



*The unfolding of your words gives light.*

## That the World May Know

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*Exodus 18:1-27*

### Introduction

Anyone who has been in a group of people—family, business, government or church—for any period of time knows that one of the big controversies is always: “Who’s in charge?” Particularly in the United States, we are concerned that our voice be heard. Our democratic republic has worked very well as governments go. But question we need answer is: “Should the church govern itself democratically?”

For the answer to that question we go back to “the church in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38). Israel’s situation was somewhat different from most. The government was also the church, which was organized by family units. Someone, however, had to be in charge and Moses was God’s man. After God brought His people out of Egypt and destroyed the army of Egypt in the depths of the Red Sea, the people headed for the Promised Land. Could Moses shepherd a flock of millions or would everyone do what was right in his own eyes?

This text begins with the reunion of Moses and his father-in-law Jethro at the foot of Mount Sinai (Horeb). Moses’ wife Zipporah and their sons Gershom and Eliezer had likely gone for a visit to Grandpa’s house after Israel crossed the Red Sea into the Sinai Peninsula near Midian. Now Jethro, having heard of the great deliverance of the Lord, came to see the redeemed nation.

<sup>1</sup>Now Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses’ father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moses and for Israel His people, how the LORD had brought Israel out of Egypt. <sup>2</sup>Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, took Moses’ wife Zipporah, after he had sent her away, <sup>3</sup>and her two sons, of whom one was named Gershom, for Moses said, “I have been a sojourner in a foreign land.” <sup>4</sup>The other was named Eliezer, for he said, “The God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh.”

<sup>5</sup>Then Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, came with his sons and his wife to Moses in the wilderness where he was camped, at the mount of God. <sup>6</sup>He sent word to Moses, “I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons with her.” <sup>7</sup>Then Moses went out to meet his father-in-law, and he bowed down and kissed him; and they asked each other of their welfare and went into the tent. <sup>8</sup>Moses told his father-in-law all that the LORD had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel’s sake, all the hardship that had befallen them on the journey, and how the LORD had delivered them. <sup>9</sup>Jethro rejoiced over all the goodness which the LORD had done to Israel, in delivering them from the hand of the Egyptians. <sup>10</sup>So Jethro said, “Blessed be the LORD who delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of Pharaoh, and who delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians. <sup>11</sup>Now I know that the LORD is greater than all the gods; indeed, it was proven when they dealt proudly against the people.” <sup>12</sup>Then Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, took a burnt offering and sacrifices for God, and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat a meal with Moses’ father-in-law before God.

<sup>13</sup>It came about the next day that Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood about Moses from the morning until the evening. <sup>14</sup>Now when Moses’ father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, “What is this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge and all the people stand about you from morning until evening?” <sup>15</sup>Moses said to his father-in-law, “Because the people come to me to inquire of God. <sup>16</sup>When they have a dispute, it comes to me, and I judge between a man and his neighbor and make known the statutes of God and His laws.”

<sup>17</sup>Moses’ father-in-law said to him, “The thing that you are doing is not good. <sup>18</sup>You will surely wear out, both yourself and these people who are with you, for the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. <sup>19</sup>Now listen to me: I will give you counsel, and God be with you. You be the people’s representative before God, and you bring the disputes to God, <sup>20</sup>then teach them the statutes and the laws, and make known to them the way in which they are to walk and the work they are to do. <sup>21</sup>Furthermore, you shall select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain; and you shall place these over them as leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens. <sup>22</sup>Let them judge the people at all times; and let it be that every major dispute they will bring to you, but every minor dispute they themselves will judge. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. <sup>23</sup>If you do this thing and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people also will go to their place in peace.”

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<sup>24</sup>So Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said. <sup>25</sup>Moses chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people, leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens. <sup>26</sup>They judged the people at all times; the difficult dispute they would bring to Moses, but every minor dispute they themselves would judge. <sup>27</sup>Then Moses bade his father-in-law farewell, and he went his way into his own land. (Exodus 18:1-27)

### **The family reunion**

Moses had been accepted into the home of Jethro during a difficult life transition and had spent about forty years there. His move away from Midian came about because the Lord called Moses to a larger task than shepherding Jethro's sheep. The last encounter Moses had with Jethro was when he asked permission to go down to Egypt:

Then Moses departed and returned to Jethro his father-in-law and said to him, "Please, let me go, that I may return to my brethren who are in Egypt, and see if they are still alive." And Jethro said to Moses, "Go in peace." Now the LORD said to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead." So Moses took his wife and his sons and mounted them on a donkey, and returned to the land of Egypt. Moses also took the staff of God in his hand. Exodus 4:18-20

Just as the journey to Egypt, the land of his birth and first forty years, had been a home-going of sorts for Moses, his heart must have leaped to return to this holy place he had only recently left. Here he worked his second forty years, met the living God. Here he heard these words from the burning bush:

And He said, "Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain." Exodus 3:12

### **The worship service**

Jethro appears to have been unconvinced until "now" (v. 11) regarding the supremacy of the living God. Here he is blessing the Lord along with the people of Israel. The Mighty One had done great things for His people and Jethro was now a convinced disciple.

### **The performance evaluation**

Jethro watched Moses moderate disputes and answer personal questions. He functioned as a prophet in his teaching, a priest in his intercession and a king in his exclusive judgments. Jethro did not tell Moses to stop shepherding, but he did say, "The thing that you are doing is not good. You will surely wear out, both yourself and these people who are with you, for the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone."

Jethro was not only concerned that his son-in-law would burn out. He knew this one-man show would eventually cause trouble for the congregation. His interest in the God of Israel gave him an interest in the children of the King.

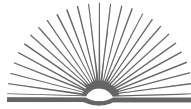
### **The structure of the congregation**

This was a matter of order, which God is interested in. Jethro wanted the people to prosper during their preparation for entering the land the Lord had given them. That is why he said, "If you do this thing and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people also will go to their place in peace." God was evidently speaking through this new convert named Jethro.

The specifics involved appointing leaders over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. The counselors likely had to deal with civil as well as spiritual matters. Moses later reviewed the plan:

I spoke to you at that time, saying, "I am not able to bear the burden of you alone. The LORD your God has multiplied you, and behold, you are this day like the stars of heaven in number. May the LORD, the God of your fathers, increase you a thousand-fold more than you are and bless you, just as He has promised you! How can I alone bear the load and burden of you and your strife? Choose wise and discerning and

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experienced men from your tribes, and I will appoint them as your heads.” You answered me and said, “The thing which you have said to do is good.” So I took the heads of your tribes, wise and experienced men, and appointed them heads over you, leaders of thousands and of hundreds, of fifties and of tens, and officers for your tribes. Then I charged your judges at that time, saying, “Hear the cases between your fellow countrymen, and judge righteously between a man and his fellow countryman, or the alien who is with him. You shall not show partiality in judgment; you shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not fear man, for the judgment is God’s. The case that is too hard for you, you shall bring to me, and I will hear it.” I commanded you at that time all the things that you should do. Then we set out from Horeb, and went through all that great and terrible wilderness which you saw on the way to the hill country of the Amorites, just as the LORD our God had commanded us; and we came to Kadesh-barnea. Deuteronomy 1:9-19

### **What this has to do with our church**

Some would quickly argue that the opinions of an Old Testament Midianite should have no impact on the way a 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian church operates. But this kind of organization is not fleshly. Those who say they oppose “organized religion” need to explain why they think “disorganized religion” is better. This kind of organization glorifies God by not letting individuals slip between the cracks. The Lord Jesus organized the multitudes into groups of hundreds and fifties before He fed them with a few loaves and fish (Mark 6:39-40; Luke 9:14). The apostles in Jerusalem shared shepherding responsibilities as a group, but delegated management of resources to a group of deacons (Acts 6).

The structure you see in Exodus is the seed idea that carried on into the early believers in Christ. Note some of the ways this applies to our church:

1. The struggle over church organization is the result of God’s blessings. The whole visit by Jethro was bathed in rejoicing over the work of God among His people. Certainly there were faults in the way Moses was managing the shepherding, but it was a good problem to have. People actually wanted to know what God had to say about their problems. It was the same way in Acts 6 when the elders needed deacons to put down the dissension brought about by a growing congregation.
2. No leader should have a monopoly on leadership in the church. Moses was not too big to be taught. He humbly listened to his father-in-law’s counsel (often not an easy task) and then put his suggestions into practice.
3. Leaders of God’s people should have proven character. The age of those who bear the title “elder” is not as important as the god-centered living that should come with age.
  - “men who fear God” Some churches choose those who are successful in business, but earthly leadership does not necessarily translate into the kingdom of God.
  - “men of truth”
  - “those who hate dishonest gain”

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