

Jethro and Moses...Great Men Making Each Other Greater Exodus 2 and 18

One hundred years ago the academic study of leadership was dominated by an approach called trait theory. According to trait theory a person who has all the necessary personality traits in the right combination will be a leader. However, since about 1948 we have come to understand that it takes a great deal more than individual characteristics to make a leader. It also takes initiative, experience and an environment where leadership can take place.

Today we take a look at two great men who were leaders for their time, not only because of the traits they had but also because of the times in which they lived.

The first man, like many in ancient times, had more than one name. His name was Reuel although he was also known as Jethro. Jethro lived in the land of Midian in the 12th century B.C. Midian was in the area we call the Gulf of Acaba in the area of the modern countries of Saudi Arabia and Jordan. Midianites, like the Hebrew people, were descendants of Abraham except they were borne by a later wife of Abraham named Ketura.

Jethro, if I correctly fill in the blanks, was well known and important in the area in which he lived. He was a free man when many were slaves. He was wealthy because he had livestock and that was the measurement of wealth. He was powerful; he was a priest and priests were usually the leaders of their clan or the tribe. But if he left Midian, my guess is that most would never have heard of Jethro.

Several years ago one of my brothers was visiting the country of India and through a translator engaged in conversation with a teenage girl. She asked him where he was from. When he said he was from the United States of America she said she had never heard of that place.

To Americans it is inconceivable that there could be anybody in the world who has not heard of our country. Yet in all probability there are many millions of people whose lives are so centered on where

they are that they have never heard of America. They would not know names such as George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, George Bush or other famous and well-known Americans. But they would know the name of their tribal chief or the woman who heads their matriarchal clan—names we would not know.

Jethro was a great man in the land of Midian in terms of the animals he owned, the distances he traveled and his ability to survive in a barren dry place with very little population.

The other man is well known to us all. In fact, if you stopped a stranger on the street it is almost guaranteed that he or she would know the name of Moses. Moses was born in Egypt to a Hebrew woman at a time when an edict had been issued requiring infanticide of all male babies. His mother defied the edict and hid her son for three months. When she could no longer keep him a secret, in desperation she wove a basket, covered it with pitch, lined it with a blanket and put her baby inside. She then set him afloat among the reeds in the Nile River.

Provisionally, a princess was bathing in the Nile that day. She and her maid servants heard the baby's cry and found him in his basket. Her heart was touched and she adopted him and took him home to be raised as the son of Pharaoh's daughter.

This gives the impression that Pharaoh sat on the throne and bounced Moses on his knee. We must be careful in our understanding of what Moses' upbringing

really was. In those days Pharaohs had many wives, many concubines and multiple harems across the empire. So in all probability Moses never even knew Pharaoh. In terms of royal descent a select family in the capital was Pharaoh's legal family and the others were not considered part of the royal lineage. But they were given special treatment so Moses was raised with wealth and sophistication at a time when Egypt was the most sophisticated place in the world. Moses would have

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studied many languages, geography, architecture, medicine, history and literature.

The meeting of Jethro and Moses is told about in Exodus 2. The background is that as a young adult Moses decided to re-identify with his Hebrew heritage. One day he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew. He looked around to see if anyone was watching and, seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and buried him in the sand. But, as is often the case when we do something wrong, someone witnessed his crime and reported it to Pharaoh who issued an order that Moses be executed for murder.

Moses fled as quickly and as far as he possibly could to the land of Midian thinking that no Egyptians would bother to go that far to look for him in such a remote desert place. When he reached Midian he went to a well because that was where people gathered in those remote areas.

There he encountered another injustice. Seven sisters were trying to get water for their father's sheep when some shepherds chased them away from the well. Again Moses intervened. This time he successfully chased away the shepherds and allowed the women access to the well. They went home and reported to their father what had happened. He immediately responded that they should have offered appropriate hospitality and sent for this Egyptian stranger to come and be entertained in their home.

Moses accepted and met the women's father, Jethro. They were a contrast to behold. Jethro—a tribal chief; secure in his position; well known in his region; unsophisticated by Egyptian standards; a man of little education; dry skinned from being out in the sun with hands rough from hard work—standing there before Moses in his royal silk robes, his hands soft from hardly ever doing a day's labor, educated and sophisticated, able to speak all the languages of the neighboring empires. They became friends; in fact, Moses married one of Jethro's daughters, Zephorah. For the next 40 years, until he was 80, Moses worked for Jethro.

Their relationship was an extraordinary one in which two great men made each other greater by contributing different gifts to each other's lives. For example, from Jethro Moses learned how to find his way in the desert, where to discover water, what to do with human waste, how to start a fire, where to find fuel, how to deal with marauding bands that threatened life and property—all that needed to be done in a

very hostile environment. Moses knew virtually nothing about desert survival when he arrived. For the next 40 years, which Moses probably endured as a necessary evil, he learned desert survival so that he could be God's chosen leader to take more than a million people out of the land of Egypt on a journey that took another 40 years from captivity in Egypt to the Promised Land of Canaan.

I have traveled to some parts of the world where you wonder how anyone could possibly live there. I'm sure I wouldn't last more than a day or two under the best of circumstances and probably you wouldn't either. Specific skills and experience are necessary to make it.

Jethro introduced Moses to the desert but Moses introduced Jethro to the Lord. That's a surprise because you might conclude that at first Jethro was far better informed in spiritual truth. He was a descendant of Abraham. And as a priest we would assume he knew something about a life of faith. Moses, by contrast, had been raised as a heathen. He had not grown up in a Hebrew household. He knew nothing about Yahweh or Abraham or faith. He knew about the sun god, the moon god and the heathen deities of the Egyptian Empire.

Initially it may have been Jethro who taught Moses about faith and sacrifices. But Jethro was also living in a polytheistic world with many competing gods. He had to consider them all. At the beginning of their friendship he could hardly be considered a man of great faith.

But one day while Moses was out in the desert he came across a bush that was on fire. As Moses came near it he discovered that although the flames were real the bush was not consumed. He knew that was supernatural. As he came close to inspect it a voice, the voice of God, told Moses that he should remove his sandals because this was holy ground.

That was the beginning of many conversations Moses had with God over the rest of his life. God actually talked to him out loud and Moses would speak back. There was a warm and intimate relationship between Moses the man and God Almighty of heaven and earth. It was that Lord who Moses introduced to Jethro.

Exodus 18 takes place after the people of Israel have escaped captivity in Egypt. Moses has led them and during that time, for safety reasons, he left his children and Zephorah with Jethro. Now Jethro and Zephorah and the two sons have come to find Moses

and the Hebrew people in the wilderness. We read in Exodus 18:5-12:

Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, together with Moses' sons and wife, came to him in the desert, where he was camped near the mountain of God. Jethro had sent word to him, "I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons."

So Moses went out to meet his father-in-law and bowed down and kissed him. They greeted each other and then went into the tent. Moses told his father-in-law about everything the Lord had done to Pharaoh and the Egyptians for Israel's sake and about all the hardships they had met along the way and how the Lord had saved them.

Jethro was delighted to hear about all the good things the Lord had done for Israel in rescuing them from the hand of the Egyptians. He said, "Praise be to the Lord, who rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians and of Pharaoh, and who rescued the people from the hand of the Egyptians. Now I know that the Lord is greater than all other gods, for he did this to those who had treated Israel arrogantly." Then Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and other 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.

Exodus 18:11 is the record of Jethro's conversion. While in conversation with Moses this great man Jethro came to faith in the Lord of heaven. Until then the God of Israel and Moses' God whom he had heard about from the burning bush had been just one more in the pantheon of heathen deities, but on that day he understood who God truly was. That was a gift that Moses had given his friend and his father-in-law, a gift that had come out of 40 years of relationship and conversation and was rooted in the reports of the great things God had done.

How typical that is of evangelism. It takes a long time, a significant relationship and an up-to-date report of the difference God is making now. Moses gave the best of all gifts to his very best friend for, on that day and at that moment, Jethro discovered the true God.

Find a friend who will make you great. Be a friend who will make your friend great.

Jethro, in turn, gave a gift back to Moses. This primitive man from Midian told Moses how to manage the resources of the people of God, a million strong, out in the wilderness. It is related in Exodus 18:13-26:

The next day Moses took his seat to serve as judge for the people, and they stood around him from morning till evening. When his father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, "What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?"

Moses answered him, "Because the people come to me to see God's will. Whenever they have a dispute, it is brought to me, and I decide between the parties and inform them of God's decrees and laws."

Moses' father-in-law replied, "What you're doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you: you cannot handle it alone. Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him. Teach them the decrees and laws, and showed them the way to live and the duties they are to perform. But select capable men from all of the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens.

Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter,

because they will share it with you. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied."

Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said. He chose capable men from all Israel and made them leaders of the people, officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. They served as judges for the people at all times. The difficult cases they brought to Moses, but the simple ones they decided themselves.

Some leaders are lousy listeners, but Moses wasn't. Moses knew this was good advice from his friend even though Jethro didn't have the management training that Moses probably had.

American management expert Peter Drucker distinguishes between effectiveness and efficiency. He says efficiency is doing things right; effectiveness is doing the right thing. We get those mixed up sometimes. We may be very efficient, doing things well, but we do the wrong things. Other times we may be effective in doing the right things, but we are inefficient in that we don't do them very well. Thirty-seven centuries ago Jethro saw the distinction and gave advice to Moses on how to manage the people of God so he would not only do what was right but he would do it in the right way. As a result, 80-year-old Moses was able to lead for another 40 years and do what he otherwise could not possibly have done.

All of this leads to characteristics of their friendship which would be good for us to learn. Characteristic number one is contributing rather than competing. We live in a competitive society where even our friends are considered to be in competition with us. Teachers compete with other teachers, preachers with other preachers and business persons with other business persons. Everyone is in competition with each other. We should learn to contribute to the greatness of somebody else and not be so self-centered that all we care about is beating out the other person. From Moses and Jethro we can learn to give other people the gift of greatness and take delight before them and God in contributing to their success.

A second characteristic of their friendship which would serve us well is mutual respect regardless of differences. These men were very different. Moses was from Egypt, Jethro was from Midian; one was urban, one rural; one was sophisticated, one unsophisticated; one was educated, one not educated at all; one was something of a laborer, the other something of a palace person. In fact, there is strong biblical evidence to indicate that Moses was white and Jethro was black. They were of different religions, different races, different backgrounds—differences so many you would never think they would be friends. But it was in the differences that they found their strengths and in the differences that they found their friendship. So let us learn not always to look for friend-

ships in those who are exactly as we are but to find those relationships that are God-given in people who are very different from ourselves.

A third and a final characteristic of their friendship is the closeness they had in spite of the distance that separated them. While they had been together for 40 years they were separated for most of the next 40. Yet they were able to maintain their friendship in a primitive time when there were no telephones or mail service. They sent messages back and forth we are told in Exodus 18. They did what was necessary so that their relationship could be maintained.

Recently I spent time with friends who date back a long time in my life. I grew up with George Lambrides but for the last 25 years we have been in different parts of the country. Bob Wright lived next door to me my freshman year in college. He has spent most of the last 20 years in Venezuela. Recently, both of them traveled far in order to spend time with me and rebuild our friendships. Although we had been apart for a long time in only a few minutes those years melted away. It has been worth it over the past years to make telephone calls, write letters and make visits. It is a wonderful truth that friends can be friends for a very long time and it is worth servicing long term friendships in order to maintain them, even in spite of great distance.

There is so much more here but we close our Bibles on the story of Jethro and Moses and friendship with a challenge.

Proverb 27:17 says, "*As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.*" Jethro sharpened Moses. Moses sharpened Jethro. May you be the kind of friend who is sharpened by others and who makes others sharp for Jesus Christ.

Faith Matters® is the Broadcast Ministry of
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