

Exodus 18

Chapter 18 is focused on three main topics; the community's relationship with foreign nations, with God and with one another. Each of these topics is made possible by the arrival of Moses' father-in-law, Jethro. Before we look at the three topics just a note about Moses' family that arrives with Jethro. We are reminded that Moses is married and has two sons. Though we learn the names of the sons, this brief appearance will be the last time they are mentioned. This is interesting because under normal circumstances the sons of a leader would be in line for his position, but in this instance, leadership will not be passed from father to son as was done in Egypt. Thus, one more way in which Israel will be different from Egypt...at least until the rise of the kings.

The first topic is the relationship between Israel and foreign nations. To this point in the story the only relationships Israel has had with other nations have been ones of violence (slavery and war). What we learn is that Israel can get along with other nations, in this case Midian of whom Jethro is the high priest. This is a positive sign in that Israel will not always need to be in conflict with its neighbors.

The second topic is Israel's relationship with God or the gods. It is interesting that Moses asked Pharaoh to allow the people to go into the wilderness to sacrifice to their God. As far as we can tell this has not happened. Even though God has been protecting and providing for the people, there has been no overt act of worship. At the end of chapter 17 Moses builds an altar and calls it, "The Lord is my banner" but Moses does nothing with the altar. This changes with Jethro's arrival. Following the traditional greeting offered by Moses to Jethro, which was Moses bowing to and then kissing Jethro (the last kiss in Exodus) and Moses telling the story of God's mighty acts, Jethro does three things. First, Jethro acknowledges that YHWH is greater than all the gods. Second, Jethro offers burnt offerings and sacrifices to god (*Elohim*) or the gods, which is appropriate. Third, Jethro breaks bread with Aaron and the elders (note Moses is not said to be present). These actions offer us two insights. First, that God needs to be thanked for God's work and not forgotten. Second, there is to be a differentiation between priests (Jethro and Aaron), military leadership (Joshua), and secular leadership (Moses). Again, this is anti-Egypt where Pharaoh plays each of these roles.

The third topic concerns the way Israel will govern itself. What becomes apparent in Moses acting as sole judge of the people is that he is imitating Egyptian cultural norms, meaning that there is a sole ruler who makes all decisions and does so according to the guidance of the gods. Jethro notices this and offers an alternative because the work is too "heavy" for Moses (note this is the word used for Moses' arms that became too heavy holding the staff during the battle with Amalek). Instead, Jethro suggests, Moses should choose men who "fear God, are trustworthy and hate dishonest gain" and set them over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens." (This seems a herculean task considering that this division of leadership would require around 73,000 men) Jethro also hedges his advice by telling Moses to check in with God. Regardless, Moses follows this advice and in so doing begins the creation of a government not based on a single ruler, but on shared leadership. The issue that still needs to be worked out is exactly what are the laws of God that are to guide the people?

Reflection: Israel is in the process of figuring out how to become a nation. This process entails dealing with the three topics listed above, just as it was and is in the United States. It is interesting that after more than 200 years we, as a nation, have not figured this out yet. We still debate the roll of God/religion, how we elect people to office, what powers ought those people to possess, and how we are to relate to the nations around us (war, peace, immigration, trade). It seems as if some things never change.

Questions:

1. Which of the anti-Egyptian moves made by Moses/Israel do you believe to be the most important?
2. Where do you see parallels between the birth of Israel and the United States as nations?
3. Why do you think that diversified leadership for God's people matters?