

UNIT 32

THE ADVICE OF JETHRO

(Exodus 18:1-27)

INTRODUCTION²²

Text and Textual Notes

18:1 Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard²³ about all that God had done for Moses and for Israel His people, that²⁴ He had brought Israel out of Egypt.²⁵ **18:2** Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, had taken Zipporah,

²² This chapter forms the transition to the Law. There has been the deliverance, the testing passages, the provision in the wilderness, and the warfare. Any God who can do all this for His people deserves their allegiance. In chapter 18 the Lawgiver is giving advice, using laws and rulings; but then he is given advice to organize the elders to assist. Thus, when the Law is fully revealed, a system will be in place to administer it. The point of the passage is that a great leader humbly accepts advice from other godly believers to delegate responsibility. He does not try to do it all himself; God does not want one individual to do it all.

The chapter has three parts: verses 1-12 tell how Jethro heard and came and worshiped and blessed; then verses 13-23 have the advice of Jethro, and then verses 24-27 tell how Moses implemented the plan and Jethro went home (rather than stay and try to run it!). See further Ernest J. Runions, "Exodus Motifs in 1 Samuel 7 and 8," *EvQ* 52 (1980):130-131; and also see for another idea Trent C. Butler, "An Anti-Moses Tradition," *JSOT* 12 (1979):9-15.

²³ Literally, "and he heard"

²⁴ This clause beginning with *ki* answers the question of what Jethro had heard; it provides a second, explanatory noun clause that is the object of the verb--"he heard (1) all that God had done . . . (2) that He had brought" See Williams, *Hebrew Syntax*, par 490.

²⁵ This is an interesting report that Jethro has heard, for the claim of God that He brought Israel out of bondage in Egypt will be the foundation of the covenant stipulations (Exodus 20).

Moses wife, after he had sent her back, **18:3** and her two sons, of which the name of the one was Gershom, for he said, “I have been an alien in a foreign land”; **18:4** and the name of the other was Eliezer, for, he said, “The God of my father has been my help,²⁶ and delivered²⁷ me from the sword of Pharaoh.”

18:5 And Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, together with his sons and his wife, came to Moses in the desert where he was camping by²⁸ the mountain of God.²⁹ **18:6** And he said³⁰ to Moses, “I,³¹ your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you, along with with your wife, and her two sons with her.” **18:7** And Moses went out to meet his father-in-law, and bowed down, and kissed him;³² they asked each other³³

²⁶ Here now we get the etymological explanation of the name of Moses’ other son, Eliezer (*’eli’ezer*), which means “my God is a help.” The sentiment that explains this name is *’elohe ’abi b’e’ezri*, “the God of my father is my help.” The preposition in the sentiment is the *beth essentiae* (giving the essence--see GKC, par. 119i). The word for “help” is a common word in the Bible, first introduced as a description of the woman in the Garden. It means to do for someone what he or she cannot do for himself or herself. Samuel raised the “stone of help” (Ebenezer) when Yahweh “helped them” win the battle (1 Sam. 7:12).

²⁷ The verb “delivered” is an important motif in this chapter (see its use in verses 8, 9, and 10 with reference to Pharaoh).

²⁸ This is an adverbial accusative that defines the place (see GKC, par. 118g).

²⁹ The mountain of God is Horeb, and so the desert here must be the Sinai desert by it. But chapter 19 suggests that they left Rephidim to go the 24 miles to Sinai. It may be that this chapter fits in chronologically after the move to Sinai, but was placed here thematically. Kaiser defends the present location of the story by responding to other reasons for the change given by Lightfoot, but does not deal with the travel locations (see p. 411).

³⁰ It seems that this verse is out of place, since the report has already been given that they came to the desert. The verb, therefore, should be given a past perfect translation, “and he had said” (possibly by message)”

³¹ The LXX solves the problem by taking the pronoun “I” as the particle “behold” and reads it this way: “one said to Moses, ‘Behold, your father-in-law has come’”

³² This is more than polite oriental custom. Jethro was Moses’ benefactor, father-in-law, and a priest. He paid much respect to him. Now he could invite Jethro into his home (see Jacob, p. 496).

³³ Literally, “[each] man his fellow”

how they were,³⁴ and then they went into the tent. **18:8** And Moses told his father-in-law all that Yahweh had done to Pharaoh and to Egypt for Israel's sake, and all the hardship³⁵ that had come upon them³⁶ along the way, and how³⁷ Yahweh had delivered them.

18:9 Then Jethro rejoiced³⁸ because of all the good which Yahweh had done for Israel, whom He had delivered from the hand of Egypt. **18:10** And Jethro said, "Blessed³⁹ be Yahweh who has delivered you from the hand of Egypt, and from the hand of Pharaoh, who has delivered the people from under the hand of Pharaoh. **18:11** Now I know that Yahweh is greater than all the gods, for in the thing wherein they dealt proudly against them He has destroyed them."⁴⁰ **18:12** Then Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought⁴¹ a burnt offering and sacrifices for

³⁴ Literally, "concerning their [his] welfare (*šshalom*)"

³⁵ A rare word, "weariness" of the hardships

³⁶ Literally, "found them"

³⁷ "how" supplied

³⁸ The word *khadah* is rare, occurring only in Job 3:6 and Psalm 21:6, although it is common in Aramaic. The LXX translated it "he shuddered." Cassuto suggests that that rendering was based on the midrashic interpretation in *B. Sanhedrin* 94b, "he felt cuts in his body"--a word play on the verb (pp. 215,216)..

³⁹ This is a common form of praise. The verb *baruk* is the *qal* passive participle of the verb. Here must be supplied a jussive, making this participle the predicate: "May Yahweh be blessed." The verb essentially means "to enrich"; in praise it would mean that He would be enriched by the praises of the people.

⁴⁰ The end of this sentence seems not to have been finished, or it is very elliptical. Here "He has destroyed them" is added. Others take the last prepositional phrase to be the completion and supply only a verb: "[he was] above them." Cassuto takes the word "gods" to be the subject of the verb "act proudly," giving the sense of "precisely (*ki*) in respect of these things of which the gods of Egypt boasted--He is greater than they (*'alehem*)." He suggests rendering the clause, "excelling them in the very things to which they laid claim" (p. 216).

⁴¹ The verb is actually "and he took." It must have the sense of getting the animals for the sacrifice. The Syriac, Targum and Vulgate have "offered." But Aelrud Cody argues because of the precise wording in the text Jethro did not offer the sacrifices but received them ("Exodus 18,12: Jethro Accepts a Covenant With the Israelites," *Biblica* 49 (1968):159-161).

God;⁴² and Aaron and all the elders of Israel came to eat food⁴³ with the father-in-law of Moses before God.

18:13 And⁴⁴ on the next day Moses sat to judge⁴⁵ the people; and the people stood by Moses from the morning until the evening. **18:14** When his father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, “What is this⁴⁶ that you are doing for the people?⁴⁷ Why are you sitting by yourself, and all the people stand by you from morning till evening?” **18:15** And Moses said to his father-in-law, “Because the people come to me to inquire⁴⁸ of God. **19:16** When they have a matter,⁴⁹ they come to me and I decide⁵⁰ between a man and his neighbor, and I

⁴² Jethro brought offerings as if he were the one who had been delivered. The “burnt offering” is singular, to honor God first. And then the other sacrifices were intended for the invited guests to eat (a forerunner of the peace offering). See Jacob, p. 498.

⁴³ The word *lekhem* here means the sacrifice and all the foods that were offered with it. The eating before God was part of the covenant ritual, for it signified that they were in communion with the Deity, and with one another.

⁴⁴ Literally, “and it was/happened on the morrow”

⁴⁵ This is a simple summary of the function of Moses on this particular day. He did not do this every day, but it was time now to do it. The people would come to solve their difficulties, or to hear instruction from Moses on decisions to be made. The tradition of sitting in Moses seat is drawn from this passage.

⁴⁶ Literally, “what is this thing”

⁴⁷ This question, “what are you doing for the people,” is qualified by the next two questions. By sitting alone all day and the people standing around all day showed that Moses was exhibiting too much care for the people--he could not do this.

⁴⁸ The form is *lidrosh*, the *qal* infinitive construct giving the purpose. To inquire of God would be to seek God’s will on a matter, to obtain a legal decision on a matter, or to settle a dispute. As a judge Moses is speaking for God; but as the servant of Yahweh Moses’ words will be God’s words. The psalms would later describe judges as “gods” because they made the right decisions based on God’s Law.

⁴⁹ Or, “dispute”

⁵⁰ The verb *shaphat* means “to judge”; more specifically, it means to make a decision as an arbiter or umpire. When people brought issues to him, he decided between them. In the section of Law in Exodus after the Ten Commandments we have the *Mishpatim*, the decisions.

make known the decrees of God and His laws.”⁵¹

18:17 And Moses’ father-in-law said to him, “The thing that you are doing is not good. **18:18** You will surely wear out,⁵² both you and this people who are with you, for this is too⁵³ heavy for you; you are not able to do it by yourself. **18:19** Now listen to me,⁵⁴ I will give you some advice, and may God be with you: You be for the people a representative to God,⁵⁵ and bring⁵⁶ their disputes⁵⁷ to God. **18:20** And warn⁵⁸ them of the statutes and the laws, and make known to them the way in which they must walk,⁵⁹ and the work which they must do.⁶⁰ **18:21** But

⁵¹ The “decrees” or “statutes” were definite rules, stereotyped and permanent; the “laws” were directives or pronouncements given when situations arose. Driver suggests this is another reason why this event might have taken place after Yahweh had given laws on the mountain (p. 165).

⁵² The verb means “to fall and fade” as a leaf (Ps. 1:3). In Psalm 18:45 it is used figuratively of foes fading away, failing in strength and courage (Driver, p. 166). Here the infinitive absolute construction heightens the meaning.

⁵³ Gesenius lists the specialized use of the comparative *min* where with an adjective the thought expressed is that the quality is too difficult for the attainment of a particular aim (GKC, par. 133c).

⁵⁴ Literally, “hear my voice”

⁵⁵ The line reads “Be you to the people before God.” He is to be their representative before God. This is introducing the aspect of the work that only Moses could do, what He has been doing. He is to be before God for the people, to pray for them, to appeal on their behalf. Jethro is essentially saying, I understand that you cannot delegate this to anyone else, so continue doing it (Cassuto, pp. 219,220).

⁵⁶ The form is the perfect tense with the *waw* consecutive; following the imperative it will be instruction as well. Since the imperative preceding this had the idea of “continue to be” as you are, this too has that force.

⁵⁷ Literally, “words”

⁵⁸ The perfect tense with the *waw* continues the sequence of instruction for Moses. He alone was to be the mediator, to guide them in the religious and moral instruction.

⁵⁹ The verb and its following prepositional phrase form a relative clause, modifying “the way.” The imperfect tense should be given the nuance of obligatory imperfect--it is the way they must walk.

⁶⁰ This last part is parallel to the preceding: “work” is also a direct object of the

choose⁶¹ from the people capable men,⁶² God-fearers,⁶³ men of truth,⁶⁴ haters of bribes,⁶⁵ and put them over them as rulers⁶⁶ of thousands, and rulers of hundreds, and rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens. **18:22** And they will judge⁶⁷ the people all the time,⁶⁸ but every great issue⁶⁹ they shall bring to you, but every small

verb “make known,” and the relative clause that qualifies it also uses an obligatory imperfect.

⁶¹ The construction uses the independent pronoun for emphasis, and then the imperfect tense “see” (*khazah*)– “and **you** shall see from all” Both in Hebrew and Ugaritic expressions of “seeing” are used in the sense of choosing (Gen. 41:33). (Cassuto, p. 220).

⁶² The expression is *'anshe khayil*, “capable men.” The attributive genitive is the word used in expressions like “mighty man of valor.” The word describes these men as respected, influential, powerful people, those looked up to by the community as leaders, and those that will have the needs of the community in mind. They will be morally and physically worthy.

⁶³ The description “fearers of God” now uses an objective genitive. To describe these men in this way is to describe them as devout, worshipful, and obedient servants of God.

⁶⁴ The expression “men of truth” (*'anshe 'emet*) indicates that these men must be seekers of truth, who know that the task of a judge is to give true judgment (Cassuto, p. 220). The word “truth” includes the ideas of faithfulness or reliability, as well as truth itself. It could be understood to mean “truthful men,” men whose word is reliable and true.

⁶⁵ The word refers to unjust gain. Here is another objective genitive. To hate unjust gain is to reject and refuse it. Their decisions will not be swayed by personal gain.

⁶⁶ It is not clear how this structure would work in a judicial setting. The language of “captains of thousands” etc., is used more for military ranks. There must have been more detailed instruction involved here, for each Israelite would have come under four leaders with this arrangement, and perhaps difficult cases would be sent to the next level. But since the task of these men would also be for instruction and guidance, the breakdown would be very useful. Deuteronomy 1:9, 13 suggest that the choice of these people was not simply Moses’ alone.

⁶⁷ The form is the perfect tense with the *waw* consecutive, making it equivalent to the imperfect of instruction in the preceding verse.

⁶⁸ “in every time” means in all normal cases

⁶⁹ Literally, “great thing”

issue⁷⁰ they themselves shall judge, so that⁷¹ you may make it easier for yourself,⁷² and they will bear the burden⁷³ with you. **18:23** If you do this thing, and God so commands you,⁷⁴ then you shall be able⁷⁵ to endure,⁷⁶ and all these people⁷⁷ will be able to go⁷⁸ to their place satisfied.”⁷⁹

18:24 So Moses listened to⁸⁰ his father-in-law, and he did all that he had said.
18:25 And Moses chose capable men from all Israel, and he made them heads over the people, rulers over thousands, rulers over hundreds, rulers over fifties, and rulers over tens. **18:26** And they judged the people at all times; the difficult

⁷⁰ Literally, “thing”

⁷¹ The *waw* here shows the result or the purpose of the instructions given.

⁷² The expression *w^ehaqel me‘aleyka* means literally “and make it light off yourself.” The word plays against the word for “heavy” used earlier--since it was a heavy or burdensome task Moses must lighten the load.

⁷³ “the burden” supplied

⁷⁴ The form is the *piel* perfect with the *waw* consecutive; it carries the same nuance as the preceding imperfect in the conditional clause. Driver says the meaning of the verb here is with the sense “approve and sanction” doing this.

⁷⁵ The perfect tense with the *waw* consecutive *ow* appears in the *apodosis* of the conditional sentence--“if you do this . . . then you will be able.”

⁷⁶ Literally, “to stand”

B. Jacob suggests that there might be a humorous side to this: “you could even do this standing up” (p. 501).

⁷⁷ Literally “this people”

⁷⁸ The verb is the simple imperfect, “will go,” but given the sense of the passage a potential nuance seems in order.

⁷⁹ Literally, “in peace.”

See further T. D. Weinshall, “The Organizational Structure Proposed by Jethro to Moses (Ex. 18:17),” *Public Administration in Israel and Abroad* 12 (1972): 9-13; and Hanoach Reviv, “The Traditions Concerning the Inception of the Legal System in Israel: Significance and Dating,” *ZAW* 94 (1982):566-575.

⁸⁰ The idiom “listen to the voice of” means “obey, comply with, heed.”

matters they would bring⁸¹ to Moses, but every small matter they would judge themselves. **18:27** Then Moses sent his father-in-law on his way,⁸² and so he went⁸³ to to his own land.⁸⁴

EXPOSITORY DEVELOPMENT

This passage forms the beginning of the transition to the Law. We have had the testing stories, the provision stories, and the warfare story. So all the basic needs and problems have been discussed so far. What lies ahead is the giving of the Law and its administration. In this chapter we have the Lawgiver being given advice, and that advice calls for the organization of elders to make decisions. Thus, when the Law actually is given, a system will be in place for its use. The striking point of this passage to me is that

*A great leader humbly accepts advice
from other Godly leaders
to delegate responsibility.*

He will not try to do everything himself, or resist the advice for change, for it is not his enterprise, but God's entirely. God does not rely on one man to do all the work. So I would think that this passage would work very well in administrative instruction.

⁸¹ This, and the verb in the next clause, are imperfect tenses. In the past tense narrative of the verse they must be customary, continuous action in past time.

⁸² The verb *wayshallakh* is the same verb and same stem used for the passages calling for Pharaoh to "release" Israel. Here, in a peaceful and righteous relationship, Moses sent Jethro to his home.

⁸³ The prepositional phrase included here Gesenius classifies as a pleonastic *dativus ethicus* to give special emphasis to the significance of the occurrence in question *for* a particular subject (GKC, par. 119s).

⁸⁴ This chapter makes an excellent message on spiritual leadership of the people of God. Spiritually responsible people are to be selected to help in the work of the ministry (teaching, deciding cases, meeting needs), so that there will be peace, and so that leaders will not be exhausted. Probably capable people are more ready to do that than leaders are ready to relinquish control. But leaders have to be willing to take the risk, to entrust the task to others. Here Moses is the model of humility, receiving correction and counsel from Jethro. And Jethro is the ideal advisor, for he has no intention of remaining there to run the operation.

I would divide the passage up into these parts: verses 1-12 describe how Jethro heard, came, worshiped and blessed; verses 13-23 describe how Jethro saw and advised so that Moses would be preserved and there would be peace; and verses 24-27 report how Moses implemented the plan and Jethro went home. It is an account of the wisdom in judging, but it displays both the humility of Moses and the humility of Jethro (he went home rather than attempt to take over).

*I. God raises up faithful leaders
to encourage and assist his servants (1-12)*

The first part essentially establishes the fact that Jethro was sent from God, is a true believer, and loves the people of God. Without this section it is doubtful that Moses would (or should) have taken the advice. There are some interesting things to look at here: the fact that Jethro had heard that God had brought them out of Egypt (this will become the covenant claim of God in chapter 20), and the naming of the two sons, Gershom and Eliezer. The second son is now included in the account, for the mission was accomplished. First, he was a stranger there; now he knows that the God of his father was his help, and delivered him from the sword of Pharaoh. The inclusion of these namings at this point is strategic for the discussion to follow. It implies that Jethro shared these faith statements.

The part that should be highlighted in this first section is the response of Jethro to the work of God—he is enthusiastically grateful. He hears of the victory, he rejoices over God's goodness (genuinely happy for blessings that someone else receives), he blesses God and acknowledges his sovereignty over the other gods, and then he worship with sacrifices. So we have a true believer sharing in the praise and worship of God over the blessings bestowed on Moses and Israel. Jethro has Israel's best at heart.

It is very hard today to find a believer, let alone a leader, who can genuinely rejoice in the good things that God has done in someone else. But then we do not praise God much at all today, so this is part of a bigger problem.

*II. God often directs his servants
through the advice of other Godly leaders (13-23).*

The second part (18:13-23) records the advice of Jethro. There is the observation of Moses' custom (13-16) and then the advice (17-23). His advice (vv.

19-23 for the positive instructions) is timeless for spiritual leaders: Moses should be God-ward to the people, he must teach them the Law and show them the way they should live and what they must do. But he should appoint able bodied men to be rulers over the people. What the exegesis must concentrate on are the qualifications of these men. They must be *'anshe khayil*, that is, men of inner strength and virtue, valerous men (aristocrats in the true sense of the word). They must also be *yir'e 'elohim*, “fearers of God,” that is, men who worship and obey God, whose lives conform to His standard. They must also be *'anshe 'emet*, “truthful men,” men whose word is reliable and true. People have to be able to trust them. Finally, they must “hate bribes,” *sone'e batsa'*. Their decisions must not be swayed by personal gain. These are the qualities of spiritual leaders and administrators

*III. God's servants will wisely accept advice
from other spiritual leaders (24-27).*

This point, of course, assumes from the previous sections that the other spiritual leaders are indeed spiritual, not jealous, not trying to control, not simply trying to inject their ideas. They are people who have experience in spiritual leadership and have the best interests of the others at heart.

Moses took the advice of his wise father-in-law (18:24-27). The last section wraps up the account with the outcome. Moses appointed the men, they listened to the cases and referred the difficult ones to Moses, and Moses let his father-in-law go back to his land (note *wayshallakh* here too).

CONCLUSION

This section makes an excellent message for the spiritual leadership of the people of God. The central expository theme could be worded as follows:

*Spiritually mature and responsible people
should be selected to assist in the administration of the people of God.*

This administration will be explained from the context; it would involve solving people's problems, counseling, hear their ideas and complaints, adjudicate between plaintiffs, and the like, so that there will be peace, and so that the leader will not be exhausted. He cannot do it all himself. Probably they are more ready to do it than the average leader is ready to relinquish his control (but not all who are eager to do it are qualified). But he has to be willing to take the risk to have them involved and leave himself free for the spiritual instruction from the word of the LORD.

It is easy to correlate this material with the fuller description of the qualifications of elders in the New Testament. But do not end up preaching the New Testament passages—unless that is your text. You have enough to deal with here on these four basic qualifications in this context. You might also want to read in the *Michnah* how the Rabbis explain all these qualifications. But you can point out that the elders were chosen for administrative purposes in a theocratic government, so it is spiritual leadership. Then, when the Synagogue became the normal center for the life of the people of Israel, and the temple and priesthood disappeared, the elders became the main spiritual leaders. Paul, then, in organizing the Church, carried over the features of the Synagogue, and that included the use of elders. The word for “elders” in the New Testament, *presbuteros*, is behind the English word “priest.” Among the elders, one was to be the overseer (*episkope*). Of course, you cannot get into all this in a sermon on Exodus 18—it will be part of a larger discussion that will take several sermons.

But two principles emerge. One is the point that in every denomination there must be qualified, spiritual leaders who will actively share in the ministry. They may have official titles, or they may not. But they must do far more than handle the finances of the congregation. And the other is that the qualifications of lay leaders overlap with qualifications for spiritual growth, and so leaders should emerge out of the spiritual development of the people.