

## **The Faith of Jethro: Polytheist or Monotheist?**

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### **Introduction**

The character of Jethro, as he appears in the book of Exodus, is an enigmatic figure in the biblical narrative.<sup>1</sup> As a descendent of Midian, his ancestry goes back to Abraham (Gen 25:1–2; Exod 2:16; 3:1). Among Abraham’s children outside the covenant line, there would have been an opportunity to know about his relationship to God and his faith in divine providence. Yet polytheism was practiced among the Midianites (Num 25:16–18). This history forms a backdrop from which to examine the person of Jethro.

In the book of Exodus, Jethro appears in three distinct roles: a priest of Midian (Exod 2:16; 3:1), Moses’s father-in-law (Exod 3:1; 18:1, 6), and as an advisor to Moses (Exod 18:13–27). This article will examine the nature of the Midianite religion as portrayed in the Bible.<sup>2</sup> Then, the

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<sup>1</sup> There is a discussion regarding possible various names by which Jethro may have been identified. See Beatrice J. W. Lawrence, “Jethro and Jewish Identity: Identity Negotiation in Jewish Biblical Interpretation” (Emory University, PhD diss., 2009), 49; William F. Albright, “Jethro, Hobab and Reuel in Early Hebrew Tradition,” *CBQ* 25 (1963): 1–11; Paul E. Hughes, “Jethro,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 469.

<sup>2</sup> There appears to have been a connection between the Midianites and the Kenites as Moses’s father-in-law is called a Kenite (Judg 1:16; 4:11) as well as a Midianite (Exod 2:16–21; 3:1; 18:1; Num 10:29). The Kenites appear to have had an amicable relationship with Israel (1 Sam 15:6), but there is no information about their religious practices in the Bible. This section will not include them as part of the analysis. See Baruch Halpern, “Kenites,” *ABD* 4:17–22; G. M. Landes, “Kenites,” *IDB* 3:6–7; Paula M. McNutt,

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article's focus will center on whether the Bible's depiction of Jethro in these three roles suggests that he was a polytheist as some of the Midianites were or a monotheist who may have even worshipped the God of Abraham.

### Midianite Religion

The Midianites are not mentioned as a people group outside the Bible, making the Bible the only clear source of information about them.<sup>3</sup> They appear to have been a loosely organized conglomeration of peoples scattered over a relatively wide geographical range.<sup>4</sup> When the Midianites appear in a religious context, apart from the narratives that include Jethro, they mostly appear to participate in polytheism or magic. As an initial example, when Balak sent for Balaam to come and curse the Israelites, the elders of Midian carried objects or money associated with divination (Num 22:7).<sup>5</sup> The practice of divination was expressly condemned in the Bible (Deut 18:10; 1 Sam 15:23; 2 Kgs 17:17).<sup>6</sup> There were also Midianites present at the incident involving Baal of Peor in which Moabites and Midianites enticed the men of Israel to participate in idolatrous practices (Num 25:6, 14–15, 17–18; 31:2–3). The worship of Baal was polytheistic as Baal formed part of the pantheons of the ANE.<sup>7</sup>

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“Kenites,” *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 407; John A Thompson, “Kenites,” *ISBE* 3:6–7.

<sup>3</sup> Ernst A. Knauf, “Midianites and Ishmaelites,” in *Midian, Moab and Edom: The History and Archaeology of Late Bronze and Iron Age Jordan and North-West Arabia*, ed. John F. A. Sawyer and David J. A. Clines, JSOTSup 24 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983), 148; Wayne T. Pitard, “Midian,” *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 518.

<sup>4</sup> Carl E. Armerding, “Midian, Midianites,” *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology*, 314; R. Dennis Cole, “Numbers,” in *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 378; William J. Dumbrell, “Midian—A Land or a League?,” *VT* 25.2 (1975): 327; John I. Durham, *Exodus*, WBC 3, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Dallas, TX: Word, 1987), 20; George E. Mendenhall, “Midian,” *ABD* 4:815.

<sup>5</sup> “קסם,” *HALOT*, 3:1116; Robert A. Alden, “קסם,” *TWOT* 2:805; Victor A. Hurowitz, “The Expression Ūqsāmīm Beyādām (Number 22:7) in Light of Divinatory Practices from Mari,” *Hebrew Studies* 33 (1992): 5–15; Isaac Mendelsohn, “Divination,” *IDB* 1:857.

<sup>6</sup> David Davis, “Divination in the Bible,” *JBQ* 30.2 (2002): 121–22; Mendelsohn, “Divination,” 1:857–58; Dónal P. O’Mathúna, “Divination, Magic,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, 193–94.

<sup>7</sup> David G. Burke, “Baal,” *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 70; Cole, “Numbers,” 385–86; Adrian H. W. Curtis, “Canaanite Gods and Religion,” *Dictionary of the Old*

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Following the entrance of the people of Israel into Canaan, there are several more references to Midianite religious practices. There is an ambiguous example exemplified in the conversation between two Midianite soldiers that Gideon overhears (Judg 7:13–14).<sup>8</sup> In the narrative, one soldier recounts a dream, and another soldier interprets the dream as foretelling what the divine intervention in the outcome of the battle will be. In the ancient world, dreams were understood to be means by which the gods would communicate with humans.<sup>9</sup> In this instance a Midianite ascribes the origin of his dream to an unspecified deity, and the dream is a source of assurance for Gideon (Judg 7:15). Whether or not the Midianite dream interpreter believes that the god who delivered the dream and the god who will bring Gideon victory was the God of the Israelites is unclear from the passage.<sup>10</sup>

As Gideon engages in the battle with the Midianites, one of the Midianite kings whom Gideon and his men pursue is named Zalmunna, whose name has as a likely meaning “image” or “statue” associated with the god *Salm* or *Salmu*.<sup>11</sup> Once Gideon defeats the Midianites, the

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*Testament: Historical Books*, 135–37, 140; John Gray, “Baal (Deity),” *IDB* 1:328–29; Glenn S. Holland, *Gods in the Desert: Religions of the Ancient Near East* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 203–6; Donald B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 43–45.

<sup>8</sup> Vince Endris frames the entire narrative of the conflict between the Israelites and the Midianites and Amalekites (Judg 6:32–8:21) as exemplifying a battle between Yahweh and Baal. Endris writes, “It also seems likely that the reader/listener is supposed to understand that the Midianites and Amalekites are Baal worshipers.” Vince Endris, “Yahweh versus Baal: A Narrative-Critical Reading of the Gideon-Abimelech Narrative,” *JSOT* 33.2 (2008): 176.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel I. Block, “Judges,” in *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel*, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 160; Sally A. L. Butler, *Mesopotamian Conceptions of Dreams and Dream Rituals*, AOAT 258 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1998), 2; Arthur E. Cundall, “Judges,” in *Judges & Ruth*, TOTC 7 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 111; Joel H. Hunt, “Dreams,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, 197–201.

<sup>10</sup> A. Graeme Auld, “Gideon: Hacking at the Heart of the Old Testament,” *VT* 39.3 (1989): 261; Robin Baker states that the Midianite was a polytheist. Robin Baker, “‘A Dream Carries Much Implication’: The Midianite’s Dream (Judges VII), Its Role and Meanings,” *VT* 68 (2018): 359–60.

<sup>11</sup> “צַלְמוֹנִי,” *HALOT*, 3:1029–30; Richard S. Hess, “Israelite Identity and Personal Names from the Book of Judges,” *Hebrew Studies* 44 (2003): 32; Talia Sutskover, “The Frame of Sacrificing in Judges,” *VT* 64 (2014): 274. Nola Opperwall-Galluch suggests that the name represents an Arabic deity “*Ṣalm*.” Nola J. Opperwall-Galluch, “Zebah and Zalmunna,” *ISBE* 4:1180. Mendenhall and Kraft indicate that the word *ṣlm* meant “statue” but also became the name of the deity. Thus, the composite name would mean

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Israelite soldiers acquire gold ornaments that appear to point to the worship of a moon god (Judg 8:21, 24–26).<sup>12</sup> From the experiences of Gideon’s interactions with the Midianites, two indications hint to the incorporation of the worship of deities from the pantheon.

The last reference to the Midianites in the context of their faith appears in Isaiah 60:6. In this passage, Midian and Ephah—a name which appears as a descendant of Midian (Gen 25:4)—are identified as coming to contribute gold and frankincense to God and proclaim praises toward God.<sup>13</sup> This description of a future event, relative to

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“Salm protects.” George E. Mendenhall, “Zebah and Zalmunna,” *ABD* 6:1055; C. F. Kraft, “Zebah and Zalmunna,” *IDB* 4:939; Elizabeth J. Payne, “The Midianite Arc in Joshua and Judges,” in *Midian, Moab and Edom: The History and Archaeology of Late Bronze and Iron Age Jordan and North-West Arabia*, ed. John F. A. Sawyer and David J. A. Clines, JSOTSup 24 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983), 166. For an analysis of various iterations of the god Šalmu, see Stephanie Dalley, “The God Šalmu and the Winged Disk,” *Iraq* 48 (1986): 85–101. Moshe Garsiel suggests a different etymology. He concludes that the name means “shape, likeness.” Moshe Garsiel, “Homiletic Name-Derivations as a Literary Device in the Gideon Narrative: Judges VI–VIII,” *VT* 43 (1993): 308.

<sup>12</sup> The camels in Judg 8:21 had šaharōnīm (“crescent-shaped ornaments”) that were linked to the worship of the moon god. Block, “Judges,” 165–66; R. D. Barnett, “Gold Jewellery from Tell El-Ajjul,” *BMQ* 16.3 (1951): 77–79; Immanuel Ben-Dor, “Amulets,” *IDB* 1:122; Amir Golani, *Jewelry from the Iron Age II Levant* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 74–75; David Ilan, “The Crescent-Lunate Motif in the Jewellery of the Bronze and Iron Ages in the Ancient Near East,” in *Proceedings of the 9th International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East: June 9-13, 2014, University of Basel. Volume 1: Travelling Images—Transfer and Transformation of Visual Ideas; Dealing with the Past: Finds, Booty, Gifts, Spoils, Heirlooms; Collections at Risk: Sustainable Strategies for Managing Near Eastern Archaeology*, ed. Hans-Peter Mathys, Oskar Kaelin, and Rolf A. Stucky (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2016), 137–48; Patrick E. McGovern, “Jewelry,” *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 366–67; Payne, “Midianite,” 166; Cemal Pulak, “The Uluburun Shipwreck and Late Bronze Age Trade,” in *Beyond Babylon: Art, Trade, and Diplomacy in the Second Millennium B.C.*, ed. Joan Aruz, Kim Benzel, and Jean M. Evans (New York, NY: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008), 350–52.

<sup>13</sup> John Goldingay, *Genesis*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Pentateuch 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 394; Ron M. Serino, “A Sign in the Dark: Moses’s Cushite Wife and Boundary Setting in the Book of Numbers,” *BibInt* 24.2 (2016): 162; Bertil Wiklander, “Isaiah,” in *Andrews Bible Commentary: OT*, ed. Ángel M. Rodríguez (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2020), 894; Midian, Ephah, and Sheba as the three nations named in the verse are all identified as descendants of Abraham and Keturah (Gen 25:3–4). Richard M. Davidson, “The Children of the East,” *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 14 (2019): 62; Tony Maalouf, *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel: The Unfolding of God’s Prophetic Plan for Ishmael’s Line* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2003), 301.

Isaiah's time, depicts these descendants of Abraham participating in the worship of the God of heaven.<sup>14</sup> John Oswalt describes this event, "the prophet is explicit about why the nations bring their wealth to Jerusalem. It is not to gain favor with the Jews, or to repay them for their suffering. Neither is it because the Jews are recognized as a superior race. They bring their gifts for one purpose: *the praises of the Lord they will proclaim.*"<sup>15</sup> Here the Midianites, and Ephahites, contribute to the adoration of God and participate in worshipping Him.<sup>16</sup>

The religious practices of the Midianites vary across the scope of the Bible. The time period of Israel's desert wanderings and the period of the judges contain references to polytheistic practices among the Midianites. Yet, in Isaiah, Midianites would participate someday in the worship of the God of Israel. This study will now focus specifically on Jethro as a person, and the evidence for the nature of his faith.

### Jethro in Scripture

Jethro appears in the book of Exodus as an individual who provided assistance to Moses during his exile from Egypt. Moses, an adopted child into the Pharaoh's household (Exod 2:9–10), intervened on behalf of a slave who was a fellow Hebrew, resulting in the death of the Egyptian slave driver (Exod 2:11–12). In order to escape the threat of death leveled against him, Moses fled to Midian (Exod 2:14–15). W. Gunther Plaut suggests that the reason Moses fled to Midian was precisely because Israel and Midian shared Abraham as a common ancestor.<sup>17</sup> At a well, Moses encountered shepherdesses who were described as daughters

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<sup>14</sup> Some commentators interpret this passage as being alluded to in the visit of the Magi to Jesus (Matt 2:1–12). Dale C. Allison, "Matthew," in *The Gospels*, Oxford Bible Commentary (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 33; Craig L. Blomberg, "Matthew," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 5; Richard T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 84; Maalouf, *Arabs*, 203–4.

<sup>15</sup> John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 541. Italics in the original.

<sup>16</sup> Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Book of Isaiah: A Historical and Theological Survey*, Encountering Biblical Studies (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 230; John L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, AB 20 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 177; Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66: A Commentary*, trans. David M. G. Stalker, OTL (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1969), 359.

<sup>17</sup> W. Gunther Plaut, "Exodus," in *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, ed. W. Gunther Plaut (New York, NY: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), 389.

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of “the priest of Midian” (Exod 2:16). Moses would go on to live with that priest of Midian, Jethro, marry his daughter Zipporah, and tend his sheep (Exod 2:21; 3:1). Later, following the Exodus from Egypt, Jethro came to meet Moses and brought Zipporah with him along with Moses’s sons, Gershom and Eliezer (Exod 18:1–5). At the time that Israel left Mount Sinai, Jethro, or someone within his family, led the people on their continued journey into the wilderness (Num 10:29–31).<sup>18</sup> Jethro may have remained with Israel and settled in the land of Canaan with them (Jdg 1:16; 4:11).<sup>19</sup> By Zipporah’s marriage to Moses, and the possible settlement in Canaan with the Israelites, Jethro’s descendants would have become part of the Israelite people through Gershom and Eliezer (Judg 18:30; 1 Chron 23:15–17; 26:24).<sup>20</sup> Jethro’s path thus becomes intertwined with that of the covenant people of Israel.

#### Jethro the Priest

In Exod 2:16, the first way Jethro is identified is as *kohen madyan* (“the priest of Midian”). To be a priest in the ANE entailed a religious leadership component and service on behalf of a god involving sacrifices.<sup>21</sup> Raymond Abba points out, “The use of כהן, however, is not limited to the priests of Yahweh. It is used also of Egyptian priests (Gen. 41:45, 50; 46:20; 47:26), Philistine priests (I Sam. 6:2), priests of Dagon (I Sam. 5:5), priests of Baal (II Kings 10:19), priests of Chemosh (Jer. 48:7), and priests of the Baalim and Asherim (II Chr. 34:5).”<sup>22</sup> The term itself would not indicate something unique about priests of Yahweh, nor would Jethro’s identification by this term necessarily indicate anything about which deity he worshipped.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> For a discussion regarding the relationship of the name Hobab to Jethro, see R. F. Johnson, “Hobab,” *IDB* 2:615; R. F. Johnson, “Jethro,” *IDB* 2:896.

<sup>19</sup> Johnson, “Jethro,” 2:896–97; Thomas B. Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, ECC, ed. David N. Freedman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 410; John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 281.

<sup>20</sup> Harvey H. Guthrie, “Eliezer,” *IDB* 2:88; Theodor M. Mauch, “Gershom,” *IDB* 2:385.

<sup>21</sup> Davos W. Dommershausen, “כהן,” *TDOT* 7:64–65; Aelred Cody, “Priests and High Priest,” *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 608–9; J. Barton Payne, “כהן,” *TWOT* 1:959.

<sup>22</sup> R. Abba, “Priests and Levites,” *IDB* 3:877. See also Dommershausen, “כהן,” 7:66.

<sup>23</sup> Beatrice J. W. Lawrence, *Jethro and the Jews: Jewish Biblical Interpretation and the Question of Identity*, Brill Reference Library of Judaism 56 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 41.

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Modern critical scholars have hypothesized that the worship of Yahweh among the Israelites originated outside of Israel and that Jethro played a role in this adoption.<sup>24</sup> Bruce Wells, referring to the land of Midian, states the following,

This region is referred to as the “Land of the Shasu”—*shasu* refers to Bedouin shepherds—in two Egyptian texts found in ancient Nubia (modern Sudan) from approximately 1400 B.C. These texts mention “*Yhw* (in) the land of the Shasu.” This *Yhw* is most likely a form of Yahweh and represent a location possibly based on the Israelite name for God. This may support the conclusion that some people in that region may have been worshipping Yahweh at this time.<sup>25</sup>

Pieces of evidence like this are part of what has contributed to the conclusion among some modern critical scholars that Moses was introduced to the worship of Yahweh during his sojourn in Midian. Bernard Robinson suggests that the placement of the story at its location in Exodus 18 is intended to show Moses’s dependence on Jethro for the introduction of the worship of Yahweh among the Israelites.<sup>26</sup>

The Midianite-Kenite Hypothesis—the theory that Israelites adopted the worship of Yahweh from the Midianites, perhaps through Jethro—has some difficulties.<sup>27</sup> William Ward argues that the term *Shasu*, used by the Egyptians, was a description of people of a particular lifestyle

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<sup>24</sup> This theory is known as the Midianite-Kenite Hypothesis. For presentations of this hypothesis, see Joseph Blenkinsopp, “The Midianite-Kenite Hypothesis Revisited and the Origins of Judah,” *JSOT* 33.2 (2008): 131–53; William G. Dever, *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 26, 236–37; Pitard, “Midian,” 519; J. Philip Hyatt, “Yahweh as ‘The God of My Father,’” *VT* 5.2 (1955): 130; Juan M. Tebes, “The Archaeology of Cult of Ancient Israel’s Southern Neighbors and the Midianite-Kenite Hypothesis,” *Entangled Religions* 12.2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.46586/er.12.2021.8847>; R. de Vaux, “Sur l’origine kenite ou madianite du Yahvisme,” in *Eretz-Israel: Archaeological, Historical and Geographical Studies* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1969), 28–32.

<sup>25</sup> Bruce Wells, “Exodus,” Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 172. See also James K. Hoffmeier, Thomas W. Davids, and Rexine Hummel, “New Archaeological Evidence for Ancient Bedouin (Shasu) on Egypt’s Eastern Frontier at Tell El-Borg,” *AeL* 26 (2016): 285–305.

<sup>26</sup> Bernard P. Robinson, “Acknowledging One’s Dependence: The Jethro Story of Exodus 18,” *TNB* 69 (1988): 139–42.

<sup>27</sup> “This hypothesis. . . has received little sustained support.” Hughes, “Jethro,” 469; “The Kenite Hypothesis is not now generally accepted, since the arguments supporting it are of very doubtful validity.” Thompson, “Kenites,” 3:7.

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rather than a specific ethnic group.<sup>28</sup> Michael Hasel maintains that the reference to *Yhw* in the land of Shasu is a toponym and the correlation with an origin of the worship of Yahweh in the region is inconclusive.<sup>29</sup> Scholars have been hard pressed to establish how Israel would have settled on the beliefs that they adopted within the ANE cultural context, particularly a radical monotheism and rejection of a belief in divine coital activity and possible mortality of the deity.<sup>30</sup> Even with regard to the reliability of the stories of the patriarchs as they appear in the Bible, there is evidence that the material reflects a knowledge of ancient customs that would not have been readily available for a later composition.<sup>31</sup> This leads H. H. Rowley to state, “There is thus some reason to believe that the stories in which [the ancient customs] are embodied were also handed down, and that the substance of the stories was faithfully transmitted.”<sup>32</sup> This raises the possibility that there may have been a common source for a monotheistic belief in Midian and Israel, and this belief would then likely trace back to Abraham.<sup>33</sup>

When Jethro comes to meet Moses at the foot of Mount Sinai, Jethro pronounces a blessing in the name of Yahweh and participates with Moses in the cultic sacrificial worship (Exod 18:10–12).<sup>34</sup> The blessing

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<sup>28</sup> William A. Ward, “The Shasu ‘Bedouin’: Notes on a Recent Publication,” *JESHO* 15.1/2 (1972): 50–56. Taylor Woodcock suggests that the Shasu were a group the Egyptians generally associated with dwelling to the east of Egypt. Taylor B. Woodcock, “Noticing Neighbors: Reconsidering Ancient Egyptian Perceptions of Ethnicity” (American University in Cairo, MA thesis, 2014), 57–66.

<sup>29</sup> Michael G. Hasel, “Merenptah’s Inscription and Reliefs and the Origin of Israel,” in *The Near East in the Southwest: Essays in Honor of William G. Dever*, ed. Beth A. Nakhai, AASOR 58 (Boston, MA: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2003), 28–29.

<sup>30</sup> Theodore J. Lewis, “Israel, Religion Of,” *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 333.

<sup>31</sup> H. H. Rowley, “Israel, History of (Israelites),” *IDB* 2:751.

<sup>32</sup> Rowley, “Israel,” 2:751.

<sup>33</sup> Wells, “Exodus,” 172; Clyde T. Francisco, “Genesis,” in *General Articles, Genesis-Exodus*, rev. ed., Broadman Bible Commentary 1, ed. Clifton J. Allen (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1973), 198.

<sup>34</sup> Roy L. Honeycutt, “Exodus,” in *General Articles, Genesis-Exodus*, rev. ed., Broadman Bible Commentary 1, ed. Clifton J. Allen (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1973), 387; Thomas Dozeman suggests, “The setting of the Mountain of God in Exod 18 blurs the distinction between the Midianites and Israelites, suggesting a degree of shared religious experience.” Thomas B. Dozeman, “The Midianites in the Formation of the Book of Numbers,” in *The Books of Leviticus and Numbers*, ed. Thomas Römer, BETL 215 (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2008), 267. Jethro’s confession of faith and participation in the worship of God at the same mountain where God appeared in the burning bush and the law would be received is very suggestive of the shared religious faith.



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Jethro pronounces begins with the formula in v. 10, “Blessed be the Lord,” and later in v. 11 Jethro states, “Now I know that the LORD is greater than all gods.”<sup>35</sup> Following the Jewish captivity in Babylon, there were a number of converts to Judaism, and in Jethro’s announcement, the rabbis found a precedent for a gentile to confess faith in the Hebrew God.<sup>36</sup> The rabbis, however, expressed concern about the comparative nature of the second phrase of Jethro’s confession, leading them to infer that Jethro had previously been idolatrous.<sup>37</sup> John Calvin later shared this view, namely that Jethro retained a polytheistic faith rather than a pure monotheism.<sup>38</sup> Brevard Childs, however, argues that to take this view “is to misunderstand the Old Testament idiom by being too literal.”<sup>39</sup> He points to Ps 135:5 where the phrase appears, “For I know that the LORD is great, and that our Lord is above all gods” which would not be understood to retain vestiges of polytheism.<sup>40</sup> Childs concludes by stating, “from the formula alone Jethro’s confession could indicate either that he was a previous worshipper of Yahweh, or that he was a new convert.”<sup>41</sup> Childs misses the option that Jethro may be acknowledging that some held a belief in other gods without affirming that those other gods truly existed. Randall Bailey and Douglas Stuart understand the reference to the other gods to indicate God’s power and echo God’s promise to bring judgment on the gods of Egypt (Exod 12:12).<sup>42</sup> There seems to be sufficient evidence to indicate that Jethro’s affirmation of faith could very well be rooted in a monotheistic belief that he held prior

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<sup>35</sup> Translations are the author’s.

<sup>36</sup> Judith R. Baskin, *Pharaoh’s Counsellors: Job, Jethro, and Balaam in Rabbinic and Patristic Tradition*, BJS 47 (Chico, CA: Brown Judaic Studies, 1983), 45; David Novak, *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism: A Historical and Constructive Study of the Noahide Laws*, Toronto Studies in Theology 14 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983), 409.

<sup>37</sup> Baskin, *Pharaoh’s Counsellors*, 54.

<sup>38</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, OTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1974), 328, 333.

<sup>39</sup> Childs, *Exodus*, 328.

<sup>40</sup> Childs, *Exodus*, 328.

<sup>41</sup> Childs, *Exodus*, 329. Childs points out, “Jethro is nowhere pictured as a heathen who becomes a Yahwist.” Childs, *Exodus*, 323. See also, Dozeman, *Exodus*, 405. For a study of the blessing formula and its use in ancient Israel, see W. Sibley Towner, “‘Blessed Be YHWH’ and ‘Blessed Art Thou, YHWH’: The Modulation of a Biblical Formula,” *CBQ* 30.3 (1968): 386–99.

<sup>42</sup> Randall C. Bailey, *Exodus*, College Press NIV Commentary (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2007), 200; Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC 2, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2006), 412–13.

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to his encounter with Moses. Since Jethro came from an environment in which polytheism was practiced, he would have been familiar with the views of polytheism and would have had experience addressing them from his position as a monotheist.

Jethro's participation in the sacrificial worship adds further credence to the possibility that Jethro had previously engaged in the worship of God. Victor Hamilton states, "Jethro seems to be the officiating priest."<sup>43</sup> In Exod 18:12, Jethro is the active agent who brings burnt offerings and sacrifices before God. The passage uses two words to describe the ritual, 'olah a term used to describe burnt offerings, and zebach a general term for offerings.<sup>44</sup> Walter Kaiser argues that Jethro's participation is in bringing the animals, not in performing the actual sacrifices.<sup>45</sup> While some commentators assume that Jethro was a convert to Judaism, this would not seem to fit with Jethro's active leadership in the worship of God.<sup>46</sup> Aelred Cody asserts that this ceremony was part of a covenant that was formed between the Kenites and Israel.<sup>47</sup> His argument, however, rests on the assumption that there is material missing immediately preceding Exod 18:12 that ostensibly describes the covenant ceremony.<sup>48</sup> Jethro's leadership in worship indicates the possibility of his

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<sup>43</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 281.

<sup>44</sup> Richard E. Averbeck, "Sacrifices and Offerings," *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, 712, 715; G. Lloyd Carr, "עֹלָה," *TWOT* 2:666–668; Herbert Wolf, "זֶבַח," *TWOT* 1:233. Sarna refers to them as the two main sacrifices offered in the worship of ancient Israel Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, JPSTC, ed. Nahum M. Sarna (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 99.

<sup>45</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, "Exodus," in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, rev. ed., ed. Tremper Longman and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 469. Kaiser argues that the word לקח in the MT carries the meaning "brought," whereas the Syriac, Targum, and Vulgate read "offered." Kaiser, "Exodus," 470. Jethro is an active participant, engaged in the worship of God, with indications that he knew what to do beforehand. With Jethro having already been identified as a priest, and no description that Aaron or anyone else sacrifices the animals, it leaves open the possibility that Jethro may possibly have been the one offering the sacrifices.

<sup>46</sup> Childs, *Exodus*, 332–33; Stuart, *Exodus*, 410–13.

<sup>47</sup> Aelred Cody, "Exodus 18, 12: Jethro Accepts a Covenant with the Israelites," *Bib* 49.2 (1968): 153–66.

<sup>48</sup> Cody, "Jethro," 158. This interpretation assumes that the book of Exodus was a product of redaction rather than the product of a single composition. For an argument for the composition of Exodus by a single author, see Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 103–5; Richard M. Davidson, "Introduction to the Pentateuch," in *Andrews Bible Commentary*:

connection with the God of Abraham and acceptance of participation by Moses and Aaron would indicate the likelihood of a shared monotheistic faith.<sup>49</sup>

### Jethro the Father-in-Law

Upon Moses's flight from Egypt to Midian, the first group that Moses is said to have encountered were Jethro's seven daughters (Exod 2:16). As Moses moved in to live with Jethro, the evidence of his settlement into the land is his marriage to one of Jethro's daughters, Zipporah (Exod 2:21). This action would indicate an assumption of closeness on the part of Jethro and Moses, a closeness that may indicate a deeper bond beyond the superficial.

With regard to choices of wives, the patriarchs had already established a tradition of marrying within the family clan and emphasizing fellow believers in the same God.<sup>50</sup> Abraham had married his half-sister (Gen 11:29; 20:12).<sup>51</sup> Abraham sent his servant to find a wife for his son Isaac from amongst his family (Gen 24:2–4), a decision that appears to have been motivated by the presence of followers of the same God amongst his family.<sup>52</sup> Isaac's twins, Esau and Jacob, were encouraged to marry close relatives. Esau had married Hittite women, and his parents were not happy with the decision (Gen 26:34–35).<sup>53</sup> When Esau becomes aware of his father's preference that Jacob not marry Canaanite women, he takes the step of marrying his cousin, Ishmael's daughter, Mahalath (Gen 28:9). Isaac had also directed Jacob

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*OT*, ed. Ángel M. Rodríguez (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2020), 121–34; Kaiser, "Exodus," 336–37; Stuart, *Exodus*, 28–34.

<sup>49</sup> "The fact that a text which generates such concern for later interpreters is recorded without more explanation in the Bible suggests that in the biblical period, Jethro's presentation of a sacrifice was not considered worthy of comment." Lawrence, *Jethro*, 51.

<sup>50</sup> Russell Fuller, "Marriage," *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 496–97; Victor H. Matthews, "Family Relationships," *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, 298; Plaut, "Exodus," 660.

<sup>51</sup> Jacques B. Doukhan, *Genesis*, Seventh-day Adventist International Bible Commentary, ed. Jacques B. Doukhan (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2016), 193; Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, JPSTC (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 143; Michael L. Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 133.

<sup>52</sup> Doukhan, *Genesis*, 297.

<sup>53</sup> Doukhan, *Genesis*, 324–25; Sarna, *Genesis*, 189; Laurence A. Turner, *Genesis*, 2nd ed., Readings: A New Biblical Commentary (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), 114.

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to go to Laban, Jacob's uncle, and find a cousin to marry (Gen 28:1–2). This directive may also have carried religious connotations.<sup>54</sup> The tradition of marrying someone who was within the same tribe was even practiced by Moses's parents (Exod 2:1; 6:20).

Moses's flight to Midian appears to have been motivated by the closeness of family relation between the Israelites and the Midianites.<sup>55</sup> Within this family relation would have been the shared ancestry that traced back to Abraham which likely included a shared faith tradition.<sup>56</sup> The law that was given later expressly prohibited marriage with those who did not share the same faith of the Israelites (Exod 34:16; Deut 7:3–4). In the general marriage practices in the ANE, Plaut states, "The older system rested on the assumption that two persons will have a proper foundation for marriage if their backgrounds are generally compatible."<sup>57</sup> This brings up the issue of Moses's dispute with Miriam with regard to his "Cushite wife" in Num 12:1.<sup>58</sup> Dennis Cole suggests three possible explanations for the identity of Moses's Cushite wife.<sup>59</sup> The first possible explanation is that Cush would be a location associated with modern Sudan and thus the woman would be someone besides Zipporah.<sup>60</sup> The

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<sup>54</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Inter (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1982), 238–40; Doukhan, *Genesis*, 337; Goldingay, *Genesis*, 440–41.

<sup>55</sup> Plaut, "Exodus," 389. Plaut references a suggestion made by Harold H. Rowley that Jochebed may have been of Midianite descent. Plaut, "Exodus," 1708. If this is true, it would add further evidence of the close link between the two peoples and the basis of Moses marrying a Midianite.

<sup>56</sup> Davidson, "Children," 25–26, 28; Kaiser, "Exodus," 361; Maalouf, *Arabs*, 132–35.

<sup>57</sup> W. Gunther Plaut, "Genesis," in *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, ed. W. Gunther Plaut (New York, NY: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), 168.

<sup>58</sup> The KJV and NKJV translate the designation as "Ethiopian wife" (τῆς γυναικὸς τῆς Αἰθιοπίσσης, LXX; *uxorem aethiopissam*, Vul.). This designation, however, is geographically inaccurate. "Cush is Nubia, known as Kash or Kush in many ancient Egyptian documents, and it extends along the narrow Nile Valley between mineral-bearing deserts from (modern) south Egypt into the northern Sudan." Kenneth A. Kitchen, "Egypt, Egyptians," *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, 207. See also Edward R. Dalglish, "Cush," *IDB* 1:751; Thomas O. Lambdin, "Ethiopia," *IDB* 2:176–77; John N. Oswalt, "כּוּשׁ," *TWOT* 1:435; John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 149.

<sup>59</sup> Cole, "Numbers," 357.

<sup>60</sup> See David Adamo, "The African Wife of Moses: An Examination of Numbers 12:1–9," *AfTJ* 18.3 (1989): 230–37; Steven L. McKenzie, "Cush," *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 145; W. Gunther Plaut, "Numbers," in *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, ed. W. Gunther Plaut (New York, NY: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981),

second possible explanation is that Hab 3:7 relates a place called Cushan with the Midianites and thus a Cushite could also be a Midianite.<sup>61</sup> The third possible explanation is that Cushite was intended to be an ethnic slur referring to the hue of Moses's wife's skin.<sup>62</sup> Within the context of the three possible explanations, what is notably missing is that the religious practices of Moses's wife are not the issue raised. Regardless of whether the Cushite wife was indeed Zipporah, or if she was not, the complaint Miriam raises is not that Moses's wife is an idolater. The argument had not been raised previously either, since the time that Jethro had brought Zipporah with him to meet Moses (Exod 18:2, 5). If the issue Miriam was specifically raising was spiritual authority (Num 12:2, 6–8), then the point at which she would have attacked Moses would have been his disqualifying marriage to a woman who did not worship the same God as the Israelites.<sup>63</sup> Additionally, the relation between the Midianites and the Israelites is one that would include idolatry and an illicit relationship between an Israelite man and a Midianite woman that is resolved by Phinehas's execution of the couple (Num 25:6–18).<sup>64</sup> Several possible explanations are that Miriam and Aaron's complaint involved unstated religious issues in addition to the stated ethnic issue, or

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1099; Bernard P. Robinson, "The Jealousy of Miriam: A Note on Num 12," *ZAW* 101.3 (1989): 428–32; Ronald B. Allen, "Numbers," in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, rev. ed., ed. Tremper Longman and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 198–202. Josephus recounts in *Ant* 2.238–57 that ostensibly Moses married Tharbis, a daughter of an Ethiopian king. This marriage took place as a result of a battle in which Moses led the Egyptian army against the Ethiopians, and the princess admired Moses' skills in warfare. See Mark Balfour, "Moses and the Princess: Josephus' 'Antiquitates Judaicae' and the 'Chansons de Geste,'" *Medium Ævum* 64 (1995): 2–3; Donna Runnalls, "Moses' Ethiopian Campaign," *JSJ* 14.2 (1983): 139.

<sup>61</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Baal Peor Episode Revisited (Num 25, 1-18)," *Bib* 93 (2012): 92; Simon Cohen, "Cushan," *IDB* 1:751; Roy E. Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, NIV Application Commentary, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 590; McKenzie, "Cush," 145; Martin Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary*, trans. James D. Martin, OTL (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1968), 94; Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas, *Commentary*, 149.

<sup>62</sup> See Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 590–91, 594–95; Frank M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 204; Serino, "Sign."

<sup>63</sup> "The attack on the marriage of Moses was a pretext; the focus of the attack was on the prophetic gift of Moses and his special relationship with Yahweh." Allen, "Numbers," 199. See also Paluku Mwendambio, "Numbers," in *Andrews Bible Commentary: OT*, ed. Ángel M. Rodríguez (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2020), 295; Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 590–91.

<sup>64</sup> Dozeman, "Midianites," 261; Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 718.

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that the religious issue was not a factor because Moses's wife shared the same faith in God.

In the mysterious episode regarding circumcision, Zipporah is portrayed as obeying God's implied command and saving Moses's life (Exod 4:24–26). Moses would have already been circumcised, as this was a practice in both Hebrew and Egyptian culture (Jer 9:24–25).<sup>65</sup> Abraham had circumcised Ishmael and all the men in his household at the time that God had given him the command (Gen 17:23–27) and later circumcised Isaac after he was born (Gen 21:4). The command had been to circumcise every male of Abraham's descendants and those born in his household (Gen 17:10–14). One could reasonably conclude that this was performed on Abraham's other sons born to Keturah as the practice appears to have been widely practiced among the ancient West Semitic peoples (i.e., Israelites, Edomites, Ammonites).<sup>66</sup>

The explanation regarding the nature of the circumcision incident is obscure and much debated.<sup>67</sup> Zipporah may very well have been aware of

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<sup>65</sup> Herodotus, *Hist.*, 2.36–37, 104; Adam J. Howell, "The Firstborn Son of Moses as the 'Relative of Blood' in Exodus 4.24-26," *JSOT* 35 (2010): 71; Philip J. King, "Circumcision: Who Did It, Who Didn't, and Why," *BAR* 32.4 (2006): 48–55; John D. Meade, "The Meaning of Circumcision in Israel: A Proposal for a Transfer of Rite from Egypt to Israel," *SBJT* 20.1 (2016): 35–49; A. R. Millard, "Back to the Iron Bed: Og's or Procrustes?," in *Congress Volume Paris 1992*, VTSup 61 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 195–97; John H. Walton, "Genesis," in *Genesis–Deuteronomy*, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 89; Wells, "Exodus," 179; P. R. Williamson, "Circumcision," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 122–25.

<sup>66</sup> Herodotus, *Hist.*, 2.36–37, 104; Michael V. Fox, "The Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in the Light of the Priestly 'ôl Etiologies," *RB* 81.4 (1974): 589–90; King, "Circumcision," 48–50; Sarna, *Exodus*, 25; Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas, *Commentary*, 216; Williamson, "Circumcision," 122; Randall W. Younker, "Ammonites," in *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, ed. Alfred J. Hoerth, Gerald L. Mattingly, and Edwin M. Yamauchi (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), 312.

<sup>67</sup> Susan Ackerman, "Why Is Miriam Also Among the Prophets? (And Is Zipporah Among the Priests?)," *JBL* 121 (2002): 73–75; Bailey, *Exodus*, 96–98; Fred Blumenthal, "The Circumcision Performed by Zipporah," *JBQ* 35.4 (2007): 255–59; Kenneth A. Cherney, "The Enigmatic Divine Encounter in Exodus 4:24-26," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 113.3 (2016): 195–203; Durham, *Exodus*, 56–58; Bradley J. Embry, "The Endangerment of Moses: Towards a New Reading of Exodus 4:24-26," *VT* 60.2 (2010): 177–96; John Goldingay, "The Significance of Circumcision," *JSOT* 88 (2000): 10–14; Robert G. Hall, "Circumcision," *ABD* 1:1026–27; Christopher B. Hays, "'Lest Ye Perish in the Way': Ritual and Kinship in Exodus 4:24–26," *Hebrew Studies* 48 (2007): 39–54; Hans Kosmala, "The 'Bloody Husband,'" *VT* 12 (1962): 14–28; Julian Morgenstern, "The 'Bloody Husband' (?) (Exod. 4:24–26) Once Again," *Hebrew Union College*

the rite of circumcision but had been resistant toward carrying it out on her son.<sup>68</sup> In order for Moses to be spiritually qualified to lead the people out of Egypt, his entire family, including his wife, would need to be participants in all the rites of the covenant, especially circumcision.<sup>69</sup> To be circumcised would have been a matter of obedience to God and a recognition of his authority over his people.<sup>70</sup> By God getting Zipporah's attention, and prompting her to perform the rite, she then acknowledged God's role in the marriage despite her possible reticence for the act of circumcision.<sup>71</sup> Alice Bellis and Susan Ackerman portray Zipporah's action of circumcising her son as a priestly function.<sup>72</sup> Thomas Dozeman calls Zipporah a "ritual specialist."<sup>73</sup> Stuart points out that growing up as the daughter of the priest of Midian, she would have been familiar with the practice and its significance.<sup>74</sup> Additionally, the presence of a "flint knife" indicates that this tool, which would have been falling into general

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*Annual* 34 (1963): 35–70; David P. Pettit, "When the Lord Seeks to Kill Moses: Reading Exodus 4.24-26 in Its Literary Context," *JSOT* 40.2 (2015): 163–77; Plaut, "Exodus," 415–16; William H. Propp, "That Bloody Bridegroom (Exodus IV 24-6)," *VT* 43 (1993): 495–518; Bernard P. Robinson, "Zipporah to the Rescue: A Contextual Study of Exodus IV 24-6," *VT* 36.4 (1986): 447–61; Kimberly D. Russaw, "Zipporah and Circumcision as a Form of Preparation: Cutting Away at the Comfort Zone," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 31 (2003): 103–12; Sarna, *Exodus*, 24; Wells, "Exodus," 177–79; Williamson, "Circumcision," 124.

<sup>68</sup> Kaiser, "Exodus," 383. Plaut and Cherney suggest that perhaps the circumcision of young children was not a custom in the land of Midian. Plaut, "Exodus," 415–16; Cherney, "Encounter," 202. Childs dismisses this interpretation as inadequate. Brevard S. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 60.

<sup>69</sup> T. Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, Teach the Text Commentary, ed. Mark L. Strauss and John H. Walton (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016), 29; Michael G. Hasel, "Exodus," in *Andrews Bible Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. Ángel M. Rodríguez (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2020), 204; Williamson, "Circumcision," 124.

<sup>70</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *Abraham: Trials of Family and Faith*, Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 43–44; Gerald A. Klingbeil, "Genesis," in *Andrews Bible Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. Ángel M. Rodríguez (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2020), 162; Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, NAC 1B (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 204–5; Plaut, "Genesis," 118; Sailhamer, *Pentateuch*, 249.

<sup>71</sup> See Hamilton, *Exodus*, 83; Kaiser, "Exodus," 383.

<sup>72</sup> Ackerman, "Miriam," 73–75; Alice O. Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 104.

<sup>73</sup> Dozeman, "Midianites," 265.

<sup>74</sup> Stuart, *Exodus*, 153.

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disuse at the time of this occurrence, was available to perform the rite.<sup>75</sup> This event takes place toward the close of the Bronze Age, yet “a flint flake was used to perform circumcision in Israel and Egypt even after metal tools and weapons were readily available. They were very sharp, easily accessible and the traditional instrument for age-old rituals.”<sup>76</sup> God instructed Joshua to make flint knives to circumcise the men of Israel upon crossing the Jordan River into Canaan (Josh 5:2). While flint was readily available in Canaan at the time, there appears to be some preparation involved in making the knives.<sup>77</sup> The availability of the tool appears to indicate that the writer assumes the preparedness of Moses and Zipporah to engage in a circumcision.<sup>78</sup>

Regardless of the responsibility of whom had failed to circumcise the child and for what reason, the narrative indicates that Zipporah is the recipient of communication from God, she is aware of what action to take to defuse the situation, and effectively carries it out.<sup>79</sup> James Bruckner goes as far as to say,

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<sup>75</sup> Trent C. Butler, *Joshua 1–12*, 2nd ed., WBC 7a (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 333; Roland K. Harrison, “Flint, Flinty (Rock),” *ISBE* 2:315; Honeycutt, “Exodus,” 321; Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus*, trans. Johan Rebel and Sierd Woudstra, vol. 1 of *Historical Commentary on the Old Testament*, ed. Cornelis Houtman, Willem S. Prinsloo, et al. (Kampen: Kok, 1993), 435–36; Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary*, OTL, ed. G. Ernest Wright et al. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1962), 50; Steven A. Rosen, “Arrowheads, Axes, Ad Hoc, and Sickles: An Introduction to Aspects of Lithic Variability Across the Near East in the Bronze and Iron Ages,” *Lithic Technology* 38.3 (2013): 145–47; Plaut, “Genesis,” 118.

<sup>76</sup> Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas, *Commentary*, 81. “Although metal knives were available, flint knives were probably more surgically efficient.” Daniel K. Bediako, “Joshua,” in *Andrews Bible Commentary: OT*, ed. Ángel M. Rodríguez (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2020), 370; Cherney, “Encounter,” 197.

<sup>77</sup> Hélène M. Dallaire, “Joshua,” in *Numbers-Ruth*, rev. ed., Expositor’s Bible Commentary 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 890. Francesco Manclossi and Steven Rosen categorize different flint tools according to different purposes. Those for ad hoc use involved simpler production whereas those for ritual use involved more complicated production. Francesco Manclossi and Steven A. Rosen, “What We Can Learn from the Flint Industries at Tell Es-Sâfi/Gath,” *NEA* 81 (2018): 83. For a description of the process of making flint tools, see Britt Hartenberger, Steven A. Rosen, and Timothy Matney, “The Early Bronze Age Blade Workshop at Titris Höyük: Lithic Specialization in an Urban Context,” *NEA* 63 (2000): 55–56.

<sup>78</sup> Kaiser, “Exodus,” 385.

<sup>79</sup> J. Alec Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, *The Bible Speaks Today: Old Testament*, ed. J. Alec Motyer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 93.



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It is also certain that Zipporah understood the situation, acted to save her family, and satisfied the Lord's concern. In doing so, this Midianite woman proved her commitment to the God of Abraham who commanded circumcision as an 'everlasting covenant' (Gen. 17:1–14). Her action resolved the ambiguity of Moses' identity as a Hebrew who was raised in Pharaoh's house and married to a Midianite woman.<sup>80</sup>

As Bruckner points out, one would expect there to have been questions among the Israelites if Jethro and Zipporah were polytheistic idolators. Zipporah did indeed demonstrate a commitment to the rite of circumcision which in both the Israelite and Midianite traditions could have been traced back to Abraham.<sup>81</sup> This would indicate a connection with God and his directions to his people.<sup>82</sup>

Zipporah then can be understood through various inferences to have been a follower of the same God as the Hebrews.<sup>83</sup> This information regarding the God of the Hebrews would have likely come through her father. That Moses would live in the company of Jethro for 40 years (Acts 7:30) and that Jethro's daughter would appear to have had a knowledge of the God of heaven would indicate that there was a religious affinity between Moses and Jethro. Under the circumstances of Moses's marriage to Jethro's daughter and the information made available about her, this information provides additional likely evidence that Jethro was a follower of the God of his ancestor Abraham just as was Moses.

**Jethro the Advisor**

The book of Exodus also portrays Jethro in an advisory role to Moses. The encounter between Moses and Jethro as recorded in Exod 18:13–27 provides a foundation and basis for the development of the governance structure of Israel during their desert wanderings and their subsequent conquest and settlement in the land of Canaan. After the

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<sup>80</sup> James K. Bruckner, *Exodus*, NIBCOT 2, ed. Robert L. Hubbard and Robert K. Johnston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 54.

<sup>81</sup> Cherney, "Encounter," 202.

<sup>82</sup> Cherney, "Encounter," 201; Herbert L. Jackson, "Invisible Woman: Zipporah" (Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, MTS thesis, 2010), 21.

<sup>83</sup> "Though called a 'Cushite Woman' (Numbers 12:1, R.V.), the wife of Moses was a Midianite, and thus a descendant of Abraham. In personal appearance she differed from the Hebrews in being of a somewhat darker complexion. Though not an Israelite, Zipporah was a worshiper of the true God." Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1958), 383.

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record of the joint sacrifices and covenant meal between Moses and Jethro, Jethro observes Moses's approach to governance of the people of Israel and suggests an alternate approach that involves training various qualified leaders among the people to whom he would delegate most of the responsibilities he was carrying (Exod 18:21–22). Moses accepts Jethro's advice and implements it in the leadership of Israel (Exod 18:24–26).

A primitive role of ancient priests was that of providing oracular guidance to those who would seek out their insights. Davos Dommershausen states, "In the early period, the primary function of the priests was oracular. Whenever a difficult decision has to be made, the people (or individual Israelites) ask the priest as official mediator for a divine oracle."<sup>84</sup> In this particular narrative, Moses fills that role of providing divine guidance in his interactions with the people, but in the same passage Jethro has been identified as the priest of Midian (Exod 18:1). Jethro's offer of advice comes with the added imprimatur that this counsel is accompanied by a divine blessing. Jethro states in Exod 18:19, "and God be with you!" and he follows this up in Exod 18:23 with the protasis, "if you do this, and God will direct you."<sup>85</sup> Jethro's statement can be interpreted to mean that his instruction has its origin in God.<sup>86</sup>

Jethro's advice and assertions place him in a position in which he is portrayed as having insight from God that Moses at this point in the narrative does not have. Roy Honeycutt comments, "The authority with which Jethro spoke for God. . . suggests that he occupied a special role in the Midianite-Israelite structure which gave to him the power to speak in this manner to Moses."<sup>87</sup> Jethro distinctly speaks authoritatively to Moses on God's behalf.<sup>88</sup> In relation to Jethro's declaration of the divine origin of his advice, John Durham states, "This assertion shows Jethro to be far more than simply the respected patriarch he is ordinarily made out to be. He is functioning toward Moses much as he is telling Moses *he*

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<sup>84</sup> Dommershausen, "כהן," 7:67. See also Abba, "Priests," 3:881.

<sup>85</sup> The New JPS Translation renders Exod 18:23 as "If you do this—and God so commands you." Sarna, *Exodus*, 101. The two phrases appear in the NKJV as "and God will be with you" (Exod 18:19) and "If you do this, God will direct you" (Exod 18:23). The translation of Exod 18:23 is also reflected in the CSB, NASB, NIV, RSV.

<sup>86</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, 252; Lawrence, *Jethro*, 52; William H. Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, AB 2, ed. William F. Albright and David N. Freedman (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1999), 632, 633.

<sup>87</sup> Honeycutt, "Exodus," 388–89.

<sup>88</sup> Bruckner, *Exodus*, 168.

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should function toward the people of Israel.”<sup>89</sup> Jethro is—in this instance, appearing in the narrative before Moses receives the law from God himself—providing the voice of God to the one who will witness God first hand.

Jethro emphasized that Moses should rely on direction and wisdom from God in his exercise of the leadership and administration of the people. This assumption is clear in Jethro’s statement in Exod 18:19 where he states, “you shall represent the people before God, and bring their cases to God.” Jethro did not qualify the statement by referring to the deity as “your god,” he instead refers to the deity using language that would be indicative of a fellow believer in the same God. This becomes another piece of evidence pointing to Jethro’s shared belief in the same God of Abraham.

The following chapter emphasizes the uniqueness of Israel among the nations of the earth (Exod 19:5). The uniqueness that characterized Israel would be theirs as a result of obeying God’s instructions and thus increasing the differentiation between them and the surrounding nations.<sup>90</sup> This uniqueness is emphasized by the use of the term *cegullah* which may be translated “special treasure,” a term indicating priceless property which God uses to characterize his special relationship with Israel.<sup>91</sup> Nahum Sarna points to how notable the narrative of Jethro’s advice is when he states, “The narrative is remarkable in several ways, not least because so important an Israelite institution as the judiciary is ascribed to the initiative and advice of a Midianite priest.”<sup>92</sup> If Jethro was in fact a pagan priest who worshipped other gods and had perhaps only moments before converted to the worship of the God of heaven, the uniqueness of Israel as a people who followed God’s instructions in a way that was not seen in the nations around—and who had special revelations from God about him—would be necessarily undermined by their reliance on Jethro’s advice for their governing structure.

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<sup>89</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, 252. Italics in the original.

<sup>90</sup> R. Alan Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 2, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 144–45; Noth, *Exodus*, 157.

<sup>91</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, 262–63; E. Lipiński, “הַלְלוּ,” *TDOT* 10:148; Kaiser, “Exodus,” 473.

<sup>92</sup> Sarna, *Exodus*, 100. Sarna also points out that David and Solomon relied on foreign help in accomplishing their goals. Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel* (New York, NY: Schocken, 1996), 127. While the reliance on Jethro is unusual, it is not without other examples in the OT.

### Conclusion

The enigmatic character of Jethro provides a fascinating insight into the Pentateuch's portrayal of the nature of ancient Israel's relationship with fellow descendants of Abraham and fellow worshippers of the God of Abraham. Given that the Midianites were descendants of Abraham through Keturah, Abraham had likely instructed his sons in the worship of the God who had made a covenant with him. Among the descendants of Midian, though some adopted polytheistic practices, some memory of the ancestry of Abraham would have been retained. Then Jethro, as a descendant of that line, would have had the possibility of retaining the worship of his ancestor Abraham.

Jethro is portrayed in various roles in the book of Exodus. He is portrayed as the priest of Midian, and though the term priest has wide application in Hebrew to sacerdotal duties relating to various deities, Jethro's priestly portrayals are uniquely focused on the worship of the God of the Hebrews. Jethro confesses faith in the God of the Hebrews and leads in offering sacrifices to him in conjunction with Moses, Aaron, and the elders of Israel. Jethro is also portrayed as Moses's father-in-law, and Moses's marriage to a Midianite woman was not singled out as a cause for concern regarding his spiritual leadership of Israel. The identity of Moses's Cushite wife in Num 12:1–2 is not clear, and the nature of Miriam's challenge may have implied some religious elements, but religious concerns are not the primary issue Miriam raises. In the instances in which Zipporah is named, she acts in a way consistent with a believer in the same God as the Hebrews. She even receives communication from God and responds appropriately in performing the rite of the covenant sign on her son. The third role in which Moses is portrayed is that of advisor to Moses. The great lawgiver of Israel is portrayed as receiving instruction from a non-Israelite with regard to how to organize the administration of the people of Israel. In the course of providing the advice, Jethro asserts a divine source of the advice and emphasizes Moses's need to submit to the divine will.

When the various pieces of evidence are considered, Jethro appears to be portrayed in the Pentateuch as a monotheist who is a fellow worshipper of the God of the Hebrews.<sup>93</sup> This suggests that the worship

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<sup>93</sup> "The Lord directed his course, and he found a home with Jethro, the priest and prince of Midian, who was also a worshiper of God." White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 247. "Jethro and his family had been devoted worshippers of the true God." Ellen G. White, "A Doomed People," *Signs of the Times*, August 24, 1882.

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of the God of heaven was not limited to those inside the covenant community and that Israel did not have exclusive access to the God of heaven.<sup>94</sup> Though the Pentateuch emphasizes God's election of Israel as a people whom he had selected for his special purposes (Exod 19:5–6), this does not create an inimitability regarding the worship of the God of Abraham. In fact, God was willing for his people to receive instruction and counsel from those outside the covenant community, and even look favorably on shared worship. The portrayal of Jethro would offer an appeal toward professed followers of God to recognize those of differing faith traditions who may very well worship the same God. This recognition can afford opportunities for dialogue, mutual edification, and growth. The story of Jethro gives just such a case.

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<sup>94</sup> Another example of a worshipper of God outside of the Israelite community is Melchizedek (Gen 14:18–20). Doukhan, *Genesis*, 214–15; Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1967), 121–22; Klingbeil, “Genesis,” 159–60; Plaut, “Genesis,” 106–7; Andrew E. Steinmann, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 1 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 163.