong will be established as what is revealed by God to be right, or wrong. God defines right and wrong, not some human standard. In this the people seek the advice of God and it becomes too much for Moses to mediate. Jethro gives him advice about appointing others to help him in this task; to share the load. We would do well to learn the lessons of this chapter for our own lives of humility, community, and covenant faithfulness. We today are called to be the people of God traveling to the promised fulfillment of God's plan for His creation.

Questions

1. Tell about a time that you have heard someone recount for you things that God has done for them?
2. What are some things that cause you to “rejoice?” Why?
3. How do you feel when someone gives you advice about something? Why?
4. In what ways are seeking advice and humility connected?
5. How do you settle disputes with others?
6. How do you determine right from wrong? What is your standard?
7. What is your view of the authority of Scripture in your life? Why?
8. Does hearing about the incredible deeds that God did during the time of the exodus affect your faith? Why, or why not?
9. When is a time that you proclaimed a “blessing” to God?
10. What do you think it means to be singularly devoted to *YHWH*?
11. What do you think it means for us to make decisions in our lives without thinking about what God would have us do?
12. How would you define idolatry?
13. How concerned do you think we should be about what God wants us to do in our lives?
14. How would you feel about someone at church acting as a judge in a dispute that you had with another church member? Why?
15. What do you believe that God requires of you in this life?

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16. What are some things that you see as “not good” in your life?
 17. Who will stand with you in this life so that you will not be “alone?”
 18. How do you respond when a task is too heavy for you to bear?
 19. How would you judge between what is major and what is minor?
 20. How do you see the Book of Exodus as relevant for your life today?
 21. How do you insure that you are constantly aware of the presence of God?
 22. What are some ways that you strive to be a person of God all through the week?

To Take Home

What is Important to know?

It is important to know from this chapter that we often will need to listen carefully to the advice of others. So often we have made our existence and certainly our salvation so individually oriented that it does not work nor resemble the walk of the people we see in Scripture. Moses was willing to listen to the advice that he received from his father-in-law and it made life not only better for him, but for his people. Heeding advice takes humility on our part, which is recognizing the value of others. What are some ways that you seek to be a part of a spiritual community?

Where is God in these words?

God is in the words of this chapter standing behind Moses and letting him make some mistakes that others can help him to correct. God teaches Moses, that despite his exalted position as someone who speaks directly to God he still needs others to help him. God brings people into our lives that can, and will, help us if we will be aware and open. God is in this chapter as the focus of worship, determining the basis for what is right and wrong and as the great covenant keeper. What are some ways that you seek to keep covenant with God in your daily life?

What does any of this mean for how I live my life?

Recognizing that I am not alone in this world and that I need other people to walk with me in this life is crucial. We have so often today made salvation so personal, and so individual, that we have taken the importance of community and put it on the sidelines, or even at times sent it to the locker room. We fail to recognize that God saves a community of people and that our salvation is rooted in His community. When we do this we step outside the plan of God and we so often fail to recognize that if we are alone we are not a part of the people God is leading to the promised land. How do you seek to be a part of a community of Jesus followers?

What is the word of God calling us to do?

The word of God is calling upon us to recognize that community requires effort. We are not to run from conflict, or to cease associating with community when something hurts us. Community, like marriage, and like family, takes effort on our part. Sometimes disputes need the help of others to settle and sometimes we need to just learn to let the minor things go and move on. In the crucifixion of Christ we find the greatest way of creating community; we die for our community. In what ways is God calling you to sacrifice for your community?