

WATER, WAR & ADMINISTRATION EXODUS 17-18

Not many days after the Lord miraculously provided water for the Israelites at Marah, they journeyed to a place where there was no water to drink. At Marah, the water was unfit to drink; here there was no water at all.

Exodus 17:1 ¹Then all the congregation of the sons of Israel journeyed by stages from the wilderness of Sin, according to the command of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, and there was no water for the people to drink.

According to Numbers 33:12-14, the Israelites camped at two places before arriving at Rephidim, those being Dophkah and Alush.

The exact location of Rephidim is unknown. One possible location is the Wadi Feiran which leads up to what people think is Mt. Sinai. The other is the Wadi Refayid which, if nothing else, has a similar sounding name to Rephidim and it too is near Mt. Sinai.

Their journey was not haphazard; they were not aimlessly wandering around in the desert. It was according to the command of the Lord; He was leading them exactly where He wanted them to go. Mt. Sinai is near this place and they would need a reliable supply of water for some time. The Lord seemed to be using that fact to once again show the Israelites He was not only with them but leading them and providing for them because He knew the doubt in their hearts.

Exodus 17:2-3 ²Therefore the people quarreled [רִיב] with Moses and said, "Give us water that we may drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel [רִיב] with me? Why do you test the LORD?" ³But the people thirsted there for

water; and they grumbled against Moses and said, “Why, now, have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?”

There is an important difference between what took place at Marah and what took place here at Rephidim. This time, the people were openly challenging Yahweh and not just Moses. The first time they were also testing and rebelling against the Lord, but it was not as overt then as it was being expressed here. Quarreling with Moses was pointless. He didn't lead them there and he didn't have any power in and of himself to provide water. Quarrel, *רִיב*, means to quarrel, to be in a state of hostility and opposition to another person or group. It also means to contend or plead in the sense of bringing a lawsuit either in accusation or in prosecution. The sense here is the people were not only hostile towards Moses, but they were also testing God and accusing Him of leading them to their death. They were questioning whether or not He was really present with them. The rebellion at this place was also more serious because they had already been through this once and God had provided for them. Their lack of faith was a serious problem for them and their relationship with Yahweh.

The Israelites still hadn't learned the lesson they were supposed to learn which was trust the Lord to lead and provide. Moses recognized this and said, “Why do you test the Lord?”

Moses cried to God for guidance. He was apparently afraid they were going to murder him.

Exodus 17:4–6 ⁴So Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, “What shall I do to this people? A little more and they will stone me.” ⁵Then the LORD said to Moses,

“Pass before the people and take with you some of the elders of Israel; and take in your hand your staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. 6“Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb [הֹרֵב]; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink.” And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel.

Moses turned to God and asked for help. If the people really wanted to kill him, he didn't stand much of a chance. It's not like out in the desert there isn't plenty of ammunition in the form of rocks lying around on the ground! As Moses knew He would, God gave him instructions for providing water to the Israelites.

He was to take the same staff he used in Egypt, representing God's miraculous powers expressed through Moses, stand before a rock at Horeb, strike that rock, and he only had to stand by and watch the provision of the Lord. God could have simply caused the water to flow out of the rock, but that would not have authenticated Moses' ministry which was once again being questioned. He had Moses strike the rock in a show of divine authentication to lead the people, be God's prophet, and perform God's miracles. He was to take the elders of Israel with him which was probably meant to be a show of support for the man of God in addition to being a cadre of leaders who would witness the event. It appears that Moses, carrying the staff, and the elders passed out of the camp before the people and went to another nearby location at Mt. Horeb. The pillar of cloud led these leaders to this rock at Horeb where the cloud stood in front of it indicating it was the rock to strike. The elders would be able to lead their people back to that location in order to get the water. The staff was an implement of judgment in Egypt and there it turned the waters to blood making

them undrinkable; here it was used to provide the blessing of potable water for God's people. There are many pictures taken of split rocks which people want to claim must be the rock Moses struck, but the text never says the rock split. It only says after Moses struck the rock water came from it. It doesn't specify how and in what form that happened.

Horeb, הֹרֵב, is generally thought to be a synonym for Mt. Sinai, but it also applies to the Sinai region encompassing the small mountain range that includes Mt. Sinai. The water was located at the base of Mt. Sinai or Horeb and they had to go back and forth from Rephidim to get it, but once they moved to the base of the mountain, their water was right there at the camp. This makes sense because they would spend months at the base of Mt. Sinai and needed the water which, apart from the intervention of God and His miraculous provision, was not otherwise available in sufficient quantities for a multitude of people anywhere else in the area.

Moses named the place Massah and Meribah which represents the attitude of the people in that place.

Exodus 17:7 ⁷He named the place Massah [מַסָּה] and Meribah [מְרִיבָה] because of the quarrel of the sons of Israel, and because they tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us, or not?"

Massah, מַסָּה, means testing and Meribah, מְרִיבָה, means quarreling or contention. This incident was used as a warning to the Israelites during the Exodus and many years later.

Deuteronomy 6:16¹⁶“You shall not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested *Him* at Massah.

Psalms 95:8–10⁸Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, As in the day of Massah in the wilderness, ⁹“When your fathers tested Me, They tried Me, though they had seen My work. ¹⁰“For forty years I loathed *that* generation, And said they are a people who err in their heart, And they do not know My ways.

Even with all the miraculous works of God, the Israelites continually tested God. They had a heart problem; they refused to know the God who saved them and learn His ways. Overall, with individual exceptions along the way, this was the history of Israel and it still is. It will take a serious time of judgment like they have never seen to bring them around.

While they were camped at Rephidim, they were attacked by the Amalekites. There is no reason given for the attack, but one could suppose the everlasting hatred generated between the descendants of Jacob and Esau played a role because Amalek was Esau's grandson (Gen. 36:12, 15-16).

Exodus 17:8⁸Then Amalek came and fought against Israel at Rephidim.

The Amalekites were nomads inhabiting the desert area of Sinai, the Negev, and east into Arabia. Perhaps the reason for the assault was to keep the Israelites out of their territory, but they were also opportunists who would raid and plunder and they may have thought Israel would be an easy mark. They may also have been after the water God was providing the Israelites from the rock. However, as descendants of Esau, they presumably had familial incentives to attack Jacob's descendants. The primary factor in the attack that we cannot disregard is Satan's desire to destroy Israel; the Amalekites were one of a long

line of willing subjects, people and nations, Satan has used to try and destroy Israel. When Balaam was working for Balak he referred to Amalek as “the first of the nations” (Num. 24:20), meaning they were the first nation to attack Israel which also implies there will be more later which has, of course, proven to be true. Other theologians believe this refers only to the fact that Amalek was one of the first people groups to form a nation, but that has no basis in fact because many people groups formed after the dispersion at Babel and I favor the first interpretation. This would not be the only time the Amalekites would be a problem for Israel during the Exodus and later in their history as a nation, but during the Exodus they would ambush the weak Israelites who were struggling to keep up with the group. As a result, Moses told them that once they were in the land of Canaan they were to kill all the Amalekites.

Deuteronomy 25:17–19 ¹⁷“Remember what Amalek did to you along the way when you came out from Egypt, ¹⁸how he met you along the way and attacked among you all the stragglers at your rear when you were faint and weary; and he did not fear God. ¹⁹“Therefore it shall come about when the LORD your God has given you rest from all your surrounding enemies, in the land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven; you must not forget.

This issue was the precipitating incident for the downfall of Saul who was commanded by God to kill all the Amalekites and their livestock because of their treatment of the Israelites during the Exodus. When he failed to do so, he lost the right to have his family inherit the throne. The complete story is revealed in 1 Samuel 15.

1 Samuel 15:2–3 ²“Thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel, how he set himself against him on the way while he was coming up from Egypt. ³Now go and strike Amalek and utterly destroy all that he has, and do not spare him; but put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.’”

Moses sent Joshua to pick some men and defend the Israelites.

Exodus 17:9 ⁹So Moses said to Joshua [יהושע], “Choose men for us and go out, fight against Amalek. Tomorrow I will station myself on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand.”

It is not known where or how the Israelites obtained weapons of war with which to defend themselves. Whether they were part of the plunder when they left Egypt or they made some along the way is unstated. Perhaps some of them had the skills to do so, but would they have had the time to do all the work of obtaining the materials and then developing it into weapons on their Exodus journey? That's doubtful. What we do know is they had swords and the capability of meeting a foe, but subsequent revelation informs us they didn't have the power, skill, or sufficient weaponry to prevail apart from the intervention of Yahweh on their behalf.

Moses had the staff of God to take with Him. This staff was no charm or amulet that guaranteed victory, but it was a reminder that the miracle working God of the universe was with them which was a concept they had a problem remembering. In this case, it would be in full view of the warriors fighting below.

Exodus 17:10–13 ¹⁰Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought against Amalek; and Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. ¹¹So it came about when Moses held his hand up, that Israel prevailed, and when he let his hand down, Amalek prevailed. ¹²But Moses' hands were heavy. Then they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it; and Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side and one on the other. Thus his hands were steady until the sun set. ¹³So Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword.

This is the prototypical spiritual battle while at the same time being a very real physical battle. Satan's forces were trying to destroy God's choice people, and God was actively involved in preserving them. The staff of God was representing the fact God was with them and fighting for them. That God was totally in this war with the Israelites was reflected in the fact that when the staff was raised, Israel was winning the battle and when it was lowered, Israel began to lose the battle. In this way, the Israelites could see the only path to victory was with God; they could not and they would not win in their own strength—they didn't have any strength, especially at that point in their history as a nation. The only way to achieve the victory was total dependence on God and it was God who won this victory on their behalf. They needed to understand that Yahweh was working on their behalf not only in freeing them in Egypt and getting them safely out of the land, but He was working on their behalf throughout their journey to Canaan and would be working on their behalf even into the land itself.

Many theologians connect the raising and lowering of the staff with praying and ceasing to pray, but that wasn't the point and the text doesn't say that. The point was God was in this fight on their behalf and the staff wasn't called the staff of God for no reason.

At the end of the day, Joshua and his men defeated the Amalekite forces. After the battle, God told Moses He was going to totally destroy the Amalek-

ite people bringing to the fore the issue of a spiritual battle that continued on even after the Amalekites suffered this defeat.

Exodus 17:14–16 ¹⁴Then the LORD said to Moses, “Write this in a book as a memorial [זְכָרוֹן] and recite it to Joshua [יְהוֹשֻׁעַ], that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.” ¹⁵Moses built an altar and named it The LORD is My Banner [יְהוָה נִסִּי]; ¹⁶and he said, “The LORD has sworn; the LORD will have war against Amalek from generation to generation.”

This was something the Israelites were supposed to remember. Memorial, זְכָרוֹן, means a memorial or a commemoration; it is a place or object, in this case a book (scroll), to remind one of something. Whether or not the book refers to the book of Exodus or a separate book is not known; we don't know when Moses was commanded to write the Pentateuch.

The text is revealing that Joshua, who was first mentioned in this pericope, is being groomed for leadership to one day replace Moses. Joshua was given command of the Israelite armed forces and Yahweh wanted to make sure that Joshua understood His will to “utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.” The fact this warfare would last from generation to generation suggests the Israelites would have to engage in a prolonged struggle to accomplish God's will by blotting them out which didn't happen until King David did it. The last mention of the Amalekites is in 1 Chronicles 4:43 where it reveals they, the descendants of Simeon, “destroyed the remnant of the Amalekites who escaped.” They did not destroy them completely, however, because Haman the Agagite (Esther 3:1) was an Amalekite. He was a descendant of the Amalekite king Saul didn't kill but Samuel did. Presumably some of the line continued after

Haman, but not as a force in biblical history. Joshua, יהושׁע, means the Lord delivers and Jehovah is Savior. His name was originally Hoshea, הוֹשֵׁעַ, meaning deliverance or salvation and also refers to savior, but Moses changed it (Num. 13:8, 16).

The Lord is My Banner, יהוה נָסִי, literally Yahweh Nissi, is usually pronounced Jehovah-Nissi or, by the Jews, Adonai-Nissi. Banner or standard, נֶס, is often described as a signal with rags, meaning cloth of some sort. It was used in battles as a visible rallying point for the troops. During our civil war, men would risk their lives to pick up the fallen flag and display it in order to rally the troops. A banner could also be used to announce a victory in battle. Naval ships do this when they come back into port after a mission. The cloth banners probably came later in history; earlier they were more akin to a pole held high as a signal marker or as a signal pole. Moses was holding up the signal pole of Yahweh when he was holding up the staff of God in the sight of his fighting men. The staff was a symbol of Yahweh's presence with them as He sat on His throne supervising the battle and assisting the Israelites. Moses built an altar and named it Jehovah-Nissi. That may have served as a reminder of the ongoing battle they would face with the Amalekites as well as a memorial to their victory at that particular point in time.

Building altars as a place of worship was not an uncommon practice at the time. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob built them in several places around Canaan.

Constable wrote an excellent summary statement on the lessons God was teaching the Israelites thus far in the Exodus. “In all the crises the Israelites had faced since they left Egypt, God was teaching them to look to Him. They should do so for deliverance from their enemies (at the Red Sea), for health and healing (at Marah), and for food and guidance (in the wilderness of Sin). They should also do so for water and refreshment (at Massah-Meribah) and for victory over their enemies in battle (at Rephidim). He was teaching them how dependent they were on Him and that they should turn to Him in any and every need.”¹

Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, brought Moses' family to him.

Exodus 18:1–4 ¹Now 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. ²Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, took Moses' wife Zipporah, after he had sent her away, ³and her two sons, of whom one was named Gershom [גֶּרְשֹׁם], for Moses said, “I have been a sojourner in a foreign land.” ⁴The other was named Eliezer [אֱלִיעֶזֶר], for he said, “The God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh.”

Jethro probably knew that Moses could be found at Horeb since that is where Moses first received the call of God to service and where he was to bring the Israelites after they were freed to worship God there (Ex. 3:1, 12) and he certainly told Jethro the details of this incredible encounter with God. Once Jethro heard they were out of Egypt, he knew right where to go to find Moses.

The Midianites were also related to the Israelites because they were descendants of Abraham through his second wife, Keturah. The Midian territory

¹ Thomas L. Constable, *Thomas Constable's Notes on the Bible: Volume I: Genesis-Deuteronomy* (Fort Worth, TX: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2010), 1:220.

bordered the Gulf of Aqaba on the east side in Arabia south of Edom although some think it went west into the Sinai as well. With the exception of Jethro's relationship to Moses, they were hostile to the Israelites. It was Midianite traders who bought Joseph from his brothers and sold him into slavery in Egypt (Gen. 37:28, 36).

What Jethro heard was the account of how much God had done for Moses and the Israelites in Egypt and in bringing them safely out of their slavery. We've already noted how the people in Canaan heard these same things and were terrified of the imminent arrival of the Israelites into the land to possess it. This was an incredible thing that had just happened and the people in the Middle East knew it. Jethro, of course, was not afraid; he was probably overjoyed that his son-in-law had accomplished exactly what his God had sent him to do. Now he was reuniting Moses with his family.

Gershom, גֵּרְשֹׁם, means banishment; it relates to being a stranger in a land and Eliezer, אֱלִיעֶזֶר, means my God is help. These names describe to some extent the experience of Moses in the Exodus account and his gratitude for God's help.

Jethro was called the priest of Midian. Some theological historians believe this relates to being a prince of Midian rather than a religious figure. If he was a priest, a religious authority, the god he served is not known. Priest is not articulated; in other words, the text does not say he was the priest of Midian but priest of Midian. When the text says "the priest" in English it makes it sound like he is some sort of high priestly authority. Priest of Midian may indicate that situation, but it

may mean he was simply one of the priests of whatever pagan religious system they served.

Beware the theologians who want to over spiritualize the difference between the Amalekites and the Midianites concerning their treatment of the Israelites. Keil and Delitzsch do that in their commentary on Exodus. "The Amalekites had met Israel with hostility, as the prototype of the heathen who would strive against the people and the kingdom of God.... [But] Jethro the first-fruits of the heathen, who would hereafter seek the living God, entered into religious fellowship with the people of God. As both Amalekites and Midianites were descended from Abraham, and stood in blood-relationship to Israel, the different attitudes which they assumed towards the Israelites foreshadowed and typified the twofold attitude which the heathen world would assume towards the kingdom of God."² I'm simply trying to warn you about excessive typology that many people want to force into the Old Testament. These are not types. I mentioned the spiritual significance of the Amalekites. Jethro is a man who came to faith by means of his association with Moses, assuming he wasn't already a believer as a son of Abraham.

Some theologians believe Jethro was a believer in Yahweh before he ever met Moses. Constable wrote, "Jethro was a God-fearing man, evidently part of

² C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 10 vols., trans. James Martin (1866-1891; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, n.d.), 1:375.

a believing minority in Midian.”³ Zuber wrote, “Moses clearly held Jethro in high esteem and probably regarded him as a priest (perhaps like Melchizedek in Gn 14; or Job) of the true God. Apparently, Moses’ story served to confirm Jethro’s faith (18:11).”⁴ Whether that is correct or not—and there is no way of knowing—the text strongly suggests Jethro became a believer as a result of the witness of Moses and the Israelites and not before. Since the Midianites were descendants of Abraham, it is possible there were some people who believed in the God of Abraham and, if so, Jethro may have been one of them, but we don’t know that either. My opinion is it is a bit presumptuous to dogmatically state Jethro must have been a believer in Yahweh even before he met Moses. It seems more likely he came to faith as result of his interaction with Moses before and during the Exodus.

Jethro sent word to Moses when he was nearing the camp.

Exodus 18:5–7 ⁵Then 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. ⁶He sent word to Moses, “I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons with her.” ⁷Then 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.

These verses suggest the family was happily reunited and enjoyed some time together.

³ Thomas L. Constable, *Thomas Constable’s Notes on the Bible: Volume I: Genesis-Deuteronomy* (Fort Worth, TX: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2010), 1:221.

⁴ Kevin D. Zuber, “Exodus” in *The Moody Bible Commentary*, gen. eds. Michael Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014), 139.

Moses told his father-in-law all that had transpired. At that point, Jethro exhibited his faith in Yahweh; therefore, we may conclude that even if he hadn't been a believer before this point in time, he had now placed his faith in the God of Moses and the Israelites.

Exodus 18:8–12 ⁸Moses told his father-in-law all [כָּל] 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. ⁹Jethro rejoiced over all the goodness which the LORD had done to Israel, in delivering them from the hand of the Egyptians. ¹⁰So 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. ¹¹"Now [עַתָּה] I know [יָדַעַ] that the LORD is greater [גָּדוֹל] than all the gods; indeed, it was proven when they dealt proudly against the people." ¹²Then 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.

If Moses recounted all the Lord had done on behalf of the Israelites in Egypt and during the Exodus in bringing them out of bondage and into Sinai, he had a lot to tell him! We need to remember what we have revealed to us in the Bible is just a sketch of the actual account. These men must have spent hours talking to one another and Moses could have added a lot of detail about God's work that we have no knowledge about which would have added to Jethro's sense of the goodness of the Lord. The language used here suggests that Moses did exactly that—told him all the Lord had done on their behalf. All, כָּל, means all or every; completely, with a degree of totality. It refers to the totality of something, in this case, the story of the Israelites liberation and the subsequent Exodus.

Moses recounted the work of God done in Egypt to free the Israelites and he told Jethro about the hardships they faced on their journey out of the nation and how the Lord had delivered them from harm.

Verse 11 provides a hint that Jethro came to faith at that time. The text says, “Now I know that the Lord is greater than all the gods ...” Now, עַתָּה, means a point of time simultaneous with the narration itself and know, יָדַע, means to know, to learn, to perceive, to discern, and so on. It basically means to know something. Greater, גָּדוֹל, emphasizes the importance, size, and significance of something or someone. This is similar to saying He is “King of kings and Lord of lords” which is the name that will be written on the Messiah’s thigh when He returns at the Second Coming (Rev. 19:16). He is the supreme one over all others, real or imagined, whether human kings or false gods. Jethro learned that truth and believed it.

To be sure, the text does not explicitly say that Jethro became a believer, but his words and actions strongly suggest it. It was at this point in time that Jethro confessed that the Lord was the supreme God, the one true God, the God of all gods. When he says he knows that, I believe he is demonstrating that he has personally appropriated that truth about Yahweh who is the true God because He alone can do the things He did in Egypt and beyond. Jethro believed in and worshiped Yahweh at that time. His faith was publicly displayed when he offered sacrifices to Yahweh. Eating with the elders of Israel marked the establish-

ment of a relationship between the Israelites and Jethro which went beyond the relationship he already enjoyed with Moses.

The next day Moses assumed what must have been a customary position sitting as the judge of the people. This was probably not a daily occurrence otherwise it would have been all Moses was able to accomplish, but it must have been somewhat overwhelming when the court was open.

Exodus 18:13–16 ¹³It came about the next day that Moses sat to judge [שָׁפַט] the people, and the people stood about Moses from the morning until the evening. ¹⁴Now 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?" ¹⁵Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God. ¹⁶"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."

Anytime a group of people, small or large and this group was huge, are dwelling close together, conflicts arise and violations of community standards occurs. This requires an arbiter to make decisions in order to maintain order in the community. That was the role of the judge. Judge, שָׁפַט, means to judge or decide. It refers to adjudicating a matter between two parties in a court or in a less formal setting implying both the authority to punish and the finality of the decision reached. There were hundreds of thousands of men who could potentially bring a dispute or a problem to Moses for a decision and some problems are not quickly presented nor quickly adjudicated. It's little wonder he was judging from morning until evening.

Jethro observed what Moses was doing and he apparently realized that was quite an undertaking for one man to handle so he questioned Moses about it. Since Moses was their leader, the people naturally looked to him for resolutions to their problems which was and still is a normal thing to do. A very important element of this situation is the fact that Moses was God's prophet. Moses acknowledged that fact when he essentially said the people weren't coming to him personally for a decision, but they were coming to him so that he could inquire of God for the decision. There was no other prophet to inquire of God at this time; only Moses was empowered and capable of fulfilling that role.

On the other hand, it is a little puzzling why Moses thought he had to act as judge alone given the source of the solution that ultimately came about through his Midianite father-in-law. In terms of organizational leadership, Egypt surely had a system set up to adjudicate disputes short of Pharaoh; therefore, the fact he didn't recognize the need is a bit surprising because he would have been familiar with the Egyptian system. It seems obvious that God had not provided him with guidance on this issue and since Moses was the one God called to service, he may have thought he should exercise the duties of judge by himself until directed otherwise. That's probably true because as the leader of the Israelites, it was, in fact, Moses' obligation to be the judge, but that doesn't preclude delegation of those duties to others for the less serious cases leaving the most serious issues for Moses to judge. It is also possible that Moses was awaiting

God's instructions on this matter and perhaps God was going to use his father-in-law to provide that guidance.

Part of Moses' duties was to make known the statutes of God and His laws. This might be confusing since the Mosaic Law was yet to be made known, but it seems likely that God was giving Moses revelation along these lines to guide him in the performance of his prophet/leadership role and to provide standards for the people to maintain order prior to giving the Law.

Jethro noticed this was not a good situation and Moses would not be able to handle it this way for a long period of time.

Exodus 18:17–18 ¹⁷Moses' father-in-law said to him, "The thing that you are doing is not good. ¹⁸"You will surely wear [נָבַל] out, both yourself and these people who are with you, for the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone.

Jethro must have thought the way Moses was doing this job was not only inefficient, but dangerous to his health. He analyzed the situation from a logical perspective and seemingly disregarded any prophetic implications for Moses' role in judging the people.

Wear, נָבַל, means to wither, to languish, to fade; it refers to wearing out, drying up, or falling off. It is used of plants but is figuratively applied to human beings. People were probably frustrated and tired from standing around all day awaiting their turn to speak to the prophet and Jethro recognized that wasn't good for them either.

Jethro was careful not to suggest Moses that he quit judging the people altogether nor would he suggest Moses do anything apart from God's approval.

Exodus 18:19–20 ¹⁹“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, ²⁰then 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.

Jethro did not tell Moses to cease being the intermediary between God and the people and he told him to teach the people the statutes and laws so they would know the way they are to go. He was still their leader, he was still their judge, he was still their prophet, and he was to continue to exercise the office of prophet and the authority of leadership with God’s help.

Jethro suggested a hierarchical framework for judging the people more efficiently that didn’t involve Moses hearing every single case, but only the most serious cases.

Exodus 18:21–22 ²¹“Furthermore, you shall select out of all the people able [תִּיל] men who fear [יִרָא] God, men of truth [אֱמֶת], those who hate [שִׂנְאָה] dishonest gain [רִבְצִיעַ]; and you shall place *these* over them as leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens. ²²“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.

Jethro counseled Moses to select men who could be assigned positions as judges in a framework that increased responsibilities the closer they got to Moses. We still run things this way today. Businesses operate on this model and the military has always used it. For example, Marine Corps infantry units begin at the squad level and progress to the platoon, company, battalion, regiment, and division level each led by a progressively higher-ranking person. That is exactly what we see here only it is recorded in terms of tens, fifties, hundreds, and thou-

sands. The men in charge of tens would judge the minor disputes and the severity of the issues would move up the hierarchy according to seriousness culminating in the major disputes judged by Moses. It could also refer to the number of people involved in the dispute; the more people the higher the level of judge to adjudicate it. The judges were probably appointed according to the family units because that was how the people were naturally organized already. At the lower levels, the judges would be more available and accessible to the people. Theoretically, this system would greatly reduce Moses' case load and allow him the time to tend to all his other responsibilities.

Those who assumed the position of judge were selected based on qualifications and merit; they didn't necessarily inherit the job along familial lines and it wasn't based on cronyism or wealth.

These men were to be selected with care; they were to be able men. Able, *יָדָיִל*, refers to ability; it pertains to one who has a special ability or capability that qualifies them for a task. Then Jethro identified the characteristics of such a man.

First, these men were to be God fearing men. Fear, *יָרָא*, means reverence or fear; it pertains to respect toward a superior. Quite simply, they were to be godly men.

They were to be honest men who respected the truth. Truth, *אֱמֻנָה*, concerns one's faithfulness, reliability, and trustworthiness; it means to be in a state or condition of being dependable and loyal to a person or standard. This has vari-

ous nuances in this context. It refers to loyalty in one's relationship to God and to one's fellow Israelites. It refers to upholding the standards of impartially judging cases based on the merits of the case irrespective of the individuals involved. It refers to being faithful to the duties of the office, to reliably upholding the standards the office of judge requires, and it means the leaders who appointed him and the people he serves can trust him to do the right thing in all circumstances.

The men appointed to be judges could not be men who wanted to obtain wealth by dishonest means; it is not referring to honestly obtained wealth. Hate, *שׂוֹנֵא*, is a strong word in Hebrew meaning hate, abhor, detest, loathe, or to be hostile; it refers to having an open hostility and intense dislike to something. Dishonest gain, *בְּצֵעַ*, means ill-gotten gain, dishonest gain, valuable things obtained by theft, deception, or other immoral actions. The obvious problem associated with being a judge would be bribery; men tempted by easy money would be tempted to take bribes.

Jethro acknowledged God's preeminent position in this.

Exodus 18:23 ²³"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."

This system was to be implemented only if God concurred with it. Would this plan meet with divine approval or not? If it didn't, it shouldn't and wouldn't be used. If it was implemented, Jethro's goal was to reduce Moses' workload which would enable him to carry out all his duties without getting worn out and the people would be happier and more satisfied with a system that allowed

their disputes to be heard in a timely manner where they didn't have to spend hours standing around waiting for a hearing before Moses.

Presumably, God approved the plan, the system was implemented, and Moses summarized the results.

Exodus 18:24–26 ²⁴So Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said. ²⁵Moses chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people, leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens. ²⁶They judged the people at all times; the difficult dispute they would bring to Moses, but every minor dispute they themselves would judge.

At that point, Jethro went back to his home.

Exodus 18:27 ²⁷Then Moses bade his father-in-law farewell, and he went his way into his own land.