

# God Is Greater

BY KAREN THOMAS SMITH

**At the heart of Jethro's visit to Moses is a divine mystery: Israel's unique covenant with God is blessed at its birth by a priest who is outside that covenant. This is a mystery we should ponder as we, who partake of the new covenant in Christ Jesus, encounter the descendants of Jethro and his fellow Arabs outside that covenant.**

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*Exodus 18:1-27*

**T**he visit by Jethro, the priest of Midian, to his son-in-law Moses on the mountain of God, is a biblical story that invites us into encounter and relationship with Muslims. Recall that years earlier, after Moses had killed the taskmaster and was forced to abandon his home in Egypt, he had found refuge and work in Jethro's household and married his daughter Zipporah (Exodus 2:15-22). Jethro and his family were Arabs living in the land of Midian—ancestors of contemporary Arab Muslims and, according to Scripture, descendants of Abraham and his third wife Keturah. The Midianites descend from the children whom Abraham sent away from Isaac to the east (Genesis 25:1-6).

It is while he was shepherding Jethro's flocks in Midian that Moses first encountered the Lord in a burning bush on Mount Horeb, "the mountain of God" (Exodus 3:1-6). Obeying the call of God to deliver the children of Israel, Moses had left his new home in Midian to return to Egypt.

Jethro's visit is a homecoming for the family, for Jethro returns Moses' wife and two sons who had had been sent away from Egypt (18:2-3). We can sense the genuine respect and tenderness of the men's greeting, even though their customs are alien to us, as "Moses 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" (18:7).

After hearing Moses' testimony of the marvelous events in Egypt, Jethro rejoices in Israel's deliverance and confesses, "Now I know Yahweh is greater than all gods" (18:11a). Jethro speaks, almost verbatim, the call to faith and prayer that Muslims repeat daily: *Allahu Akbar!* God is greater!

Then something amazing occurs. Jethro, this child of Abraham and priest of the alien Midianite faith, offers the burnt offering to Yahweh. Even Aaron, who is not yet a consecrated priest, comes "with all the elders of Israel" to partake of the sacrifice from Jethro's hands and gratefully receive his blessing (18:12). Jethro goes on to instruct Moses in matters of governance, thereby shaping the future of the people of Israel through his wisdom.

### **IN SCANDAL AND MYSTERY**

Each year in the Jewish lectionary the story of Jethro's visit is read—together with the accounts of God's giving the Decalogue and establishing the covenant with Israel in chapters 19 and 20—in a pivotal reading called *Sedra Yitro*, or the "scroll of Jethro." For many Jews, this is a scandalous pairing of events, because Jethro, after acclaiming Yahweh's greatness, worshipping the Holy One who is "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," and instructing Moses in leadership, does not stay for the culminating event—the initiation of the covenant between God and the people.<sup>1</sup> The account of his visit, in other words, is not a "conversion" story. Jethro remains outside the covenant. This wise man from the east offers his gift of blessing, but then returns to his own country by another way, never again to be seen within the biblical horizon.

At the heart of Jethro's visit is a divine and, therefore, wonderfully baffling mystery: the salvation received as a gift through Israel's unique covenant with God is blessed at its birth by a priest who is outside that covenant. It is a mystery we do well to ponder in this age when we, who partake of the new covenant in Christ Jesus, encounter more and more the descendants of Jethro and his fellow Arabs outside that covenant. Must our encounters with the descendants of Abraham who are outside the covenants of God with Israel and in Christ lead to a "clash of civilizations," as many pundits insist, or may they open us to God's blessing in rich ways we have yet to imagine?

### **IN SPIRIT AND TRUTH**

As we turn a few pages of the Story, more than a millennium of years pass after these events at Mount Horeb (Sinai) to when Jesus encounters the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-42). She too stands in a faith tradition with marked resemblance to Islam, and she meets Jesus, the Gospel reminds us, with noonday thirst at the well of "our ancestor Jacob" and at the foot of another mountain of God's blessing, Mount Gerizim.<sup>2</sup>

In their disjointed conversation about faith, Jesus refuses to be trapped into well-worn arguments. Instead, he startles her with radical words:

“The hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.... The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him” (4:21b, 23).

Jesus invited the Samaritan woman, and today he invites us, into the mystery of saving faith. We must bear the tension of living in the ambiguous domain of spirit and truth, where even those of alien faith may speak to us of the God who has poured himself out in saving love in Jesus Christ. Even where God has done this unique thing in Christ, we can expect others who do not share our faith to visit us and bless us even as we witness to them of the saving acts of God. And we may all wonder at the mystery of the God who is greater than our imagining. *Allahu Akbar*. Amen.

#### NOTES

1 Bernard Coysaud made this point in a Bible study on Exodus 18 delivered at the Synod of the Eglise Evangelique au Maroc, November 13, 2004.

2 God instructed Joshua to renew the covenant with the people on Mount Gerizim after they entered the land of promise (Joshua 8:30-35), and the mountain was remembered as the mountain of blessing (Deuteronomy 11:29; 27:12).

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