

JOURNEY TO SINAI
EXODUS 15:21 - 18:27

I am YHWH who heals you

22Then Moses ordered Israel to set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water.

23When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter. That is why it was called Marah.

24And the people complained against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" **25**He cried out to YHWH; and YHWH showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.

There he made for them a statute and an *edict* and there he put them to the test. **26**He said, "If you will listen carefully to the voice of YHWH your God, and do what is right in his sight, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians; for I am YHWH who heals you."

27Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees; and they camped there by the water.

The 'wilderness of Shur' is where Hagar encountered YHWH (Genesis 16:7). 'Three days' is a way of speaking of a period that is more than one day and less than a week.

'Marah'(mārâ) means 'bitterness'. The fact that they 'found no water'(15:22), and the use of 'bitter' four times in verse 23 to describe the undrinkable nature of the water, highlights the extreme nature of their plight. Understandably they 'complain'(lûn, 15:24). This word, occurring here for the first time in Exodus, will emerge as a key theme of the desert journey.

YHWH, who 'heard their cry' in Egypt (3:7), hears their cry again and guides Moses to a piece of wood that makes the water drinkable. The imagery behind the story may come from folklore which understood the oleander to have healing properties. The point being made here is indicated by the verb 'show'(hôrâ, from yârâ). It is the root of the word Torah (tôrâ). It is impossible for an Israelite to read this text without being reminded that true healing comes from listening to and obeying the Torah (see Psalm 1:1-2; Sirach 38:5). Hence the mention (15:25-26) of 'statute'(ḥōq), 'edict'(mišpat), and 'commandment'(mišwâ). The word 'right' (15:26) has the image of not deviating from the way; that is, from the Torah.

YHWH will meet their needs, but they must listen and obey. We are being prepared for the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. God's offer of grace is unconditional. However, it will not be forced upon us, or have its effect automatically. We must be open to welcome grace, and to allow it to bear fruit in our lives.

Testing (nāsâ, 15:25) will also become a key theme during the desert journey. Their thirst was a test of their trust in YHWH's leading them. In this scene there is no suggestion that they failed the test. Later, however, things will deteriorate. For the moment they are being reassured. To the solemn 'I am YHWH' of 6:2ff is added 'who heals you'(rāpâ, 15:26). Sirach recalls this scene in his reflection on God's use of medicine to heal (38:4-8).

The Exodus happened on the fifteenth day of the *first* month (12:18). As in the previous scene, the people ‘complain’ (16:2; 15:24), and as in the previous scene YHWH hears their cry and responds.

However there is a significant difference. The previous scene began by describing a situation of grievous need: ‘they found no water’ (15:22). This scene begins with their complaint (16:2). Here we are witnessing a failure in faith, in spite of the crossing of the Red Sea (14:31), and in spite of the way God supplied water to them when they were thirsty (15:25).

God promises to rain down bread from heaven. They are to gather only enough for the day (compare ‘give us this day our daily bread’, Matthew 6:11). We hear again the word ‘test’ (16:4; 15:25), and once again it is about obedience to the Torah. The Hebrew word translated ‘instruction’ (16:4) is *tôrâ*. The ‘instruction’ referred to is hinted at in verse five: it is the observance of the sabbath.

The expression ‘draw near to YHWH’ (literally ‘to the face of YHWH’, 16:9) is a liturgical one, summoning the people to assemble in the sanctuary. For the first time we meet the word ‘glory’ (*kābôd*; 16:10). The ‘cloud’, revealing but hiding the presence of YHWH, has been guiding them ever since they began their journey (13:21; 14:19,20,24).

¹The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt.

²The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of YHWH in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh-pots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

⁴Then YHWH said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. ⁵On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.”

⁶So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “In the evening you shall know that it was YHWH who brought you out of the land of Egypt, ⁷and in the morning you shall see the glory of YHWH, because he has heard your complaining against YHWH. For what are we, that you complain against us?”

⁸And Moses said, “When YHWH gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because YHWH has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against YHWH.”

⁹Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, ‘Draw near to YHWH, for he has heard your complaining.’” ¹⁰And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of YHWH appeared in the cloud.

¹¹YHWH spoke to Moses and said,
¹²“I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am YHWH your God.’”

¹³In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the bread that YHWH has given you to eat.

¹⁶This is what YHWH has commanded: ‘Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.’” ¹⁷The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. ¹⁸But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed.

¹⁹And Moses said to them, “Let no one leave any of it over until morning.” ²⁰But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was angry with them. ²¹Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted.

As in the case of the plagues (see page 66), the imagery used in this story is based on experience: the landing of migratory birds in the Sinai and the sugary secretion from an insect that lives on the sap of the tamarisk bush. For the storyteller, however, the focus is on God’s miraculous intervention. The manna is ‘bread from heaven’(16:4). It is the unconditional gift of God’s gracious love.

The Hebrew for ‘What is it?’(16:15) is *mān hū*, the name given to the food (see 16:31, translated there as ‘manna’).

In 16:4-5, YHWH’s instructions to Moses were that the people gather the ‘bread from heaven’ ‘day by day’. Here, miraculously, no matter how much they gathered, it met their needs exactly, an ‘omer’(a measure between one and two litres) per person.

Verse eighteen is quoted by Paul (2Corinthians 8:15).

Moses adds the instruction that none is to be left over till the next day. YHWH had said: ‘I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not’(16:4). Here we discover that ‘they did not listen to Moses’(16:20). They were unable to eat the food left over – it ‘bred worms and became foul’(16:20). ‘Moses is angry with them’(16:20).

Earlier, the priest authors linked three religious observances to the Exodus: the festival of Passover, the festival of Unleavened Bread, and the rite of redemption of the firstborn (see page 68). Here they link the observance of the 'holy sabbath' (šabbat godeš), including the solemn rest (šabbātôn) to the giving of the manna. Both 'sabbath' and 'solemn rest' occur here for the first time.

They concluded their account of creation with these words:

On the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

– Genesis 2:2-3

Here for the first time, the people are instructed to keep the seventh day as a special day of rest dedicated to YHWH. This observance became especially important as an identifying religious observance during the Exile, when other practices associated with the temple were no longer possible. Here the priests link the observance of the sabbath back to Moses and their origins. That God wants the sabbath kept is demonstrated by the freshness of the manna the following morning, in spite of 16:21.

Because of the wonderful ways in which God showed his care at this time, the desert journey is seen as a honeymoon time for Israel (Hosea 2:14; Jeremiah 2:2; Deuteronomy 32:10ff). Verse 28 introduces another theme. The journey is not easy, and we have already heard that the trials of the journey are a test of their obedience (see 15:25-26; 16:4). We have just heard that 'they did not listen to Moses' (16:20). Now YHWH says:

How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and instructions?

– Exodus 16:28

We are being introduced to the tradition, developed especially in the Book of Numbers, that focused on the people's infidelity.

²²On the sixth day they gathered twice as much food, two omers apiece. When all the leaders of the congregation came and told Moses, ²³he said to them, "This is what YHWH has commanded: "Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy sabbath for YHWH; bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil, and all that is left over put aside to be kept until morning."

²⁴So they put it aside until morning, as Moses commanded them; and it did not become foul, and there were no worms in it.

²⁵Moses said, "Eat it today, for today is a sabbath for YHWH; today you will not find it in the field. ²⁶Six days you shall gather it; but on the seventh day, which is a sabbath, there will be none."

²⁷On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, and they found none.

²⁸YHWH said to Moses, "How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and instructions?

²⁹See! YHWH has given you the sabbath, therefore on the sixth day he gives you food for two days; each of you stay where you are; do not leave your place on the seventh day."

³⁰So the people rested on the seventh day.

Manna kept as a memorial

³¹The house of Israel called it manna; it was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey.

³²Moses said, "This is what YHWH has commanded: 'Let an omer of it be kept throughout your generations, in order that they may see the food with which I fed you in the wilderness, when I brought you out of the land of Egypt.'"

³³And Moses said to Aaron, "Take a jar, and put an omer of manna in it, and place it before YHWH, to be kept throughout your generations."

³⁴As YHWH commanded Moses, so Aaron placed it before the covenant, for safe-keeping.

³⁵The Israelites ate manna forty years, until they came to a habitable land; they ate manna, until they came to the border of the land of Canaan.

³⁶An omer is a tenth of an ephah.

The 'bread from heaven'(16:4) was called 'manna'(mān, 16:31, see 16:15). Aaron (the priest) is instructed by Moses to keep an omer of the manna in a jar 'before YHWH'(16:33), that is, in the tabernacle (temple). He obeyed by placing it 'before the covenant'('ēdût, 16:34). To this point 'covenant' has translated the Hebrew b'rit. 'ēdût adds the notion of something tangible that can witness to the covenant. As they are reminded of the covenant, the manna will remind them of YHWH's gracious love.

God sustained Jacob in a desert land, in a howling wilderness waste; he shielded him, cared for him, guarded him as the apple of his eye.

– Deuteronomy 32:10

In spite of their lack of faith and obedience, YHWH saw that they did not lack food throughout the 'forty years'(16:35) of their journey in the wilderness.

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Jesus, too, knew what it was like to journey in a wilderness and to experience hunger. He taught us that our real hunger can be satisfied only 'by every word that comes from the mouth of God'(Matthew 4:4, quoting Deuteronomy 8:3).

John has a lengthy reflection on Jesus as the manna from heaven, given 'for the life of the world'(John 6::52; see 6:25-58). This is illustrated in a scene found in all four gospels – a scene filled with allusions to God's giving of the manna (see John 6:4-14; Mark 6:32-44 and 8:1-10; Matthew 14:13-21 and 15:32-39; Luke 9:10-17). Jesus reveals God's love in his person and in his deeds and words. Everyone is invited to come and eat this 'spiritual food'(an expression used by Paul of the manna, see 1Corinthians 10:3). This 'eating' is expressed ritually in the Eucharist, the 'hidden manna'(Revelation 2:17).

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The Letter to the Hebrews reflects on the meaning of the sabbath rest for the disciples of Jesus (Hebrews 3:7 - 4:13). The author is referring to the entrance into the final 'Promised Land' of eternal communion with God in Christ. He continues the tradition that focused on the infidelity of the people, and, quoting Psalm 95:7-11, he warns his readers not to harden their hearts, but to listen to God's voice.

This follows the same stereotyped pattern that we found in 15:22-26. It begins with a real need, which leads to a complaint, followed by Moses' interceding and a miracle in which God meets their need.

Here, however, unlike 15:22-26, the question is asked: 'Why do you test YHWH?'(17:2). To this point God has been doing the 'testing'(nāsâ; see 15:25; 16:4; and Genesis 22:1). This scene builds on the previous one, highlighting the people's failure to trust: 'Is YHWH among us or not?'(17:7). Their complaint (17:3) echoes 16:3.

Moses, fearing for his life, appeals to God, who tells him to go ahead to Horeb (17:6), and to strike the mountain (šûr) with the staff. Our mind goes back to God's first encounter with Moses at Horeb, when the staff was given 'divine' powers (4:1-5). The 'elders of Israel'(17:6) witness the gushing of water from the sacred mountain.

'Massâ'(17:7) means the place of 'testing'(nāsâ); 'M^crîbâ' means the place of dispute (rîb).

The imagery is based on the experience of discovering a spring under a rocky surface. The story as presented here focuses on the miracle of God's intervention to provide water for his thirsty people. A parallel story is found in Judges 15:18-19.

The scriptures return to this scene as a warning not to put God to the test.

O that today you would listen to his voice!
Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the
proof, though they had seen my work.

– Psalm 95:7-9 (quoted Hebrews 3:7-9)

He split rocks open in the wilderness, and gave
them drink abundantly as from the deep.
He made streams come out of the rock, and
caused waters to flow down like rivers.
Yet they ... tested God in their heart ...
Even though he struck the rock so that water
gushed out and torrents overflowed.

– Psalm 78:15-20

¹From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as YHWH commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.

²The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test YHWH?"

³But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?"

⁴So Moses cried out to YHWH, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."

⁵YHWH said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go.

⁶I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the *mountain*, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink."

Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested YHWH, saying, "Is YHWH among us or not?"

The Water of Life

The Isaiah School draws on this scene to encourage their contemporaries to dare the journey back through the desert to Judah:

I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys;
I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water.

– Isaiah 41:18

I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.

– Isaiah 43:20-21

They did not thirst when he led them through the deserts;
he made water flow for them from the rock;
he split open the rock and the water gushed out.

– Isaiah 48:21

YHWH will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places,
and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of YHWH;
joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.

– Isaiah 51:3

Hence God's call:

Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters ...
I will make with you an everlasting covenant.

– Isaiah 55:1,3

Elsewhere in the scroll of Isaiah we read:

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

– Isaiah 12:3

YHWH will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places ...
and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

– Isaiah 58:11

The psalms are full of this imagery. Only God can satisfy the thirst of our souls:

He opened the rock, and water gushed out; it flowed through the desert like a river.

– Psalm 105:41

He turns rivers into a desert, springs of water into thirsty ground ...
He turns a desert into pools of water, a parched land into springs of water.

– Psalm 107:33,35

Jesus' disciples saw him as God's answer to our thirst. Paul writes:

Our ancestors all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock
that followed them, and the rock was Christ.

– 1Corinthians 10:4

John alludes to this scene when the soldier strikes the body of Jesus on the cross:

And at once blood and water came out ... These things occurred so that the scripture
might be fulfilled ... 'They will look on the one whom they have pierced.

– John 19:34,37

In Jesus God is, indeed, 'with us' (Exodus 17:7; see Matthew 2:23; 28:20).

The Amalekites are associated with Edom (Genesis 36:12) and with the northern section of the Sinai peninsula, near Kadesh (Genesis 14:7). Since the battle recorded here happens near ‘Rephidim’ (see 17:1) which is near Horeb (17:6), either Sinai/Horeb is near Kadesh, or the Amalekites ranged over a huge area.

‘The mountain’ (ha gib‘â) mentioned in verse nine is presumably Horeb. Moses has ‘the staff of God’ (17:9; see 4:20), the vehicle of divine power. As with the plagues and the crossing of the Red Sea, when he raises the staff, divine power influences the battle. His ‘arms’ (yād) are raised, one holding the staff, the other, presumably, calling down God’s power from heaven.

For the first time we are introduced to Joshua (yehôšūa‘: ‘Yahweh saves’). This is the first battle waged by Israel, a battle sanctioned and supported by YHWH. Though it is a defensive battle, not an aggressive one, it is the beginning of an idea that will permeate the Torah; namely, the assumption that because Israel is God’s chosen people, Israel’s enemies are necessarily God’s enemies (17:14-16). We touched on this idea in the Introduction (page 32). Hur’s name is probably the Egyptian ‘Horus’, the falcon headed God symbolising the divinity of the Pharaoh. We are told later that Hur is a prince of Judah (31:2).

Verse fourteen is the first mention of writing. The idea may be that the record of this victory is to be etched onto the rock on which Moses was sitting at Horeb. Note the mention of ‘writing’ and ‘reciting’, an indication of the place of oral tradition.

A number of elements of Israel’s life as a nation come together in this passage, and are linked back to Moses: the army, the mediation of the priesthood (Aaron) and the monarchy (Hur), and writing.

The point of the battle cry in verse sixteen seems to be that Israel is to rally to YHWH’s banner. The translation ‘banner’ (17:16) requires an alteration of the Hebrew text from the unknown ‘kēs’ to ‘nēs’ (17:15). The Hebrew letters ‘k’ (כ) and ‘n’ (נ) are easily confused.

⁸Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. ⁹Moses said to Joshua, “Choose some men for us and go out, fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the *mountain* with the staff of God in my hand.”

¹⁰So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. ¹¹Whenever Moses held up his *arm*, Israel prevailed; and whenever he lowered his *arm*, Amalek prevailed.

¹²But Moses’ *arms* grew weary; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held up his *arms*, one on one side, and the other on the other side; so his *arms* were steady until the sun set. ¹³And Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the sword.

¹⁴Then YHWH said to Moses, “Write this as a reminder in a book and recite it in the hearing of Joshua: I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.” ¹⁵And Moses built an altar and called it, YHWH is my banner. ¹⁶He said, “A hand upon the banner of YHWH! YHWH will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.”

¹Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moses and for his people Israel, how YHWH had brought Israel out of Egypt. ²After Moses had sent away his wife Zipporah, his father-in-law Jethro took her back, ³along with her two sons. The name of the one was Gershom (for he said, "I have been an alien in a foreign land"), ⁴and the name of the other, Eliezer (for he said, "The God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh"). ⁵Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, came into the wilderness where Moses was encamped at the mountain of God, bringing Moses' sons and wife to him. ⁶He sent word to Moses, "I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you, with your wife and her two sons." ⁷Moses went out to meet his father-in-law; he bowed down and kissed him; each asked after the other's welfare, and they went into the tent. ⁸Then Moses told his father-in-law all that YHWH had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardship that had beset them on the way, and how YHWH had delivered them. ⁹Jethro rejoiced for all the good that YHWH had done to Israel, in delivering them from the Egyptians. ¹⁰Jethro said, "Blessed be YHWH, who has delivered you from the Egyptians and from Pharaoh. ¹¹Now I know that YHWH is greater than all gods, because he delivered the people from the Egyptians, when they dealt arrogantly with them." ¹²And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices to God; and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses' father-in-law in the presence of God.

The last time we heard of Jethro was when he had farewell to Moses as Moses set off for Egypt (4:18), accompanied by Zipporah (4:20-25), and their 'sons' (4:20; see Acts 7:29). 'Gershom' was named earlier (2:22). 'Eliezer' (from 'ēli, 'my God', and 'āzār, 'help') is named here for the first time. 'Sent away' (18:2) may imply divorce. Whatever happened, the story has her back with her father.

'The mountain' (18:5) is Horeb (17:6), where YHWH first encountered Moses when he was a shepherd caring for Jethro's sheep (3:1). The meeting here provides a pause to look back over all that has happened since their last encounter.

Jethro, the priest of Midian, rejoices to hear Moses' account of 'all the good that YHWH had done to Israel' (18:9). He 'blesses' YHWH (18:10); that is to say, he praises YHWH for the ways in which YHWH has blessed his son-in-law and the people of Israel (compare Genesis 24:27). He praises God in the language of Israel's faith (18:11).

When YHWH commissioned Moses to be his instrument in liberating the Israelites, he promised to be with him, and offered as proof: 'You shall worship God on this mountain' (3:12). The promise is realised here when Jethro, the priest of Midian, offers 'a burnt offering and sacrifices' (18:12; see 10:25). The 'burnt offering' is completely consumed by fire. The 'sacrifices', having been offered to God, are shared in a sacred meal by Jethro, Moses, Aaron and the elders 'in the presence of God' (18:12). The story seems to have no problem in a priest of Midian leading the cult.

Just as the authors of Exodus have no difficulty reporting the story of a priest of Midian leading a sacrifice on God's holy mountain (3:5; 15:13), so they have no difficulty in God revealing his will to Moses through the same priest.

This is a theological reflection on what it is that is essential in Moses' ministry. Moses is presented first of all as providing people with answers when they came to him seeking God's will. The expression 'inquiring of God' (18:15) is used for going to a sanctuary seeking an oracle. Here it covers arbitrating in civil disputes as well as instructing them on 'statutes and instructions of God' (18:16).

Jethro begins by pointing out what is essential to Moses' role. There is a danger that in trying to do everything himself, Moses will neglect his essential role. 'Having people around him from morning to evening' (18:14), means he has no time to 'stand before God and bring their cases before God' (18:19). Unless he does this, how can he enlighten the people concerning God's will (18:20)?

What Ezekiel has to say about the essence of the prophetic ministry is relevant here. He begins with the image of a sentinel warning of approaching danger and concludes:

I have made you a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me.

– Ezekiel 33:7

Coming as this passage does just before the section on the giving of the Law, it provides a critical context in which to understand the role of leadership in relation to the Law.

¹³The next day Moses sat as judge for the people, while the people stood around him from morning until evening. ¹⁴When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, while all the people stand around you from morning until evening?"

¹⁵Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God. ¹⁶When they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make known to them the statutes and instructions of God."

¹⁷Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. ¹⁸You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. ¹⁹Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you!

You should represent the people before God, and you should bring their cases before God;

²⁰teach them the statutes and instructions

and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do.

²¹You should also look for able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain; set such men over them as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. ²²Let them sit as judges for the people at all times; let them bring every important case to you, but decide every minor case themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. ²³If you do this, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people will go to their home in peace.” ²⁴So Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said. ²⁵Moses chose able men from all Israel and appointed them as heads over the people, as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. ²⁶And they judged the people at all times; hard cases they brought to Moses, but any minor case they decided themselves. ²⁷Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went off to his own country.

These verses take the reflection of 18:13-20 a step further. How is Moses’ unique and normative role perpetuated in the life of the people of Israel, and in particular by those responsible for ensuring justice? The Book of Deuteronomy has a much more extensive reflection on the same issue, and examines four institutions in Israel that exercise different areas of institutional leadership: the judges (17:6-13); the king (17:14-20); the priests (18:1-8); and the prophets (18:9-22).

Here in Exodus, the focus in Jethro’s words, given as a command of God (18:23), is on those whose office it is to ensure the administration of justice. Placed here, just before the giving of the Torah, the authors of Exodus are insisting that civil administration in the administration of justice is part of covenant responsibility. It is a sharing in Moses’ charismatic, prophetic office, and is to be an expression of God’s justice. The essential point is brought out clearly in Deuteronomy where, at the beginning of his last will and testament, Moses says:

You must not be partial in judging: hear out the small and the great alike; you shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God’s. Any case that is too hard for you, bring to me, and I will hear it.

– Deuteronomy 1:17

Moses obeys God’s command given through his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, who leaves Horeb and returns ‘to his own country’ (18:27).