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MINISTRIES

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Parashah Points: Yitro – Wise is He Who Learns From Everyone

Welcome to another episode of Parashah Points—short thoughts from the weekly Torah Portion.

This week’s Parashah Point comes from Yitro, which is Hebrew for “Jethro,” and it goes from Exodus 18:1 to Exodus 20:23.

In this Torah Portion, the father-in-law of Moses, Jethro, gives Moses some organizational advice on how to judge cases among the people of Israel.

Then we read about the Israelites reaching Mount Sinai.

The parashah concludes with Israel receiving the Ten Commandments.

There’s a lot we can talk about in this Torah Portion. Today we’re going to present a thought on staying humble and learning from everyone.

In the midst of Israel’s journey in the wilderness after leaving Egypt, before they have their monumental encounter with God at Mount Sinai where they receive the Ten Commandments, the Torah speaks of a brief family reunion. Jethro visits his son-in-law, Moses, in the wilderness. During their reunion, Jethro sees Moses’ legal administration skills in action and notices some areas for improvement. And so he offers some helpful advice:

Exodus 18:17-19

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. Now obey my voice; I will give you advice, and God be with you...”

Jethro goes on to tell Moses that he is to represent the people before God and teach them God’s laws (18:19-20). In addition, Moses should establish qualified leaders of integrity over groups within Israel to judge “small matters” (18:21-22) while Moses handles the “great matters” (18:22).

Jethro's advice is very practical and effective. Moses immediately saw the wisdom in it and put the plan into action, managing God's people accordingly throughout their wilderness journey (Exodus 18:24-26). This model of establishing qualified leaders to shepherd God's people is even repeated in other places in the Torah (Numbers 11:16; Deuteronomy 1:9-18) and continues on into the New Testament (1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9).

What's interesting is that Scripture seems to represent Jethro's advice as also being *God's* instruction! Not only is Jethro's model reiterated elsewhere in the Bible, but also, there is some evidence in the text itself. In Exodus 18:23, Jethro says, "If you do this, *God will direct you, you will be able to endure...*" This is the ESV, which is representative of most English translations where the second clause, "God will direct you," is part of the "if" clause.

But several scholars have pointed out that it makes more sense grammatically to read the second clause as Jethro saying his advice is from God himself: "If you do this—God directs you—you will be able to endure..." (See Cornelis Houtman, *Historical Commentary on the Old Testament: Exodus*, pp. 420-421)

So did God give a direct verbal command to Jethro to pass on to Moses? Well, nothing in the text seems to suggest that. But Jethro's advice is nevertheless presented to us as being in alignment with God's will. Here is one how biblical scholar puts it:

Jethro also says, in an almost offhand way: God so commands this. Yet there has been no verbal command from God, and one ought not be assumed. Jethro exudes the kind of confidence in his own plan that it will in fact be in tune with God's own will for the situation. **Wise discernment of what seems prudent in this situation is believed to be just as much the will of God as a specific divine verbal communication.** One should probably assume a "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" approach to the matter (see Acts 15:28).

-Terence E. Fretheim, *Interpretation Commentary: Exodus* (Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 2010)

So Jethro's wise advice was in accordance with God's will. And Moses must have recognized this. After all, he instituted an entirely new systematic arrangement for shepherding God's people based on this advice. It seems unlikely that Moses would have gone to all that trouble just to be polite to his father-in-law.

Now, keep in mind that God had been speaking and revealing things to Moses directly since Exodus 3. Moses had a direct channel of communication with YHWH. We might ask, then, why did Moses need *Jethro*, a Midianite priest, to give him these instructions? Why didn't God just tell Moses what to do himself?

The Torah doesn't say *why* God directed Jethro to advise Moses instead of instructing Moses directly. But maybe there is a lesson here. There's a popular quote from Ben Zoma. It goes like this:

"Who is wise? He who learns from everyone."

-Ben Zoma, *Pirkei Avot 4*

Moses was literally God's chosen prophet who had just led Israel out of Egypt. He was given special revelation about God's will and laws. He worked great miracles in accordance with God's direction. Additionally, he had all of this experience as a shepherd. And yet, a Midianite priest was able to give

Moses some wise correction and instruction.

Maybe the reason God used Jethro was to remind Moses—and us—to remain humble. No matter how much we've learned, we could always learn more. We could always be corrected and shown a better way—even by those we might not expect to have worthwhile advice!

Think about it. Who was Jethro to advise Moses in how to shepherd God's people? He wasn't in Egypt during the Exodus. He hasn't been traveling and learning about YHWH in the wilderness. Sure, he was Moses' father-in-law, but what did *he* know about managing a bunch of Israelites? Well, apparently he knew *something*—because God used him to correct and advise his chosen prophet, Moses.

Don't think you're too smart that you assume you can't still learn from those not as informed or experienced as you. That's not wisdom. That's arrogance. Stay humble and open to God revealing new things to you. And don't discount the possibility that He just might just speak through the Jethro in *your* life.

Thank you for joining us for another Parashah Point!

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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