

Article

Jethro and Moses in Dialogue (Exodus 18: 8–26): Ethics of Communitarian Responsibility

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Abstract: Jethro's dialogue with his son-in-law, Moses, in the Book of Exodus 18: 8–26 can be summarised according to the four-fold elements of subsidiarity, communitarian responsibility, delegation, and synodality, which lead to focus in life. The Elder priest of Midian, in north-western Arabia, advises his son-in-law to practise subsidiarity and communitarian ethical responsibility by undertaking the fundamental task of teaching the precepts, statutes, and instructions that would form the backbone of the twelve-tribe nation of Israel. Subsidiarity and delegation were to be exercised by different levels of leadership, together with Moses himself, in the choice of the exemplary leaders who would both teach Israel and judge minor issues among its people. Finally, synodality is advised by Jethro so that the People of Israel and their leaders can reach their ultimate aim in the Promised Land in peace. Subsidiarity, communitarian responsibility, delegation and synodality would bring Israel as a nation gathered around their one God, YHWH, according to the aim for which they were called from slavery in Egypt to freedom in Canaan.

Keywords: ethics education; communitarian ethics; values education; religious education; holistic formation; education in responsibility



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1. Introduction

Jethro, the Elder priest of Midian, in north-western Arabia (Mendenhall 1992), instructed his son-in-law, Moses, to practise subsidiarity and communitarian ethical responsibility by undertaking the fundamental task of teaching Israel the precepts, statutes and instructions that would form the backbone of the twelve-tribe nation of Israel gathered by YHWH, the God of Israel. Subsidiarity and delegation were to be exercised by different levels of leadership, together with Moses himself, in the choice of the exemplary leaders who would both teach Israel and judge minor issues among its people. However, this profane advice on managerial skills would lead to Israel's exclusive focus on YHWH. Synodality was advised by Jethro so that the People of Israel and their leaders could reach their ultimate aim in the Promised Land in peace. Although this pericope has been studied in the context of the Moses cycle in biblical exegesis and theology (Albright 1963; Coats 1973; Fretheim 1991; Fuchs 1987; Hughes 1994, 2003), the application of this text as a model for an ethics of communitarian responsibility is a new endeavour.

2. The Context

The context in which this situation arose in the life of Moses as a leader, prophet, and teacher of the People of Israel in the text from the Book of Exodus was not occasioned by an inundation of overwhelming profane work, but by the fundamentally religious tasks of the discernment and leadership of the same People of God. After Jethro heard about what God had done with Moses and all Israel (Exodus 18: 1), Moses recounted what God did for his people, especially in their exodus from Egypt and in their wanderings in the desert until their arrival at the Promised Land. It seems that the priest of Midian was already open to the information that Moses was due to share with him (Exodus 18: 1). Moses explained to

him what God had done with him and Israel, and Jethro believed in the Lord YHWH, as the God who is greater than all other gods.

Exodus 18, within which the pericope of vv.8–26 is framed, finds the People of Israel in the existential situation (*Sitz im Leben*) of their exodus out of slavery and bondage in Egypt, but wandering far away from Mount Sinai (chapter 19) and, thus at some distance from receiving the commandments (chapter 20), which were to be crucial to their lives and aims. The issue of why the author refers to “the statutes and instructions of God” (Exodus 18: 16.20) when Israel had not yet reached Sinai, the mountain of God (Houston 2001), remains a subject of debate. The question posed by its location may be considered best in light of the importance of this reunion between Moses and Jethro in Exodus 18. Exodus 18 is set at the encampment at the mountain of God before Israel’s arrival (18: 5, in view of 19: 1–2), and Moses is at trouble to apply and interpret God’s prescriptions and instructions for living in the covenant before they are given and before the covenant is offered and then made. Discrepancies of this magnitude cannot have been overlooked by the compilers of Exodus. A reason, one that overrides considerations of logical or chronological order, must be sought for the location of this chapter just before Exodus 19 instead of after chapter 24, when the covenant is solemnised, or after chapter 34, when the covenant is renewed and Israel prepares to leave Sinai. An acceptable reason is perhaps a thematic one. The Exodus compilers were for a number of reasons eager to have “one” Israel before the momentous events at Sinai (Durham 1987).

The name Moses, which loomed large in early Jewish and early Christian writings, and which towered over Pentateuchal history, plays a major role not only in later rabbinic, Christian, and even Greco-Roman traditions, but also occupies a prominent place in the Qur’an and the Islamic tradition (Cazelles 1998). In essence, Moses can serve as a bridge between most cultures, peoples, and religions. According to the Hebrew Scriptures, Moses had a unique status among many peoples, possessed superhuman traits (e.g., Deuteronomy 34: 11), and was a prophet (Deuteronomy 34: 10), priest (Exodus 40: 29), leader of Israel (Numbers 33: 1; see Acts 7: 40; Hebrews 3: 16), poet (Deuteronomy 31: 22), miracle worker (e.g., Numbers 20: 11), lauded hero of the exodus (e.g., Psalm 77: 20), and a mediator between God and his people, Israel (Exodus 17: 10–13), as well as the interpreter of God’s words (Deuteronomy 12: 8–10), and the founder of Israel’s law, religious culture, and political administration (Chavalas 2003).

He was born to Levite parents after the Pharaoh decreed the death of all new-born Hebrew boys. Rather than drown Moses, his mother set him on the Nile shallows, where he was discovered by the Pharaoh’s daughter. The princess raised Moses as her own son, employing his natural mother as a wet nurse (Exodus 1: 22–2: 10). The Pharaoh’s daughter named him *Mōshēh*, interpreting his name as “Rescued (Hebrew, *māshāh*) (Clines 2001a) from the water” (Exodus 2: 10). Given by the Egyptian princess, the name Moses should have been Egyptian. However, if understood as Hebrew, it ought to mean not “rescued from the water,” for which a passive participle, *māshûy*, would have been required, but “rescuer from the water.” The vowel pattern *qōtēl* is a regular one for the formation of the active participle with roots of the triconsonantal type. The participle is in nearly all respects an adjective (Waltke and O’Connor 1990). Had this been the case, the name would have been prophetic: the leader who rescued Israel through the waters of the Red Sea (Exodus 14: 16–30). The name is most likely derived from the Egyptian *m-ś-y*, “give birth to,” with a theophoric element (as in Tut-moses) (Cazelles 1998). At the same time, the Pharaoh’s daughter adopted him and wanted to bring him up as her own child because her children were not “good” (Hebrew, *tôvîm*). In this context, this would mean that they were not healthy, as was Moses (see Exodus 2: 2). However, could Moses the Hebrew assimilate the frame of mind, the customs, the laws, and the national spirit of Egypt? It seems not, since he could not accept the sight of an Egyptian citizen behaving unethically towards a Hebrew slave, and killed the perpetrator (Exodus 2: 11–12). As a Hebrew himself, it seems he did not grasp the idea that his people were enslaved and had no rights. The Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament interprets this issue as follows: “By faith Moses, when he

was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the People of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin" (11: 24–26).

The occasion on which Moses became Jethro's son-in-law, as the husband of Jethro's daughter, Zipporah (Exodus 2: 21), was one of deep tension, with deep-seated sexist and gender discrimination, one of male bullying and arrogance in a male-dominated society, represented by the male shepherds' preference over female shepherdesses (Jethro's daughters—Exodus 2: 16–21), who made way for the males to fill their herds' troughs with drinking water first, even though the shepherdesses arrived first.

Reuel (Exodus 2: 18), later called Jethro, was a priest of Midian (Exodus 2: 16)—a completely different caste from that of Moses. The two were from totally distinct nations—a Hebrew–Egyptian against an Arabian Midianite. The pairing of the completely different figures of Moses and Reuel/Jethro is a paradigm of the intertwining of cultures, and trans-cultural and inter-cultural dialogue. In our case, this intermingling and dialogical intercourse translated itself at a point in the faith-sharing experiences that led Moses to give testimony to Jethro of what God had done with Israel, to Jethro's welcoming of this account, and to the faith in YHWH as the God above all other gods. Jethro's meeting with Moses takes us back to Israel's slavery in Egypt. In Genesis 37: 25, a caravan of Ishmaelites (referred to as Midianites, Jethro's people, in v.28) were moving down from Gilead to engage in the spice trade in Egypt. In v.28, these Midianite traders bought Joseph, son of Jacob, from his brothers and took him to Egypt to sell as a slave. In our text, Jethro, the Midianite priest—probably using the same spices as those in which the traders dealt to offer them in his cult—gives advice to the Hebrew–Egyptian Moses. Furthermore, in v.36, the Midianite traders sell Joseph to Potiphar, captain of the guard of the Egyptian Pharaoh. In Egypt, Joseph was to rise to power, saving both Egypt and its surrounding peoples from famine. However, a time came when "a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph" (Exodus 1: 8). This was the beginning of Israel's slavery in Egypt. Israel was to give testimony about YHWH before the nations and let them know what the Lord had done to them for their salvation from slavery (see, e.g., Genesis 12: 1–3; Exodus 9: 13–14; 10: 1–2; Deuteronomy 4: 5–9; Joshua 9: 9–10; Isaiah 43: 8–10; Ezekiel 5: 14–15; Psalm 9: 1–2.11.14; 72: 18; 77: 14–15; 106: 8).

3. The Dialogue

Moses tells Jethro "all that the Lord had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardship that had beset them on the way, and how the Lord had delivered them" (v.8). Should we interpret this Moses' sharing of his faith with his father-in-law as teleological? We have to say that, after having been gathered together as one people by YHWH through Moses, the aim (Greek, *télos*) of the People of Israel was as follows: "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain" (Exodus 3: 12). The Lord God's formation of a people of his own was surely the aim of the People of Israel, which Jethro, although a Midianite priest, understood: "Jethro rejoiced for all the good that the Lord had done to Israel, in delivering them from the Egyptians" (v.9). The author of Exodus highlights this teleology through a literary device, explicitly using the Tetragram name for 'The Lord' (Hebrew, *YHWH*) four times in the first four verses, together with a double use of 'God' (Hebrew, *'elōhîm*), always in the attribution of what he did in favour of Israel and against Egypt.

Moses, son of Hebrew Levite parents, brought up in the court of Egypt, witnessed to the Midianite priest, Jethro, through what we today would call "narrative catechesis." A true victory indeed for God himself that the Midianite priest would joyfully acknowledge (vv.9–10) God YHWH as the God above all other gods. As an aside, this had taken place in a New Testament context, we would have used the term "evangelisation," since the Greek root word *euangélion* refers to the good news of victory brought by messengers from the battlefield to their king and the prize they carry with it (Friedrich 1964).

Jethro was given testimony of the power of YHWH and began to believe in the one true God of the Hebrews as the God above all others, a belief referred to as henotheism (Goldingay 1988; Sawyer 1984). Although some scholars see Jethro's declaration in vv.10–11 as an indication of his turn to Yahwism (see 2 Kgs 5: 15, in the leprous Syrian general Naaman and Elisha), it is likely that Jethro merely acknowledges that Moses' deity, YHWH, is more powerful than all other deities (Craghan 1998; Green 2022; Dozeman 2018). He even worshipped YHWH—he not only embraced the Hebrew faith, but also its religion. He worshipped YHWH in front of and together with the Hebrew Elders, meaning that it was God himself who willed all this. It seems that this kind of faith-sharing takes place in a prominent manner, even if all that is shared is what the Lord has done with the witness. Durham (1987) opines that the theory that the Israelites and the Midianites, variously connected with the Kenites, had a common faith and entered into a mutually beneficial covenant, a historical event reflected in Exodus 18, cannot be grounded in the evidence that Exodus 18—and indeed the Old Testament as a whole—proffers to confirm or to disprove in detail.

4. Faith Sharing

According to v.14, Jethro identified the faith-sharing experience and triggered the dialogue that led to the communitarian, co-responsible, and communitarian aspect of faith: "When 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?' Moses said to his father-in-law, 'Because the people come to me to inquire of God. When 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.'"

Through faith-sharing in an inter-cultural context, through narrative catechesis, Moses became the signpost of God for Jethro (vv.15–16). In v.16, the biblical author shows that Moses already had an inkling as to the right way to share his leadership responsibility: teaching the People God's ways, his commandments and decisions, thus educating the People entrusted into his hands in the faith and in ethical behaviour.

"Biblical faith is theistic" (Wright 1998). It is based on monotheism (Goldingay 1988), or at least henotheism, the existence of one living personal God, and sets the whole of human life in response to him. Old Testament ethics is, therefore, primarily a response to God, his covenant, who he is, and what he has done. From this perspective, we can verify that the Jethro–Moses dialogue is built upon these three fundamental elements of biblical ethics. In vv.15–16, Moses explains the situation that Jethro questions concerning his son-in-law, who sits all day with the people to pass judgment on them, so that they can respond to YHWH's will and his covenant and obey him: "Because the people come to me to inquire of God. When 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." Secondly, in v.23, Jethro promises Moses that if Israel obeys YHWH and responds willingly to his commandments, "all these people will go to their home in peace." However, we must keep in mind that the promise that Israel will receive YHWH's will in the commandments and will be able to enter the Promised Land and, thus, "come home in peace", is foretold by YHWH in the event of the burning bush in Exodus 3. There, YHWH promises: "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain" (Exodus 3: 12). From this point onward, from Mount Sinai and the reception of the commandments, there was no turning back on the journey to the Promised Land.

Thirdly, the attitude of sharing the exploits of the Lord with others so as to help them believe in the God of Israel can be seen recurring throughout the Bible. In a special manner, the Psalms reflect this attitude in the joyful atmosphere of singing: "I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds. I will be glad and exult in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High . . . Sing praises to the Lord, who

dwells in Zion. Declare his deeds among the peoples . . . so that I may recount all your praises, and, in the gates of daughter Zion, rejoice in your deliverance" (Psalm 9: 1–2.11.14). A similar claim can be made of Psalm 77: 14–15: "You are the God who works wonders; you have displayed your might among the peoples. With your strong arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph" (see also, among others, Exodus 15: 6; the Gibeonites to Joshua in Joshua 9: 9–10; Psalms 72: 18; 86: 10; 105: 5; 106: 8).

This is similar to Mary's actions in the Magnificat: "for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name" (Luke 1: 48–49). She shared with Elizabeth, proclaiming what God had in fact done with her, without humiliating herself; she accepted that God had done great things with her, and in her.

The following passage reveals the command given by Jesus to the possessed man of Gerasa after he cast the demons out of him: "As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. But Jesus refused, and said to him, 'Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you'. And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed" (Mark 5: 18–20).

Jethro's was a perfect turning towards YHWH, a discovery of the true God among all other gods because of the sharing by Moses of God's exploits with his People. Furthermore, this turning led to a perfect end: Jethro recognised the true God, YHWH, and gave him sacrificial worship, together with the Community of Israel, through its representatives.

5. Formation in Faith

Jethro delved deeper into Moses' and Israel's ethical behaviour, indeed, into their formation in faith (Dumbrell 1995). This formation in faith is deeply rooted in the covenant (Williamson 2003) between Israel and YHWH, to the extent that the covenant relationship formed the basis of Israel's ethic, which was at all times responsory, as prophetic preaching always presupposes (Wright 1998). Israel's daily life required ethical conduct that was appropriate to the set of relationships with God through which it existed, which were translated into commandments and precepts. Jethro showed Moses how this could not continue; he gave signs to Moses that this was not ethical, not even God's will: "Moses' father-in-law said to him, 'What you are doing is not good. You 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'" (vv.17–18). Jethro pushed towards an ethical formation and education, seeking to give fresh and informed responses to new ethical situations, which developed as Israel grew, and as life as one united people seemed to become more complex and multi-faceted.

According to the well-known legal maxim, "Justice delayed, is justice denied." The maxim is attributable to William Ewart Gladstone, who also stated: "But above all, if we be just men, we shall go forward in the name of truth and right, and bear this in mind, that when the case is ripe and the hour has come, justice delayed is justice denied" (Platt 1993). However, while Gladstone is considered the author of this maxim, which he pronounced during a House of Commons debate on 16 March 1868, earlier occurrences of the phrase exist. The Rabbinic Tractate Pirkei Avot 5, 8 states that: "Our Rabbis taught: . . . The sword comes into the world, because of justice delayed and justice denied . . ." The medieval Sephardic Jewish rabbi and philosopher Moses ben Nachman, commonly known as Nachmanides (1194–1270) understood the advice given in our case by Jethro to Moses in Exodus 18: 22, to judge the people at all times, as suggesting that Israel needed more judges because potential litigants would otherwise suffer injustice due to their inability to find a judge to hear their case. In the context of our discussion, if legal redress or equitable relief to an injured party among the People of Israel is available, but is not forthcoming in a timely fashion due to a lack of judges and justice wielders, this is effectively the same as having no remedy at all. What Moses was doing—deciding all cases by himself—was not ethical precisely because, being the sole judge, he could not deal with all cases fairly and in reasonable time.

If the legal system acts too slowly to resolve legal issues, either because cases are overly complex (see vv.22.26), or because the system itself is overly complex or overburdened (see vv.14.18.22), justice is delayed and, consequently, it is not served. Individual cases may be affected by judicial hesitancy in making decisions (see v.16). The persistent failure to decide matters in a timely manner results in injustice. An example of such a case is mentioned by Jesus in his didactic parable of the widow and the unjust judge in Luke 18: 1–8: every time that the widow requests justice from the judge against her opponent, he is shown as an unjust judge, even if this solely due to his hesitation in arriving at a final decision (Sciberras 2015).

If the situation was “not good (Hebrew, *lō’-thôb*)”, then it had to change. It was so “not good (*lō’-thôb*)” that it overwhelmed Moses and even the people. The reference to the fact that the task is “too heavy for you (Hebrew, *kî kâbêd mimmêkā haddābār*); you cannot do it alone”, means that the responsibility was breaking Moses, and God does not need the leader to break to save his people. Jethro indicated that his advice would be based on God’s will: “God be with you (Hebrew, *wîhî ‘elôhîm ‘immāk*)” (v.19).

6. Three Elements for Good Leadership in Faith

6.1. Formation and Teaching

Formation and teaching are the first steps and elements in good leadership and vision seeking; their aims are the formation of and teaching to the people what they themselves should shoulder. The formation of the ethical and religious values formation of the People of Israel through the teaching of the commandments and the precepts of God was a very significant aspect of society at large, in that Israel could, through this formation, understand the importance of shouldering its responsibilities. This was ethics intertwined with religion within an educational perspective. “Teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do” (v.20). The Hebrew expression “*‘et-hadderek yēlku bāh*” (literally, “the way they are to go in it”) refers to the ethical way of behaving (Brown et al. 1957), rather than a walk from one geographical point to another. Israel, and most probably even Moses, did not know the way to the Promised Land or where it lay. This formation was of fundamental significance not only for the safeguarding of ethical teaching in itself (“the way they are to go and the things they are to do (Hebrew, *‘et-hamma’asêh ‘ashêr ya’asûn*)”), but also for safeguarding the interests of the Israelites, who were the main recipients and who suffered most when this ethical formation was lacking in Moses and their leaders. “Moses’ father-in-law said to him, ‘What you are doing is not good. You 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’ (vv.17–18). Furthermore: “So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. If 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” (vv.22–23).

6.2. Sharing of Responsibility

The sharing of responsibility is highlighted by the author in v.21. It is translated into co-responsible leadership, subsidiarity, and communitarian leadership (Cole 1995) as a second element of good leadership in faith. Andreas Føllesdal defines the principle of subsidiarity as follows: “The ‘principle of subsidiarity’ regulates authority within a political order, directing that powers or tasks should rest with the lower-level sub-units of that order unless allocating them to a higher-level central unit would ensure higher comparative efficiency or effectiveness in achieving them” (Føllesdal 1998). In simpler terms, Eeva Pavy describes the general aim of subsidiarity as the attempt “to guarantee a degree of independence for a lower authority in relation to a higher body or for a local authority in relation to central government. It therefore involves the sharing of powers between several levels of authority” (Pavy 2022). The necessity of defending and promoting the original expressions of social life is emphasised by the Church in the Encyclical *Quadragesimo anno*,

in which the principle of subsidiarity is indicated as the most important principle of “social philosophy.”

Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so it is an injustice and, at the same time, a grave evil and disturbance of the right order to assign to a greater and higher association tasks that lesser and subordinate organisations can perform. Every social activity ought, by its very nature, to furnish help to the members of the social body, and never destroy and absorb them (Pope Pius XI 1931, as quoted in (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004, 105, no. 186); see also (Pope John Paul II 1991), as quoted in (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004, 167, no. 291)).

The principle of *Mutatis mutandis* can be applied to Jethro’s request to Moses, but it is aligned with God’s will if it is put into practice. Benedict XVI speaks of subsidiarity in these terms: “Subsidiarity respects personal dignity by recognising in the person a subject who is always capable of giving something to others. By considering reciprocity as the heart of what it is to be a human being, subsidiarity is the most effective antidote against any form of all-encompassing” (Pope Benedict XVI 2009) power in leadership.

Jethro offered human-management advice to Moses, inviting him to introduce the principle of subsidiarity and the principle of delegation in leadership, together with the principle of management *in solidum*, or by a group of people together. Subsidiarity is thus the principle of community or social organisation, according to which social, political, and other communitarian issues should be dealt with at the most immediate or local level, which is consistent with their resolution.

In our case, Jethro recognised and affirmed all the members of the People of God as capable of contributing to the common good of the whole People, particularly the leaders, irrespective of whether they were leaders of thousands or leaders of tens (vv.18.21). Whether one is responsible for a thousand or for ten matters little, as long as every member contributes. Thus, within Israel, subsidiarity encouraged every member to recognise the role that each person and tribe had in building up a just People and nation, contributing in a more marked manner to the common good. Respecting the gifts of others and their contributions to the whole of Israel, the leaders did not take away the rights, responsibilities, or freedom of their subjects; they did not take over what others could do for themselves. Jethro highlighted all this in a particular manner to Moses. Instead, through his advice, Jethro was encouraging all the members of the People of Israel to participate, to be accountable to each other, and take part in the religious, cultural, and social life of the community as they attempted to “be able to endure, and all these people will go to their home in peace” (v.23). The significance of the concept of responsibility is manifold. God is judge. All of humanity stands in relationship to him. Relationship brings responsibility, and responsibility entails accountability and obligation.

6.3. Vision and Teleology

The third element, clarified in vv.21 and 24, shows that burden sharing is not cutting cake into slices; it is not just co-operation, but collaboration. It is perceiving each individual’s capabilities and trusting these specific abilities. It also entails trust in co-leaders.

Furthermore, v.23 highlights vision sharing as a means with which the community can reach its aim—teleology (Lang 2014). In a manner reminiscent of the way in which Lang explains teleology, Jethro advises Moses to choose “men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain” (v.21), since, by contrast, the goals of power, influence, and riches count for nothing (see Wisdom 7: 8–9). Furthermore, this skewed form of seeking distracts seekers from the right vision and *télos*.

7. Leadership—Religious Context

Moses began another day of work in his leadership role, a day of discernment, of judgments of cases and issues within Israel. From the previous context, we can conclude that even the work of leadership, discernment, and judgment is part of the religious context,

or rather of the context of the leadership of the people of YHWH, a work of pastoral charity. Judgment is a prominent theme in the Bible, and it is primarily associated with God. The Bible focuses its explanation of the judgment of God not on some future “day of judgment”, but on God’s status and activity as the *present* rule and director of the world, as Jesus himself pointed out the Kingdom of God (see Luke 17: 21), with *entós* (among) leaning towards the meaning of “within you, in your hearts” (Motyer 1995).

The previous context also gives us a further perspective on another aspect of religious leadership: the human shouldering of responsibility. YHWH performed so many wonders among his People, which Moses shared with and witnessed for his father-in-law, Jethro. Could not God perform miracles in the same manner through him by way of the work that is mentioned later, of leadership, discernment, and judgment, to the extent that Moses could cope with it, and pronounce perfect judgments that would have led Israel closer to YHWH himself? God trusted Israel to such an extent that what they could do, they were to do, and he did not intervene, even miraculously!

Consequently, Jethro showed Moses that he was not leading well; he was not leading in a healthy and sustainable manner, in a manner that was beneficial for the People and that would also leave him healthy. God was indeed working miracles in this sense. Indeed, God did allow Israel to do what it had been equipped to do and was capable of doing.

Thus, the account is one of situations of tension and new circumstances between the individuals who made up the People of Israel, situations of tension in the People because they could not resolve issues between themselves, which forced them to appeal to Moses. This led to a prolonged situation of tension and fatigue for Moses, who tried to cope with all these issues, as well as a tense situation between Jethro and Moses himself because Jethro could not understand and accept the manner in which Moses led. Furthermore—it is worth repeating—YHWH did not perform any miracles or intervene to solve these situations. There was no need. He trusted that Israel would solve them itself.

Jethro’s wise and logical advice led to the resolution of the situations of tension and fatigue. This entirely psychological and managerial solution, involving good human management, is paradigmatically human. Moses was not advised to go to pray in the Tabernacle before passing judgement, nor to ask God to intervene, as he had done in Egypt. Instead, he received the very human advice (vv.20–22) of subsidiarity, delegation of authority, and synodality.

The *Preparatory Document* for the Synod in 2021–2023 lays the foundation for synodality, which, *mutatis mutandis*, can be applied to the issue being discussed here: “The basic question guiding the entire process [of the Synod is]: ‘How does this ‘journeying together,’ which takes place today on different levels (from the local level to the universal one), allow the Church to proclaim the Gospel in accordance with the mission entrusted to her; and what steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow as a synodal Church?’” (Synod of Bishops 2021, Preparatory Document, no. 2).

However, Jethro, the converted Midianite priest, yoked together the human and psychological advice he gave to Moses—to include in his leadership a number of elders and leaders with him—with the presence of God in the midst of his People: “Now 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; if 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” (v.23). “God so commands you” implies that this advice came from God.

Jethro saw how a more humane, holistic, meaningful, supportive, subsidiary, and delegated leadership could build the People of God, how it could build the community in a stronger manner. With leadership, discernment, and a judicial system of this kind, “the people will arrive in peace in their place” (v.23).

Where was that place at which the People could arrive in peace with such leadership? Where was the place of the People of God? The call of Moses in front of the burning bush (Exodus 2: 3–1–12) led to the second moment in the life of Moses and the People of Israel: the call of Moses led to the liberation of Israel, the wanderings in the desert, the handing

on of the Law. However, the scene of Moses' call in front of the burning bush ended with another promise of God's love: "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain'" (Exodus 3: 12).

It seemed that Israel did not appreciate in a corresponding manner the great exploits through which God took them out of slavery in Egypt and the trouble to which Moses went to lead them to the mountain. This went beyond merely taking them out of slavery in Egypt. Grumbling, they wanted to go back to Egypt (Numbers 14: 3–4). In the Scriptures, grumbling (Hebrew, *r-g-n*; Greek, *dia-gongúzein*) means to "murmur, grumble," but also, and contextually, to 'backbite, gossip as a sign of displeasure' (Bauer et al. 2000; Hunt 2003; Clines 2001b). The Israelites wanted to stone Moses (Exodus 17: 4). They longed for the onions and garlic they had in Egypt (Numbers 11: 5). They fashioned false gods in the golden calf, regarding them as the gods who had actually brought them out of Egypt (Exodus 32: 4).

God undertook such efforts so that the People could be what they actually were, the People of God, and to consider and love the God YHWH as their God, in worship, in adoration and lordship, to attribute to him all that they enjoyed. To the opposite was the case with Jethro: the wonders that the God YHWH performed and the troubles that God underwent led Jethro to believe in one God, YHWH, above all other gods.

8. Moses' Identity and Role

Verses 19 and 20 in Jethro's advice resolved yet another tension and another source of confusion, which probably brought about anger and frustration within the People of Israel: what was Moses' concrete identity and mission? If, after choosing a number of elders to help him in leadership, he would still remain the main leader, then what was his main mission? Jethro resolved this tension for Moses: "Now 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; teach them the statutes and instructions and *make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do*."

Moses' mission was to offer a grand vision for Israel—how to truly be the people of YHWH—in a discernment made in the light of God. He was not supposed to show the physical and geographical path from Egypt to the Promised Land, but the path on which the true People of God should be.

9. Conclusions

Formation in faith and in subsidiarity, communitarian responsibility, delegation, and synodality would bring Israel together as a nation around their one God, YHWH, according to the aim for which they were called from slavery in Egypt to freedom in Canaan. Israel was empowered to become the People of YHWH with a strong moral and ethical backbone through holistic formation in faith according to YHWH's Law.

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