

**Exodus 18**  
**Israel's first convert**

**Be humble; learn and live**

You might have noticed that the actress **Gillian Anderson** triumphed recently in the **Golden Globe** awards. That was for series 3 of **The Crown**, where she played the part of **Margaret Thatcher**.

That was her second trophy in the Golden Globes, too. She was nominated four times back in the 90's for her part in the **X-Files** series, winning the top spot in 1997.

I must admit that when I not just saw her as Margaret Thatcher, but *heard* her, I was amazed at how almost chillingly she brought the Iron Lady back to life. Thatcher really polarised politics back in the 70's and 80's; you loved her or you hated her.

And you certainly never got an opportunity to interrupt her. She had, so I've heard, perfected a trick to that effect. She didn't pause to take a break in between her sentences, when people who want to get a word in subconsciously pick up on that cue and launch in with their comment. Instead, Margaret Thatcher supposedly took breaths at random times *in the middle of* her sentences, when people weren't ready for them, and so they missed their chance to contradict that formidable woman. Some would say they escaped lightly; at least she didn't then shoot them down in flames of derision!

There are quite a few rather more common little tricks you can employ to win an argument, though. You can deliberately misquote people, or at least quote them out of context. You can insist that "it's a simple question, **yes or no?**" ... when the situation is actually *not* that simple or clear-cut at all. And you can make claims that you don't have to substantiate with specific evidence. *Oh, everyone knows that ... something.* Everyone but the person you're disagreeing with, at least.

It works with religion as well as politics, of course. You don't need to talk to many people for very long to find that they believe all sorts of nonsense about the Bible ... and they will happily state these ideas very emphatically without, most likely, having bothered to read it for themselves.

So "the **Bible** is full of contradictions, everyone knows that!" In which case, could you show me a few?

"The Bible has changed beyond recognition over the years, everyone knows that!" So could you show me some of these places, perhaps?

How about the phrase "the God of the OT"? Have you heard that one? Oh you should have ... everyone knows that! No, that's a sneaky trick even to say that, because if we're not careful, we answer as if we accept that there *is* "a God of the OT" who is, by implication, different from "the God of the NT". The distinction that

people are typically trying to make there is that “the God of the OT” is mean and vindictive, whereas Jesus, now he’s OK, he’s actually quite nice. But ... don’t listen too much to that first two-thirds of the Bible, or you’ll be misled by all those nasty things that that defective “God of the OT” is said to do.

I don’t know precisely how you might try to answer that one, if someone tries it on you. I suggest you find a few passages in the OT where “the God of the OT” is quite obviously recognisably the same as “the God of the NT”, full of grace:

***“The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ...”***

(Exodus 34:6)

Gentle and caring:

***As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.***

(Psalms 103:13-14)

And if you hear people trying to say that “the God of the OT” is mean and exclusive - whereas Jesus is nice and welcoming - you could even go to today’s passage in Exodus 18.

If you think of the Exodus from Egypt as some kind of national birth, then Israel is still pretty much a baby at this time. Their national identity is not yet fully formed. They’ve had a nasty scrape - previous chapter - with the Amalekites, that’s for sure, and there’s more of that ahead of them. But Israel’s calling was never to be totally exclusive, jealously hoarding all of God’s goodness for themselves. See what God (“the *gracious* God of the OT ... and the NT”) intended, back at the start:

***“And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”***

(Genesis 12:2-3)

See that? *All* the families of the earth. And therefore I think what we might have, as we go through this section of the book of Exodus, is showing how this promise of Genesis 12 is going to work out.

Amalek swoops in without warning against Israel, and is not just defeated, but abolished:

***Then the LORD said to Moses, “Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.”***

(Exodus 17:14)

There is dishonour answered with curse. But now into the Israelite camp

comes a pagan priest ... who is converted, we'd probably describe it as nowadays. He rejoices in Israel's deliverance, he blesses God ... and he himself then finds blessing. Of course, he's not just *any old* pagan priest; he happens to be **Moses' wise father-in-law**, who **hears how God delivered his people, and becomes Israel's first convert**.

Jethro learns to worship (1-12)

Moses learns to lead (13-27)

- **Jethro learns to worship (1-12)**

***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.***

(Exodus 18:1)

I think I need to mention that there's some uncertainty about precisely when this chapter occurs in the chronology of Exodus. Plainly it's here in chapter 18, *before* the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai in chapter 20, but there are suggestions that this actually happened *after* that.

I'm not entirely sure, but I can see the point of that argument. You come to the second half of the chapter, and you see a quite settled arrangement, the people queuing up for Moses to give judgement in their minor disputes and uncertainties, and I would certainly wonder whether this could have come about pretty much immediately, only a couple of months out from Egypt, and a good chunk of that time spent on the road (or probably *off-road*) travelling, too.

And yet Moses is not yet totally worn down by the process, either - though Jethro points out that it's unsustainable, in the long term. So it hasn't been going on very long yet, by the looks of it.

I know that it still seems odd to us, when we're used to our historical accounts being delivered in strict chronological order. But there are some places in the Bible where things are plainly reported *out* of chronological order, so I think we have to assume that this is not an overwhelming priority to the Bible writers or original readers.

So I think it certainly *could* be that this event occurs *post* Sinai. And maybe all these uncertainties about laws are because those laws have only recently been delivered to the Israelites, and they're still getting to grips with how to apply them.

But in any case, news of Israel's exit from Egypt, and repelling the assault of the Amalekites ... that would be doing the rounds of the area. So "the priest of Midian", which is somewhere around this general area, would surely have heard of what is going on. And this particular man, you'll have noticed as we read through the passage, has a personal stake in all of this. This is not just any old priest of Midian; he is also Moses' father-in-law. And he has been taking take of some very special possessions of Moses, too.

***Now Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, had taken Zipporah, Moses' wife, after he had sent her home, along with her two sons.***

(Exodus 18:2-3)

We've not been told about this until now, and we aren't given the reason, either. Perhaps Moses thought it was just too dangerous for his wife and family to be around during some of these conflicts. But now it appears that things are settling down again ... and, let's face it, the Israelite camp is where all the action in the area is centred, so ... what a convenient reason for Jethro to pay a visit and see for himself.

The comment about the names of the boys is interesting, though:

***The name of the one was Gershom (for he said, "I have been a sojourner in a foreign land"), and the name of the other, Eliezer (for he said, "The God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh").***

(Exodus 18:3-4)

We've heard about Gershom before - 2:22. That's a good long way back in the story, recorded just after Moses had left Egypt 40 years back, so I really can't see him being just a little kid. He could already be a grown man. But then there's the name of this second son, whom we haven't heard of before and don't hear of again. Look at the meaning of that name that we're given here. That's a puzzle to me.

Was Eliezer born a decade or more back, and given a name that was more about future hope than actual reality as yet, a kind of prophecy built into it?

Is Eliezer only a baby, maybe only conceived before Moses sent Zipporah to safety, before the final showdown in Egypt, and now named to celebrate the nation's liberation?

Or maybe they *changed* his name recently, to celebrate God's hand in granting them this freedom?

I don't know that we've got enough to decide, to be honest; I just find it curious, that's all. But we've got some much more certain stuff to work and think through here. We're told where the reunion happened - the Mount Horeb or Mount Sinai area - either soon before or soon after all that Exodus 20 stuff.

***Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, came with his sons and his wife to Moses in the wilderness where he was encamped at the mountain of God.***

(Exodus 18:5)

And, probably according to the custom of the day, Moses is forewarned of the visit, so that all the proper decorum for the meeting of two tribal leaders can be put in place.

***And when he sent word to Moses, "I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons with her," Moses went out to***

***meet his father-in-law and bowed down and kissed him. And they asked each other of their welfare and went into the tent.***

(Exodus 18:6-7)

I wonder if that was like our British “How are you?”, or was it a bit more thoughtful and actually interested. It’s really odd, but in the last few years I’ve several times had people say to me, when we have met, *Yes, fine thanks!* ... and I know I haven’t even asked “How are you?” like I’m supposed to. It’s a bit of a shame, I think, that that is all so empty and perfunctory.

I really quite hope that Moses and Jethro actually got down to the meaning of the word here. “Welfare” is clearly what is meant, but the word that is used in Hebrew is the word that in other contexts we translate as “peace”, *shalom*. Wouldn’t it be good if, just once in a while, when we meet, we ask each other - with serious interest and concern - about one another’s *peace*?

Clearly much of Moses’ “peace” has been tied up in what has happened in the preceding chapters of Exodus!

***Then 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 come upon them in the way, and how the LORD had delivered them.***

(Exodus 18:8)

Isn’t that good, though, how Moses seems to be cutting his own leading role *out* of the picture here? This isn’t about how God has been using *him*. It’s just summarised as God being good to his people, and *God* being faithful to his promise. The Mighty-To-Save had saved his people mightily. Moses hadn’t opened up the Red Sea; *God* had. Joshua hadn’t defeated Amalek; *God* had.

And Jethro warms to all of this. *Rejoices*, actually.

***And Jethro rejoiced for all the good that the LORD had done to Israel, in that he had delivered them out of the hand of the Egyptians.***

(Exodus 18:9)

But being a believer is more than just rejoicing at hearing a good story. Remember that on that famous **Desert Island** - where I guess they allow CD’s as well as discs, nowadays - there are two great works of literature to read: the Bible and Shakespeare. You can appreciate the Bible, just as literature, without ever coming to know its author. You can marvel at the wisdom Jesus showed in the words he spoke. You can weep tears of desolation when you read of the Man of Sorrows, and then tears of joy when you read on to the Resurrection ... and still not know Christ himself.

So we see Jethro not just excited by Israel’s recent history, but, I think, now personally committing himself to the God of that history. He doesn’t just say, as people might do nowadays, *I think it’s just great that you have this faith and this experience*. Instead, he accepts it as actual truth, and acknowledges the worthiness of this God who saves his people.

***Jethro said, "Blessed be the LORD, who has delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and out of the hand of Pharaoh and has delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians."***

(Exodus 18:10)

But it's not just about things that have happened to people, other people. Something has happened to this "priest of Midian". Exactly what that priestly role might have included, I'm not sure we can really say. But it would have involved something to do with other so-called gods.

Maybe he would have been like people nowadays, reckoning that equality and diversity works in the spiritual realm, too - that all of those supposed deities were just as true and real - or equally imaginary and unreal - as all the others. Very likely he would have thought that whatever deity he worshipped was limited geographically: some power, maybe even some substantial power, in his or her own area ... but other territories belonged to other deities. But now all of that is changed.

***"I know that the LORD is greater than all gods, because in this affair they dealt arrogantly with the people."***

(Exodus 18:11)

He's maybe not yet all the way through to what we would call monotheism, the belief that there is only one God, the kind of thing that you see later on in the Bible:

***For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens.***

(Psalms 96:4-5)

But Jethro has made an enormous leap forward. A Gentile - to use a word that hadn't really been coined then - has come to faith in the one true God. The powerful God who graciously saves his people.

And it does not just affect his inward beliefs, or even the words he says; it affects his actions, too:

***And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices to God;***

(Exodus 18:12)

There's still some debate over whether he would have tried to offer those sacrifices himself, or whether maybe Aaron would have done the offering of whatever Jethro brought. I suspect the latter, but I can't actually prove that.

But do you see what has happened? This man has gone from thinking that - and being a symbol of a system that - each tribe or area or grouping will have their own god or gods, and, as we might say nowadays, "it's all good". He has gone from being an active participant in that kind of system to a more personal faith in the one

true God, and borne witness to that change of outlook by some profoundly significant actions.

It is so very similar to how some of the NT Christians were described:

***... you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.***

(1 Thessalonians 1:9-10)

Folks, way, way back, we have an example of just that kind of thing, in Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, the *former* priest of Midian. Is that what you have done, too?

Have you turned from all the various false notions about reality that are doing the rounds nowadays?

Are you intending now to serve and to worship instead "the living and true God"?

And will you refuse to hide behind simply the word "God", but gladly name the name **Jesus**, the Son of God, *the* one and only Son of the one and only God.

Do you believe that God really, really did raise him from the dead?

Do you not just accept, but have you even started to *long for* the literal, actual, physical return of this Jesus from heaven, to finally wrap up this world system and usher in something wonderful and new and *right*, like it was back at the beginning but not just "very good" ... instead, something even *better*?

And have you put your faith in Jesus now to save you from the very real, not at all imaginary, old-school, "god of the OT" kind of notion, the wrath to come on those who will continue to unbelieve and even disbelieve?

If those things increasingly characterise you, then *you* are welcome to break bread in fellowship with the people of God this morning - just as we see Jethro welcomed into that fellowship at the end of that first section this morning:

***... and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses' father-in-law before God.***

(Exodus 18:12)

And yet, although Jethro had a lot to unlearn, he also had a lot of experience of this world, and something worth listening to, as well. I think it's amazing that Moses was so ready to learn from a recent convert from paganism ... even if it was his own father-in-law. Or perhaps *especially* if it was his own father-in-law!

•            **Moses**                      **learns**                      **to**                      **lead**                      (13-27)

So Jethro takes a spin around the camp, with his eyes open, and his mind engaged. He *thinks* about what he sees.

***The next day Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood around Moses from morning till evening.***

(Exodus 18:13)

Sitting was the position of authority. That's why a king has a throne, not a lectern! But it looks as if there were plenty of people having to stand, the way it is phrased there. Just as we have phone queuing that can go on for hours nowadays, trying to get through to someone who can help you with the advice you need can be a long job.

Notice that word "judge", by the way - and don't think it's always sort of legal stuff. It may well have included things about God's Law - particularly if, as we said earlier, this happens post Sinai - but "judging", in the sense of the word here, would likely include all sorts of advice and help with decisions. It's just general leadership, in many ways.

But whereas it can work when there is a small number of people, what has grown up here is just unworkable ... and unworkable for both sides. Moses is doing this from morning to evening, and that will just slowly grind him down. And unless there's an amazingly efficient queuing system, people are going to get mighty fed up about just standing around for most of a day to get to eventually, maybe, see Moses.

I'm guessing that this has just grown and developed into what we see here, and the people who have been there while it has been growing haven't noticed what has been happening. But an outsider can see at once the craziness that has developed.

***When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, and all the people stand around you from morning till evening?"***

(Exodus 18:14)

And Moses is probably so mentally exhausted by all of this that he has no time to, as we say, "think outside the box". *There is all this need! What's the alternative?*

***And Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God; when they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make them know the statutes of God and his laws."***

(Exodus 18:15-16)

Sounds good in principle, but don't we agree with Jethro?

***Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone."***

(Exodus 18:17-18)



But here's a suggestion - and I think this sounds remarkably well-balanced, coming from such a new believer. There is just the right balance of practicality and spirituality. Listen to advice. *And* listen to God.

***"Now obey my voice; I will give you advice, and God be with you!"***

(Exodus 18:19)

Yes, you do have a critical role in all of this, Moses.

***"You shall represent the people before God and bring their cases to God, and you shall warn them about the statutes and the laws, and make them know the way in which they must walk and what they must do."***

(Exodus 18:19-20)

Moses, you're going to teach people, and you're going to pray for them. There are things that these people need to do, if they're going to follow God - and they need to know the what and the how. But Moses, you're also going to delegate!

***"Moreover, look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. And let them judge the people at all times."***

(Exodus 18:21-22)

Just as in God's church, centuries later, *reliable*, honest, trustworthy people are needed:

***... what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.***

(2 Timothy 2:2)

If anything, the integrity of those people is more important than their ability:

***... an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, ...***

(1 Timothy 3:2)

But only delegate, Moses, not abdicate!

***"Every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you."***

(Exodus 18:22)

And the result:

***"If you do this, God will direct you, you will be able to endure, and all this people also will go to their place in peace."***

(Exodus 18:23)

And you know, I think the simplicity of the next sentence is remarkable. Even faced with a win-win situation, it's possible to not embrace it wholeheartedly because *someone else* came up with the idea. Whereas this man Moses, we're told later, has a very remarkable characteristic: meekness. It's not about him. And what Jethro has said is a win-win-WIN.

***So Moses listened to the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said.***

(Exodus 18:24)

Folks, are we able to take advice - or even a rebuke - no matter, even, who has said it?

Are we willing to change the way we do things, even if they have a long and honourable pedigree, if something better comes along?

I know I have to start seriously delegating things over the next couple of years, things that I could quite easily continue to do ... but in order to make sure that the church is ready to carry on when I retire. That's why, for example, on your church meeting agendas today it says something about a "Missions Secretary", someone to take over receiving all the various mission organisation information and forwarding it onto the church as a whole, and putting appropriate stuff on the notice boards. Not because I suddenly can't or won't, but because that transition in a couple of years needs to be as smooth as I and we can make it.

Folks, we may still like to call ourselves a "Reformed" church. That's a theological term about a particular set of beliefs. But there is a danger in using that word, if we start to think we are no longer in the process of *being* reformed by the work of the Spirit of God. If we think we have arrived personally, and no longer need to change or be changed. If we think our church structures have been perfected over the years, and have to be resurrected unchanged when Lockdown starts to lift.

Even a meek man like Moses found himself trapped in a hole, by the way he sought to serve his people. It was probably his desire to serve them well that led him into working longer and longer hours, less and less effectively.

Folks, nobody needs to feel insulted if it comes to the stage when it's time to change. Worthy things can become weary things, and need to be laid to rest in honour. We need to work out what *our* sacred cows are ... and then rejoice that we can enjoy a plate of steak!

We need, like Jethro, coming to faith in the true and living God, to be humble, to learn and to live.

We need, like Moses, coming to his senses, to be humble, to learn and live.

***"If you do this, God will direct you, you will be able to endure, and all this people also will go to their place in peace."***

(Exodus 18:23)

**Be humble; learn and live**