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Beatrice J. W. Lawrence                                      Date

Jethro and Jewish Identity: Identity Negotiation
In Jewish Biblical Interpretation


By


Beatrice J. W. Lawrence
Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Division of Religion
Hebrew Bible and Jewish Hermeneutics


_____
Walter Wilson, Ph.D.
Advisor


_____
William Gilders, Ph.D.
Committee Member


_____
Brent Strawn, Ph.D.
Committee Member


Accepted:


_____
Lisa A. Tedesco, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School


_____
Date

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Beatrice J. W. Lawrence
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Abstract

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This dissertation examines the treatment of Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, in Jewish biblical interpretation up to the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE. The particular focus of this examination is Jewish identity, and how Jethro's non-Israelite identity in the Bible is addressed by rabbinic exegetes. First, the author discusses the biblical texts pertinent to post-biblical Jewish discussions of Jethro (comprising portions of Exodus, Numbers, Judges and 1 Chronicles). Then, the author presents and discusses the treatment of Jethro in Tannaitic midrashim, later midrashim, Targums, and Talmudic materials. Certain themes—both positive and negative—appear and reappear throughout the rabbinic texts examined in this study. In each collection of texts, we find that Jethro is praised for his beliefs, spiritual sensitivity and wisdom; honored for his hospitality to Moses; and lauded as a Torah scholar, even the progenitor of a line of scholars. His connection to Torah, however, does not supercede the fact that he is not an Israelite: Jethro is excluded from the revelation of the Torah at Sinai. He is frequently viewed as a convert, both subtly and directly, but little information is given about his conversion process. His idolatrous past is frequently addressed, but often with hospitable overtones: Jethro is treated as a paradigmatic convert because of the change he undertakes. Each body of literature also contains traditions that record an unyielding ethnic distinction between Jethro and the Israelites—even after he has converted, a boundary remains. The land of Israel was a less significant marker of identity for the rabbis of the later midrashim and the Targums than it was for the Tannaim. Though certain aspects of identity are afforded to Jethro with relative consistency—Torah study and belief in YHWH—the problem of ethnicity and lineage consistently places a barrier between Jethro and the Israelites. The later midrashim demonstrate more extreme traditions in this regard; they are more radically inclusive *and* more virulently exclusive than the Tannaitic midrashim, indicating the fact that anxiety about boundaries continued to be a component of Jewish thought during the rabbinic period, and continued to grow in significance with time.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

"Identity" is a popular topic of study for contemporary scholars of Judaism. This is due in part to the perception that Jewish identity is currently in crisis; as Jews experience higher levels of interaction with and integration into modern cultures, assimilation and intermarriage rates increase, prompting some to sound the death-knell of traditional Judaism. However, this concern has its roots in the misconception that a) Judaism as a religious civilization[1] is in its "truest" form when it exists in isolation; and b) Judaism as a tradition has never before confronted this kind of significant interaction with non-Jewish population groups. In fact, Judaism has continuously co-existed with other (often more powerful) civilizations, resulting in a long tradition of identity-negotiation in Jewish texts; definitions of Jewishness, discussions of non-Jews, and descriptions of the process whereby an outsider becomes an insider are present in Jewish texts from the biblical period onward.[2] Throughout history, Jews have turned to the biblical text and its hermeneutical tradition to make sense out of their experiences. Each period in Jewish history is marked by a unique form of biblical introspection, an act of turning back to the text and importing new perspectives into it. Certain biblical

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[1] The term "religious civilization" comes from Mordecai Kaplan's works, especially *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American Jewish Life* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1934). I use this term because it reflects my understanding of Judaism—in the ancient period as well as in the modern period—as a religious, cultural, and social reality. When discussing identity and hermeneutics, it is important to take into account the varied aspects of Judaism that have informed its history, development, and textual tradition.

[2] It is noteworthy that significantly less attention is paid in traditional Jewish sources to the process whereby an insider becomes an outsider. Though some rabbinic texts raise concerns about apostate Jews, they are still consistently identified as Israelites and are even welcomed back into the community of Israel more readily than new converts. See y. Hor 3:5; t. Dem 2:4. The process whereby a person *enters* the Jewish community appears to be of greater concern to rabbinic writers than the process whereby a Jewish person *exits* the community. See Dov Noy, "Apostasy in Jewish Law," *EJ* 2: 275-277.

characters are especially appropriate (and problematic) when it comes to definitions of Jewishness, and one of those characters is the focus of this study: Jethro.

The Bible is replete with non-Israelites who interact with the Israelite community. Many of them are portrayed negatively: enemy kings, evil warlords, and nefarious Canaanites. However, there are some non-Israelites who resist such thoroughly negative interpretation because of their positive interactions with the Israelites: Ruth, Melchizedek (Gen 14:17-20), Naaman (2 Kings 5), Achish (1 Sam 21:11-16; 27-29), Jael (Judges 4-5), Rahab (Joshua 2, 6) and Cyrus (Ezra 1-6; 2 Chr 36:22, 23; Isa 44:28, 45:1; Dan 1:21, 6:28, 10:1) among others. Jethro stands out as a biblical personality whose interaction with the Israelites is even more complicated. He is problematic for ancient and classical Jewish interpreters for several reasons. As priest of Midian, Jethro is the leader of a non-Israelite ethnic and religious community; however, Moses agrees to live with him and marry into his family (Exod 2:21). In addition, Jethro advises Moses to create a system of courts and judges to handle the problems of the Israelite community (Exodus 18), which develops into a complex system of jurisprudence comprising judges, trials, and ultimately (according to the rabbis) the Sanhedrin. The significance of this system of justice in classical Jewish self-evaluation is clear from texts such as Deuteronomy Rabbah 5:7: "The Holy One said: Of all the nations I created, I love only Israel. Of all else I created, I love only justice. So I will give what I love to the nation I love." Israel's system of justice, therefore, is uniquely sanctioned by God. Hence, Jethro becomes a locus of anxiety for Jewish interpreters: an apparent idolater, the priest of a foreign religion, who is nonetheless the inventor of the Jewish system of justice and Moses'

father-in-law. He resists villainization as well as valorization in a way that makes him an excellent figure for a study concerning identity and Jewish biblical interpretation.

In this dissertation, I will examine hermeneutical strategies for negotiating Jethro's identity as presented in ancient and early medieval Jewish biblical interpretation (2$^{nd}$ c. CE—10$^{th}$ c. CE). The texts pertinent to this investigation span several centuries, beginning with early rabbinic works (Targums, Tannaitic midrashim, Talmud where appropriate) and ending with later midrash.[3] This examination will be structured by using several guiding questions for each text: How does this work portray Jethro vis-à-vis Moses and the Israelites? Is his identity significant in the discussion? How is he "defined," ethnically and religiously? What is his relationship to the Midianites? How do his actions and words reveal familiarity (or lack thereof) with the traditions, rituals

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[3] My decision not to include certain Hellenistic and Second Temple materials in this study is rooted in my examination of those texts. Though the treatments of Jethro in LXX, pseudepigraphal texts, Philo and Josephus are interesting, these works do not address the central questions of identity that inform my dissertation. Jubilees does not demonstrate any interest in the figure of Jethro. Ezekiel the Tragedian is primarily concerned with demonstrating that Jethro (Raguel) was a powerful figure in his homeland, a beneficent leader, and a source of wise leadership for Moses, but does not explore the question of Jethro's identity (other than to identify Midian with Africa, thereby circumventing the problem raised by Num 12:1, in which Miriam and Aaron refer to Moses' "Cushite" wife). Demetrius the Chronographer focuses his exegetical attention on Jethro's three main names, and ultimately determines that they are three different characters, all descended from Abraham through Keturah. Philo is concerned with allegorical examination of Jethro (of course), which means his identity is not as important as his character traits. He is used as a pedagogical tool for exploring the nature of character, the soul, and one's relationship with God. It is the same sort of exegesis one would expect of any character addressed by Philo, and does not add to the picture I am seeking to uncover. Josephus has a bit more material in his retelling of the Bible; however, he does not add much that pertains to the issue of identity. He is relatively loyal to the biblical text, and he emphasizes Jethro's humanity and his admiration of Moses, but that is the limit of his interest. These writers do not seem concerned to justify Moses' marriage, to address Jethro's status vis-à-vis Israel, or to suggest a potential conversion. This is, of course, worthy of note and deserves further exploration. Perhaps the political and cultural context of the works contributed to these writers' interest in personality and character and their relative lack of concern for drawing boundaries between Jethro and Israel. Examination of the unique nature of Second Temple and Hellenistic Judaism and the impact of that uniqueness on the literature of the era has already been undertaken by scholars whose works remain the most valuable resources on the subject: Shaye Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Erich S. Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); John H. Hayes and Sara R. Mandell, *The Jewish People in Classical Antiquity: from Alexander to Bar Kochba* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998); John J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora* (2$^{nd}$ ed.; Grand Rapids: Willam B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000).

and practices of the Israelites?  What components of Jethro's personality are important to the authorship of this text?  Is the tradition trying to integrate Jethro into the community of Israel or keep him separate from it?  These questions, as well as others, will enable me to examine not only the content of each text under discussion but also the hermeneutical maneuvers behind the choices made by the text's author(s); the choices made in each text index the matters of utmost importance to the interpreters, whether they be religiosity, national identity, ethnicity, or individual characteristics.

In what follows, I will first offer some preliminary definitions as part of the Introduction, as well as a general survey of key concepts.  This includes, first, the identification of key ideas and terms, as well as overview of relevant works; second is an introduction to the sources of the texts that will be analyzed; third is a discussion of critical and hermeneutical issues germane to the study of these texts; fourth, because Jethro is often portrayed as a proselyte, there is a discussion of the notion of proselytism and circumcision in rabbinic Judaism; and fifth is a brief discussion of model studies that have influenced my organizational framework.  Chapter Two is a close examination of biblical texts that mention Jethro or that clearly pertain to his identity for later interpreters, namely Exodus 2, 4, and 18; Num 10:29-32; Judg 1:16 and 4:11; and 1 Chr 2:55.  Chapters Three and Four comprise analyses of Tannaitic and later midrashim up to and including Exodus Rabbah that address Jethro, his identity, and his relationship with the Israelites.[4]  Chapter Five examines Targumic traditions regarding Jethro.  Chapter Six

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[4] I have chosen not to incorporate medieval works such as the *Yalkut* collections or *Midrash haGadol* into this dissertation.  The midrashic works that emerged in the medieval period are of a different nature than those that preceded them; for this reason, Jonah Fraenkel called them "post-midrashic" in *Darkhe haAggadah ve-haMidrash* (Tel Aviv: Yad leTalmud, 1991), 11.  The materials discussed in this dissertation present an interesting and diverse collection of views on Jethro and his identity.  In future studies, I hope to explore Hellenistic and medieval works concerning Jethro.

sums up the conclusions and contributions of this study to the understanding of Jewish identity in ancient rabbinic texts.

One of the fundamental questions informing this study is the nature of "identity" itself. How is identity marked: via ethnicity, religiosity (religious beliefs and practices), or political definitions (relationships with power structures)?[5] Is "Jewish identity" in these texts presented as a uniform entity, or does it change and develop with time and new circumstances?[6] Several important works have emerged over the past few decades addressing the question of identity in the ancient world and specifically Jewish identity in antiquity. Kenton L. Sparks' work, *Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel: Prolegomena to the Study of Ethnic Sentiments and Their Expression in the Hebrew Bible,* is such a work. Sparks points out that defining ethnicity is a "thorny problem," but posits what is essentially a Barthian definition: ethnicity serves as a social boundary between groups and is rooted in genealogical links, cultural traits, and/or physical characteristics.[7] Sparks points out that analyzing cultural artifacts (archaeological findings, texts) in order to determine views of ethnicity is somewhat problematic: culture and ethnicity are different (though closely related) human realities.[8] It is important to

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[5] An example of a political identity can be found with the Idumeans, who during the Hasmonean period were supposedly compelled to submit to circumcision and other Jewish laws and subsequently became part of the Judean state. It is a matter of some scholarly debate whether or not they became known as "Jews." See Cohen, *Beginnings,* 17-24, 109-139.

[6] To some extent, this is an obvious question to answer. "Identity" is an element of human society that is consistently in flux, in part because of the varying elements to which a society is exposed. Tali Hyman notes that "we begin to see how important it is to move beyond the quest for all-encompassing formulae or templates for one monolithic Jewish identity…. Identity formation is utterly dynamic and complex, and Jewish identity formation is no exception." Tali Hyman, "The Liberal Jewish Day School as Laboratory for Dissonance in American Jewish Identity-Formation" (PhD diss., New York University, 2008), 74.

[7] Kenton L. Sparks, *Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel: Prolegomena to the Study of Ethnic Sentiments and Their Expression in the Hebrew Bible* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1998), 3. See also Frederik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Boston: Little Brown, 1969).

[8] Hence he would not be fully comfortable with Anne Killebrew's use of archaeological findings to map ethnic identities in ancient Israel. Killebrew, *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity: An Archaeological Study of*

remain aware of the role of text as cultural artifact: the texts presented in this study are representations of the thought world of ancient Jews, but are not totally transparent; cultural factors such as literary forms, rhetorical conventions, and tacit value assumptions play a role in how these texts were created and shaped, and how they should be interpreted.

Especially germane to this study are works that focus on rabbinic constructions of identity. Sacha Stern's *Jewish Identity in Early Rabbinic Writings* examines texts that juxtapose "Israel" and "the nations," arguing that it is largely a question of corporate rather than individual identity for the Tannaitic rabbis.[9] He notes that it is significant there is no specific tractate or other discrete piece of literature that deals with the question of identity. Perhaps, he muses, identity as a member of Israel was a given, taken for granted, an assumption underlying all other discourse; however, he concedes that it is also possible that Jewish identity was not yet a formulated field of inquiry, and we must glean insight from the text in piecemeal fashion.[10] This recognition of the limitations of traditional Jewish texts for the study of identity is valuable as a backdrop for my discussion of Jethro's portrayal in Jewish sources. However, Stern does not emphasize biblical interpretation as a unique forum for negotiating identity; therefore, he does not deal with the unique hermeneutics at play in interpreting the Bible. When the rabbis interpret biblical texts, there are claims and requirements placed on their exegesis that are not present for folktales or halakhic discussion. The unique nature of biblical interpretation informs the parameters of this study.

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*Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, and Early Israel 1300-1100 BCE* (Archaeology and Biblical Studies 9; Atlanta: SBL, 2005).

[9] Sacha Stern, *Jewish Identity in Early Rabbinic Writings* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1999).

[10] Stern, *Jewish Identity*, xvi.

Works such as S. Cohen's *The Beginnings of Jewishness* address the complexities of identity negotiation in antiquity; for Cohen, the Greco-Roman period is marked by a fluidity of boundaries between Jew and non-Jew.[11]  There are many ways a non-Jew can enter the Jewish community, ranging from friendliness towards the Jews to religious conversion.[12]  Based on inscriptions, Greco-Roman texts and Jewish texts up to the 5th c. CE, he posits a series of behaviors whereby "a gentile in antiquity…became less a gentile and more a Jew."[13]  According to Cohen, a non-Jew could gain some level of access to the Israelite community in several ways: acknowledging the power of the Jewish God;[14] benefiting the Jews;[15] practicing some Jewish rituals;[16] worshipping the God of the Jews exclusively;[17] joining the Jewish community—by joining a Jewish household as a slave (and, if male, undergoing circumcision), by living among the Jews and taking part in some Jewish customs, and by marriage;[18] and by converting formally to Judaism.[19] Cohen states that formal conversion in the Greco-Roman period entailed three elements: following Jewish law, exclusive worship of the Jewish God, and integration into the community.[20]  In addition, Cohen argues that the meaning of the word "Jew" undergoes change during the Greco-Roman period, beginning as an ethnic-geographic identity and later becoming a religious, cultural, and political one.[21]  In rabbinic texts, we witness a structuring of the boundaries between Jews and non-Jews in the form of an official,

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[11] Cohen, *Beginnings,* 4.
[12] Ibid., 140-74.
[13] Ibid., 140.
[14] Ibid., 142-6.
[15] Ibid., 146-8.
[16] Ibid., 149-50.
[17] Ibid., 150-4.
[18] Ibid., 154-6.
[19] Ibid., 156-62.
[20] Ibid., 156.
[21] Ibid., 69-106.

public conversion process, as well as through laws concerning matrilineal descent and intermarriage.[22] Though I do not agree with all of Cohen's conclusions,[23] his overall argument is persuasive and underscores the multi-layered nature of Jewish identity. No single marker of identity is sufficient to determine Jethro's identity in Jewish biblical interpretation; rather, it is necessary to examine the intersection of several political, cultural, ethnic, and religious factors.

Especially important to the present study is G. Porton's work, given the discussions of conversion that cluster around interpretations of Jethro. Porton thoroughly pursues the questions surrounding non-Jews and converts in two foundational works, *Goyim: Gentiles and Israelites in Mishnah-Tosefta* and *The Stranger Within Your Gates: Converts and Conversion in Rabbinic Literature.*[24] The contribution of these works is enormous, and it is impossible to highlight in this brief introductory survey all of the pertinent issues that emerge from Porton's work. Porton looks at the relations between

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[22] This process is described in b. Yev. 47a-b and the post-talmudic tractate Gerim 1:1. See discussion in Cohen, *Beginnings,* 198-238.

[23] I find Cohen's argument that y. Bab. Qam. 4:3 4b, and b. Bab. Qam. 38a demonstrate a lack of physical referents to Jewish identity to be unconvincing. The story contained in these texts relates how a group of Romans was able to "pass" as a group of Jews, infiltrate a Beit Midrash, and study Jewish law. Cohen states that because the text records no indication that the Romans had to change their dress, accents, or basic mannerisms, it is clear that Romans and Jews ultimately looked, dressed and behaved in a similar fashion. (Compare Sifre Deuteronomy 344, which includes the instruction "Make yourselves Jews".) However, this argument fails to take into account the *goal* and *genre* of the tale. In order for this fable— whose goal is to promote Jewish self-esteem—to be effective, it was necessary for the Romans to be able to study Torah and walk away with a greater respect for Jewish law. Hence the authorship of the story would assume the success of the Romans' "spy mission"; otherwise, the emphasis of the story would be not on the superiority of Jewish law, but on the nature of Jewish dress, speech, or behavior. In addition, the fact that a version of the tale exists which offers the possibility of the Romans' disguising themselves ("make yourself Jews") indicates that at least a part of the tradition history of this particular story *was* concerned about physical differentiation. In addition, in his chapter on intermarriage, Cohen discusses Mosaic law but does not demonstrate concern about the fact of Moses' intermarriage, nor awareness of the interpretive tradition that developed from that problem. Cohen, *Beginnings,* 37-9.

[24] Gary Porton, *Goyim: Gentiles and Israelites in Mishnah-Tosefta* (Brown Judaic Studies 155; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988). Gary Porton, *The Stranger Within Your Gates: Converts and Conversion in Rabbinic Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

Jews and proselytes in several categories: the land of Israel;[25] the Jewish calendar;[26] marriage;[27] and communal institutions.[28] Porton discovers that in some ways, converts are considered by rabbinic authorities to be similar to or even equated with native-born Israelites, while in other ways, a clear distinction is posited.[29] Porton's research demonstrates (among other things) the necessity of paying attention to categories and themes in rabbinic exegesis: how the rabbis address converts and non-Israelites vis-à-vis the land may be very different from rabbinic attitudes about intermarriage.

In my study I depend heavily on Porton's approach and interpretations for my treatment of Jewish identity negotiation through the figure of Jethro. Porton notes that the rabbis "conceived of Israel as both an ethnic group and a religious community."[30] Hence, when a proselyte would become a member of the Jewish community, it would be necessary to cope somehow with the proselyte's ethnic differentiation from Israel. One of the most helpful discussions presented by Porton concerns method on this issue: the application of the insights of modern scholarship on ethnicity and ethnic groups. He posits a general definition of ethnicity that will inform this dissertation: an ethnic group shares a perception of common ancestry. This ancestry can be real or fictitious, but its significance cannot be overstated:

> A concern with ancestry is fundamental to the Israelite community's self definition. Its preferred designation in the rabbinic texts, 'children of Israel/Jacob,' underscores that fact, for it signifies that, from one point of view, Israel's identity is grounded in the belief that all of its members share a common ancestry.[31]

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[25] Porton, *Stranger,* especially 42-4, 62-4, 177-81.
[26] Ibid., especially 57-8, 81-2, 141-3, 182-3.
[27] Ibid., especially 155-65.
[28] Ibid., 177-92.
[29] Ibid., 8.
[30] Ibid., 1.
[31] Porton, *Stranger,* 2. See also Porton, *Goyim,* 285-99.

While it is relatively easy for the rabbis to imagine that an individual non-Jew could undergo a reorientation in belief and adopt Jewish practice, it is more complicated to determine how an individual can become a descendant of Jacob. Hence, Porton argues, it was necessary to create a "cultural" understanding of ancestry distinct from the biological one; the proselytes had to view themselves as descendants of Jacob much in the same way Americans view themselves as descendants of the pilgrims, though few Americans can actually make such a claim.[32] Though this cultural understanding enabled proselytes to adopt the identity of "Israel," it also could underscore a permanent, un-bridgeable gap between those who adopted the cultural identity and those who could (ostensibly) demonstrate biological ancestry. In other words, tension exists within the rabbinic texts about whether or not a proselyte ever becomes fully an insider.

Though I agree that ethnicity and religion are two very different components of identity for ancient Jewish interpreters, a word of caution from Cohen is well-advised concerning interpretation of the differences between the two. Cohen concurs that ethnicity is *one* component of Jewish identity in antiquity, along with religiosity and political identity. He, too, distinguishes between "crossing the boundary" religiously vs. socially, and notes that, "Theological conversion was not social conversion"; a person could adopt Jewish beliefs and practices, but that did not change his ethnicity, heritage, or even cultural orientation.[33] However, Cohen adds that "we should not be too insistent on separating 'religion' from 'ethnicity' in antiquity, when the ancients had a much more

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[32] Porton, *Stranger,* 6.
[33] Cohen*, Beginnings,* 152; see also the Prologue, "Jews and Others," 1-10.

organic conception of these matter [*sic*] than do we."[34]   In fact, Cohen's interpretation of

a "sense of identity" is broader than Porton's "ethnic group" and encompasses some of

the elements of religion.   His understanding of the myth of shared common origin that

permeates an identifiable group is that it can be traced to "a specific place at a specific

moment": hence, though ancestry through Jacob is clearly still invoked by the rabbis as

part of Israelite identity, it is also possible to share in the common origins of the Israelites

through the Exodus and the Sinai experiences.[35]   In addition, Cohen takes issue with

Barth's emphasis on the boundaries of an ethnic group, to the exclusion of concern about

what is encompassed by the boundaries:   "A social boundary cannot exist without the

'stuff' it encloses.  It is not the boundary that makes the group; it is the group that makes

the boundary.  Hence a study of identity needs to focus *not just on* boundaries *but also* on

the territory that it encircles."[36]   I hope to build my examination of treatment of Jethro on

an awareness of both the boundaries the rabbis work to maintain and on the elements of

Jewishness, interior to the boundaries, that are of utmost concern to Jewish biblical

interpreters.


**The Sources**[37]

The choice to include diverse works of ancient Jewish biblical interpretation in

this study is based on the understanding that Jewish biblical interpretation has been

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[34] Cohen*, Beginnings,* 138.

[35] Cohen, *Beginnings,* 7.  This will be a significant factor in rabbinic interpretation of Jethro who, though a descendant of Abraham, could not *become,* biologically, a descendant of Jacob: he was a witness to the events of the exodus and may even have been a witness, in some form or another, to the giving of the Torah at Sinai.

[36] Cohen*, Beginnings,* 6.  My emphasis.

[37] All translations of primary sources throughout this dissertation are mine, unless otherwise noted.

ongoing since before the close of the biblical canon and takes many forms.[38]  In order to

analyze these texts effectively, I must take into account the history and context of each

genre, as well as the critical issues in scholarship surrounding the use and interpretation

of these materials.  What follows is a brief introduction to the genres of Jewish biblical

interpretation that form the core of this dissertation.

Tannaitic Midrashim[39]

My discussion of representations of Jethro in Tannaitic midrashim will focus on

Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael (hereafter Mekilta), Mekilta de-Rabbi Shimon, Sifre Numbers,

Sifre Deuteronomy, Sifre Zutta, and Midrash Tannaim.  These midrashim are most

pertinent to my examination because they comment directly on biblical passages

concerning Jethro.

The works included here are diverse and disparate; what unites them is their

purported provenance as 3rd—4th century collections of Tannaitic interpretations of

Scripture emerging from the Jewish community of Palestine.[40]  My usage of this

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[38] For the assertion that biblical interpretation began during the biblical period, and for discussion of the various forms biblical interpretation has utilized, see Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as it was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Kugel, ed., *Studies in Ancient Midrash* (Cambridge: Harvard University Center for Judaic Studies, 2001); Jacob Neusner, *What is Midrash?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

[39] The present introductory description is a summary of key points representative of current scholarly discourse. Critical editions and studies of the Tannaitic midrashim used in this study will be presented in ch. 3.  However, it should be noted that critical editions of some of the texts used in this dissertation still need to be produced.

[40] This provenance has been accepted by a majority of scholars of ancient Judaism, and is usually based on internal evidence: similarities with the Mishnah and Tosefta in terms of style, language, and named authorities; and references in later works.   See Leopold Zunz, *Die gottesdienstlichen Vortrage der Juden* (Frankfurt a.M., 1892); J. N. Epstein, *Introduction to Tannaitic Literature: Mishna, Tospehta, and Halakhic Midrashim* (Heb.; Tel Aviv: Magnes Press,  1957), 499-515; Jacob Z. Lauterbach, *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* (3 vols.; Philadelphia: JPS, 1949) 1:xviii.  Daniel Boyarin discusses Neusner's claim that these texts are much later than the Tannaitic period in his review of Neusner's *The Canonicial History of Ideas, The Place of the So-Called Tannaitic Midrashim: Mekhilta Attributed to R. Ishmael, Sifra, Sifre to Numbers, and Sifre to Deuteronomy*  (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990); see Boyarin, "On the Status of the

provenance as a taxonomic category does not mean that the origins of these works are absolutely and universally agreed-upon. There is still debate concerning the date of each collection, not only in terms of content but also compilation. Part of the debate concerns the difficulty of determining whether a given interpretation represents the time a particular work was compiled (a late date), or sometime prior to compilation. In addition, manuscript evidence must be taken into account when attempting to determine the date of a given text, or even of a specific tradition within a text. It is also possible that many individual interpretations circulated orally at some point. Theories concerning the dating of Tannaitic midrashim must take into account references to these texts in later works as well, such as Amoraic midrashim (Exodus Rabbah, for example), the Yalkut collections, and medieval midrash compilations (Midrash Sekel Tov, Midrash Lekah Tov). Hence, determining a *terminus ad quo* can be tricky.

How can a date be determined for a text with a purported Tannaitic provenance, when the manuscript evidence is medieval? Manuscript evidence can establish a *terminus ad quem:* by a certain date, a document was in a particular form. Other evidence must be utilized to determine the history of a document prior to the manuscript, such as references to a document in other works, and the reappearance of individual traditions (whether verbatim or paraphrased) in more than one document. All of these

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Tannaitic Midrashim," *JAOS* 112:3 (1992): 455-65. Ben-Zion Wacholder argues for a late date for Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael in his article, "The Date of the Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael," *HUCA* 39 (1968):117-44. He bases his argument on analysis of the internal evidence that has been used to support a Tannaitic date for these texts, arguing, for example, that halakhot deemed to be pre-Mishnaic are in fact post-Mishnaic (124-6), and that the citation of Tannaitic authorities in the Mekilta cannot be trusted because the teachings presented by those authorities are out of character with their teachings in the Talmud (126-34). This article is refuted, however, by Menahem Kahana in "The Critical Editions of Mekhilta De-Rabbi Ishmael in the Light of the Genizah Fragments," *Tarbiz* 55 (Fall 1986): 489-524. See also the introduction to Reuven Hammer's *Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 1-21, in which he discusses the multiple layers that make up works of Tannaitic midrash, the relationship between the Tannaitic (or halakhic) midrashim and Mishnah, and some of the literary features that distinguish works from this genre and time period.

factors taken together can provide a sense of a given text's history. Steven Fraade argues that it is not responsible to suggest a date prior to compilation for any given midrashic text when one is trying to reconstruct history:

> All of these texts are anthologies, some ordered topically, others exegetically, in each case with an intermixture of the other. Such collections undoubtedly incorporate traditions and the literary crystallizations of traditions that antedate, and may in some cases considerably antedate, the time and circumstances of their formation into the continuous texts in which we now find them. But the process of textual redaction has left such a deep mark on the constituent parts that the extraction of those parts—not to mention the distillation and synthesis of their traditions—for purposes of historical representation of a time much earlier than that of the texts' redaction is fraught with difficulties.[41]

In fact, Fraade (along with Neusner) refers to this collection of works as the "so-called Tannaitic midrashim," in large part because he feels it is not possible to justify their Tannaitic provenance.[42] In his response to Neusner's *The Canonical History of Ideas,* however, Daniel Boyarin argues that adhering only to a *terminus ad quem* is no less problematic:

> Drawing conclusions from lateness, as Neusner does all the time, is just as precarious as drawing conclusions from earliness. The relevant matrix for a given statement may indeed be another time and place than the one of the document in which it appears, and documents have history themselves, history retained on their surface in the bumps and inconsistencies of the final text. These, which are called intertextuality, are finally what make cultural historiography possible.[43]

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[41] Steven D. Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (New York: SUNY Press, 1991), 71.

[42] Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary,* 230-1 n. 11. See also H. L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 261: "The designation of the halakhic midrashim as '*Tannaitic* Midrashim,' however, is a consistent principle of classification only as long as one also speaks of Amoraic or Geonic midrashim, i.e. if the criterion is the time of origin. But for this the dating of many midrashim (and especially the halakhic midrashim) is far too problematic."

[43] Boyarin, "On the Status of the Tannaitic Midrashim," 457.

Intertextuality, as defined by Boyarin, enables a reader to see within a text traces of its development, to view it as containing material that certainly antedates its redaction. Boyarin identifies as one of the components of his view of intertextuality that "text is always made up of a mosaic of conscious and unconscious citation of earlier discourse."[44] Hence dating a text to the time of a manuscript, or of a citation in a later text, is not accurate. Ultimately, the decision to assign to a document a particular provenance is an act of educated conjecture: "As all sophisticated historians know by now, all we have are constructions—some more and some less plausible."[45] The uncertainties concerning these documents are numerous and significant. In the cases of Sifre Zutta and Midrash Tannaim, the matter is even more complicated: these were only preserved in medieval works; in addition, fragments of Sifre Zutta were recovered from the Cairo Geniza.[46] Thus each of these midrashim comes to us as a medieval re-collection of a purportedly older work. For the purposes of my examination of these midrashim, I am viewing each of the works as Tannaitic in origin, though later re-working and editorial activity are also evident. Because of the commonalties between these works and the other Tannaitic midrashim (common haggadic material, similar language and exegetical techniques), I postulate a similar historical and geographical framework for all of these works: 3rd—4th century Palestine.

It is important to note at this juncture that Boyarin's methodological stance informs a good deal of my own reading of rabbinic texts. His view of intertextuality not

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[44] Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 12.
[45] Boyarin, "On the Status of the Tannaitic Midrashim," 458.
[46] Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction*, 293-4, 298-9; Saul Lieberman, *Sifre Zutta* (New York: JTS, 1968), vii-ix; David Hoffmann, *Midrash Tannaim al Sefer Devarim* (2 vols.; Berlin: H. Itzkowski, 1909), iv-v.

only provides a lens through which to view the history of a given document; it also provides the reader with the opportunity to view each document as dialogical, to see within it inconsistencies which are not in fact problematic, but are part of the nature of midrash as a genre. Neusner has postulated that each document of rabbinic Judaism has a discrete point of view, "a way of life, a worldview, a social entity…"[47]  Though it is important to treat each document of rabbinic Judaism as having its own history and even its own rhetorical goals, it is also important to refrain from homogenizing the contents of a given document into a single unified whole.  In addition, rabbinic documents are not made of clear-paned glass, affording the reader immediate access to the circumstances and worldviews of the authors.  As Boyarin points out:

> [T]exts may be dialogical in nature—contesting their own assertions as an essential part of the structure of their discourse—and…the Bible is a preeminent example of such a text…. [T]here are cultural codes,…either conscious or unconscious, which both constrain and allow the production (not creation) of new texts within the culture; these codes may be identified with the ideology of the culture, which is made up of the assumptions that people in the culture automatically make about what may or may not be true and possible, about what is natural in nature and in history.[48]

When reading midrash, it is important to keep in mind that the content of the text is shaped by references to literature, beliefs, and traditions that are not necessarily cited directly in that text.  In addition, the genre of a given document will have an impact on its content.  Hence what is achieved in Targums will not be exactly the same as what is achieved in midrash, even if there is similar material present in both.  Intertextuality as a

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[47] Neusner, *Canonical History of Ideas,* 23.
[48] Boyarin, *Intertextuality,* 12.

phenomenon brings into clear view the fact that there are no "seamless wholes"[49] in rabbinic literature (or in any literature, for that matter); there is room for documents to connect with other documents, just as there is room for a single document to contradict itself.[50]

## Later Midrashim[51]

The problems concerning date for the Tannaitic midrashim similarly apply to later midrashim, only perhaps more so:  must a reader assume that a tradition recorded in

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[49] Boyarin, *Intertextuality,* 14.

[50] Neusner does address the potential for documents referring to other documents; he states, "If…a document contains materials shared verbatim or in substantial content with other documents *of its classification*, or if one document refers to the contents of other documents, then the several documents that clearly wish to engage in conversation with one another have to address one another.  That is to say, we have to seek for the marks of connectedness, asking for the meaning of those connections."  Neusner, *Midrash as Literature: The Primacy of Documentary Discourse*  (New York: University Press of America, 1987), xv (my emphasis.)  Throughout this dissertation, I will examine connections between various midrashim, Targums, and even the Talmud.  Though this might run afoul of Neusner's view that documents should only be in conversation with other documents of similar classification, the evidence itself suggests that traditions that appear in these different works did somehow influence one another.  See also Neusner's critique of the literary principle of intertextuality in *Wrong Ways and Right Ways in the Study of Formative Judaism: Critical Method and Literature, History, and the History of Religion* (Brown Judaic Studies 145; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), especially 31-58.  In this critique, he accuses the proponents of intertextuality of arguing that "all documents impose meanings upon each, and each demands a reading solely in the setting of the whole literature."  He then explains his own point of view: "The writings of the sages of Judaism in late antiquity form a vast literature, each document exhibiting its own integrity, but in addition connected to others, ands also continuous with the entire canon of which it forms a part." Neusner, *Wrong Ways,* 43.  In fact, Boyarin and others who understand intertextuality to be a feature of rabbinic texts are not arguing that there is any one ("sole") way to find meaning in the text, but that it is simply a truth about the nature of these texts that there are multiple layers of interaction and that they are multivocal and multivalent; an individual text has a meaning in relation to its immediate context, its place in a document, its place in a canon, and its place in a culture.  Neusner's own statement (from *Midrash and Literature,* above) is not terribly different from this view.

[51] In addition to works already cited above, important studies of midrash and midrashic hermeneutics include Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick, eds., *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Judah Goldin, *Studies in Midrash and Related Literature* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1988); Irving Jacobs, *The Midrashic Process* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); M. Fishbane, ed., *The Midrashic Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993); David Weiss Halivni, *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1982); Isaac Heinemann, *Darkei haAggadah* (Jersualem: Magnes Press, 1954); Joseph Heinemann, *Aggadot ve-Toldotehen* (Jeruselam: Keter, 1974); Kugel, *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990); David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991). Critical editions and studies of the later midrashim included in this dissertation will be presented in ch. 4.

Exodus Rabbah can only be dated with certainty to the 10$^{th}$ century?  What if that same tradition appears in Tannaitic midrashim, or in Talmudic texts?  Boyarin's view, that nuanced readings of examples of intertextuality are necessary to trace traditions, is important for anyone working with later midrashim (or rabbinic texts in general): assuming a late date *or* an early date can be problematic, and any cultural historiography that results from analysis of rabbinic texts must be rooted in careful comparison of texts. The reappearance of a theme, idea, or whole text in more than one compilation can indicate relative chronology, and provides an opportunity to learn about the development of ideas in ancient Judaism.

There is a historical distinction between Tannaitic midrashim and later midrashim, in the general sense:  the latter texts came into being as collected works of midrash *after* the former texts.  Many of the later midrashim contain references to or demonstrate direct dependence upon Tannaitic materials (so Pesiqta of Rab Kahana,[52] Tanhuma-Yelammedenu, Lamentations Rabbah,[53] and Genesis and Leviticus Rabbah[54]). However, these works also demonstrate content and linguistic affinities to the Babylonian Talmud, which may or may not be the result of later editing and additions.  Proposed dates of composition for these later works begin in the 5$^{th}$ century (Lamentations Rabbah, Leviticus Rabbah, Pesiqta of Rab Kahana).  H. L. Strack and G. Stemberger are willing to accept a 6$^{th}$ or 7$^{th}$ century date for Songs Rabbah, propose a date in the 8$^{th}$ century for Numbers Rabbah and Ecclesiastes Rabbah, and place Exodus Rabbah sometime between the 10$^{th}$ and 12$^{th}$ centuries.  However, they consistently emphasize that these proposed

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[52] Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction,* 320-2.
[53] Ibid., 310.
[54] Ibid., 303 (Genesis Rabbah), 316 (Leviticus Rabbah).

datings are entirely dependent upon evidence that is equivocal.[55]  How does one explain,

for example, the fact that Pesiqta of Rab Kahana and Leviticus Rabbah have five chapters

in common?  Which came first?  Similarly, how should a reader understand the existence

of exegetical *and* homiletical midrashim in Exodus and Numbers Rabbah?

Certain midrashic collections are even more problematic than others in

determining date.  Tanhuma-Yelammedenu is known through other rabbinic collections

(such as Yalkut), and scholars have argued about the origin and transmission of this text

for centuries.  There appear to be at least two recensions of the text: A, based on 16th

century manuscripts, and B (Buber), based on undated manuscripts which differ

significantly from A in commentary to Genesis and Exodus.[56]  There appears to be a

strong connection between the Tanhuma-Yelammedenu tradition and the Pentateuchal

compilations, to the extent that some have postulated the existence of more than one

Pentateuchal midrash tradition.  Strack and Stemberger will accept the common dating of

the work to the 9th century, but only with significant reservations.[57]  Their treatment of

Deuteronomy Rabbah is even more fraught with questions:  The work has such an

apparently jumbled history of transmission that they are only willing to limit its date of

origin to sometime between 450 and 800 CE.[58]

It is so difficult to label these texts with dates of origin and compilation because

of their complex histories:  these later midrashim apparently underwent continuous

development.  Communities added and deleted traditions, re-arranged the texts, combined

passages from disparate documents, and in general demonstrated fluidity and freedom in

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[55] For dating of the later midrashim, see Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction,* 313-39.
[56] Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction,* 332.
[57] Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction,* 332-3.
[58] Ibid*.,* 335.

the treatment and usage of these materials. It is quite possible for a scholar to become frozen by these complications, to refuse to say anything at all about the trajectories of interpretation that appear in these texts, especially in relation to other rabbinic works. However, I have chosen to utilize these works optimistically, by noting what is unique to each text as well as what is shared between texts, where interdependency is plausible, and where significant divergence of opinion becomes evident in the discourse of the rabbis.

Talmudic materials[59]

How is one to determine the specific historical context of a *baraita* or a halakhic discussion that is contained within the Talmud? Though some scholars have chosen to trust the attributions contained within the Talmud,[60] I am not comfortable doing so. There are numerous instances in the Talmud in which heated discussion is reported between rabbis who did not live coterminously. In addition, the same teaching can be attributed to several different authorities.[61] Because the Talmud is not a uniform work—that is, it was not redacted in its entirety by one person or even one school of thought—it is impossible to determine its overall hermeneutics or point of view. It appears that in some cases, midrashic interpretation arose from Talmudic exegesis of Mishnah, while in other case the already extant midrashim provided resource material for the Talmud:

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[59] The Talmudic materials that are important to this study consist primarily of aggadic (non-halakhic) traditions. Studies of aggadic materials in the Talmud include Neusner, *The Aggadic Role in Halakhic Discourse* (3 vols.; Lanham: University Press of America, 2001); Avigdor Shinan, *The World of the Aggadah* (Tel Aviv: MOD Books, 1990), especially 114-125. See also Louis Ginzberg, "The Palestinian Talmud," in *Essential Papers on the Talmud* (ed. Michael Chernick; New York: New York University Press, 1994), 181-209, especially 197-9. My usage of Talmudic texts is limited to the Babylonian Talmud, as there is no pertinent material on Jethro in the Palestinian Talmud.

[60] Judith Baskin, for example, uses attributions in Talmudic texts to date traditions. Baskin, *Pharaoh's Counsellors: Job, Jethro and Balaam in Rabbinic and Patristic Tradition* (Chico, Cal.: Scholar's Press, 1983), 10, 23-4.

[61] Louis Jacobs, "How much of the Babylonian Talmud is pseudepigraphic?" *JJS* 29 (1997): 46-59.

> BT also contains numerous midrashim from the Amoraic period. In part this material will have arisen from the interpretation of M[ishnah], for example where Scripture passages are to support the halakhah of M[ishnah] or Amoraic decisions…. [T]here are also longer and continuous midrashim whose *Sitz im Leben* is not the exegesis of M[ishnah] but the interpretation of Scripture which was fostered as a separate discipline in the schools and synagogue sermons of Palestine or Babylonia. In these cases…one must probably assume fully formulated oral or written units of tradition, which the Amoraim had before them as sources and which they did not only create in the context of M[ishnah] interpretation.[62]

Ultimately, reconstructing the sources underlying the Babylonian Talmud is impossible.[63] In addition, the existence of separate academies in rabbinic Babylonia and Palestine precludes the possibility of there being a single Talmudic tradition. The date of final redaction is still the subject of bitter arguments among scholars, ranging from the 6th to the 9th centuries.[64] The Talmud is the composite rabbinic work *par excellence,* the ultimate amalgam of teachings and traditions, a living document whose borders are still not officially closed. Methodologically, this means that any attempt to utilize traditions contained within the Talmud must be rooted in close reading, analysis of intertextuality, and a fair-sized grain of salt. There are Talmudic texts that are pertinent to my examination of Jethro, and I use them by noting their connections to and differences from other rabbinic traditions.

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[62] Strack and Stemberger, 217-8.
[63] Ibid., 220.
[64] Ibid., 226. See also David Weiss-Halivni, "The Amoraic and Stammaitic Periods," in *Essential Papers on the Talmud*, 127-60.

Targums[65]

     Determining the authorship and provenance of the Targums is difficult, to say the

least. Each of the Targums most likely underwent extensive development, redaction, and

additions. Philip Alexander states it most directly: "It simply has to be conceded that, in

the case of the Aramaic targumim, objective dating criteria (apart from the *terminus ad*

*quem* provided by the dates of the manuscripts) simply do not exist."[66] However, certain

analytical tools can be useful in determining relative dating of the Targums, in relation to

one another and in relation to other works of rabbinic literature. These tools include

analysis of recurrent aggadic themes, analysis of halakhah, and analysis of

"actualization" within the Targums—the assigning of contemporary names to places and

(sometimes) peoples mentioned in the Bible.[67]

     In spite of the complexity concerning the provenance of the Targums, it is

possible to make a few statements that represent scholarly consensus. Targum Onqelos

(hereafter Tg. Onq.) receives its name from b. Meg 3a, which identifies Onqelos the

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[65] Pertinent scholarship on the Targums includes Paul Flesher, ed., *Targum and Scripture: Studies in Aramaic Translation and Interpretation in Memory of Ernest G. Clarke* (Leiden: Brill, 2002); Derek Robert George Beattie and Martin J. McNamara, eds., *The Aramaic Bible: Targums in their Historical Context* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994); Kevin J. Cathcart and Micahel Maher, eds., *Targumic and Cognate Studies: Essays in Honor of Martin McNamara* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996); John Bowker, *The Targums and Rabbinic Literature: An Introduction to Jewish Interpretations of Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969; a new edition will be coming out in January 2009); Etan Levine, *The Aramaic Version of the Bible* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988); Gerard J. Kuiper, *The Pseudo-Jonathan Targum and its Relationship to Targum Onkelos* (Rome: Institutum Patristicum "Augustinianum," 1972).

[66] Philip S. Alexander, "Jewish Aramaic Translations of Hebrew Scriptures," in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading, and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (ed. Martin Jan Mulder and Harry Sysling; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2005), 243.

[67] For the purposes of this study, it is not useful for me to go into great detail concerning these tools and how they can be applied. I refer the reader to Shinan, "Echoes from Ancient Synanoguges: Vocatives and 'Emendations' in the Aramaic Targums to the Pentateuch," *JQR* 81:3-4 (1991), 353-64; "The Aggadah of the Palestinian Targums of the Pentateuch and Rabbinic Aggadah: Some Methodological Considerations" in *The Aramaic Bible* (ed. McNamara and Beattie), 203-17; Robert Hayward, "Jacob's Second Visit to Bethel in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan," in *A Tribute to Geza Vermes* (ed. Phillip R. Davies and Richard T. White; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 175-92; Flescher, "Translation and Exegetical Augmentation in the Targums to the Pentateuch," in *Judaic and Christian Interpretation of Texts* (ed. Neusner; Lanham: University Press of America, 1987), 29-85.

proselyte as the composer of the Targum. In y. Meg. 71c, however, Aquilas is named as

the Targumist, and the name Onqelos does appear in other rabbinic texts as a corruption

of Aquilas; most likely, the assignation of the name "Onqelos" to the Targum is based on

an erroneous conflation of the two names.[68] Though it is the official Targum of

Babylonia,[69] Tg. Onq. exhibits a form of Aramaic which is not identical to that of the

Babylonian Talmud (though it does demonstrate some Eastern Aramaic influence), but is

more akin to the Aramaic of the Genesis Apocryphon from Qumran.[70] There are no clear

quotations of Tg. Onq. in the Yerushalmi or other Palestinian sources, though the aggadot

contained in Tg. Onq. do appear in Palestinian texts. For these reasons, it is currently

acknowledged that Tg. Onq. originated—at least in its earliest form—in the land of

Palestine, was later taken to Babylonia, and was subsequently reworked and shortened to

adhere to Babylonian traditions. This reworking is dated by Alexander to the 4th—5th

centuries, though the original form of the Targum can be dated to the 1st—2nd centuries.

Tg. Onq. was later taken back westward, and is referred to in Palestinian texts beginning

in the 8th century (Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer, for example).[71]

Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (hereafter Tg. Ps.-J.) was identified erroneously as the

Targum of Jonathan ben Uzziel because of the acronym ת"י in the first edition. Zunz

showed that this acronym, understood to refer to "Targum Yonatan," probably should be

rendered "Targum Yerushalmi."[72] Tg. Ps.-J. is the most expansive Targum to the

Pentateuch, and apparently combines traditions from many different periods. Though

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[68] P. Alexander, "Targum, Targumim," *ABD* 6:321. See also the discussion in Bowker, *Targums,* 25 n. 1.

[69] Alexander, "Targum," 321; Bowker, *Targums,* 22-6; Levine, *Aramaic Version,* 23.

[70] Moses Aberbach and Bernard Grossfeld, *Targum Onkelos to Genesis: A Critical Analysis Together with an English Translation of the Text (Based on A. Sperber's Edition)* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1982), 9. See also E. Y. Kutscher, "The Language of the Genesis Apocryphon," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 4 (1958): 9-11.

[71] Alexander, "Targum," 321; Alexander, "Jewish Aramaic Translations," 217-8.

[72] Zunz, *Die gottesdienstlichen Vortrage,* 71; Alexander, "Targum," 322; Bowker, *Targums,* 27-28.

there are references to Islam within Tg. Ps.-J. (for which reason some scholars want to date the whole work post-7th century), there are also some passages which are arguably pre-Mishnaic. Thus its redaction must be dated to the 7th-8th centuries or later, but it contains some much older material.[73] Alexander understands Tg. Ps.-J. to consist of 1) material from an original, very early Palestinian Targum (the "Ur-Targum" of most of the Pentateuchal Targums, according to some scholars); 2) material imported from Tg. Onq.; and 3) aggadic material unique to Tg. Ps.-J.[74] Tg. Ps.-J. may represent an attempt to fuse Tg. Onq. with the Palestinian Targum after Tg. Onq.'s ascension to official status, though it may also represent a Palestinian version of Tg. Onq. At any rate, its recension history is clearly complex, and it is difficult to date individual traditions included within Tg. Ps.-J. Targum Neofiti (hereafter Tg. Neof.) also contains some very early *and* some very late material; A. Diez-Macho argued that this Targum was pre-Mishnaic, while M. Goshen-Gottstein saw reason to date it to the early Renaissance period.[75] It appears that Tg. Neof. underwent a great deal of tampering at the hands of editors and redactors, though it is impossible to say what may have been lost through the centuries.[76] It is more expansive than Tg. Onq., less so than Tg. Ps.-J., and clearly demonstrates affinities in language and aggadot to the Palestinian tradition.[77]

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[73] Bowker, *Targums,* 26-27; Alexander, "Targum," 322-3.
[74] Alexander, "Targum," 322.
[75] Alexander, "Targum," 323.
[76] Bowker, *Targums,* 16-21.
[77] For the purposes of this study, Targum Jonathan (to the Former and Latter Prophets) is not useful. I will introduce the Targum to Chronicles in ch. 4.

**Attitudes Towards Proselytes in Rabbinic Texts**

The goal of this study is not only to develop a greater understanding of how Jethro is interpreted; by engaging in a thorough study of Jewish exegesis of Jethro, I hope to gain insight into the way Jewish identity is constructed in ancient Jewish biblical interpretation, how these interpreters defined the Jewish community and its boundaries, and the means of crossing those boundaries. Though other scholars have worked diligently on the question of identity in ancient Judaism, an examination of a specific character and his post-biblical afterlives reveals perspectives and concerns that are not apparent in rabbinic materials which address identity *in the abstract.* What the rabbis say about non-Jews and converts *in theory* can be remarkably different from what they say about a particular non-Jew/convert in the course of biblical interpretation. Several broad issues come to the fore when attempting to assess attitudes towards proselytes and towards Jethro in particular, and therefore it is valuable to first review treatment of proselytes and assess the role of circumcision.

One of the most prevalent themes throughout post-biblical Jewish interpretation concerning Jethro is that of conversion: Jethro is depicted as a proselyte to Judaism. The details about his conversion vary; in some cases, he converts prior to meeting Moses,[78] while in others he doesn't convert until he hears about the miracles wrought during the Exodus.[79] Sometimes Jethro is depicted as experiencing a purely religious conversion,[80] while in other texts, he undergoes particular elements of the formal conversion ceremony.[81] The nuances of these presentations will be discussed in the chapters that

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[78] E.g. Exodus Rabbah 1:32.
[79] E.g. Tanhuma Yitro 7.
[80] E.g Mekhilta Amalek 3.
[81] E.g. b. Sanh. 94a.

follow. However, it is necessary at this juncture to ask: How are proselytes viewed *in general* in post-biblical Jewish texts? Any examination of Jethro *as a proselyte* needs to take place against the backdrop of general attitudes towards converts.

Porton's *The Stranger Within Your Gates* explores rabbinic treatments of proselytes quite thoroughly, incorporating Mishnah, Tosefta, midrashim up to the 5$^{th}$ century, and the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds. He examines the status of converts, descriptions of conversion rituals, and matters such as intermarriage and Israelite culture. His analysis contributes a great deal to the study of rabbinic texts and the study of conversion in Judaism; however, there are significant methodological differences between Porton's work and my own. Porton is not trying to reconstruct a social history of conversion (nor am I), because, in his opinion, the limitations of the documents used in his study prohibit such an undertaking. As a student of Neusner, Porton is firmly committed to treating each document as a separate entity, and he is careful to note that little can be determined about traditions that cross documentary boundaries.[82] However, he is comfortable treating some rabbinic compilations as internally consistent; for example, he argues that Mekilta treats Jethro positively, while Sifre Numbers demonstrates ambivalence.[83] I see ambivalence present in *both* midrashic compilations concerning Jethro, and I do not believe it is tenable to state that "Mekilta as a whole," or any other rabbinic document, has a singular viewpoint. Like all rabbinic texts, these midrashim conflict with themselves and each other. In this way, my treatment of rabbinic texts is both more and less atomistic than Porton's: I treat each interpretation as a separate entity, but I am willing to see links between and among

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[82] See Porton's discussion of this methodological point, *Stranger,* 13-4.
[83] Porton, *Stranger,* 68-9.

rabbinic documents (such as between Talmud and Targums, for example). In addition, Porton's goal is to examine those texts that address conversion directly, not texts that address conversion in the course of discussing a particular character from the Bible.[84] I hope that my own analysis of the interpretive traditions surrounding Jethro in particular offers me a unique lens into the rabbinic views of Jewish identity.

The vocabulary used to describe converts is interesting in and of itself: the word for proselyte is *gēr*,[85] indicating that this term, which in the biblical period means "resident alien," has undergone a significant change in the thought-world of post-biblical Judaism. The *gēr* of the Bible is a person who does not dwell among his[86] kin; he is subsequently without a local support network, and therefore his rights need to be protected (similar to the orphan and the widow).[87] The term can be used to describe the Hebrews/Israelites, referring to their experiences living outside their own land.[88] When the term refers to a non-Israelite, it depicts a person who is not a full member of the Israelite community, though he can participate in certain components of community life and much of biblical law applies to him as well.[89] The post-biblical *gēr,* however, is a convert, a person who was not originally part of the Jewish community but has become a

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[84] Of course, Porton does mention Jethro and discusses some of the texts surrounding his status as a convert. See Porton, *Stranger,* 59-60, 64-5, 68, 72, 127, 198, 201, 257 nn. 95-7, 258 n. 99, 261 n. 13, 273 n. 55, 284 n. 126, 317-8 n. 302. However, the present study incorporates a much larger body of materials concerning Jethro specifically and examines these texts as *biblical exegesis*, which is a unique, if prevalent, kind of rabbinic hermeneutic, with a unique set of constraints.

[85] I will leave this term untranslated throughout the dissertation, in order to enable the word to function in a multivalent fashion. It is often necessary to ask *how* the term is being used in a given text, and because of this, I do not want to make a singular decision about how it should best be translated.

[86] I retain the use of the masculine for discussing the *gēr* because this is the language of the texts under consideration. Obviously, women as well as men were in that position. The book of Ruth may be an example. There seem to be different issues at work regarding women, but exploring these goes beyond the scope of this dissertation.

[87] So Lev 23:22; Deut 10:18; and 24:17.

[88] See, for example, Gen 12:10; 20:1; 26:3; 32:4; 36:6-7; Exod 2:22.

[89] Exod 12:49; Lev 16:29; Lev 17:10; Lev 24:16; Num 15:69; Deut 24:14; vs. Deut 14:21.

Jew.[90] Because this understanding of the term is so prevalent in post-biblical literature, it appears that in places where the rabbis and commentators of late antiquity come across a biblical reference to a *gēr,* they feel justified reading that reference vis-à-vis conversion.[91]

The central question for my examination is this: to what extent is the *gēr* like a born Jew? Certain responses to this question emphasize the positive value of proselytes. In Numbers Rabbah 8:2[92] God explains that *gērim* are equated with the Levites (that is, they are of high status in Israel) because of the effort it takes to convert: God had worked great miracles to bring the Israelites out of slavery and into God's covenant, but concerning the proselyte God states, "This one came on his own; he is therefore deemed by me the equal of an Israelite, even of a Levite." The same text adds a statement of overarching inclusiveness: "*Gērim* are beloved, for in each and every passage Scripture likens them to Israel." Most responses to this question, however, are more complicated. While Numbers Rabbah 8:4 supports a hospitable response to proselytes, it does so for reasons that merit further exploration:

> At the time the Gibeonites said to Joshua, "Come up to us quickly, and save us and help us" (Josh 10:6)—at that time Joshua asked himself, Shall we burden the community for the sake of these *gērim*? The Holy One said to him: Joshua, if you keep away those who have been far off, you will end up keeping away those who are near. Besides, consider your origin: is it not from *gērim*?[93]

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[90] It is important to note the difference between "Israelite" and "Jew" that is indicated in this development: while the term *gēr* in the biblical period has national or ethnic connotations in addition to religious consequences (affecting participation in religious rituals), it appears to be a primarily religious designation in the post-biblical period.

[91] This understanding of the word *gēr* by rabbinic interpreters is extremely prevalent, as will become evident in the chapters that follow.

[92] See also Midrash Tehillim 146:8.

[93] Moshe A. Mirkin, *Numbers Rabbah* (2 vols.; Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1964): 1:147.

In this midrash, Joshua is ordered to take care of the Gibeonites (who, it must be said, converted out of concern for personal safety rather than religious devotion) for two reasons: it is the best way to ensure a unified community, and the Israelites are not so different from these people; they were *gērim* in the land of Egypt. Though the text maintains a distinction between "those who are far off" and "those who are near", it also advocates a policy of active inclusiveness, requiring Joshua to have a sense of responsibility for those who have become part of the fold. The second reason given by God for the recommended course of action is significant: God does not see such a clear distinction between Israelites and *gērim.* In this text, the term *gērim* is multivalent. The Israelites were *gērim* in Egypt in the biblical sense of the word: they were living in a land which was not theirs. The Gibeonites are *gērim* in a rabbinic sense: they have converted and joined the Hebrews. The effect of this multivalence is to draw a link between the experience of the Hebrews in Egypt and the experiences of those who undergo conversion. The use of the word "*gēr*" enables the rabbis of this midrash to make a case for welcoming converts, even though the application of the word "*gēr*" to the Israelites in Egypt has nothing to do with conversion.

Still, we find several rabbinic texts that emphasize demarcation between *gērim* and Israel, with varying degrees of hostility regarding converts. In the Babylonian Talmud, R. Aha b. Avia, in the name of R. Assi b. Hanina, lays down a rule concerning proselytes that guarantees ongoing differentiation between them and their Israelite neighbors: "A cistus hedge (חצובא) forms a partition in the estate of a proselyte. What is the cistus hedge? Rab Judah said in the name of Rab: The plant with which Joshua marked the boundaries for the land of Canaan for the Israelites" (b. BB 56a). This plant,

described also in b. Bets. 25b, b. Pes. 111b, and Genesis Rabbah 31, apparently has roots

that grow straight down, thus preventing the plant from encroaching on neighboring

property.[94]  Why would it be necessary for proselytes' land to be framed in such a

manner?  To prevent the proselytes from encroaching on Israelite land, and vice versa.

This hedge forms a boundary that is uniquely capable of preserving legitimate borders in

perpetuity; the rabbis of this text, therefore, wanted to maintain permanent differentiation

between Israelites and proselytes.

For the rabbis of b. Kid. 70b,[95] it is lineage that is the insurmountable obstacle for

*gērim:*

> R. Hama bar Hanina said: When the Holy One Blessed Be
> He causes his presence to dwell, he causes it to dwell only
> upon families in Israel of legitimate descent ( משפחות מיוחסות
> שביישראל), as it is said, "At that time, declares YHWH, I
> will be God to all the families of Israel, and they shall be
> my people" (Jer 31:1).  Scripture does not say, "of all
> Israel," but, "of all the families of Israel."  Rabba bar Rav
> said, This is the extraordinary difference between Israel and
> *gērim.*  For concerning Israel it is written: "I will be their
> God and they will be my people" (Ezek 37:27).  But this is
> written concerning *gērim*: "For who is this who dares to
> approach me?' says YHWH" (Jer 30:21)…. Rabbi Helbo
> said, *gērim* are as hard for Israel as a sore (ספחת), as it is
> said, "And the *gēr* will join them and cleave (נספחו) to the
> house of Jacob" (Isa 14:1).

The negativity of this text regarding proselytes is clear: even those who join

Israel are forever differentiated in God's eyes from the "unsullied" Israelite families.

According to R. Hama bar Hanina, God's own presence is reserved for those with pure

lineage, which is remarkably different from Numbers Rabbah 8:4; in the latter text, God

teaches that the most honored among Israel can have foreign lineage. In b. Kid. 70b,

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[94] Jastrow, 494.
[95] See also b. Yev. 109b.

however, God draws near only to those Israelites with demonstrably unmixed lineage. Though this demarcation is already clear, Rabbi Helbo adds a qualitative judgment which likens *gērim* to a skin affliction. Ironically, the secondary scriptural reference for his teaching, Isa 14:1, is about non-Israelites joining Israel because of new knowledge and devotion to God. Rabbi Helbo has managed to turn a text which underscores the ultimate inclusion of non-Israelites into a text which expresses contempt and disgust for them.

Many rabbinic texts demonstrate ambivalence, and even contradictory views, concerning proselytes. The extracanonical tractate Gerim presents a myriad of opinions concerning proselytes, ranging from hospitality to condemnation.[96] The actual conversion ritual depicted in Gerim, along with b. Yev 47a-b, has been carefully and brilliantly explored already in Cohen's *The Beginnings of Jewishness.*[97] For the purposes of our study, however, it is most helpful to examine the ways the tractate talks about proselytes, who they are, what motivates them, and whether or not they are full members of Israel.[98]

The motivation of the potential proselyte is one of the factors that determines the person's place in Israel after his conversion. Gerim 1:3 reports that, "he who embraces Judaism through the desire to marry a Jewish woman, through personal love for the Jews, or through fear of the Jews, is not a proselyte…. And he who embraces Judaism, not for the sake of heaven, is no proselyte." Hence the status of an individual as a *gēr* is dependent upon genuine love for God, not philo-Judaism, nor fear, nor marriage. Though

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[96] Gerim is one of seven halakhic tractates that are generally regarded to be post-Talmudic. Michael Higger, *Seven Minor Tractates* (Jerusalem: Maqor, 1971).

[97] Cohen, *Beginnings,* 198-217.

[98] Gerim chapter 3 contains discussion of a category of *gēr* that exists in the liminal space between proselytes and non-Jews: the "domiciled alien" (גר תושב), who has renounced idolatry but not pursued conversion. This figure enjoys some of the benefits of Israelite society, while still retaining significant social differentiation. For example, an Israelite may not intermarry with a domiciled alien, but it is forbidden to make a loan to him with interest.

the tractate makes it abundantly clear through extended discussion that the components of the ritual of conversion serve as the path which brings a person into the community of Israel, it is also clear from this text that the beliefs of the proselyte are of central importance. Spirituality matters.[99]

This does not mean, however, that a person who converts even with the best of intentions, and even through the appropriate and regulated ceremony, is necessarily freed from his past. In Gerim 2:5, R. Jose and R. Judah disagree on this point; the former argues that "proselytes are called to account for sins they have committed before their conversion," an opinion which indicates that the proselyte's identity does not undergo complete change through the conversion experience. R. Judah repudiates this view: "A proselyte is not called to account for those sins, because he is considered as a newly born child." The fact that R. Judah refers to the proselyte as a newborn child is significant not only because of the proselyte's status and responsibilities (according to b. Yev. 22a, a proselyte may not serve as a witness), but also because it creates the image of the proselyte being newly born into the community, the way native-born Jews are born into their identity. This potentially hospitable interpretation, however, is undermined by the following discussion; the text continues with this argument between R. Hanina and R. Jose:

> R Hanina, the son of Gamaliel, said, Why are the proselytes afflicted? They are afflicted because they have postponed their conversion, by figuring: "Within a year, within two years, when I shall have collected my debts, and when I shall have attended to my needs." R. Jose said to him, If the proselytes suffered financial losses [only], your view would be correct. But the children and grand-children of the proselytes die young, and furthermore, these proselytes

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[99] For a similar argument about the different kinds of proselytes and how they are viewed, see Yalkut Shelakh §745.

are subjected to many ills and sufferings.  Why, then, are
they afflicted?  They are afflicted because of the seven laws
which the Noachides were commanded to observe.[100]

The question that motivates this discussion, "Why are the proselytes afflicted?", is itself significant: why are these rabbis examining the suffering of proselytes as if it were qualitatively different from the suffering of born Jews?  The assumption underlying the question, therefore, underscores the innate *separateness* of converts.  R. Hanina's response to the question is puzzling: it appears that he believes some converts postpone their conversion because of financial concerns, though it is not revealed how their finances would be affected by conversion.  Perhaps contributions would be expected to their new community, or perhaps they are concerned about losing business dealings once they become Jewish.  Regardless of the motivation, R. Hanina locates the reason for the suffering of these converts in their own actions prior to conversion, in their attitudes towards the process of becoming Jewish.  R. Jose points out that "suffering" in this discussion is not limited to economics; there must be a reason proselytes experience sickness and premature death.  He locates the reason in the Noachide laws (Genesis 9), which are incumbent upon all people, not only the Jews.[101]  Hence the proselytes are being punished for not adhering even to those few laws God gave to all of humanity.  What is implied in this interpretation is revealing: proselytes will be judged, *after* they become Jewish, by how they lived as non-Jews.  Hence proselytes are not really equivalent to new-born children; they come into Judaism with a past, and that past stays forever a part of their identity.

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[100] Higger, *Treatises,* 72-3, lines 62-7 (Hebrew); 52 (English).  Higger's translation.
[101] For the teaching that these laws are incumbent upon all people, see (among other texts) t. Abod. Zar. 9:4; b. Sanh. 56a.

In Gerim 4:1, the past history of a proselyte is also considered to be extremely important, but for a very different reason. Rather than separation and punishment, the proselyte's history should result in acceptance and compassionate treatment:

> "You shall not wrong a *gēr,* nor shall you oppress him" (Exod 22:20). You shall not wrong the proselyte through words, nor shall you oppress him economically. You shall not say to him: Last night you worshipped Bel and Nebo, and you still have swine between your teeth; and still you desire to associate with me? You must not speak to him thus, (for) he may quote to you, "You were *gērim* in the land of Egypt" (Exod 22:20). Thus, R. Nathan used to say, do not reproach your neighbor for a fault which is also yours. R. Eliezer bar Jacob says, Because the original environment of the proselyte was bad, the Torah cautions repeatedly against treating him badly. Thus it is said: "You shall not oppress a *gēr*" (Exod 22:20); "For you know the heart of a *gēr*" (Exod 23:9); etc. It is because his original environment was bad that the Torah warns repeatedly against treating him badly.

In this discussion, the proselyte's past is an ongoing factor in his life, but not because it serves to separate him from his new community. Rather, Jews are warned against abusing him for two reasons: 1) his past is not so different from the past history of all Jews (in Egypt); and 2) he suffered greatly in the past when he was a non-Jew, and it is important to have compassion on him as a result. The continued emphasis on the memory of being *gērim* in Egypt has the effect of blurring the line between proselyte and born Jew; Jews were once *gērim* in the geographical sense (living outside their land), and in the religious sense (practicing idolatry). The Passover Haggadah reminds Jews that "Our ancestors were idolaters" and that the history of the Jewish people began "in degradation." The humility inherent in this position results in a "leveling of the field," at

which point proselytes are not so easily differentiated from their neighbors who are Jewish by birth.[102]

Numbers Rabbah 8:9 directly addresses the concerns of proselytes who are uncertain about their status in the Jewish community. The proselytes who are the subject of this text wonder whether they will benefit from their good deeds, whether they will earn a place in the World to Come, and whether their children will be members in good standing of the greater Jewish community. The midrash is encouraging in its response to these concerns:

> The words "When you eat of the labor of your hands" (Ps 128:2) are spoken to a proselyte who has no merit of the fathers…. [T]he psalm offers good tidings to him: because of his own merit, he will "eat" in this world as well as in the World to Come…. "Your wife will be like a fruitful vine" (Psalm 128:3). Even though his wife became a proselyte with him and is not of the daughters of Israel, she shall be *like* the daughters of Israel, "as a fruitful vine" that is heavy with fruit…. "In the innermost parts of your house" (ibid.)—if she conducts herself according to the Jewish religion and is modest, she will be privileged to produce children who are masters of Scripture, masters of Mishnah, masters of good deeds…. And besides, they will have progeny that will endure forever…. The proselyte will be privileged to wed his daughter to a priest, and from her children, who are his children's children, will arise priests, who will bless Israel.[103]

Hence converts to Judaism should be comforted that their own deeds have brought them merit, and that their descendants will be integrated into the Jewish community. This text is unambiguously inclusive in this regard, but this text does not stand alone. Numbers Rabbah 8:9 exists within a textual world in which there are

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[102] The extent to which proselytes are praiseworthy is explored immediately following this text, in Gerim 4:2, through an extended discussion of why "proselytes are beloved."

[103] Mirkin, *Numbers Rabbah,* 1:159.

numerous other traditions recorded, many of which problematize the status of *gērim.*
Most significantly for my study, it is important to note that analyzing those texts that
directly address the concept of conversion is not sufficient to determine the rabbinic view
of converts; rather, it is necessary to see how the various views of ancient Jewish
interpreters come into play in biblical exegesis. After all, what the rabbis have to say
about converts as a general category may or may not match how they treat Jethro, one
particular figure who is often (though not always) treated in rabbinic texts as a proselyte.

Jewish interpretive texts are not universally clear on the procedure of Jethro's
conversion: is it purely spiritual, or did he undergo ritual elements? Porton points out
that it is likely impossible to determine what was ritually required for conversion in the
rabbinic period; in spite of the arguments of modern scholars concerning texts such as
Sifre Numbers Shelakh 108,[104] which lists the three necessary elements as circumcision,
immersion, and sacrifice, there is little consistency concerning the application of these or
other ritual requirements in the conversion process:

> [T]here is a wide-ranging controversy recorded in the
> rabbinic documents concerning the necessity of these three
> rites…. [O]ne could easily conclude that the conversion
> ritual had not yet been established at the close of the
> Talmudic period…. The evidence suggests much diversity
> and flexibility with regard to the conversion ritual, at least
> as it is recorded in the rabbinic documents from Mishnah
> through the Babylonian Talmud.[105]

It is not advisable, therefore, to make assumptions about how the rabbis
understood Jethro's conversion process; in texts which refer to him as a convert, it is
necessary to seek evidence for the nature and status of that conversion. Where no such

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[104] Haim S. Horovitz, *Sifre to Numbers and Sifre Zutta* (Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1966); 112 lines 6-11.
[105] Porton, *Stranger,* 133-4.

evidence is given, it is impossible to know with certainty what the rabbis mean by his "conversion," at least in a ritual sense. Speculation, therefore, is an unfortunate but necessary component of interpretations of post-biblical treatments of Jethro as a convert, though that speculation can and should be rooted in the thought-world of each rabbinic document as well as the context of each interpretation.

## Circumcision

Circumcision is a particularly difficult issue. Whereas the biblical text itself presents later Jewish interpreters with proof that Jethro brought a sacrifice (Exod 18:12), nothing in the Bible provides evidence that Jethro was (or was not) circumcised. For Jewish interpreters, however, there is evidence within the greater narrative of Moses' life that highlights the centrality of circumcision: the perplexing events recorded in Exod 4:24-26. As I will show in the chapters that follow, some rabbinic interpreters found a way to link that story with Jethro's identity, with significant hermeneutical results.

The importance of circumcision in the classical and rabbinic periods is still a matter of some debate. There are numerous texts that highlight circumcision as the identifier *par excellence* for male Jews. Cohen notes that in the Hasmonean period, circumcision was a uniquely important factor in determining the relationship between non-Jews and Jews. Numerous statements recorded in Jewish and non-Jewish Greco-Roman literature indicate that circumcision was identified almost exclusively with the Jews.[106] Though there are references to righteous Gentiles in the literature of this period

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[106] See detailed discussion in Cohen, *Beginnings,* 39-49.

who found favor with God but were not circumcised,[107] Cohen draws a qualitative line between these figures and those who actually sought social entry into the Israelite community. According to Cohen, all Tannaitic texts take for granted that conversion requires circumcision.[108] I disagree: it is not uncommon for traditions recorded in Tannaitic texts to contradict one another, even in the very same document. Hence, I am not comfortable applying the teaching presented in Sifre Numbers Shelach 108 to all other Tannaitic texts. Whenever a convert is mentioned in these materials, it is necessary to analyze the circumstances surrounding the conversion *as presented in each case.*

Even when circumcision is mentioned, however, the problem of identity is not circumvented: "If other peoples are to forge a single nation or kinship group with the Israelites, they must be circumcised. Circumcision is necessary, but not sufficient; the circumcision of non-Israelites does not ipso facto make them Israelites."[109] Hence circumcision is not the only factor that affords a person entry into the Jewish community.

Did the understanding of circumcision change with the inception of the official conversion ritual recorded in b. Yev. 47a-b and tractate Gerim? It should be noted that traditions recorded in rabbinic texts do not necessarily represent the reality of lived experience for the general Jewish population at that time;[110] rather, it is possible to understand rabbinic texts as representing the *ideal* according to the rabbis: this is the way the rabbis would like the community to be structured. Hence the formulation of a

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[107] See discussion of Philonic passages suggesting that conversion is not necessary in Cohen, 152-3, esp. n. 41; Porton, *Stranger,* 139.

[108] Cohen, *Beginnings,* 219.

[109] Cohen, *Beginnings,* 123.

[110] See Seth Schwartz's discussion of this matter in *Imperialism and Jewish Society: 200 B.C.E.—640 C.E.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 5-12. Schwartz argues that scholars in the past have assumed the hegemony of rabbinic thought in the ancient period, but archaeological evidence relating to the daily lives of Jewish people in the early rabbinic period has revealed that there was great diversity in Jewish thought and practice, and that rabbinic documents "did not simply reflect reality but constituted attempts to construct it, that is, they are statements of ideology." (8)

complete, structured conversion ritual does not necessarily prove that this ritual became the means of conversion for all Jewish communities of the rabbinic period. Nor is there agreement within the texts about the application of the ritual. Porton notes that the houses of Hillel and Shammai engage in an argument about whether or not circumcision has to be a part of the official conversion process, or if it is possible for a person to convert and *later* undergo circumcision.[111] In other words, Hillel and Shammai differ on whether circumcision is required to become a Jew, or is only required of all men once they are Jews. The benediction for circumcision differs for converts and native-born Israelites, according to b. Shab. 137b; for the former, the liturgy highlights the significance of circumcision as a component of God's intended created order, while for the latter, the liturgy highlights the specific covenant with Abraham. This distinction is significant: "Native-born Israelites are Abraham's progeny, and they are circumcised because of that fact. Converts may join YHWH's People as part of the deity's universal plan of creation, but they are still somewhat distinct from those who were descended from the patriarchs."[112]

Ultimately, the scholarly debate concerning the role of circumcision in conversion in the rabbinic period presents several important issues that must be considered when evaluating Jethro's status as a *gēr:* Was circumcision always assumed in conversion to Judaism? Is it assumed when Jethro is treated as a convert? How does one distinguish between the social (even ethnic) and religious components of conversion? If Jethro was not circumcised, how are we to understand his status as a convert?

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[111] Porton, *Stranger,* 139-41, referring to traditions recorded in t. Shab. 15:9, Sifra Tazri'a Pereq 1:6, y. Shab. 19:4, and b. Shab. 135a.
[112] Porton, *Stranger,* 141.

**Recent Relevant Scholarship**

Jethro is a uniquely problematic figure for Jewish interpreters wishing to understand their own identities and their relations with "others."  Surprisingly, the only major work devoted to an examination of Jethro's representation in post-biblical interpretation is that of J. Baskin.  In her 1983 book, *Pharaoh's Counsellors,* Baskin examines the biblical "afterlife" of three figures: Job, Balaam and Jethro.  Her main goal is to determine how rabbinic and patristic traditions relate to one another concerning these figures.  The three-fold focus of this work, as well as its goal of cross-tradition examination, prevents it from addressing the same kinds of questions I am asking about identity negotiation and biblical exegesis; rather, Baskin assigns to each figure a summary title (in Jethro's case, "the proselyte to Israel") and proceeds to analyze the sources from that perspective.[113]  Though she has a few insights about contradictory portrayals of Jethro in post-biblical interpretation, she has neither the space nor the need to unpack the implications of those contradicting traditions in her book.  Hence, it is due time Jethro received the attention he deserves as a locus of anxiety concerning Jewish identity.

There are several publications that provide models for my study.  Geza Vermes' *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism* contains studies of biblical figures and stories as they are presented in post-biblical interpretation.[114] In particular, his study of the story presented in Exod 4:24-26 as it is interpreted in the Septuagint, the Targums (Tg. Onq., the fragment Targums, and Tg. Ps.-Jon.), Jubilees, Mekilta, Exodus Rabbah, and

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[113] Baskin, *Pharoah's Counsellors,* 45-74.
[114] Geza Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism: Haggadic Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 1961).

Talmudic texts is a useful model for this dissertation.[115]   Karin Zetterholm's *Portrait of a Villain* presents a study of treatments of Laban in ancient Jewish sources, focusing on Targums and midrashim.[116]  Her overall goal is "to describe the development of the view of Laban the Aramean in Jewish literature from the Bible to the end of the rabbinic period and try to explain how the mainly negative characteristics which are attributed to him came into being."[117]   She sees her work as being one in a "longstanding tradition of comparative midrash" including Vermes, J. Heinemann, S. Fraade, and J. Kugel, and believes that exercises of this sort can reveal not only the development of individual figures in post-biblical literature but also can "shed light on the mechanisms of biblical interpretation and the ideology and world view of the people who fashioned them."[118] Among the many gifts of her work is her emphasis that midrashic interpretation[119] is not only ideological but also exegetical: the rabbis interpreted the Bible in light of their experiences, but were also constrained by the text as well.[120]  Hence it is necessary to examine the texts presented throughout this dissertation as demonstrations of the ideologies of the rabbis *and* as representing exegesis which is shaped by the Bible itself.

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[115] Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition,* 178-92.  He uses these texts to describe the interpretive process that led up to and informed Paul's theology of baptism (190-2), and states that he believes it is possible to apply methods of historical criticism to examine the development of interpretive trajectories, and to make claims about the history of ideas (8-10).

[116] Karin Hedner Zetterholm, *Portrait of a Villain: Laban the Aramean in Rabbinic Literature* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002).

[117] Ibid., 1-2.

[118] Ibid., 3.

[119] Zetterholm includes the Targums when she refers to 'midrashic interpretation'; she views midrash as "an interpretive stance" and not necessarily a discrete genre.  See Kugel, "Two Introductions to Midrash," in *Midrash and Literature*, 77-103.  Though Kugel's understanding of midrash is compelling, I will use the term "midrash" in this dissertation to refer to a specific genre of ancient Jewish interpretive literature in which Scripture is explained, through narrative exegesis as well as homilies, utilizing other parts of the biblical canon (Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer is not exactly "midrash" according to my definition, though I will include that text in ch. 4, on later midrashim).  The nature of midrash—its forms and boundaries—is a valuable topic for exploration, but it is not possible for me to engage in a thorough or definitive examination of this question in the present study.

[120] Zetterholm, *Laban,* 14-21.

Karla R. Suomala has published an extended study of Exodus 32-34 in ancient interpretive literature, in which she examines the treatments of this dialogue between Moses and God in ancient translations (LXX, Dead Sea Scrolls, Samaritan Pentateuch and Targum, Vulgate, and Peshitta), rewritten Bible, Greek Jewish literature, midrashim, Talmudic literature, and Targums.[121] Suomala's main interest is in dialogue and the way ancient interpreters understood the relationship between Moses and God; she focuses on the construction of relationship in post-biblical interpretations of Exodus 32-34 and the way in which dialogue is used to demonstrate—or undermine—the power difference between Moses and God as well as the idea that a human being could in fact change God's mind about a course of action.[122]

Carol Bakhos' work, *Ishmael on the Border,* is similar to these other studies in that she traces the treatment of Ishmael in midrashim from the Tannaitic to the medieval periods.[123] Bakhos raises several methodological points that are beneficial for this dissertation. She states that in the figures of Ishmael and Esau, "we have examples of the ways in which the rabbis dealt with their minority status under foreign rule—the ways in which they reacted to political power and domination in light of their status as God's chosen people."[124] Because Esau is representative of Rome and Christianity in rabbinic thought, and Ishmael is representative of Islam (post-7th century CE), these two figures are especially appropriate for the rabbis to examine with identity in mind. However, even before the advent of Islam, rabbinic interpretations of Ishmael reveal a great deal about

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[121] Karla R. Suomala, *Moses and God in Dialogue: Exodus 32-34 in Postbiblical Literature* (Studies in Biblical Literature 61; New York: Peter Lang, 2004).

[122] See the introduction in Suomala, *Moses and God,* 1-19.

[123] Carol Bakhos, *Ishmael on the Border: Rabbinic Portrayals of the First Arab* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006).

[124] Bakhos, *Ishmael,* 5.

how the Jews of antiquity understood themselves in relation to others: as the son of

Abraham who is *not* the heir of the divine promise, Ishmael represents an abstract,

"imagined" other, and the rabbis can define themselves against him and his

descendants.[125]  Bakhos believes that rabbinic interpretation is *both* exegetical and

ideological, that "extratextual factors, that is, religious, sociopolitical, and cultural

concerns, are inextricably part of the hermeneutical process."[126]  In addition, Bakhos

states that it is possible to use interpretive texts to reconstruct social history, even when

those texts are multilayered and have a long history of compilation and redaction.[127]  An

examination of midrash like the one undertaken in the present study, therefore, can and

should highlight "the utility of midrashim as historical sources and the use of history as a

hermeneutical tool."[128]  This is because the goal of the aggadists was twofold: to explain

the text, and to make it relevant to contemporary readers.[129]  In fact, Bakhos believes

these two aspects of the rabbinic agenda cannot be completely separated, but sees a

"synergistic relationship between the historical and exegetical aspects of rabbinic

literature:"[130]

> At times the biblical verse is explicitly the focal point of
> rabbinic exegesis; in other cases it is the vehicle through
> which the rabbis express their theological, social and
> political concerns…. Even when the focal point is exegesis,
> one must keep in mind that several factors come into play.
> Although lately midrashic scholars have emphasized the
> exegetical aspect, no one denies the interplay between the
> verse and extratextual factors that give rise to a certain
> interpretation…. The issue is not whether extratextual

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[125] For detailed examples of how the rabbis responded to Ishmael as an 'other,' see especially the discussion in Bakhos, *Ishmael,* 31-45.

[126] Ibid., *Ishmael,* 4.

[127] Ibid.

[128] Ibid.

[129] Ibid.*,* 2-3, 5-10; J. Heinemann, "The Nature of Aggadah," in *Midrash and Literature* (ed. G. Hartman and S. Budick), 49.

[130] Bakhos, *Ishmael,* 8.

> factors are part of exegesis, but, rather, *how* and *when* we
> can use such texts as historical sources.[131]

This perspective on the multilayered nature of rabbinic hermeneutics is important for my examination of Jethro in rabbinic texts.

However, there are also substantial differences between Bakhos' examination of Ishmael and the present study. Because Ishmael comes to represent the religion of Islam in Jewish interpretation after the 7th century CE, Bhakos is able to detect and highlight a distinct shift in treatment of Ishmael after the advent of Islam. The later interpretations that develop concerning Ishmael center around the connections and conflicts between Judaism and Islam, and between Jews and Muslims. Jethro, however, does not come to represent any *particular* religious or ethnic group in post-biblical Jewish interpretation, and consequently the interpretations that develop concerning him are qualitatively different from those concerning Ishmael. No single historical event marks a change in treatment of Jethro in Jewish thought. Rather, the "problem" with Jethro for Jewish interpreters is primarily textual: how do we understand a text that has presented us with a man who is not Israelite, is the priest of another religion, and who is the member of an ethnic/national group [the Midianites] that is problematic for the Israelites, and yet this man is often presented positively?[132]

The present study is very similar to the projects discussed above in scope and methodology. Like Vermes, Zetterholm, Suomala and Bakhos, I will be examining the treatment of Jethro as he appears in various forms of post-biblical literature. I will focus

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[131] Bakhos, *Ishmael,* 6-7.

[132] Bakhos' argument that the children of Keturah become paradigmatic "others" in rabbinic texts, unfit to receive the divine promise, may be a useful strategy for understanding Jethro's otherness (after all, the nation of Midian descends from Keturah), but as will be seen in this dissertation, Jethro is rarely identified with Midian in rabbinic texts.

exclusively on Jewish texts (rather than including Christian translations or patristics) because I am interested in how Jethro functioned as a locus of anxiety for Jewish interpreters trying to establish the nature of Jewish identity and the relationships between Jews and non-Jews.  Because this is my primary interest, I will not include *all* ancient Jewish texts that mention Jethro, but only those that specifically pertain to the question of Jewish identity (such as those addressing ethnicity, conversion, and the role Jethro and his descendants played among the Israelites).  Like Cohen and Porton, I will take note of the themes that reappear consistently in these texts, including (but not limited to) the Temple, the land of Israel, and participation in Jewish rituals.  My methodological task is twofold, in that it is historical and hermeneutical.  First, I will make historical claims concerning the development of certain traditions and the ways beliefs and perspectives changed through the centuries.  As noted above, I am adhering to a generally-agreed upon relative chronology, which enables me to map out trajectories of interpretation.  Any claims made concerning the development of ideas demonstrated in these texts must be sound according to historical-critical methods of study.  Second, I will treat these texts as exegesis, as examples of rabbinic hermeneutics.  Any claims made about Jethro's identity in these texts emerge not only from the interpreters' beliefs about Jewishness and non-Jews, but also from their understanding of the Bible as holy Scripture.   The presentations of Jethro that will be examined were not based on the principle of "anything goes," but were rooted in respect for Scripture and the genuine belief that whatever answers Jewish interpreters sought in the text could be found there.

## Chapter 2:  Jethro in the Bible

The purpose of this chapter is to identify and examine the biblical texts that form the foundation for discussions of Jethro by Jewish biblical interpreters.  This corpus includes not only those texts that refer to Jethro by name (Exod 3:1, 4:18 and 18), but also texts that arguably refer to Moses' father-in-law by other names (Jether, Hobab, Reuel, and the Kenite); in addition, there are some biblical texts that do not directly mention Moses' father-in-law, which are nonetheless of importance to later interpreters discussing Jethro.  These biblical texts provide information about the Kenites, the Midianites, the Rechabites, and the roles these groups played in Israelite history.

My decision to enlarge the discussion to include texts that do not mention Jethro explicitly is rooted in one of my discoveries upon conducting the research for this study: the interpreters represented in these rabbinic texts linked Jethro with all Kenites because he is identified as a Kenite; thus even the Rechabites of 1 Chr 2:55 become relevant for understanding Jethro in rabbinic exegesis, because they are identified as Kenites. Whether or not the biblical text reveals any link between Jethro and the Rechabites, the rabbis made that link in their interpretations.  In addition, Jethro and Zipporah sometimes appear in rabbinic interpretations of biblical texts concerning the Midianites, even when they are not mentioned in the original biblical context.  In this way, the rabbis demonstrate a primary concern with the biblical verse rather than the biblical book; that is, the rabbis are comfortable linking verses from disparate parts of the Bible if they share a single word or idea.[1]  This practice is broadly an example of the hermeneutical principle

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[1] This aspect of midrashic exegesis has been explored by Kugel, "Two Introductions to Midrash," 93.  See also Kugel, *In Potiphar's House,* 253-5.

of *gezerah sheva* ("equal ordinance," or verbal analogy).[2]   The presence of the word "Kenite" in Judg 1:16, Judg 4:11 and 1 Chr. 2:55 enables the rabbinic interpreters to link these verses together as if they are all discussing the same group of people.   It appears that when the rabbis read about "Jethro the Kenite" or "Jethro the Midianite," they often had in mind biblical texts that provide information about these identifiers and were willing to utilize them in exegesis.

For each genre of ancient biblical interpretation, the hermeneutical practices concerning these intertexts will have varied; for example, it is more likely that one will find an explicit reference to 1 Sam 15:6[3] in a discussion of Jethro in midrash than in Targums.   However, that does not mean that the various intertexts concerning Kenites and Midianites did not play a role in how the Targumists understood Jethro's ethnicity. In order to grasp the subtleties of the hermeneutics at play in each of the interpretive traditions that I will examine in this dissertation, one must first analyze those biblical texts that played a part in the interpretation of Jethro.

I will therefore examine components of Exodus, Numbers, Judges and 1 Chronicles in this chapter.  My purpose is not to offer comprehensive exegesis of these passages but to highlight and examine exegetical problems that would prove fruitful for later interpreters.  The reason for such a focus is that these problematic components of the biblical text create the opportunities for later Jewish exegetes to interpret creatively.  The fact that lacunae, strange grammar, and unusual words exist in the biblical text is not news to any reader of the Bible.  One of the first tasks facing a modern reader of midrash

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[2] Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction,* 21.
[3] 1 Sam 15:6: "And Saul said to the Kenites: 'Go, depart, go down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them; for you showed kindness to all the children of Israel, when they came up out of Egypt.' So the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites."

is to ascertain what in the biblical text has created the opportunity for the rabbis'

interpretations; in other words, it is important to try to grasp what is "bothering" the

rabbis.  This task, referred to by Kugel as "reverse-engineering," requires a thorough

knowledge of the biblical text.[4]    Hence it is vitally important for this study that I

examine the biblical texts to take note of unique components, omissions, and grammatical

oddities.

My examination of these biblical texts will move in the order of the Jewish canon.

Scholars debate about the relative chronology of the biblical books as well as the dates of

the different works and strata within them.[5]  But it is clear that the biblical interpreters of

the Common Era had in their possession a Bible that largely corresponded to the canon of

the Tanakh as we have it now, especially the first five books.[6]  As the heart of the canon

for ancient Jewish interpreters, the Torah takes pride of place and hence it is appropriate

to move through the Torah in canonical order, and then examine texts from the Prophets

and Writings.  My presentation and analysis of these texts in canonical order is not meant

to imply that the interpreters I am discussing in subsequent chapters *thought* in canonical

order.  Rather, we have reason to assume that many of these interpreters thought of the

Bible in a less linear fashion, as a textual world whose various parts intersect with one

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[4] Kugel, *Potiphar's House,* 251-3.  For more on this point, see Barry W. Holtz, "Midrash," in *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts* (ed. Barry Holtz; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984)*,* 189-90.
[5] This is generally the focus of source criticism and tradition criticism.  There are numerous works that address the relative chronology and placement of the sources of the Pentateuch, some of which are intended for scholars while others are intended for popular audiences.  In particular, see: Antony F. Campbell and Mark A. O'Brien, *Sources of the Pentateuch: Texts, Introductions, Annotations* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993);  Richard Elliot Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: HarperOne, 1997);  Ernest Nicholson, *The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Pres, 1998);  Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (trans. Bernhard W. Anderson; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1981);  John Van Seters, *The Pentateuch: A Social Science Commentary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999);  Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (trans. J. Sutherland Black and A. Menzies; Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1885).
[6] See James A. Sanders, "Canon (Hebrew Bible)," *AB* 1:837-52.

another.[7]  The Torah had a central role, but biblical materials outside the Torah could be used by these interpreters to explain and expound upon Torah text.[8]

Before I begin, it is necessary to make clear to the reader that I will generally refer to Moses' father-in-law as Jethro, and treat Reuel, Jethro, Hobab, Jether and the Kenite as if they are the same figure.  This assumption is certainly problematic: by lumping all of the various characters called "Moses' father-in-law" into a single figure, I might appear to be ignoring the theories (source-critical and otherwise) that attempt to address these different names.  However, my choice to assume *one* identity for Moses' father-in-law for this study is based on the traditions of later Jewish exegetes whose interpretations are the subject of this dissertation; throughout works of Jewish biblical interpretation, the various men identified as Moses' father-in-law are treated as one person, whose various names serve to highlight aspects of his character, his relationship with God, or other components of his personality.[9]  In general, the source-critical theories that address the issue of Jethro's names are not significant for classical Jewish biblical interpretation.  Nonetheless, I will devote some attention in this chapter to discussion of the modern scholarly theories concerning Jethro's multiple names, as well as the relationships between the Israelites and the Kenites, Midianites and Rechabites.

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[7] This is another aspect of Kugel's view of the verse-centrism of the rabbis: "The basic unit of the Bible, for the midrashist, is the verse: this is what he seeks to expound, and it might be said that there simply is no boundary encountered beyond that of the verse until one comes to the borders of the canon itself."  Kugel, "Two Introductions," 93.

[8] In fact, Kugel notes that "each verse of the Bible is in principle as connected to its most distant fellow as to the one next door; in seeking to illuminate a verse from Genesis, the midrashist is as likely to have reference (if to anything) to a verse from the Psalter as to another verse in the immediate context—indeed, he sometimes delights in the remoter source."  Kugel, "Two Introductions,"  93.

[9] There are notable exceptions to this practice, found in Sifre Numbers 78 and Targum Tg. Ps.-J. to Exod 2:18; in these texts, Reuel is identified as the father of Jethro, Zipporah's grandfather.  However, the vast majority of rabbinic texts demonstrate conflation of the various names.

**<u>Exodus</u>**[10]

We are first introduced to the figure of Jethro in Exodus 2, after Moses has fled the land of Egypt and arrived at a well in Midian. Exodus 2:16-21 reads:

<div dir="rtl">

16 ולכהן מדין שבע בנות ותבאנה ותדלנה ותמלאנה את הרהטים להשקות צאן אביהן. 17 ויבאו הרעים ויגרשום ויקם משה ויושען וישק את צאנם. 18 ותבאנה אל רעואל אביהן ויאמר מדוע מהרתן בא היום? 19 ותאמרן איש מצרי הצילנו מיד הרעים וגם דלה דלה לנו וישק את הצאן. 20 ויאמר אל בנתיו ואיו למה זה עזבתן את האיש? קראן לו ויאכל לחם. 21 ויאל משה לשבת את האיש ויתן את צפרה בתו למשה. ותלד בן ויקרא את שמו גרשם כי אמר גר הייתי בארץ נכריה.

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16 The priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. 17 But shepherds came and drove them away. Moses rose and rescued them, and watered their flock. 18 When they returned to their father Reuel,[11] he said, "Why have you hurried back today?" 19 They said, "An Egyptian man[12] saved us from the shepherds, and he even drew water for us and watered our flock!" 20 He said to his daughters, "Where is he? Why did you leave the man? Call him so that he may eat bread." 21 Moses consented to stay with the man, and he gave him his daughter Zipporah. She bore a son,

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[10] Commentaries consulted for this study include: Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1967); Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974); John I. Durham, *Exodus* (WBC 3; Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1987); Everett Fox, *Now These Are the Names* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986); Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus* (2 vols.; trans. Johan Rebel and Sierd Woudstra; Kampen: Kok Publishing House, 1993); James P. Hyatt, *Exodus* (NCB; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980); M. Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962); Carole Meyers, *Exodus* (New Cambridge Bible Commentary; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18* (AB 2; New York: Doubleday, 1999); J. Gerald Janzen, *Exodus* (WC; Louisville, Kent.: Westminster John Knox, 1997).

[11] The 5th century Alexadrinus codex of the LXX reads "Iothor" (= a form of Jethro) here. Emmanuel Tov notes that, "The scribe of A[lexandrinus] often adapted the text to similar verses and added harmonizing details." Emmanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (2nd ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 139.

[12] It is interesting that Reuel's daughters refer to Moses as an "Egyptian man." What led them to this conclusion? His clothing? His language or accent? The text does not record any argument with this identifier. And yet, Moses has already demonstrated concern for the Hebrews in Egypt (Exod 2:11-12), and within a few chapters, he will come to identify himself as a member of the Israelite nation (Exod 4:18). Does the text here purposefully record a misperception that Moses is Egyptian, or does the text imply that Moses is both Egyptian and Israelite (that he can be both, or that he is a cultural hybrid of sorts)? Commentators have generally been silent on this issue, though Hyatt (*Exodus,* 68) and Cassuto (*Exodus,* 25), assume the daughters thought Moses to be an Egyptian because of his clothing.

and he called him Gershom, "for," he said, "I have been a
*gēr* in a foreign land."

Several aspects of this brief passage present exegetical issues.  First, Reuel is referred to as the "priest" of Midian.  The reader does not know what are the characteristics, roles or requirements of this title; though the word כֹהֵן is used in the Bible primarily in reference to Israelite religious officiants, some non-Israelites bear the title as well.[13]  It is not clear from this text, therefore, what Reuel believes or how he enacts religious leadership.[14]  Second, there is a large gap in the narrative; we are not privy to the course of events that led from Reuel's offer of hospitality to Moses' ultimate decision to dwell in Midian and marry into Reuel's family.  We know that Reuel is hospitable; this positive trait might have something to do with Moses' willingness to remain in his home.[15]

When Moses and Zipporah have their first child, it is significant that Moses explains the child's name in relation to his experience of "foreignness":  "I have been a

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[13] See, for example, Gen 41:45; 2 Kgs 11:18; 1 Sam 5:5.

[14] Propp (*Exodus,* 171) suggests that his residence near Mt. Horeb (3:1) combined with his confession of YHWH's greatness in 18:11 and his offering of sacrifices (18:12) characterizes him as a YHWH-worshipper.  However, the text does not make clear how close Reuel's home is to Mt. Horeb, and Jethro's statement in 18:11 might be an expression of a *newfound* understanding of YHWH.  Propp is reading the texts about Reuel/Jethro as if they were consistent with one another; the text of Exodus 2 does not in fact tell us anything about Reuel's religious identity.  Ibn Ezra also identifies Reuel as a priest of YHWH, but does not offer an explanation.  H. Norman Strickman and Arthur M. Silver, *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch: Exodus* (New York: Menorah, 1996), 46.

[15] In addition, Moses' marriage to Zipporah is worthy of comment.  What information do we have about Zipporah, other than her identity as a Midianite?  Why is she an appropriate wife for Moses?  Even before the narrative turns to the miraculous events of the Exodus, the reader is aware that Moses is special; his birth narrative contains several elements that serve to highlight his significance. It is possible that for ancient readers, the woman who marries Moses must be significant as well.  Propp (*Exodus,* 176-7) argues that the lack of information concerning Moses' love affair with Zipporah is due to the text's relative lack of concern for Moses' private life; he is a political and religious figure more than an idealized ancestor.  In this dissertation, the question of Zipporah's identity in Jewish interpretation will not be pursued, with the exception of interpretive texts that demonstrate anxiety—or lack thereof—about Moses' marriage into Jethro's family.

stranger (גר) in a foreign land (ארץ נכריה)" (Exod 2:22).[16] The very name Moses chooses

for his first-born is a marker of identity, in that it reveals some of Moses' attitude towards

his own status and experience. It is not clear if the foreign land in Moses' speech refers

to Egypt or to Midian, and commentators are divided on the issue.[17] If the word *gēr* in

Gershom's name is a reference to Moses' life in Egypt, then it highlights Moses'

identification with the Israelites and their experiences.[18] If, on the other hand, Moses'

"*gēr*-ness" is in relation to his stay in Midian, Moses is in fact acknowledging his own

outsider status: he is a sojourner, whose status, even if he remains in the land, will never

be equal to those who were born there.[19] The land itself is foreign to him, perhaps

negatively so; √נכר has a semantic range incorporating notions of disguise and

defacement as well as foreignness.[20] What is the significance of Moses' choice of this

name? At a time when his relationship to the Midianites is undergoing solidification—

after all, his son is partially Midianite—Moses is declaring that he is not an insider.[21]

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[16] See Cassuto (*Exodus,* 26), Durham (*Exodus,* 23), Meyers (*Exodus,* 45), Janzen (*Exodus,* 25), and Fox (*Names,* 21), for the theory that Gershom's name is based on √גרש, "to expel." This may be etymologically correct, but I prefer to understand the name as the phrase *gēr-sham*, "a stranger there," because the biblical text makes this wordplay explicit.

[17] Meyers (*Exodus,* 45-6) sees a connection between the name Moses grants to his son and the statement in Gen 15:13 that the Israelites would be גרים in Egypt. Durham (*Exodus,* 24) states that, "The foreign land to which Moses refers must be understood to be Egypt," because of the perfect form of the verb "to be," adding that Moses is "at home" in Midian, "no matter how unfamiliar to him may be this land and the ways of its people." Noth (*Exodus,* 37) understands Gershom's name to reflect Moses' status in Midian. Janzen (*Exodus,* 25) translates the phrase ambiguously: "I have been [or, I have become] an alien residing in a foreign land."

[18] The use of the word *gēr* as an indicator of Moses' connection to the Israelites in Egypt seems to be underscored by the fact that the first use of the noun *gēr* in the Bible is Gen 15:13, in which YHWH predicts slavery in Egypt for the people. The only other use of the word prior to the present text is Gen 23:4, in which Abraham describes himself as a "גר ותושב" while negotiating with the Hittites to buy the cave of Machpelah.

[19] Childs, *Exodus,* 32. Compare Propp (*Exodus,* 173), who suggests that the verbal clause לשבת את used in Exod 2:21 indicates Moses' status in Midian is that of a working family member, not a guest. Hence modern commentators are not in agreement concerning Moses' status among the Midianites; the fact that ancient interpreters did not agree on this matter should therefore not be surprising.

[20] *HALOT* 1:699-700.

[21] It is significant that a few Hebrew manuscripts identify Zipporah as the one who names Gershom. If it were *her* choice to name him Gershom, then one could read this narrative as her attempt to honor her

Though Moses lives among the Midianites and has married into a Midianite family, he is not a Midianite himself.[22] In either case, it is significant that Moses utters a statement indicating an understanding of his own identity *and* of his status vis-à-vis the Midianites among whom he lives; the text itself appears to be highlighting a distinction between Moses and his Midianites in-laws, which can in turn inform later interpretations.

Exodus 3:1 reports that Moses comes upon the burning bush and receives his holy commission while tending the flocks of "his father-in-law Jethro, priest of Midian (יתרו כהן מדין חתנו)." Then in Exod 4:18, Moses goes to his father-in-law to seek permission to leave:

וילך משה וישב אל יתר[23] חתנו ויאמר לו אלכה נא ואשובה אל אחי אשר במצרים ואראה העודם חיים ויאמר יתרו למשה לך לשלום.

> Moses went and returned to his father-in-law Jether and said to him, "I would like to go and return to my kin who are in Egypt, to see if they are still living." Jethro said to him, "Go in peace."

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husband's experience in Midian or in Egypt, or to differentiate her son from the rest of his Midianite family (because of his Israelite blood).

[22] Propp argues that the verb הייתי, in the perfect tense, indicates that Moses *used* to feel he was a stranger, either in Egypt or in Midian. Thus according to Propp (*Exodus,* 174), this statement proves that Moses has acclimated and is now at home in Midian: "He is no longer a *gēr,* or at least less of one." Grammatically, the MT expresses the idea that Moses' foreignness is over, or at least that it was most significant in the past. However, the Septuagint translates this verb into the present tense (πάροικος ειμι), indicating that a tradition history concerning this text highlighted Moses' foreignness in Midian. I find the interpretation that Moses coins this name in reference to his experience not in Midian but in Egypt to be compelling, for narrative reasons. As a member of the royal family and an Israelite, Moses grew up in the uncomfortable position of belonging in two communities which were opposed; hence he really belonged nowhere. (We have no reason, based on the biblical text, to believe that Moses did not know of his Israelite identity.) When he flees to Midian and settles with a family there, one might think he is finally at home; however, God does not allow him to settle in peace and comfort, but requires that he become the ultimate sojourner—leading a people out of slavery and into a mysterious new land. Moses' own experience of homelessness, his own position of not-belonging, creates an effective metaphor for the experience of the Israelites as a nation. Moses' own fate—being buried in the wilderness outside the new homeland— provides a moving narrative counterpart for the experience of the Israelites entering their new home at last. Cf. Propp's discussion of this narrative structure, *Exodus,* 176-7.

[23] The Samaritan Pentateuch, the Vulgate, and Tg. Ps.-J. all read "Jethro" here; this is a logical rendering, as the name "Jethro" appears later in this very same verse. It seems that the MT records the *lectio difficilo,* which is arguably due to scribal error or omission.

The brief conversation that takes place between Moses and "Jether" in Exod 4:18 reveals a great deal about ethnicity, identity, and the relationship between Moses and his father-in-law. First, the fact that Moses feels the need to procure Jethro's permission to return to Egypt indicates either a very close relationship or, at least, a great deal of respect. Second, Moses' language is significant: "Please allow me to go back to my kin (אחי) who are in Egypt to see if they are still living."[24] The text does not indicate the identity of Moses' "kin"; he could be referring to the Israelites, but he could also be referring to the Egyptians.[25] There are several plausible ways to interpret this passage. Moses could be intentionally misleading about his intentions when relating them to his father-in-law, using language that does not explicitly identify the people Moses needs to visit, nor the purpose of his trip. Or, the language used by Moses could be used to create literary tension: it is possible that the narrator wants to leave the issue of Moses' relationship with the Israelites open. Within the larger narrative, Moses undergoes significant changes in his understanding of his role vis-à-vis the Israelite nation; he begins the journey seeking a way out of the obligation (Exod 3:11; 4:10, 13), but he ultimately develops a strong sense of responsibility for the Israelites, even defending them to God (Exod 32:11-14). Hence the ambiguity in this statement could serve a narrative purpose, highlighting the transition taking place in Moses' self-understanding. It is also possible that in our passage Moses is using the term "kin" to refer explicitly to the Israelites. The word אח is used throughout the Bible to index a variety of close

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[24] The phrase "to see if they are still living" is an idiom which refers to checking on someone's welfare (as in Gen 45:3): Childs, *Exodus,* 101; Cassuto, *Exodus,* 53.

[25] See Propp, *Exodus,* 215.

relations: familial, tribal, and geographical.[26]  If, in this case, Moses is using this term to indicate a close tie to the Israelites, then the text is making a bold statement about Moses and his Midianite family.  When Moses refers to the Israelites still in Egypt as his "kin," this indicates that in spite of his marriage into Jethro's family and his choice to reside in the land of Midian, Moses is still committed to his own Israelite identity.  If we read Exod 4:18 this way,  then according to the biblical text, Moses' kin are those who are linked to him by shared ancestry (ethnicity), and such a connection cannot be superceded by marriage, residence in another land, or acculturation.

Exodus 18 is probably the most significant chapter concerning Jethro for later biblical exegetes.

וישמע יתרו כהן מדין חתן משה את כל אשר עשה אלהים למשה [1]
ולישראל עמו כי הוציא ה' את ישראל ממצרים. [2] ויקח יתרו חתן משה
את צפרה אשת משה אחר שלוחיה [3] ואת שני בניה אשר שם האחד גרשם
כי אמר גר הייתי בארץ נכריה [4] ושם האחד אליעזר כי אלהי אבי
בעזרי ויצלני מחרב פרעה. [5] ויבא יתרו חתן משה ובניו ואשתו אל משה
אל המדבר אשר הוא חנה שם הר האלהים. [6] ויאמר אל משה אני חתנך
יתרו בא אליך ואשתך ושני בניה עמה. [7] ויצא משה לקראת חתנו וישתחו
וישק לו וישאל איש לרעהו לשלום ויבאו האהלה. [8] ויספר משה לחתנו
את כל אשר עשה ה' לפרעה ולמצרים על אודת ישראל את כל התלאה
אשר מצאתם בדרך ויצלם ה'. [9] ויחד יתרו על כל הטובה אשר עשה ה'
לישראל אשר הצילו מיד מצרים. [10] ויאמר יתרו ברוך ה' אשר הציל
אתכם מיד מצרים ומיד פרעה אשר הציל את העם מתחת יד מצרים. [11]
עתה ידעתי כי גדול ה' מכל האלהים כי בדבר אשר זדו עליהם. [12] ויקח
יתרו חתן משה עלה וזבחים לאלהים ויבא אהרן וכל זקני ישראל לאכל
לחם עם חתן משה לפני האלהים.
ויהי ממחרת וישב משה לשפט את העם ויעמד העם על משה מן הבקר [13]
עד הערב. [14] וירא חתן משה את כל אשר הוא עשה לעם ויאמר מה הדבר
הזה אשר שתה עשה לעם?  מדוע אתה יושב לבדך וכל העם נצב עליך מן
בקר עד ערב?
ויאמר משה לחתנו כי יבא אלי העם לדרש אלהים. [16] כי יהיה להם [15]
דבר בא אלי ושפטתי בין איש ובין רעהו והודעתי את חקי האלהים ואת
תורתיו. [17] ויאמר חתן משה אליו לא טוב הדבר אשר שתה עשה. [18] נבל
תבל גם אתה גם העם הזה אשר עמך כי כבד ממך הדבר לא תוכל עשהו

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[26] See, for example, Gen. 9:25; 13:8; 14:16; 16:12; 25:18; Judg 1:3; 2 Sam 13:4 (blood relations); Gen 31:32; Judg 9:18; 2 Sam 19:13 (tribal relations); Lev 19:17; Deut 17:15 (countrymen).

לבדך. <sup>19</sup> עתה שמע בקלי איעצך ויהי אלהים עמך היה אתה לעם מול האלהים והבאת אתה את הדברים אל האלהים. <sup>20</sup> והזהרתם אתהם את החקים ואת התורת והודעת להם את הדרך ילכו בה ואת המעשה אשר יעשון. <sup>21</sup> ואתה תחזה מכל העם אנשי חיל יראי אלהים אנשי אמת שנאי בצע ושמת עלהם שרי אלפים שרי מאות שרי המשים ושרי עשרת. <sup>22</sup> ושפטו את העם בכל עת והיה כל הדבר הגדל יביאו אליך וכל הדבר הקטן ישפטו הם והקל מעליך ונשאו אתך. <sup>23</sup> אם את הדבר הזה תעשה וצוך אלהים ויכלת עמד וגם כל העם הזה על מקמו יבא בשלום. <sup>24</sup> וישמע משה לקול חתנו ויעש כל אשר שמר. <sup>25</sup> ויבחר משה אנשי חיל מכל ישראל ויתן אתם ראשים על העם שרי אלפים שרי מאות שרי חמשים ושרי עשרת. <sup>26</sup> ושפטו את העם בכל עת את הדבר הקשה יביאון אל משה וכל הדבר הקטן ישפוטו הם. <sup>27</sup> וישלח משה את חתנו וילך לו אל ארצו.

<sup>1</sup> Jethro, priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard all that God had done for Moses and for his people Israel, how YHWH had brought Israel out of Egypt. <sup>2</sup> And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, took Zipporah, Moses' wife, after he had sent her away, <sup>3</sup> and her two sons (of whom the name of the one was Gershom, for he said, "I have been a *gēr* in a foreign land," <sup>4</sup> and the name of the other was Eliezer, because "the God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh.") <sup>5</sup> Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, came with his sons and his wife to Moses, to the wilderness where he was encamped at the mountain of God. <sup>6</sup> He said to Moses, "I,[27] your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons with her." <sup>7</sup> Moses went out to meet his father-in-law; they bowed low and he kissed him, and each one asked after the other's welfare, and they went into the tent. <sup>8</sup> Moses told his father-in-law everything YHWH had done to Pharaoh and to Egypt for Israel's sake, all the hardship that had befallen them on the way, and how YHWH had delivered them. <sup>9</sup> Jethro rejoiced over all the goodness YHWH had done for Israel, how he had delivered them from the Egyptians. <sup>10</sup> Jethro said, "Blessed is YHWH, who has delivered you from Egypt and Pharaoh, who has delivered the people from Egypt. <sup>11</sup> Now I know that YHWH is greater than all the gods, for the thing by which they sought to destroy is upon them." <sup>12</sup> Jethro Moses' father-in-law took a burnt offering and sacrifices for God, and Aaron and all the elders of Israel came to eat food with Moses' father-in-law before God. <sup>13</sup> The next day, Moses sat to judge the people,

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[27] LXX, Sam., Syr., and 4QpaleoExod read "הנה" rather than "אני"; these versions are more logical, but I have preserved the *lectio difficilo* above.

and the people stood around[28] Moses from morning to evening. [14] When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this thing you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, with all the people stationed around you from morning to evening?" [15] Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God. [16] When they have a dispute, they come to me and I judge between a man and his neighbor, and I make known the statutes of God and his laws." [17] Moses' father-in-law said to him, "The thing you are doing is not good. [18] You will certainly wear out, you and this people with you, for the thing is too heavy for you and you cannot do it alone. [19] Now listen to me: I will advise you, and may God be with you.  You be for the people before God, and you shall bring the disputes to God. [20] Warn them about the statutes and the laws, and make known to them the way that they should go and the work that they should do. [21] Seek out from all the people capable men who fear God, honest men who hate bribes, and appoint them over them as rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties and rulers of tens. [22] They shall judge the people in every season, and every major dispute they shall bring to you, and every minor dispute they shall judge themselves; thus it will be easier for you, and they will bear it with you. [23] If you do this thing, and God commands you, you will be able to endure, and also this nation will come to its place in peace." [24] Moses listened to the voice of his father-in-law, and he did all that he said. [25] Moses chose capable men from all of Israel, and he appointed them as heads over the people—rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens. [26] They judged the people in every season: the difficult dispute they would bring to Moses, but every minor dispute they would judge themselves. [27] So Moses sent his father-in-law away, and he went to his land.

There is some debate among scholars concerning the location of this chapter in the larger narrative of Exodus, whether the chapter was re-located to its present position or was crafted, purposefully, at this point in the narrative. Verse 5 refers to the "mountain

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[28] The oppressive nature of Moses' task is underscored by the use of the preposition על here; though I have translated the word as "around" in order to reflect the English idiom, it is possible to understand this phrase to mean the people stood *upon* Moses, that is, surrounding him without relief.

of God," though the Israelites have not yet arrived there; God's laws are mentioned in vv. 16 and 20, though the Torah has not yet been given; and a sacrifice is offered without the Tabernacle in v. 12. All of this "cumulatively suggests the prior establishment of cult and Covenant."[29] As a result, many scholars suggest this chapter belongs somewhere *after* the giving of the Torah.[30] However, there are also reasons to support the position of the chapter precisely where it is. First, there is the possibility, suggested by Cassuto, that ch. 18 in fact reports events that came after ch. 19, but was purposely placed here in order to juxtapose the negative relations between Israel and the Amalekites (ch. 17) with the friendly relations between Israel and the Kenites. Cassuto believes that "the association of subjects, and even verbal association, was a more important factor in the arrangement and linking of sections than the chronological sequence."[31] Propp suggests that it is possible ch. 18 was placed before ch. 19 so that Jethro offers his sacrifice *before* Aaron's consecration (and hence Jethro's sacrifice is less problematic, as he is not officiating while in the presence of an ordained priest of YHWH). Propp also notes that the chapter refers to the exodus and the wilderness journey, but not the giving of the covenant, and that the laws referred to in ch. 18 are not religious laws but civil, case laws.[32] In addition, Propp suggests that ch. 18 is indeed intended to juxtapose with ch. 17, but not concerning "good and bad gentiles"; rather, the purpose is to highlight Israel's development in terms of military (ch. 17) and civil (ch. 18) administration. Regardless of how modern commentators address the question of placement, Exodus 18 raises important question for ancient Jewish interpreters concerning Jethro's role vis-à-vis the law and the cult.

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[29] Propp, *Exodus,* 628.
[30] See discussion in Childs, *Exodus,* 321-2.
[31] Cassuto, *Exodus,* 211-2.
[32] Propp, *Exodus,* 628.

There are several aspects of Exodus 18 that immediately grab the reader's attention. It is noteworthy that Jethro's title in relation to Moses ("Moses' father-in-law") is reiterated so consistently throughout this chapter. In v. 1 he is identified as "priest of Midian," but that title is subsequently omitted, whereas the identifier "father-in-law" appears thirteen times. Unless the reader assumes that this text was organized by a redactor or editor in a sloppy fashion, it is clear that the text is highlighting Jethro's familial connection to Moses, though the reason for this emphasis is not evident. It is not revealed to the reader how Jethro learned about the exodus; all we know is that upon hearing about it, Jethro wanted to reunite with his son-in-law.

The fact that Moses had "sent away" his wife (and children) is also peculiar: the text does not reveal when or why Moses did this. Zipporah and the children were with Moses when he set out for Egypt in Exodus 4. It is possible this is a source critical issue: in E, Moses has sent his family away, whereas in J, there is no evidence of their parting.[33] That Exodus 18 now reports that Zipporah and the children were sent away probably indicates that a tradition concerning Zipporah and the children was lost at some point (at least from the E source).[34] Some commentators seek narrative explanations for Moses' separation from his wife and children; Propp assumes that Moses left them behind in Midian out of concern for their safety, and adds that "one can well imagine Zipporah's

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[33] Noth (*Exodus,* 146-9) in particular views the problem concerning Zipporah to be a source-critical one; he understands Exodus 18 to be an E text with some J additions, and states that a lost E text contains the tradition that after receiving his divine commission, Moses separated from his wife. This lost E text is, according to Noth, presupposed by Exod 4:18 but, of course, unknown in Exod 4:24-26 (J). See also the delineation of sources for Exodus 18 by Campbell and O'Brien, *Sources,* 187 n. 57.

[34] Cassuto (*Exodus,* 213-4) does not consider this gap to be significant; he states that any lost tradition concerning the whereabouts of Zipporah and the children was left out of the text because it was not "germane" to the action at hand.

own second thoughts after the Bloody Bridegroom incident!"[35] This lacuna present in the text provides later interpreters with the opportunity to create scenarios in which Moses sends his family away, and these later interpreters would often seize upon the fact that the verb indicating this action, √שלח, is the same verb used in Deuteronomy 24 to reference divorce.[36] Potential tension concerning the role of Zipporah and the children is also evident in the fact that the biblical text vacillates concerning the parentage of Gershom and Eliezer: in vv. 3 and 6, they are referred to as "her children," whereas in v. 5, they are "his" (Moses') children.[37] Thus there exists, built into the biblical text, ambiguity about the relationship Moses has with his Midianite wife and children.

When Jethro and his party approach Moses' encampment, Jethro sends word to Moses that he is arriving, and Moses goes out to meet his father-in-law. The actions taking place in 18:7 are worthy of close examination. The verse can be broken down as follows:

7a:  Moses went out to meet his father-in-law;
7b: he bowed and kissed him;
7c: each asked after the other's welfare;
7d: and they went into the tent.

The component of the verse that causes the most exegetical difficulty is 7b; the antecedent of the phrase "he bowed low and kissed him" is not clear. Jethro is mentioned second in 7a, granting him greater proximity to the verbs of 7b. However, Moses is the subject of the verb in 7a; therefore, if we assume Moses is still the subject, he would be

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[35] Propp, *Exodus,* 629. Taking a very different approach, Meyers suggests that "שלוחיה" is not a verb, indicating that Moses sent Zipporah away, but is a noun, indicating her dowry.
[36] This creates the possibility to identify the "Cushite woman" of Num 12:1 as Moses' second wife.
[37] LXX, Syr. and Vulg. have "your two sons" in v. 6.

the actor in 7b, bowing to and kissing his father-in-law. How, then, can we determine who bowed to whom? Only the Samaritan Pentateuch offers a different rendering, in which Jethro, Zipporah and the children bow to Moses (וישתחוו למשה). The tension that would have prompted this reading is evident: it would have been difficult for some readers to imagine Moses bowing down before another man, let alone a Midianite priest.

Exodus 18:11 is one of the most important verses for later Jewish exegetes: Jethro's recognition of YHWH as "greater than all the gods" is often cited in relation to two other famous non-Israelites who become worshippers of YHWH: Na'aman and Rahab. However, Na'aman and Rahab both make more monotheistic, less monolatrous statements. After he is healed, Na'aman proclaims, "Now I know that there is no god in all the earth except in Israel" (2 Kgs 5:15). Rahab tells the spies she hides on her roof, "for YHWH your God is God in the heavens above and on the earth below" (Josh 2:11). How, then, are we to understand Jethro's statement? Has he simply given YHWH a place in a pantheon, albeit a place of superiority? Or does his statement in fact indicate a monotheistic conversion? Childs takes issue with this question, arguing that Jethro's statement is "monotheistic enough"; to say that Jethro remains a polytheist "is to misunderstand the Old Testament idiom by being too literal."[38] He cites Ps 135:5 as proof that this kind of statement is an appropriate way to express monotheistic faith: "Surely when the Psalmist praises God with such words as: 'YHWH is great…our YHWH is above all gods,' there is no vestige of polytheism left."[39] Childs' argument is based on a highly problematic assumption: that anything purportedly coming from the mouths of Israelites in the Bible must be monotheistic. He does not consider the

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[38] Childs, *Exodus,* 328.
[39] Ibid.

possibility that biblical texts can contain the record of monolatrous, not monotheistic, Israelite faith.[40]

Jethro's statement in Exod 18:11b is famously cryptic and usually understood to be corrupt.[41] My translation is simply my best attempt to utilize the text as is. The general thrust of the statement appears to be an expression of admiration for YHWH's sense of irony: the Egyptians have been destroyed by the means whereby they sought to destroy the Israelites (drowning). With this new understanding of YHWH, Jethro proceeds to offer sacrifices (עלה וזבחים), and Aaron and the elders of Israel come to partake of the sacrificial meal "before Elohim." The text expresses no surprise that the priest of a foreign religion is the officiant at this sacrifice, nor at the fact that Aaron and the elders participate with him. Propp sees this as a matter of necessity, as Aaron has not yet been consecrated: "Polytheist or not, in the absence of another priest Jethro undertakes to lead Israel in sacrifice."[42] The structure of events in vv. 11-12 could arguably indicate the creation of a treaty between Israel and Jethro: Jethro first makes a statement of faith which serves to invoke the deity into the process, and follows it up with a ratification ceremony consisting of a sacrifice and shared meal.[43] The fact that a text which generates such concern for later interpreters is recorded without comment in the Bible suggests that in the biblical period, Jethro's presentation of a sacrifice was not considered worthy of comment. Childs takes this point of view, stating blandly, "He is

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[40] In this way, Childs is similar to the rabbis of the midrash, many of whom assume that only non-Israelites could utter non-monotheistic statements.

[41] So Noth, *Exodus,* 149; Propp, *Exodus,* 630; Houtman, *Exodus,* 409; Fox (*Names,* 101) simply calls the Hebrew "difficult."

[42] Propp, *Exodus,* 631. Note Propp's logic: ch. 18 was placed before 19 so that Jethro's sacrifice would not seem so improper, but because this event takes place before ch. 19, it is necessary for Jethro to officiate.

[43] Support for the notion that such a treaty existed can be found in Judg 4:17-22; 5:6, 24-27 and 1 Sam 15:6, all of which indicate that a special relationship existed between the Israelites and Jethro's descendants. Another theory based in part on this text is the Midianite/Kenite hypothesis, which suggests that the Midianites/Kenites introduced Israel to the tenets of YHWH-worship. See further, below.

not treated as an outsider, nor does he act like one…. There is no hint in the text that he has won the right to participate in the cult because of a recent conversion."[44] For later Jewish interpreters, however, this event is worthy of much comment and explanation.

Chapter 18 changes focus somewhat abruptly at this point,[45] turning the reader's attention to Moses' activities as arbiter for the Israelite people. When Jethro points out the difficulty of Moses' task, and a means whereby the task can be made manageable, Moses heeds his mentor's advice. One of the most fascinating components of this brief narrative is Jethro's use of language. The narrator depicts Jethro adopting religious-legal terminology, referring to the laws as חוקים and תורות.[46] Jethro also couches his advice to Moses with statements concerning God's will: "Now listen to me; I will advise you, and may God be with you!" (v. 19); "If you do this—and God so commands you—then you will be able to bear up" (v. 23). Jethro claims for his advice the status of divine approval, even divine commandment.[47] Childs argues that this characteristic of Jethro's speech demonstrates a theological point: the realm of common sense is also a suitable vehicle for God's revelation, regardless of the source.[48] Other scholars also identify this narrative as

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[44] Childs, *Exodus,* 329.

[45] Some commentators attribute the change in focus to sources. Childs (*Exodus,* 321) identifies the entire chapter as E, but with some J influences in vv. 1-12. Propp (*Exodus,* 627) identifies the entire text as E, while Campbell and O'Brien (*Sources,* 187) see two strands, but argue that both originated with E.

[46] LXX renders Exod 18:20 in a way that underscores the religious nature of the laws Jethro is discussing: Moses is instructed by Jethro to inform the people of τα προστάγματα του θεου (= חקי אלהים,"God's statutes") and τὸν νόμον αυτου (= תורתיו, "his law"). Thus according to LXX, Jethro is specifically referring to religious law, which begs the question: how did he know about these laws? Perhaps the MT preserves an alteration intended to attribute knowledge of *civil* law to Jethro, or perhaps the MT preserves the more original form of the verse which was later altered to reflect knowledge of *divine* law.

[47] It is interesting that Ibn Ezra and Rashbam interpret the statement in v. 19 as a prediction that God will bless Moses if he follows Jethro's advice, while Exodus Rabbah 27:6 and Mekilta Amalek 4 indicate that Moses should only follow the advice *if* God permits. *Mikraot Gedolot: Sefer Shemot* (New York: Shulsinger Bros., 1950), 270-2. Cassuto (*Exodus,* 219-21) states that Jethro has not at this point forsaken his past as a "heathen priest", but offers what is simply logical advice; Jethro's references to God commanding Moses should be interpreted as conditional of God's approval of Jethro's advice: "if your God will sanction this thing and will command you to implement it."

[48] Childs, *Exodus,* 332.

an etiology whose purpose is to explain the existence of the judiciary.[49]  The details concerning the number of judges and the size of their constituent parties is unrealistic (Propp notes that, based on the census data presented in Exod 12:37, there would be over 600 supreme judges and 78,600 magistrates![50]).  One wonders if this chapter also seeks to demonstrate the central importance of a judicial system: it is as necessary to the survival of the people as is the military power structure described in ch. 17.

After Moses has heeded Jethro's advice, Moses and his father-in-law part (v. 27). Jethro has bequeathed to Moses an organization principle for the construction of a judicial system, and potentially also a model for sacrificial YHWH-worship.  And yet, Jethro leaves the Israelites, doing the reverse of what Abraham did in Gen 12:1: while Abraham went *from* his native land at God's command (לך לך מארצך), Jethro goes *to* his native land (וילך לו אל ארצו).  His role has, for the time being, been fulfilled, and he moves from being a central advisor and fellow YHWH-worshipper to reclaiming his status as part of another people from another land.

**Numbers**[51]

Though Moses and Jethro parted at the end of Exodus 18, Moses' father-in-law is mentioned again in Num 10:29-32:

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[49] Noth, *Exodus,* 150; Cassuto (*Exodus,* 217) adds: "Possibly this was the form of the judicature of the Kenite tribe, and a similar organization was established among the Israelites."

[50] Propp, *Exodus,* 632-633.

[51] Commentaries to Numbers include: Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993); Phillip J. Budd, *Numbers* (WBC 5; Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1984); J. de Vaulx, *Les Nombres,* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1972); Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1-20* (AB 4a; New York: Doubleday, 1993); Martin Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968); Gordon Wenham, *Numbers* (TOTC; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981).

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²⁹ ויאמר משה לחבב בן רעואל המדיני חתן משה נסעים אנחנו אל המקום
אשר אמר ה' אתו אתן לכם לכה אתנו והטבנו לך כי ה' דבר טוב על
ישראל. ³⁰ ויאמר אליו לא אלך כי אם אל ארצי ואל מולדתי אלך. ³¹
ויאמר אל נא תעזב אתנו כי על כן ידעת חנתנו במדבר והיית לנו לעינים.
³² והיה כי תלך עמנו והיה הטוב ההוא אשר ייטיב ה' עמנו והטבנו לך.

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²⁹ Moses said to Hobab son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law, "We are travelling to the place concerning which YHWH said, 'I will give it to you;' go with us and we will deal well with you, for YHWH promised[52] good concerning Israel." ³⁰ He said to him, "I will not go; rather, to my land and to my birthplace I will go." ³¹ He said, "Please do not leave us, for you certainly know our encampment in the wilderness and you can be for us as eyes.[53] ³² And if you go with us, the good which YHWH will do for us, we will do for you."

Here the name given is "Hobab son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law." The name itself is confusing; it is unclear from the text if it is Hobab or Reuel that is Moses' father-in-law. If Hobab is the father-in-law, then is Reuel Zipporah's grandfather? Or, if Reuel is the father-in-law, is Hobab Reuel's son? Commentators universally agree that it is difficult to know who is Moses' father-in-law in v. 29, and present a variety of suggested translations.[54]

Moses makes a request of Hobab: as the Israelites are setting out for the land YHWH promised to them, Moses invites Hobab to come with them and promises to share YHWH's generosity.[55] This invitation is curious: by offering to extend YHWH's goodness to Hobab, is Moses offering to bring Hobab (and his people) into the Israelite

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[52] For the translation "promise" for √ דבר see *HALOT* 1:210; Deut 6:3; and Jer 18:20.

[53] It is most likely that the idiomatic והיית לנו לעינים means, "to serve as our guide." As the idiom is found only in this biblical passage, I chose to translate more literally. LXX renders the word עינים as πρεσβύτης, "statesman;" this translation may reflect a perceived connection between Numbers 10 and Exodus 18, highlighting Hobab's (and Jethro's) role as an advisor.

[54] See discussion of the various names given for Moses' father-in-law, below.

[55] de Vaulx, *Nombres,* 145, suggests that this reflects a non-aggression pact.

fold? Is Moses offering to share the land with Hobab and his kin?[56] It is also possible that Moses is simply demonstrating his own generosity: "YHWH is going to be good to us, and therefore we will have enough to share with those whom we choose." Regardless of the offer, Hobab refuses, stating, "I will not go, but I will go to my land, to my birthplace (אל ארצי ואל מולדתי אלך)." As in Exodus 18, Hobab's words are highly reminiscent of Abraham and his undertaking in Genesis 12. Hobab's words serve to link him permanently with his own land, the place of his birth: in spite of the beneficial and positive interactions between the Israelites and Hobab, Hobab identifies himself with a different land, a different people, and thus does not view *himself* as a part of the Israelite community.

Hobab's refusal is countered by Moses with a request that reveals more clearly what may have been Moses' original motivation: it appears, therefore, that Hobab knows the region through which the Israelites need to travel; does this signify that Hobab and his kin live in a very large region, are nomads, or are simply experienced travelers themselves?[57] Or are the Midianites a threat: would Moses prefer that they travel with the Israelites since they know so much about the Israelites' itinerary?

It is interesting that the LXX translates this verse with some qualification: ησθα μεθ' ημων, "you know better than us." Perhaps the translator of the LXX felt it was necessary to explain how Hobab could have known the Israelites' campsites so well; perhaps there was concern that Hobab not be seen as too great a leader in the wilderness, and hence it was necessary to suggest that he had only *some* more knowledge than Moses

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[56] So Noth, *Numbers,* 78: "By this…can be meant only the gift of a land, in which Hobab is hereby promised a share." Levine (*Numbers,* 316) concurs: "The wording of this verse suggests that the Midianites were actually being offered a share in the Promised Land."

[57] Noth (*Numbers,* 77) argues that Moses' request here is practical: as an experienced desert-dweller, Hobab could find places to camp near vegetation and water.

himself. Moses extends the same offer as before: "And if you go with us, the good which YHWH will do for us, we will do for you." Once again, Moses expresses the desire to create a means for Hobab to dwell among the Israelites. Moses actually seems to want to make Hobab a member of the community, and it is remarkable that Moses offers so freely to share that which YHWH has offered to the Israelites—land, bounty, and all of the trappings of the covenant. In fact, Moses' offer could be seen as cavalier: does Moses have the right to share this great goodness YHWH offers to Israel?

Hobab's ultimate response is not recorded. The text does not reveal to us if Hobab acquiesced, or continued to stress his place in his own land. The narrative in Judges unfolds in a way that suggests the former.

**Judges**[58]

Judges 1:16 has far-reaching implications:

ובני הקיני[59] חתן משה עלו מעיר התמרים את בני יהודה מדבר יהודה
אשר בנגב ערד וילך וישב את העם.

> The descendants of the Kenite, Moses' father-in-law, went up from the City of Palms with the Judahites to the wilderness of Judah which is in the Negev of Arad; they went and settled with the people.

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[58] Commentaries on Judges include: Robert G. Boling, *Judges* (AB 6a; New York: Doubleday, 1975); Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: JPS, 1990); Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, Kent.: Westminster John Knox, 2008); J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary* (OTL; trans. John Bowden; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979).

[59] MT reads ובני קיני, but the reference to "the Kenites" in Judg 4:11 indicates that the definite article would also be appropriate in Judg 1:16. This is in accordance with the translations of both Soggin, *Judges,* 22-3, and Boling, *Judges,* 57. Niditch (*Judges,* 30) translates this phrase "the descendants of Keni," taking the second word to be a proper name.

There are several aspects of this text that are worthy of note. Moses' father-in-law is identified as "the Kenite" rather than "the Midianite." The text is silent on the relationship between the Kenites and the Midianites, and the subsequent reference to Moses' father-in-law in Judg 4:11 also identifies him as a Kenite.[60] It is stated in this text that the descendants of Moses' father-in-law traveled *with* the people of Judah into the land: are we to understand that the Kenites took part in the conquest *with* the Israelites, that they were directly involved in the single most important activity of the Israelites vis-à-vis their divinely gifted land? When the Israelites were instructed to expel the inhabitants of the land, what was it about the Kenites that gave them the right to remain among the Israelites once they were settled? What was their status once they settled among the Israelites? Unfortunately, this short notice in Judg 1:16 does little to answer these questions, and to compound the problem, the text is difficult to translate. In addition to the liberal use of the particle את (which can be translated a variety of ways), there are difficulties with the geography of the verse. The "City of Palms" can be understood as another name for Jericho (Deut 34:3),[61] but it is not revealed why they had originally settled there, albeit temporarily. What region is the wilderness of Judah, how does it relate to Negev-Arad? LXX omits the phrase מדבר יהודה, perhaps understanding it to be a duplication. 1 Samuel 27:10 may shed some light on the problem: in his conversation with Achish, David makes reference to "the Negev of Judah" and "the Negev of the Kenites." Based on this reference, it appears that the Kenites traveled with the tribe of Judah, but the two groups settled in distinct areas of the Negev region, areas with discernible boundaries. The final line of Judg 1:16 presents another problem; the

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[60] I will explore the identifiers "Kenite" and "Midianite" in detail, below.

[61] So Boling, *Judges,* 57; Niditch, *Judges,* 41.

potentially corrupt phrase וילך וישב את העם, which is often translated as "they went and settled with the people", is rendered in the Old Latin and some manuscripts of the LXX to read "and they went and settled with *Amalek*." This alternative reading is supported by 1 Sam 15:6, in which it is reported that the Kenites were indeed among the Amalekites when Saul went to war against the latter. In summation, therefore, this verse—as presented in the MT and a few versions—can be interpreted to mean several things: that the Kenites enjoyed a semi-insider status among the Israelites and were thus part of the conquest; that the Kenites were even given land upon which to live among the Israelites; but that the Kenites may have retained their uniqueness, not blending in with the Israelite people, or potentially even dwelling among one of Israel's greatest enemies.

The short reference to Moses' father-in-law in Judg 4:11 provides scant little additional information:

וחבר הקיני נפרד מקין מבני חבב חתן משה ויט אהלו עד אלון בצענים אשר את קדש.

> Heber the Kenite separated from Kayin,[62] from the descendants of Hobab, Moses' father-in-law, and pitched his tent as afr as Elon-bezaanannim, which is near Kedesh.

The noun קין requires some exegesis on the part of the reader: is it an ethnic group, a geographical reference, or the name of a group of artisans? What is the significance of Heber's decision to "separate" from Kayin? For Boling, Heber's move represents a political decision *and* sets the stage for dramatic divine action: "Here it is explained that an entire clan migrated and changed sides in the time of Jabin, so that in

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[62] Boling (*Judges,* 96) identifies this as "Smithland." For more on the proposed link between the Kenites and metal-working, see below.

Deborah's day it would be recognized as providential that a Galilean Qenite chieftain has a loyal Yahwist wife."[63] If Kayin is identified as synonymous with the Kenites who settled in the Negev in Judg 1:16, then Heber is, in some respects, outside the margins of Kenite territory, at least geographically.

After the notice concerning Heber's whereabouts, the narrative continues with the story of Jael and Sisera, in which Jael demonstrates fidelity to the Israelites and kills the army commander. On the one hand, this narrative reflects positively on the Kenites: Jael kills an Israelite enemy. On the other hand, however, Sisera only flees to Jael's tent because of the friendship between Heber and King Jabin.[64] Are the Kenites friends or foes of Israel? It is possible that Heber's "separation" from the Kenites at the beginning of the chapter reflects symbolically his parting from allied status with Israel, and that Jael is the corrective to this behavior, though there is no explicit evidence for this view.[65]

## 1 Chronicles[66]

Though 1 Chr 2:55 does not mention Jethro, it provides fertile ground for later interpreters to discuss what became of some of Jethro's descendants:

ומשפחות ספרים ישבו[67] יעבץ תרעתים שמעתים שוכתים המה הקינים
הבאים מחמת אבי בית רכב.

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[63] Ibid., 97.

[64] So Soggin, *Judges*, 75. Niditch (*Judges,* 66) also suggests a formal understanding of non-aggression between Heber's family and Jabin, and argues that the location of Heber's tent near Kedesh grants it the status of a refuge (Josh 20:7).

[65] Both Boling (*Judges,* 97) and Niditch (*Judges,* 66) suggest this understanding of Judges 4-5.

[66] Commentaries on 1 Chronicles include: Roddy L. Braun, *1 Chronicles* (WBC 14; Dallas: Word Publishing, 1986); Sara Japhet, *I & II Chronicles: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, Kent.: Westminster John Knox, 1993); Ralph W. Klein, *1 Chronicles* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006); Gary N. Knoppers, *I Chronicles 1-9* (AB 12; New York: Doubleday, 2003).

[67] The MT records that the *Ketiv*, "they dwelt," should be replaced with the *Qere* ישבי, "dwellers." W. Rudolph in *BHS,* 1463.

> The families of scribes that dwelt at Jabez are the Tir'atim,
> the Shim'atim, the Sukkatim; these are the Kenites who
> come from Hammath, the father of the house of Rechab.

The context of this verse is a Judahite genealogy, though there is nothing in 1 Chr 2:55 to link it directly to the Calebites that are discussed in the preceding verses. The verse stands out for several reasons. One issue is the meaning of the word ספרים; W. Rudolph suggests that this word should not be translated as "scribes," but rather as "Sifrites," i.e. the residents of Kiryat Sefer.[68] This is rejected by G. Knoppers and S. Japhet; Knoppers asserts that the presence of scribes in Chronicles is not surprising (and hence, another translation is not necessary),[69] while Japhet notes that "such a rendering makes their genealogical affiliation so complex as to be nearly incomprehensible, and besides is refuted by the designation 'dwellers of Jabez.'"[70]

Another problem in this verse is the identity of "Jabez"; is this a place or a person? The grammar of the verse itself suggests that "Jabez" is a location, for the three named groups are "dwellers" (ישבו) of Jabez. However, there is no known Jabez—place or person—within the Bible other than the character who appears in 1 Chronicles 4. He is named "Jabez" by his mother because of the pain (√עבצ) involved in his birth. He is more highly regarded than his brothers, and in v. 10 he utters a now-famous prayer: "Oh, greatly bless me, enlarge my territory, may your hand be with me, and may you protect me from harm, lest I suffer!" Though there is no explicit link in 1 Chr. 2:55 between this

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[68] *BHS,* 1463. So also C. H. Knights, "Kenites = Rechabites? 1 Chronicles II 55 Reconsidered" 43 (1993), 10-18.
[69] Knoppers, *1 Chronicles,* 301.
[70] Japhet, *I & II Chronicles,* 90.

character and the scribes, this pious man becomes a source of interpretive flourishes in later Jewish works.

These scribes, identified as Kenites, are also supposedly the descendants of Hammath, from the genealogical line of Rechab.[71]  Many scholars accept this genealogical link and see the Rechabites as linked to the Kenites.[72]  However, the genealogical identification of the scribes as Rechabites is not universally accepted. Japhet argues that בית רכב should be understood geographically, as the town of בית מרכבות  (Josh 19:5, 1 Chr 4:31), which contained an ethnic group by the name of Hammath.[73]  Japhet observes that nowhere else in the Bible does בוא√ מן have a genealogical sense ("to descend from") but is a spatial notification ("to come from," as from a city).[74] C. H. Knights deduces from these arguments, as well as others,[75] that those who would identify the Rechabites with the Kenites because of this verse are incorrect:

> 1 Chron ii 55…depicts the Kenite clans, the Tirathites, the Shimeathites and the Sucathites, as coming from the lands belonging to Hammath, chieftain of the town Beth-Rechab, in the Beer-Sheba region.  At some point they moved north to Kiriath-sepher, where they became linked in some way with the Calebites.  At a later stage in their history they moved again, to Jabez, the location of which remains unknown…. [N]o reference to the Rechabites is to be found in the verse, and, even if there was, the reference would not claim that the Rechabites were a Kenite clan…. The

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[71] According to Jeremiah 35, the Rechabites are also Kenites who demonstrate unique behaviors: refraining from intoxicants, building homes, and engaging in agriculture.

[72] So William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 2: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 26-52* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 246; Douglas Rawlinson Jones, *Jeremiah* (NCBC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1992), 432; Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36* (AB 21b; New York: Doubleday, 2004), 572-3.

[73] Japhet, *I & II Chronicles,* 90.  So also Knights, "Kenites = Rechabites?" 16-7.

[74] Knights, "Kenites = Rechabites?" 13-14; Japhet, *I & II Chronicles,* 90.

[75] Knights (ibid., 10-1, 16) notes that there is no other biblical text that connects the Kenites with the Rechabites, and that in 1 Chronicles 1-9, the formula "X father of Y" refers to the founding of a group or geographical area, not paternity.

supposed connection between the Kenites and the Rechabites, for which the sole evidence adduced has been 1 Chron. ii 55, needs to be rejected forthwith.[76]

In spite of the fact that there is no explicit connection between Jethro and the Rechabites in the Bible, the rabbis of later Jewish interpretation connect the two groups and link them to Jethro through the designation "Kenite"; this connection enables those interpreters to provide many details about Jethro and his descendants that are not present in the biblical text.

## Exegetical problems

<u>Jethro's names</u>

Much attention has been paid in modern biblical scholarship to the name of Moses' father-in-law. In addition to "Jethro," other names are presented in the biblical texts that refer to this character: "Reuel" in Exodus 2 and Num 10:29, "Hobab" in Num 10:29 and Judg 4:11, and "Jether" in Exod 4:18.[77] How can this variety of names be explained?

One option is to view the names as representative of different sources. Many scholars attribute the names "Hobab" and "Reuel" to the Yahwistic source, and "Jethro" to the Elohistic source (though Noth suggests that Moses' Midianite father-in-law was nameless in the original E material, and the name "Jethro" was added later).[78] The

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[76] Knights, "Kenites = Rechabites?" 17-8.

[77] It is almost universally assumed that "Jether" is a variant spelling of "Jethro." See Childs, *Exodus,* 92. Houtman (*Exodus,* 81) makes note of the alternation between גשם and ומשג in Neh 6:1, 6 as evidence for this kind of variant.

[78] Noth, *Exodus,* 146-8; Levine, *Numbers,* 335; Budd, *Numbers,* 113; Propp, *Exodus,* 50, 170-3. A. Chiu adds to this source-critical explanation a tradition-critical explanation that is highly reminiscent of midrashic exegesis: Chiu argues that in Judea, Moses' father-in-law was known as a pious man and was subsequently named "friend of God" (Reuel) and "beloved" (Hobab), while in Israel, Moses' father-in-law

joining together of the sources resulted in retention of different names for the same figure. Source-critical explanations, however, do not fully solve the problem. First, there is debate about differentiating E from J. Some scholars have argued that there appears to be no E source separate from J; J. Van Seters, for example, refers to all non-P material in Genesis-Numbers as the work of the Yahwist.[79] In fact, some theoretical models have been suggested that downplay the significance of discrete sources while highlighting tradition complexes.[80] Propp, however, adheres to a differentiation between J and E in Exodus: "recurring idioms, characters and themes all point to the Elohist."[81] Though source-critical explanations for the complexities of the Jethro texts are not unproblematic, source criticism can still be a useful exegetical tool for addressing certain issues.

It is also difficult to determine how the names "Reuel" and "Hobab" relate to one another within the same source: is "Reuel" the father-in-law of Moses, or is "Hobab"? This question leads to another exegetical option: to view these figures as different characters, though all related in some way to Moses' father-in-law. One solution is to identify Reuel as Zipporah's grandfather.[82] Hobab, son of Reuel, would therefore be Moses' actual father-in-law in J. However, even if we were to translate the word אב in Exod 2:18 as "grandfather" or "head of house," the text reports that Reuel gave *his daughter* to Moses to marry; it seems clear that in Exodus 2, Reuel is Moses' father-in-law. W. F. Albright argues for a differentiation between the names "Reuel" and "Hobab"

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was known as a rich and prominent leader and was subsequently given a name linked to riches and excellence (Jethro). A Chiu, "Who is Moses' Father-in-Law?" *EAJT* 4:1 (1986): 62-7.

[79] Van Seters, *The Pentateuch,* 24-9, 112-3. For a discussion of E as well as the debate about its existence, see Alan W. Jenks, "Elohist," *AB* 2:478-82.

[80] See, for example, Rolf Rendtorff, *The Problem of the Process of Transmission in the Pentateuch* (*JSOTSup* 89; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990).

[81] Propp, *Exodus,* 50.

[82] Ashley (*Numbers,* 196) suggests this possibility, noting that the word אב can mean "grandfather" or "head of house," as in Gen 28:13; 32:10; and 2 Kgs 15:3. This explanation also appears in Sifre Numbers 78 and Tg. Ps.-Jon. to Exod 2:18.

based on clan designations and variant vowel markings for the noun וֺתֵח.[83] According to

Albright, "Reuel" is a patronymic tribal name, the clan name of Hobab. Albright further

argues that Jethro and Hobab are two different characters; Jethro is Moses' father-in-law

(חֹתֵן), while Hobab is Moses' son-in-law (חָתָן), married to Moses' otherwise unmentioned

daughter. Albright believes this differentiation is supported by the differences between

the two characters: Jethro is a wizened advisor who returns to his homeland after helping

Moses, while Hobab is a young, vigorous man of the desert. Hence Exod 2:18 should

read "Jethro, son of (or member of) Reuel." Albright's argument is compelling because

of the solution it offers: all three names are present in the text for specific reasons.

However, there are a few problems with his view. First, there are no versions or textual

witnesses to support Albright's proposed rendering of Exod 2:18 ("Jethro, son of Reuel").

Second, there is no biblical evidence for Moses' daughter (wife of Hobab). Third, the

noun חָתָן does not appear in the Bible meaning "son-in-law" or "brother-in-law," though

T. C. Mitchell has argued that it can be translated loosely as "relation by marriage"; if the

vowels were emended for this word, Albright's translation could be supported.[84] Fourth,

the biblical texts themselves do not reveal to us anything about the ages of Jethro and

Hobab.[85] Albright's argument, therefore, enjoys no more support from the text than the

other arguments presented here. Though the details of each argument vary, there is

general consensus that the presence of these varied names is due to different traditions

concerning Moses' father-in-law, which were combined in the biblical narrative.

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[83] William F. Albright, "Jethro, Hobab and Reuel in Early Hebrew Tradition," *CBQ* 25 (1963): 1-11.

[84] The word חָתָן does appear in the Bible as "son-in-law," in Gen 19:14; Judg 15:6; 19:14; 1 Sam 18:18; 22:14; Neh 6:18; 13:28. It is possible, therefore, to support the translation "son-in-law" in Numbers 10, if the vowels are changed (as Albright suggests). The root חתן appears in Ugaritic, Syriac, and Arabic meaning "son-in-law." In Syriac and Arabic it can also mean "brother-in-law." *HALOT* 1:364-5; T. C. Mitchell, "The Meaning of the Noun *htn* in the Old Testament," *VT* 19 (1969): 93-112.

[85] See Ashley, *Numbers,* 196.

The Midianites, the Kenites, and the Rechabites

In the biblical texts concerning Jethro and his descendants, two populations are specifically named: the Midianites and the Kenites. In addition, the Rechabites of Jeremiah 35 and 1 Chr 2:55 figure prominently in some post-biblical Jewish interpretations of Jethro. Whether these are ethnic, religious, or occupational designations is a matter of some debate. But any examination of Jethro that seeks to highlight the role of identity must take into account the characteristics of these three groups and their relationships to one another.

The Kenites are a somewhat mysterious group in the Bible.[86] They apparently dwelt in and around what would become Israelite territory (Gen 15:9; 1 Sam 27:10; 30:29) and interacted with the Israelites as well as other groups in the region. According to Judg 1:16, at least a portion of the Kenite population settled in the Negev, with or adjacent to the Judahites (1 Sam 27:10 refers to a Negev of Judah, a Negev of the Jerahmeelites, and a Negev of the Kenites). The Kenites can be associated with metal-working through their perceived ancestry, which includes Tubal-Cain, the inventor of metallurgy; through the eponymous root קין√; and through archaeological evidence uncovered in areas reportedly occupied by Kenites.

Ancient and modern interpreters have understood the Kenites to be the descendants of Cain through Tubal-Cain;[87] this genealogy has been accepted by certain interpreters though the biblical text itself does not explicitly state that there is such a

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[86] Soggin (*Judges,* 23) states that we know "practically nothing" about the Kenites. For theories concerning the identity of the Kenites, see: Roland de Vaux, "Sur l'origine kenite ou madianite du Yahvisme" *Eretz Israel* 9 (1969): 28-31; Baruch Halpern, "Kenites," *ABD* 4:17-22; Knoppers, *1 Chronicles,* 316; Levine, *Numbers,* 92-4; B. Mazar, "The Sanctuary of Arad and the Family of Hobab the Kenite," *JNES* 24 (1965): 297-303; Paula M. McNutt, "The Kenites, the Midianites, and the Rechabites as Marginal Mediators in Ancient Israelite Tradition," *Semeia* 67 (1994): 109-32.

[87] Knoppers, *1 Chronicles,* 316; Niditch, *Judges,* 41.

connection. The root קין is associated with metalsmithing in several ancient Semitic languages;[88] the fact that Tubal-Cain is the inventor of metalsmithing in Gen 4:22 underscores this meaning of the word. It has been argued that the Kenites were a metal-working occupation clan within the Midianites and members of the Midianite league, which could be either a cause for or a result of the conflation of Jethro's Midianite and Kenite identities in the Bible.[89] It is important, however, not to delineate too harshly between occupational and ethnic identities: "Even if it began as an occupational term, by the time of our texts it had an ethnic denotation."[90]

The Kenites are associated with Israel's enemies in Num 24:22: "But קין will be consumed, when Assyria takes you captive." In addition, they are apparently dwelling among the Amalekites, arch-enemies of Israel, in 1 Samuel 15. However, in 1 Sam 15:6, Saul instructs the Kenites to withdraw from the Amalekites before he goes to war with the latter, "that I may not destroy you along with them, for you showed kindness (חסד) to all the Israelites when they left Egypt." Though it is possible that the specific nature of the Kenites' kindness to Israel has not been recorded in the Bible, it is also possible to interpret 1 Sam 15:6 in relation to Judges 4 and 5: the heroine Jael is married to a Kenite (and may be a Kenite herself), who helps Israel by inviting Sisera into her tent and then killing him with a tent peg. Or, it may be a reference to Jethro's patronage of Moses and the Israelites after the Exodus. According to F. Fensham, the term חסד is an indication of a formal non-offensive treaty between the Kenites and the Israelites, and he cites Exodus

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[88] *HALOT*, 2:1097.

[89] So F. C. Fensham, "Did a Treaty Between the Israelites and the Kenites Exist?" *BASOR* 175 (1964): 52: "the relation between the Midianites and Israelites may coincide with the relation between the Kenites and Israelites." Another theory concerning the references to Jethro as both a Midianite and a Kenite suggests that the Kenites were substituted into certain Jethro texts in order to appease anti-Midian P editors ; see discussion on this point, below.

[90] Halpern, "Kenites," 18.

18 as the beginning of this treaty.[91]   Fensham understands Exodus 18 to be a record of

negotiations carried out between Jethro and the Israelite elders in the presence of YHWH;

hence, YHWH is the witness to the stipulations of the treaty.  The sacrifice offered by

Jethro seals the treaty-making (similar to Exod 24:5), and the communal meal shared by

Jethro and the elders indicates that they are parties of the treaty (as in Exod 24:11).  Thus

the actions of "sacrifice plus meal" indicate the creation of a formal and binding

agreement.[92]  According to G. Mendenhall, this understanding of Exodus 18 as recording

the inception of a treaty between the Kenites and the Israelites supports one theory

concerning Jethro's tradition history: Jethro was originally a shepherd who was later

"promoted" to the title of priest because of the covenant enacted in Exodus 18.[93]  Though

it would be extremely difficult to prove this tradition-historical argument, it is clear that

the Kenites receive deferential treatment by the Israelites in the biblical narrative, and

some sort of loyalty exists between the two peoples.

The Midianites appear in multiple and varied contexts throughout the Bible.  The

eponymous ancestor of this group is a son of Abraham through Keturah (Gen 25:2),

which establishes the Midianites as close relatives of the Israelites.  They are mentioned

briefly in Gen 37:28, 36 as traders who pull Joseph from the pit and then sell him;

however, the Midianites are conflated with the Ishmaelites in Genesis 37, and they are

only mentioned in passing.  It is in the books of Numbers and Judges that the Midianites

receive the most extended attention, and that attention is decidedly negative.  When the

Moabites detect the threat of Israel approaching in the wilderness, they inform the elders

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[91] Fensham, "Treaty," 52.
[92] See also, especially, Gen 31:54, where Jacob and Laban take part in a sacrificial meal to formalize their agreement, and the same Hebrew phrase is utilized, אכל לחם.
[93] George Mendenhall, "Midian," *ABD* 4:816.

of Midian, who in turn join the Moabites in asking help from Balaam (Num 22:4); hence the Midianites are here identified with the enemies of Israel. At Baal-Peor, the Israelites are drawn to idolatry because of the seduction of Moabite women (Num 25:1); however, these women are identified as Midianites beginning in v. 6. In fact, one Midianite woman, Cozbi daughter of Zur, receives the dubious honor of being named—twice!—in this story cycle; she seduces an Israelite, Zimri ben Salu, and is subsequently killed (along with Zimri) by Pinhas (Num 25:8; 15). In Num 25:16-18, God tells Moses to attack Midian because of this shameful affair.

There is a textual problem in this story cycle; the women are alternately identified as Moabite and Midianite. In addition, Moses tells the people to impale the guilty ones in vv. 4-5, while vv. 8-9 report that a plague killed off the offenders. The conflation of what appears to be two traditions can be understood as either the cause for or the result of a link between Moab and Midian as significant enemies of the Israelites. Because of this conflation, a general web of hermeneutical significance is established that later Jewish interpreters utilized: Balaam, Peor, Midianites, Moabites, sin, and punishment.[94] Later Jewish exegesis of Jethro as a Midianite must be seen, at least in part, in this intertextual context.

The story of the conflict between Midian and Israel continues and is expanded in Numbers 31. God orders Moses to avenge the Israelite people against the Midianites. The Israelites kill every male, the five kings of Midian, and Balaam. In addition, they pillage the Midianites (taking virgin women, female children, animals, and treasures),

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[94] Thus Balaam's words concerning Israel (Numbers 23-24), which are harmless (and even positive), are less important in post-biblical Jewish interpretation than his association with the sins of Peor (see Num 31:15).

and they burn down the Midianite towns. There is no mention of Jethro or his family.[95] In spite of this calamitous defeat, the Midianites rear their heads again in Judges 6, at which point they serve as the agents of punishment for sinful Israel: "Then the Israelites did what was offensive to YHWH and YHWH delivered them into the hands of the Midianites for seven years" (Judg 6:1). As a result of disobedience, the Israelites come under oppression from the Midianites, who are joined in their nefarious activities by the Amalekites and the Kedemites. The Israelites cry out to God, receive a prophetic word which explains the cause for their punishment, and are presented with a deliverer in the form of Gideon. After Gideon's miraculous victory over the Midianites, Israel is free from their oppression for 40 years. Isaiah 9:3, 10:26; and Ps 83:10 recall Midian's punishment in Judges 7-8 and refer to Midian as an enemy group.

As is evident from these texts, a significant portion of the biblical material in which Midian appears presents this group in a negative light: they attack Israel and lead it astray, they join forces with particularly nasty enemies of Israel, and their defeat becomes a symbolic representation of YHWH's capacity to destroy those who harm the people of Israel.[96] It is fascinating, therefore, to note the juxtaposition between these problematic Midianites and the benevolent Midianite father-in-law of Moses. Source critical explanations are frequently summoned as the solution to this problem: throughout J and

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[95] Indeed, this story cycle may be one of the primary reasons certain post-biblical Jewish works emphasize Jethro's Kenite identity over his Midianite one.

[96] There are also a few biblical texts that mention Midian without polemic: Gen 36:35 reports that Hadad son of Bedad defeats the Midianites as part of its commentary on local politics and genealogy; Isa 60:6 refers to the dromedaries of Midian; and Hab 3:7 describes Midian's pavilions. Because of these references, it has been argued that Midian was a nomadic group of people. Indeed, the references to tents and camels could indicate a nomadic way of life for the Midianites, and the fact that Hobab knows the way through the desert in Num 10:29-36 supports such a notion. However, Hobab reports that he wants to return to "his land" and Numbers 31 specifically states that the Midianites were living in towns at the time of the Israelite attack against them. It is possible that some Midianites traveled frequently because of their trade; see below.

E, Midian is presented in a neutral (even positive) fashion (see, for example, Exodus 18); in P, however, Midian is highly polemicized (see, for example, Num 25:6-15).[97]  The treatment of the Midianites in J/E and P is so distinct, in fact, that it can probably be traced to the tension between E's pro-Mushite and P's pro-Aaronid polemics.[98]  In E (and J), Moses' association with the Midianites is acceptable, while in P, the negative treatment of Midian may present a subtle criticism of Mosaic leadership.  Propp summarizes the reasons for P's vilification of Midian quite succinctly:

> Perhaps he [the P writer] simply was outraged by Jethro's sacred office in JE—in 18:12 (E), Jethro takes precedence over Aaron himself!  Perhaps, too, he intended his aspersion of Midian to besmirch Moses, who is married to a Midianite in JE (but not in P!)…  Finally, the Kenites[99] were associated with Arad,[100] where a temple stood in the late preexilic period….  We may *a priori* assume this structure offended the Priestly Writer, an advocate of centralized worship.[101]

Because the neutral and positive traditions concerning Jethro and his Midianite-ness would have been so problematic for P, it is remarkable that these traditions remain intact, to some extent, in the biblical text.  Coats argues that this is because the kernel of the tradition history present in the story of Moses in Midian, and subsequently the part of the tradition history that would have been most zealously maintained, is *not* the theophany at Sinai/Horeb, but Moses' marriage into the Midianite clan and his

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[97] So Levine, *Numbers,* 94-5.
[98] See Frank M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 200-6; R. Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible,* 78, 203-4.
[99] I will discuss the relationship between the Kenites and Midianites, below.
[100] See discussion of the sanctuary of Arad, below.
[101] Propp, *Exodus,* 176.

relationship with Jethro.[102]  (This would explain the continuous repetition of Jethro's full

title ["priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law"] throughout Exodus.)  Other explanations

of the juxtaposition between the positive and negative treatments of Midian have resulted

in a strand of biblical scholarship that emphasizes what must have been a significant

contribution by Midian to the early Israelites.  As Cross notes, the fact that a tradition was

preserved in the Bible in which Moses marries into a Midianite family and takes direction

from a Midianite priest indicates that this tradition was too deeply rooted in the Israelite

self-understanding to be altered or removed by later P polemicists, for whom this

tradition would surely have been embarrassing.  In fact, Cross argues, Midian is more

important, geographically, to Israel's tradition history than Sinai; he even suggests that

the theophany at the mountain of God originally was understood to have occurred in

Midian, not Sinai.[103]  Dumbrell suggests that the contribution of the Midianites to Israel

can be seen in the social structure of the Midianite people; Dumbrell describes this

structure as a league, in which the Midianites maintained ongoing ties to other

populations.  This league formation is a better test case for Noth's concept of the

amphictyony than Greek or European leagues.  Ultimately, Dumbrell argues, the

Midianites influenced the social structure of the Israelites because it was "an amorphous

league of the Late Bronze Age," which shaped Israel's sense of tribal behavior;

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[102] G. W. Coats, "Moses in Midian," *JBL* 92 (1973): 3-10.

[103] See Frank Moore Cross, "An Interview," *BR* 8 (1992): 20-33, 61-2. Cross points to the archaeological evidence of a thriving culture in 12-13th c. Midian and juxtaposes it to the sheer absence of cultural artifacts in Sinai at this time.  He adds:  "when we can isolate old traditions that have no social function in later Israel, or actually flout later orthodoxy,…such traditions may preserve authentic historical memories, memories too fixed in archaic poetry to be revised out or suppressed." (62)

eventually, the Midianite league ceased to function (thus the stories in Judges 5-7), and disappeared from the historical scene before the end of the biblical period.[104]

A fascinating theory to come out of exploration of Midian's impact on Israel emphasizes Israel's theological history. The so-called Midianite (or Kenite) Hypothesis, first developed in the 19th century, posits that YHWH was a Midianite/Kenite deity and was introduced to the Israelites during their sojourn in the wilderness.[105] Hence the Midianites/Kenites introduced the Israelites not only to their deity but also to several important components of YHWH-worship, including sacrifice and religious officiation. This theory was promulgated by several scholars during the 19th and 20th centuries, though it has undergone re-evaluation in recent years. Childs states that this theory "went far beyond the available evidence" and amounted, essentially, to "a brilliant cul-de-sac."[106] Childs prefers Gressmann's explanation for the retention of the Jethro traditions, which argues that these stories are a "cult etiology" that explains the origins of YHWH worship at Kadesh.[107] Fensham similarly critiques the theory for lack of evidence, and refers to it as a "once popular notion."[108] Carol Meyers, however, still grants the theory a degree of credibility. Because the account of Moses' encounter with YHWH takes place in Midian, and Zipporah and Jethro take part in circumcision and sacrifice (in Exodus 4 and 18, respectively), Meyers believes there is a core of historical truth to the role of Midian in Israelite history: "These highly unusual and positive features of the Midianite

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[104] W. Dumbrell suggests that the Ishmaelites eventually took the place of the Midianites in Israel's tradition history, which explains the source- and tradition-critical problems of Gen 37. William J. Dumbrell, "Midian: A Land or a League?" *VT* 25 (1975): 323-37.

[105] See de Vaux, "Sur l'origine kenite ou midianite du Yahvisme"; G. Mendenhall, *The Tenth Generation: The Origins of the Biblical Tradition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); H. H. Rowley, *From Joseph to Joshua* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950).

[106] Childs, *Exodus,* 323.

[107] Ibid.

[108] Fensham, "Treaty," 51.

connection, especially in light of the genealogical connection between Israel and Midian (Gen 25:1-4), suggest a note of validity for a formative Midianite role in Israel's past."[109]

According to B. Mazar, archaeological evidence supports this theory. Based in part on the presence of certain types of pottery, Mazar identifies the Late Bronze-Early Iron Age "holy functionaries" who presided at Arad and near Kadesh as Kenites, whose clan ancestor was Hobab; these smith-priests left behind utensils associated with worship.[110] However, the identification of the pottery remains as Midianite/Kenite in origin has been criticized by P. McNutt, who notes that this identification is based on pre-conceived notions gleaned from the biblical text; she states that "there are problems with both the argument that ethnicity can be identified on the basis of pottery and the related argument that the presence of a certain type of pottery indicates *dominance* of a site by a particular ethnic group."[111] However, McNutt argues that there are other archaeological sites whose remains suggest that the metal-working Midianites/Kenites were associated with YHWH worship; Site 2 in the Timna Valley (Ramesside period) has revealed metallurgical instruments indicating that "ritual may have been an integral part of the metallurgical operations and by extension, that the metalsmiths may have functioned in some capacity as ritual specialists."[112] In addition, McNutt states that the Hathor sanctuary (also in the Timna Valley), which is dated no later than the mid-12th c. BCE, links the practitioners there to Israelite worship through the presence of iron, indications of a tent over the temple court, and a copper snake reminiscent of 2 Kgs 18:4 and Num 21:9.

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[109] Meyers, *Exodus,* 12.
[110] Mazar, "The Sanctuary of Arad," 297-303.
[111] McNutt, "The Kenites," 116.
[112] Ibid.

It is significant that none of these findings can support an identification of the Midianites/Kenites with the deity YHWH. Therefore, there is no archaeological evidence that can firmly link the Midianites with forms of Israelite worship, and the attempts to forge that link have been flawed. However, the literary evidence in the Bible is compelling: it is in Midian that Moses learns of his calling and meets YHWH, and it is remarkable that Jethro receives a fair amount of attention in the biblical text. I am inclined to agree with Meyers; there appears to be a strong tradition history present in these texts, and these traditions have not been altered in spite of the fact that they are difficult to explain in light of other presentations of Midian.

The third group of people under examination here is never linked explicitly to Jethro; however, the Rechabites appear frequently enough in later Jewish interpretation concerning Jethro to warrant our attention. According to Jeremiah 35, Rechab and his clan came to Jerusalem to escape Nebuchadnezzar's armies. Because of their unique disciplined way of life (abstaining from intoxicants, building homes, and engaging in agriculture; see Jer 35:6-10), Jeremiah presents them as a prime example of fidelity to commandments, as well as fidelity to an ancestor, Jonadab ben Rechab (Jer 35:8; 2 Kgs 10:15-27).[113] The Rechabites, who are *possibly* mentioned in 1 Chr 2:55, are sometimes affiliated with metal-working, both through their identities as Kenites (if one reads 1 Chr 2:55 in this way), and, in 1 Chronicles 4, through the city of Ir-Nahash ("City of Copper").[114] Frank Frick depicts the lifestyle of the Rechabites as reflective of a guild-centered profession; the specialized knowledge of metallurgists was carefully guarded

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[113] Jonadab is identified as "son of Rechab" in the MT of Jer 35:8, but not in the LXX.

[114] Holladay, *Jeremiah,* 247. The identification of the craftsmen of 1 Chr 4:12 as the "men of Rechab" is potentially problematic: the MT reads "men of Recah," while the LXX reads "men of Rechab." For discussion of this problem, see Japhet, *Chronicles,* 112; Lundbom, *Jeremiah,* 573.

and handed down through the generations (hence resulting in an emphasis on endogamous marriage), and the guild of metal-workers would move from one place to another when resources became scarce.[115]   In addition, their abstinence from alcohol could be based on a desire to prevent the divulgence of professional trade secrets.[116]   This understanding of the Rechabites then fuels Frick's theory that they are connected to Jethro: he argues that Jethro was rejected by his neighbors because he was a member of the metalworking guild, and that is why they abused his daughters.[117]   However, the only evidence in the Bible to support this construction is the *possible* link between the Rechabites and the Kenites in 1 Chr 2:55, as well as the connection with Ir-Nahash. Frick's view of the Rechabites is difficult to support based on the biblical text alone, but ancient Jewish interpreters found the Rechabites to be a fruitful source of information concerning Jethro.

Excursus: A Metaphoric and Ethnographic Version of the Midianite Hypothesis

McNutt presents a theory that posits the Midianites, Kenites, and Rechabites were extremely important in Israelite tradition-history; she argues that the unique characteristics of these three groups were utilized to construct an overarching metaphor for the Israelites' experience in Egypt and the Exodus.   Her use of ethnographic perspectives makes her argument particularly useful for an examination of identity in biblical texts concerning Jethro and his kin, and consequently her article is worthy of extended examination.   McNutt draws on traditional African and Middle Eastern metal-

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[115] Frank S. Frick, "Rechab," *ABD* 5:630-2.
[116] Ibid.  This argument is refuted by Gerald L. Keown, Pamela J. Scalise and Thomas G. Smothers, *Jeremiah 26-52* (WBC 27; Dallas: Word Books, 1995), 196.
[117] Frick, "Rechab," 632.

working culture,[118] and designates metallurgists as comprising a "marginal" community. She derives her definition of marginality from Victor Turner: marginal individuals are those who are "simultaneously members (by ascription, optation, self-definition, or achievement) of two or more groups whose social definitions and cultural norms are distinct from, and often even opposed to, one another."[119]   Hence "marginality" is qualitatively different from simple "outsider" status; it is one's capacity to belong (to varying extents) within one community while also belonging in another that grants one the dangerous status of "marginal."  After all, those who are marginal cannot be as easily excised from a community's world view as those who are clearly outsiders.

According to McNutt, artisans and metalsmiths occupy this marginal territory in traditional Middle Eastern and African societies.[120]  Because they work with materials with distinctive smells, and have dangerous and privileged knowledge of something seen as magical and mysterious, they are treated with ambivalence, awe, and fear.  These people are socially and economically necessary members of the larger community's life, but they are culturally liminal.  In addition, they are neither farmers nor herders, and hence their profession is unlike most of their neighbors.  In the Bible, artisans and metalsmiths are treated with great respect, as is evident from the tales of Bezalel, Hiram, and the artisans carried into captivity by the Babylonians (2 Kgs 24:14, 16; Jer 24:1;

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[118] McNutt's evidence is drawn primarily from the myths and beliefs of contemporary traditional societies spread throughout Africa and the Middle East.

[119] McNutt, "The Kenites," 110.

[120] Of course, traditional Middle Eastern and African societies are divorced from the world of the Bible by geography as well as time; one could argue that McNutt is comparing communities without any controlling set of criteria.   However, McNutt is not alone in this use of social science; Nancy Jay utilizes evidence from populations far removed from the world of the Bible for her analysis of the sacrificial system, but her conclusions are still compelling for biblical studies.  At the heart of this kind of study is a structuralist approach, which Jay describes in this way: "interest is not in individual signs and their meanings, but in the underlying system of relations *between* signs which makes it possible for them to be meaningful.  Although each language is unique, they are ordered by logical structures that may be universal."  Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992), 5.

29:2).  However, in Genesis, the roots of metallurgy (in Tubal-Cain) reflect ambiguity; Cain is the inventor of murder, and yet his offspring are the inventors of most of the major components of civilization: technology, art, and music.  In some ways, Cain is the ultimate marginal figure: marked by God, a farmer who can yield no produce, forced to be a wanderer.  Thus, his role as the progenitor of the great artisans of the world results in those artisans carrying on his marginality.

The Kenites of the Bible demonstrate this marginality quite effectively: as supporters of Israel and Yahwism, they are apparently on friendly terms with the Israelites, and yet they are never incorporated into the Israelite people.  The Rechabites similarly demonstrate fidelity to the Israelites to some extent (2 Kgs 10:15-23), and are treated as models of adherence to commandments (Jeremiah 35), and yet their unique way of life results in their remaining a separate entity among the Israelites.  McNutt adds that in some African societies, intermarriage is forbidden between members of the metallurgy clans and non-metallurgists; in fact, she argues that the grave sin of Numbers 25 is not the act of sex between an Israelite and a non-Israelite, but the fact that the non-Israelite is a *Midianite*.

It is the role of metalworkers as ritual specialists that serves as the source of a powerful metaphor.  McNutt points out that in W. Africa, the iron god is an agent of the creator god, who assists in the act of creation by completing and organizing it, as well as bequeathing education to the human being.  She notes that:

> Among the Dogon of W. Africa…as both a descendant of the gods and the first human ancestor, the first smith mediates between the heavenly and earthly realms and transmits to humans crucial knowledge about social

> organization, agriculture, animal domestication, and technology. He is responsible for maintaining a balance between the divine and human spheres and for resolving internal and external controversies.[121]

According to McNutt, Zipporah acts as a ritual specialist in Exodus 4 by performing circumcision (which smiths in Africa perform as well), and she mediates a rite of passage at a liminal time (Moses returning to Egypt with a new role in life). This pattern of mediation is the central thrust of McNutt's metaphor: metallurgists begin by breaking down the original components of metal, melting them to create something out of them. Then the metal is in a liminal state which requires artful shaping. Finally, the metal is "reborn" in a new, superior form. Israelite history can be seen as metaphorically representing the processes of metallurgy. The Midianites foster Israel's initial destruction by forcing Joseph to "go down" to Egypt. Israel in Egypt experiences oppression and a "breaking down"; in fact, Egypt is referred to as an iron furnace in Deut 4:20; 1 Kgs 8:51; and Jer 11:4. During the liminal phase of Israel's national life (the birth of its national consciousness around the time of the exodus), Jethro welcomes Moses and creates the opportunity for his new awakening. Later, when Israel is in the process of re-forming, Jethro provides the nation with needed shaping and advice and, according to the Midianite hypothesis, the Midianites/Kenites provide Israel with the foundations for a superior, independent spiritual life. Thus the Midianites (which, according to McNutt, includes the Kenites and Rechabites) foster the symbolic death and rebirth of Israel, serving as mediators (ritually and culturally) in a metallurgical metaphorical structure. McNutt's summation of this argument effectively highlights the centrality of Jethro in this process:

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[121] McNutt, "The Kenites," 119.

> Jethro is a priest-smith who mediates between the realms of the divine and human. He mediates in the human realm as legal counselor, and, most importantly, he facilitates the completion of Israel's "rite of passage" into a new "state" as a people with a national and religious identity. He has a hand in assisting Yahweh, the Divine Smith, in "forging" Israel into a united people.[122]

This whole theory establishes the marginal nature of Jethro and his kin as a central determinant in his role mediating Israel's development as a people. Thus, it is no coincidence that Jethro occupies marginal territory; it is a necessary component of Israel's history.

Don Benjamin responds to McNutt and details a few concerns with her theory.[123] First, he is unsure about the appropriateness of utilizing the Midianite/Kenite hypothesis in her argument when it is itself not without problems (namely, lack of evidence). In addition, Benjamin argues that the fact that smiths are marginal is not to be equated with them being marginalized: it is possible smiths *choose* to live on the fringe—to protect their methods, because of the heavy use of fire, or because of noise and smell. Finally, Benjamin suggests there are other, more significant metaphors that should be examined as potentially influencing the structure of major portions of the Bible: pottery (Genesis), animal husbandry (Leviticus), sexuality, birth, etc. These are valid critiques. McNutt's theory is discussed here *not* because it is unequivocally convincing; rather, her work is worthy of examination in the context of this dissertation because she has sensed and attempted to explain an aspect of Jethro's story that is the root of my study: his liminality,

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[122] McNutt, "The Kenites," 126.
[123] Don C. Benjamin, "A Response to McNutt: 'The Kenites, the Midianites, and the Rechabites as Marginal Mediators in Ancient Israelite Tradition,'" *Semeia* 67 (1994): 133-45.

combined with his influence on Moses and the Israelites. Modern interpreters have not yet "solved the problem" of Jethro's place vis-à-vis the Israelites, and though the methods used to address that problem vary, many of the questions being asked today are the same as those asked by ancient Jewish interpreters of the Bible.

## Conclusions

The purpose of this chapter has been to highlight components of the biblical text that will be important for ancient Jewish interpreters, as well as to discuss some of the modern treatments of these issues. As is evident from the material presented in this chapter, the biblical texts concerning Jethro contain many exegetical problems; in addition to the immediately obvious problems—such as Jethro's multiple names, Jethro's reaction to the news of God's great works for Israel, and the lack of clarity concerning the Kenites' settlement in the land with Israel—there are numerous subtle issues raised by the biblical narrative. What is the nature of the relationship between Moses and Jethro? What is the significance of Jethro's identity as a Kenite, and as a Midianite? What is the connection between the Kenites, Midianites and Israelites? Modern scholars have sought to address these complex questions in a variety of ways; some of the theories presented here provide relatively satisfying explanations for irregularities in the text. But many of the problems that bothered ancient interpreters bother modern interpreters as well, and there is often a dearth of evidence to support any one explanation. As we will see in the chapters that follow, the rabbis also developed traditions concerning aspects of the biblical text that are not immediately problematic for modern readers. The biblical

traditions concerning Jethro are rich with exegetical potential for the Jewish interpreters of antiquity.

## Ch. 3: Jethro in Tannaitic Midrashim

As S. Stern notes, there is no summative statement in rabbinic literature concerning Jewish identity; there is no point at which rabbinic authorities determine precisely what constitutes authentic identity, nor is there a monolithic set of criteria.[1] Rather, throughout rabbinic literature, one finds that discussions of identity take place in relation to many, varied topics. Similarly, there is no single "midrashic" response to Jethro. The rabbis of the midrashim demonstrated different, even conflicting, attitudes towards Jethro. However, a few themes recur with regularity. In Tannaitic midrashim, Jethro has a connection to the Israelite deity that facilitates a degree of fraternity between him and the Israelites. His past as an idol-worshipper is highlighted in characterizing both the importance of his theological conversion *and* the distance that remains between him and the Israelites after this conversion. His descendants are the source of some anxiety because of their apparently central role in the life of the later Jewish community, which results in attempts to simultaneously honor their role but maintain some sense of separateness. In addition, the Tannaitic midrashim contain traditions that address the place of Jethro's descendants among the Jews in the land of Israel. In this chapter, I will explore the treatment of Jethro in Tannaitic midrashim according to these themes.

### Jethro's names

The biblical texts concerning Moses' Midianite father-in-law contain several different names for this figure—Jethro, Jether, Hobab, and Reuel, in addition to the descriptive title "the Kenite." It is no surprise that the rabbis of the Tannaitic midrashim

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[1] Stern, *Jewish Identity,* xvi.

felt the need to address these multiple names.  Because nothing in the Bible can be seen

as superfluous or erroneous (and hence, it would be unacceptable to posit that the Bible

demonstrates uncertainty or confusion as to the name of Moses' father-in-law), the rabbis

had to explain *why* one figure would have several different names, and what the text is

trying to teach us by recording different names.[2]  The overarching interpretive principle of

the rabbis' conversations is that of conflation: all of these various names represent the

same person, and each name highlights a unique characteristic or experience of that

person.[3]  What is intriguing about these name-discussions is the way in which Jethro's

ethnic identity, personal values, and merit vis-à-vis the Israelite community are

highlighted.

Mekilta Amalek 3[4] presents a list of seven names for Jethro.  He is called Jether

because he caused a portion to be added (יתר√) to the Torah; he received an additional

letter to his name (which became Jethro) because he abounded in good deeds, like other

biblical figures who merited additional letters in their name (such as Abraham and

Sarah).  He was known as Hobab because he was beloved (חביב) of God, and he was

known as "Keni" or "the Kenite" (הקיני) because he was zealous (קנא) for God and

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[2] The hermeneutical principle that nothing in the Bible is erroneous or superfluous is what Kugel refers to as "omnisignificance:"  "For the basic assumption underlying all of rabbinic exegesis is that the slightest details of the biblical text have a meaning that is both comprehensible and significant.  Nothing in the Bible, in other words, ought to be explained as the product of chance, or for that matter, as an emphatic or rhetorical form, or anything similar, nor ought its reasons to be assigned to the realm of Divine unknowables.  Every detail is put there to teach something new and important, and it is capable of being discovered by careful analysis."  Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 104-5.

[3] The exceptions to this general conflation are found in Tg. Ps-J. to Exod 2:18, as well as a brief passage of Sifre Numbers 78 (Horovitz 72, lines 7-8), in which the opinion is presented that Hobab is Moses' father-in-law and Reuel is Hobab's father; when the women Moses encounters at the well reportedly go to tell "their father Reuel" about Moses, Scripture is indicating that women call their grandfathers "father."

[4] Lauterbach 2:164, lines 31-34.  In addition to Lauterbach's edition of Mekilta, see H. S. Horovitz and I. A. Rabin, *Mekilta de Rabbi Ishmael* (Jerusalem: Bamberger et Vahrman, 1960); J. Neusner, *Mekhilta According to Rabbi Ishmael: An Analytical Translation* (2 vols.; BJS 148, 154; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

acquired (קני√) Torah.  In addition, he is associated with two other biblical characters: Heber (the Kenite, see Judg 4:11), because he associated (נתחבר) himself with God; and Putiel (see Exod 6:25) because he freed himself (נפטר) from avodah zarah.[5]  These are all positive aspects of Jethro's character and behavior.

One major theme in the midrashic conversations about Jethro's various names is that of Jethro's relationship to the Israelite God.  Sifre Numbers 78[6] interprets the name "Reuel" as a construct:  "R. Shimon b. Menassia says, 'His name was Reuel, meaning "friend of God [רע אל]."'"[7]  R. Ishmael b. R. Yose brings in Prov 27:10 to support this interpretation:  "your friend and the friend of your father do not abandon."[8]  The correlation between this text and Num 10:31 is found in Moses' plea to Hobab: "do not abandon us."   R. Ishmael is utilizing *gezerah sheva,* a connection forged by the word "abandon"; the texts from Numbers 10 and Prov 27:10 illuminate one another.  In this scenario, Jethro is the "friend of your father," i.e., God.

In the midrashic passages concerning his names, Jethro's identity is generally addressed not in reference to his Midianite ethnicity, but in reference to his link to the Kenites, through Judg 1:16 and 4:11.  The potential connection between the Kenites and the Midianites (whether "Kenite" was a sub-group of "Midianite," or perhaps "Kenite" refers to a particular trade) has been discussed at some length in the field of biblical studies; what is of interest to us here is the way in which the Tannaitic rabbis emphasize Jethro's "Kenite-ness" while generally ignoring his "Midianite-ness."  Sifre Numbers 78

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[5] The identification of Jethro with Putiel will be very significant for midrashic, Talmudic and Targumic discussions of Exod 6:25 and Numbers 25.

[6] Horovitz, *Sifre to Numbers,* is a valuable critical edition of this text.  Neusner, *Sifre to Numbers: An American Translation and Explanation* (2 vols.; BJS 118-9; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), provides both a translation and commentary.

[7] Horovitz 72, lines 8-9

[8] Horovitz 72, lines 13-15.

addresses the identifier "Kenite" because it is helpful for establishing a didactic pun: Jethro is known as a Kenite because he acquired (קנה) for himself heaven, earth, and Torah.[9]  R. Dosetai, on the other hand, addresses this ethnicity directly by explaining: "His name was Keni, and why was he called Keni?  Because he distanced himself from the deeds of the Kenites, (concerning) the matter with which they made the Omnipresent One jealous."[10]  The first Scriptural reference for R. Dosetai's explanation is Deut 32:21: "They made me jealous with their 'no-god' (לא אל), they made me angry with their futilities."  This verse, in its context, is actually a reference to the Israelites making God jealous, but is taken by R. Dosetai to concern the Kenites because of the use of the word "jealous" (קנא√).  The second Scriptural reference R. Dosetai employs is Ezek 8:3, which refers to a "jealousy-inducing (idolatrous) image" at the Temple, utilizing the same root. Once again, the context of the passage does not concern the Kenites, but the presence of קנא√ provides R. Dosetai with the opportunity to link the Kenites to idolatrous practices that enrage the deity.  The result of this hermeneutical maneuver is two-fold:  First, Jethro's Kenite identity is problematic because the Kenites are idolaters who infuriate the Israelite God.  Second, Jethro has separated himself from these idolatrous deeds.  Hence, Jethro's ethnic identity, which is problematic for his capacity to relate to the Israelites and their deity, has been addressed and handled to some extent by Jethro through his rejection of his indigenous idolatrous leanings. The identifier "Kenite" has become, primarily, an adjective describing personal and spiritual traits rather than an ethnic marker.

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[9] Horovitz 72, lines 12-13.
[10] Horovitz 72, lines 10-12

By reading Jethro as renouncing idolatry, the rabbis may in fact be affording him a degree of entry into the Israelite community. According to y. Ned. 3:4 38a, anyone who renounces idolatry confesses to the entire Torah.[11] Though we must be cautious about conflating views from disparate texts, it is possible that there was a belief circulating among the writers of Palestine that renouncing idolatry was an act which linked the renouncer to an important symbol of Jewish identity: the Torah. Belief in the Torah, which will be discussed further below, was apparently one means by which a non-Jew could access the Jewish community to an extent. As Cohen points out, theological conversion was recognized and discussed in Jewish and non-Jewish texts of the Greco-Roman era (including Philo, Joseph and Asenath, and our midrashim),[12] and texts such as Sifre Numbers demonstrate great respect for the decision of a non-Jew to renounce his evil, misguided ways and embrace the true God; however, Cohen also notes that "[t]heological conversion was not social conversion."[13] Though Jethro separated himself from the Kenites' beliefs, that alone could not result in the complete loss of his Kenite identity and the adoption of Israelite identity instead.

## Jethro as proselyte

The prospect of theological conversion brings with it the issue of the proselyte, or *gēr*. Sifre Numbers 80 interprets Num 10:31 ("you shall be for us as eyes") utilizing a word play on the name "Hobab" to demonstrate Jethro's status as a *gēr*.

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[11] b. Meg. 13a states that one who renounces idolatry "is called a Jew"!
[12] Cohen, *Beginnings,* 3-4, 129-38, 142-6, 150-4.
[13] Cohen, *Beginnings,* 152.

> You will be as beloved (חביב) to us as the orbs of the eyes,
> as it says, (Deut 10:19): "You shall love a *gēr* for you were
> *gērim*"; and (Exod 23:9): "you shall not oppress a *gēr*, for
> you were *gērim*"; and (Exod 22:20): "You shall not wrong
> nor oppress a *gēr*, for you were *gērim*."[14]

It is assumed in this midrash that Jethro is a proselyte, as it is in Sifre Numbers 78,[15] and Mekilta de Rabbi Shimon (in its commentary to several passages in Exodus 18).[16] This in itself is not particularly novel; after all, many rabbinic texts concur on this point. What is interesting in the Tannaitic midrashim is the way in which Jethro's status as a proselyte is explained and how his conversion is characterized.

Mekilta Amalek 3[17] addresses the problem of Jethro's original religious identity in two ways. First, R. Joshua explains that Jethro's title as כהן מדין refers in fact to his status as a כומר (idolatrous priest) and draws a prooftext for this argument from Judg 18:30, which mentions the idolatrous priests who served the Danites: just as in Judg 18:30, those called כהנים are in fact idolatrous according to the rabbis, so also is Jethro called a כהן though he is an idol-worshipper. In the same passage, however, R. El'azar of Modiim states that Jethro was a chief (שר), not a priest, thereby rendering any problem associated with Jethro's religious officiation null and void. These rabbis are not comfortable attributing any kind of valid priesthood to Jethro.

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[14] Horovitz 77, lines 6-8

[15] Horovitz 72, line 19: "שלא מצינו בכל הגרים שחיבבו את התורה כיתרו".

[16] David Hoffmann, *Mekilta de Rabbi Shimon b. Yohai* (Frankfurt a. M.: Y. Koyffmann, 1905), 85-9 passim. J. N. Epstein and E. Z. Melamed, *Mekilta de Rabbi Shimon b. Yohai* (Jerusalem: Sumptibus Mekize Nirdamim, 1955), 127-36 passim. For an English translation along with a critical introduction and annotation, see W. David Nelson, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2006), especially 195-211.

[17] Lauterbach 2:166, lines 58-61.

Jethro's conversion is represented in Mekilta by Exod 18:11: "Now I know that YHWH is greater than all the gods." According to Beshallah 7,[18] Jethro means by this statement, "I acknowledged it in the past, and now even more so that His name has become great in the world. For the thing whereby the Egyptians sought to destroy Israel, by this thing He punished them." It is God's miracles and ironic genius that inspire Jethro to affirm that which he had already at least suspected: that YHWH is the greatest of the gods. However, it is clear that according to the rabbis of Mekilta Amalek 3,[19] this statement in Exod 18:11 is not in fact monotheistic; after all, Jethro does not deny the existence of the other gods, he merely asserts YHWH's supremacy over them. In a way, Jethro has only incorporated the Israelite deity into his pantheon.[20] The rabbis compare Jethro unfavorably to other converts: both Rahab (Josh 2:11) and Naaman (2 Kgs 5:15) "knew better" than Jethro; their statements of faith were more purely monotheistic: "Naaman knew better than him…Rahab knew better than him…." A comparison with another text in Mekilta is illuminating in this regard: in Exod 15:11, the Israelites themselves sing God's praises in a way that smacks of polytheism: "Who is like you among the gods [אלים], YHWH?" Mekilta's commentary to this passage, however, does not address the problematic implications of this song. Rather, it is clear in Shirata 8[21] that the rabbis of the Mekilta read this phrase as a statement of monotheistic faith: the problematic word אלים is translated as "powerful ones," "silent ones," "those who serve God (angels)," and even "those who ascribe divinity to themselves" (such as Pharaoh or Nebuchadnezzar) or "those to whom others ascribe divinity (idols)." The text never

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[18] Lauterbach 1:244, lines 18-20.
[19] Lauterbach 2:176, lines 204-212.
[20] See discussion of this phenomenon in Cohen, *Beginnings,* 142-6.
[21] Lauterbach 2:59-67 passim.

considers the possibility that the Israelites were in fact uttering a monolatrous statement: that YHWH is great *among the other gods*. In fact, the midrash explains that even the nations of the world, upon hearing this song, renounce their idols. Thus we see that when the rabbis of Mekilta were reading about the Israelites, they assumed a monotheistic stance; when they were reading about Jethro, on the other hand, they assumed a non-monotheistic stance. The rabbis, therefore, read with the categories of identity in their minds: one does not interpret an Israelite the way one interprets a non-Israelite. Identity, therefore, is more than what is found in the text; it is also found in the act of reading that interprets the text. It is an important hermeneutical category for the rabbis of the Mekilta.

On the other side of this argument is the possibility, suggested in Amalek 3,[22] that Jethro's polytheistic leanings may have some benefit, not for him, but for the Israelites: "They say: There was not an idol that Jethro failed to seek out and worship it." Thus, when Jethro makes the statement, "Now I know that YHWH is greater than all the gods," he is uniquely qualified to make that judgment; as someone familiar with every single false god in the world, Jethro could honestly mean that YHWH is greater than all of them. In addition, when Jethro blesses God in response to the miracles that have occurred, Jethro is demonstrating faith that is greater than the Israelites' faith: "Said R. Pappias: This passage expresses reproach for the Israelites. For behold, there were six hundred thousand people [there] and not one of them stood to bless the Omnipresent One until Jethro came and blessed the Omnipresent One." In a way, therefore, Jethro's idolatrous past serves to show how great a change he undergoes with his new understanding of God, a process that is worthy of some praise, even if it is at times faint.

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[22] Lauterbach 2:176, lines 207-212.

It is not clear in all of the Tannaitic midrashim, however, if Jethro has "officially" converted. In one text, Sifre Numbers 78, is it apparent that Jethro underwent a conversion thorough enough that his descendants could intermarry with the Israelites and eventually become priests: "Some of their daughters married priests, and the sons of their sons presented offerings upon the sides of the altar."[23] Sifre Numbers 108[24] lists three ritual requirements for conversion—circumcision, immersion, and sacrifice; neither circumcision nor immersion appears in the Tannaitic discussions of Jethro as a proselyte. It is also unclear whether or not Jethro's sacrifice should be understood as a conversion ritual, or if it is simply an expression of fraternity between Jethro, the Israelites, and God. In most Tannaitic texts, it appears that either Jethro has undergone a purely theological change without the corresponding cultural rituals, or the rabbis assumed that his conversion was thorough and valid (by whatever standards may have applied). The absence of circumcision in particular as a component of Jethro's experience is significant.[25] Cohen argues that all Tannaitic texts assume circumcision in the conversion process;[26] however, the individual texts about Jethro do not make that point clear, and it is possible for Tannaitic texts to convey a multitude of opinions on the matter. Hence, it appears that the emphasis here is on a theological change in Jethro, but not necessarily a ritually-organized conversion.

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[23] Horovitz 73, lines 17-18. This is one of the midrashim that conflates Jethro's descendants with the Rechabites (73, line 13): "We derive [from Judg 1:16] that the sons of Jonadab ben Rechab are the sons of Jethro."

[24] Horovitz 112, lines 5-7.

[25] Compare b. Sanh. 94a, in which it is reported that when Jethro rejoiced (ויחד) (Exod 18:9), he in fact caused a sharp knife (חד) to pass over his flesh and circumcised himself!

[26] Cohen, *Beginnings,* 219.

Since circumcision is not mentioned concerning Jethro, are any of these texts making a claim about his status?  Mekilta Amalek 3[27] raises circumcision as an issue of significant contention between Moses and Jethro:

> When Moses said to Jethro, "Give me your daughter Zipporah as a wife," Jethro said to him: "Accept one condition which I will state, and I will give her to you as a wife."  He asked, "What is it?"  He said, "Your first son will be for עבודת כוכבים, and those from then on will be for the sake of heaven."  Moses accepted.  Jethro said to him: "Swear to me," and Moses swore; hence "Moses consented (ויואל משה)" (Exodus 2:21).

In this story, which is built on commentary explaining Gershom's name, Moses asks Jethro to give him Zipporah as a wife.  Jethro states that there is one condition for the arrangement: that Moses' first son shall be for idolatry.  (It is unclear from the text exactly what this means: will Gershom be an idolater?  Or will he be a sacrifice?)  Moses, amazingly, accepts this condition; Jethro makes him swear an oath, which Moses does.  Mekilta[28] reports that "it was for this that the angel at first wished to kill Moses" in Exod 4:24-26, and it is Zipporah's quick action in circumcising her son that ameliorates the angel.  Moses' omission of the act of circumcising his son marks Gershom as linked to idolatry, and his subsequent circumcision marks Gershom as a member of God's people.  This circumcision separates an idolater from an Israelite.  Based on the placement of this narrative in a discussion of Gershom's name, it is also possible that this midrash is implying that circumcision is the pre-eminent mark of a *gēr*.  Thus, we see that these Tannaitic texts emphasize circumcision, but do not attribute it to Jethro (and in fact

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[27] Lauterbach 2:168-9, lines 92-102.
[28] Lauterbach 2:169, line 104.

present him as *opposing* it for his grandson!), which serves to keep him entrenched—socially and culturally—as an outsider.[29]   The negativity of this tradition in Amalek 3 stands in sharp contrast to other Tannaitic traditions that treat Jethro more favorably, as a worshipper of YHWH.   However, what stands out most boldly is that in the Tannaitic midrashim we find the equation of circumcision with conversion, and yet not a single Tannaitic text attributes the act of circumcision to Jethro.

### Jethro's sacrifice

It is reported in Exod 18:12 that:  "Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, took a burnt offering and sacrifices for God; and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat food with Moses' father-in-law before God."   In Sifre Numbers 78, R. Shimon utilizes this biblical verse to demonstrate Jethro's close relationship with God.[30]   By using this particular text to highlight Jethro's friendship with God, R. Shimon is indicating that it is Jethro's sacrifice that facilitates his connection with the deity; the sacrifice indexes closeness, friendly status, and favorable relations.   A זבח, in the Bible, is an eaten sacrifice.[31]   It is clear from an examination of biblical references to זבחים that there is a social aspect at play in these sacrifices; people come together in celebration of a זבח (so Gen 31:54).   However, according to Exod 34:15, Israelites are forbidden to make covenants with the inhabitants of the land of Canaan, because "they will lust after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and invite you, and you will eat of their sacrifices."   Thus

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[29] It is interesting that according to this text, it is *Zipporah*, Jethro's daughter, who ameliorates the situation.
[30] Horovitz 72, lines 8-10.
[31] *HALOT,* 2:261-2.  See also Gary A. Anderson, "Sacrifice and Sacrificial Offerings (OT)," *ABD* 5:870-86.

Israelites are not to eat of sacrifices offered to other gods.[32] If we read all of these references to זבחים in connection with one another (intertextually), the picture that emerges is of a sacrifice that indexes fraternity among members of a community.  If we further assume that R. Shimon and his colleagues were also reading intertextually—an assumption that is valid considering the capacity these readers demonstrate to make lexical links connecting various parts of the Bible—then it becomes clear that R. Shimon is indicating Jethro's facility in offering a real and valid זבח, one that is appropriate for Israelite participation, because it is directed to the appropriate deity.  Jethro is not on the same level as "the inhabitants of the land of Canaan"; rather, he has made an offering and shared his sacrifice with Aaron and the elders, who become linked to him in fellowship.

This is different from the interpretation presented in Mekilta Amalek 3.[33]  Mekilta demonstrates a mixed message concerning Jethro's sacrifice.  First, the day of the sacrifice is identified as Yom Kippur.[34]  This means that Jethro's sacrifice is particularly important, even holy.  The midrash then expresses surprise (הרי הכתוב מתמיה עליו) that Jethro, "a man who has been a worshipper of idols, who would sacrifice, offer incense and offer libations and bow down to his idols, *now* brings a burnt-offering and sacrifices

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[32] Porton points out that in Mishnah and Tosefta, it is clear that a non-Jew may bring certain sacrifices to God, though all of the sacrificial laws may not apply: "application of the sacrificial laws depends on the status of the person who made the offering." Porton, *Goyim,* 60 n. 110.  (See m. Zeb. 4:5.)  The sacrifices a non-Jew can bring are limited to the freewill and peace offerings (hence Jethro's sacrifice is permitted), and according to t. Sheq. 3:11, an Israelite or a priest may eat of a non-Jew's peace offering, though the non-Jew himself may not eat of it.  There are several reasons to proceed with caution, however, in evaluating the significance of these rabbinic texts vis-à-vis our midrash:  First, the genre of Mishnah and Tosefta is different from the genre of midrash, and hence there are different goals at play in the interpretations presented there.  The writers of Mishnah and Tosefta are primarily concerned with establishing a structured system whereby Jews and non-Jews should interact, whereas aggadic midrash is concerned primarily with providing exegesis of biblical text that presents a particular lesson or moral.  These different goals can present very different results.  In addition, Mishnah and Tosefta are both concerned with the sacrificial cult at the Temple, whereas in our biblical text and midrash a pre-Temple sacrifice is described.  See Porton, *Goyim*, 60, 75, 262-8.

[33] Lauterbach 2:177, lines 218-222.

[34] Lauterbach 2:179, line 1.

to God!"  The rabbis then explain that when Aaron and the elders came to partake of the sacrificial meal, Scripture indicates that they ate the meal "before (לפני) Elohim" in order to teach "that when anyone welcomes his fellow, it is as if he has welcomed the Shekhinah."  In other words, the act of hospitality is the important component of the story; it is Jethro's hospitality towards his dinner guests—or, more likely, their hospitality to this foreigner in their midst—that renders God present, *not* the sacrifice Jethro has offered.  Though Jethro may be a model of hospitality, he does not have the capacity to offer the same quality of sacrifice that the priests would have offered.  The religious character of the sacrifice is undermined by this interpretation: what matters in this event is an act of hospitality.

## Jethro as advisor

In Exodus 18, Jethro witnesses Moses struggling to meet the arbitration demands of his people, and intervenes by advising Moses to create a system of judges whereby the burden can be shared among "capable men, who fear God, truthful men who hate bribes." (18:21)  Sifre Numbers 78 addresses a quandary the rabbis perceive in this text: did Jethro really originate the plan for the judiciary? In this section of the midrash, it is reported that Jethro earned the Torah portion named after him because of the good advice he gave to Moses.  But R. Shimon b. Yohai asks, "wasn't that matter in Moses' hands from Sinai?  For it is said: 'If you do this, and God so commands you.'"[35]  In other words, Jethro's reference to God commanding Moses in Exod 18:23 (which is indeed a puzzling statement, as it appears to present Jethro as informing Moses of God's will) in fact indicates that Jethro is merely repeating that which God had already said to Moses.

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[35] Horovitz 72, lines 15-17.

Thus Sifre Numbers 78 explains: "Why did it escape Moses' eyes?" In other words, why did Moses forget what God had already told him directly? The midrash responds: "In order to assign merit to a righteous person, in order to attribute the matter to Jethro."[36] This midrash simultaneously praises Jethro and undermines his authority. On the one hand, Jethro is a righteous and worthy person, one who deserves the honor that has been bestowed upon him. On the other hand, he is not in fact the brilliant originator of his own advice: the credit for creating the Israelite system of justice goes to God.

Mekilta Amalek 4, in its exegesis of Exodus 18:24, records a teaching that also addresses the exegetical issue of determining the source of Jethro's advice:

> So Moses listened to the voice of his father-in-law—(to be interpreted) literally[37]—and did all that he said—all that which his father-in-law said to him: these are the words of R. Joshua. R. El'azar of Modiim said, So Moses hearkened to the voice of his father-in-law—(to be interpreted) literally—and did—according to all that God said to him.[38]

This midrash reports conflicting ideas: that Jethro was the creator of his own advice, *or* that Jethro merely reported God's teaching to Moses. The compiler of this midrash felt the need to include both opinions, thereby creating a text that maintains a level of ambivalence concerning the role of Jethro in the origin of the Jewish system of justice.

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[36] Horovitz 72, lines 17-18.
[37] According to Jastrow, 372, the word ודאי signifies something that is "real" rather than metaphorical. Hence I am interpreting the word in this midrash to mean "literally," not according to a symbolic meaning. Lauterbach (2:185) translates the term as "to be taken literally," while Neusner (2:33) translates it simply as "literally."
[38] Lauterbach 2:185, lines 94-97.

In contrast to these two texts, Sifre Deuteronomy 15[39] records a tradition that assigns full merit to Jethro for this system. In its exegesis of Deut 1:15, the midrash highlights the phrase "wise and knowledgeable men" and explains, "This is one of the seven attributes that Jethro told to Moses; he went and only found three (of these attributes): wise and knowledgeable men."[40] That is, Moses found 1) wise, 2) knowledgeable, 3) men.[41] This one short phrase is packed with hermeneutical significance. The group of seven attributes mentioned in the midrash refers to a combination of Exod 18:21—spoken by Jethro—and Deut 1:13—spoken by Moses. In Exod 18:21, Jethro tells Moses to find 1) capable men; 2) who fear God; 3) truthful men; 4) who hate bribery. It is reported in Exod 18:25 that Moses found capable men. In Deut 1:13, Moses reports on his own search for 1) wise, 2) discerning, and 3) knowledgeable men. It is reported in Deut 1:15 that he found wise and knowledgeable men, but not discerning men. Hence the two texts—Exodus 18 and Deuteronomy 1—have been combined by the midrashic interpreters: Exod 18:21 and Deut 1:13 represent one story, in which men with seven attributes are mentioned, men with three of these traits are found, and Jethro is the author of the entire combined idea. Thus, even though Deut 1:13 fails to identify Jethro as the originator of the idea, the midrashists of Sifre Deuteronomy extrapolate from the Exodus text his central role, and attribute to him not only his own recorded good advice in Exodus, but also the advice presented in Deuteronomy. When presented with the opportunity to deny Jethro's central role in this story, the rabbis of

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[39] The critical edition for this text is Louis Finkelstein, *Sifre on Deuteronomy* (New York: JTS, 1969). Translations consulted are: Hammer, *Sifre*; Neusner, *Sifre to Deuteronomy: An Analytical Translation* (2 vols.; BJS 98, 101; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987). See also Neusner, *Sifre to Deuteronomy: An Introduction to the Rhetorical, Logical, and Topical Program* (BJS 124; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987).
[40] Finkelstein 24, lines 7-8.
[41] So also Neusner, *Sifre Deuteronomy,* 48.

Sifre chose instead to go the other direction and credit him even more. Therefore, it appears that the traditions recorded in Tannaitic midrashim concerning Jethro's advice follow a somewhat illogical pattern: when interpreting Exodus 18, the text wherein Jethro gives Moses the advice, the interpreters marginalize Jethro's role in the establishment of the judiciary. However, when interpreting Deuteronomy 1, the text wherein Jethro is not mentioned, the rabbis bring him into the picture.

How do we understand these very different interpretations of Jethro's role? How can we explain the distinction between Sifre Numbers (which denies Jethro's ingenuity), Mekilta (which records contradictory opinions), and Sifre Deuteronomy (which validates Jethro's role)? Is there anxiety over Jethro's role in the creation of a system of judges? It appears so, or the rabbis would not have addressed the issue of his role. There is evidently enough anxiety about Jethro's role to result in a few traditions which attribute merit for the idea to God. However, even when God is identified as the originator of this plan, Jethro is still referred to as a righteous, worthy individual. He is not villainized. This may be the result of hermeneutical constraints: in the Bible, Jethro is a positive figure. It appears that regarding the creation of the judiciary, Jethro is viewed as meritorious enough to warrant some kind of praise, even if he is not viewed as the originator of a component of Jewish law.

## Jethro's descendants and the Land

Another treatment of Jethro's Kenite identity in the Tannaitic midrashim may demonstrate a tendency towards incorporation of Jethro and his descendants into the Israelite community on a social level. In a tradition that appears, with slight variations, in

four midrashic texts—Sifre Numbers 81,[42] Avot de Rabbi Nathan 35,[43] Sifre

Deuteronomy 62,[44] and Sifre Deuteronomy 352[45]—the location of the Temple creates a

problem during the settlement of the land:

> They knew that the "chosen house" would be built in the
> portion of Judah and Benjamin. Therefore they set aside
> the pasture of Jericho. Who occupied it all those years?
> The descendants of the Kenite, Moses' father-in-law,
> occupied it, as it is said (Judg 1:16): "The descendants of
> the Kenites went up with the Judahites from the City of
> Palms to the wilderness of Judah which is Negev-Arad, and
> they went and dwelt with the people." But after the Temple
> was built, they went away from them. R. Judah says: They
> went to Jabez to learn Torah, as it says (1 Chr 2:55): "The
> families of the scribes that dwelt at Jabez: The Tir'atim, the
> Shim'atim, the Sukkatim; these are the Kenites…."[46]

Because the Temple would in the future be located in land apportioned to the

tribes of Judah and/or Benjamin,[47] it was necessary during the settlement to set aside land

for the members of these two tribes who would later be displaced. The land that was set

aside was the pasture of Jericho, an area measuring 500 cubits by 500 cubits (according

to Sifre Deuteronomy 352). During the 440 years that passed between the time of the

settlement and the building of the first Temple, that land was occupied by the Kenites, the

descendants of Jethro, who became scribes at Jabez (1 Chr 2:55).[48] The prooftext for

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[42] Horovitz, 77, lines 9-16.

[43] S. Schechter, *Aboth de Rabbi Nathan* (New York: Phillip Feldheim, 1945). For English translations, see: J. Goldin, *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Neusner, *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan (Abot de Rabbi Nathan) Version B: A Translation and Commentary* (Studies in Judaism is Late Antiquity 11; Leiden: Brill, 1975).

[44] Finkelstein 128, lines 7-13

[45] Finkelstein 411 line 16 through 412 line 17.

[46] Sifre Deuteronomy 62: Finkelstein 128, lines 7-13.

[47] According to Sifre Deuteronomy 62, the land was located in both tribal territories; according to Sifre Deuteronomy 352, it was located only in Benjamin.

[48] Throughout these midrashim, we see that *any* Kenite can be linked to Moses' father-in-law.

these midrashim is Judg 1:16.  In short, these texts record variations on a general theme: for 440 years, Jethro's descendants dwelt among the people of Israel in the territory near Jericho; after the Temple was built, they vacated the land on which they had been living so that members of Benjamin or Judah could live there.  Hence the descendants of Jethro enjoyed a semi-official, temporary status as residents in the land.  It is assumed, therefore, that the descendants of Jethro traveled into the land with the Israelites, were with the Israelites during the conquest of the land, and took part in the settlement.  This means that in Numbers 10, when Moses asks Hobab to journey with the Israelites into the land, in spite of the initial answer Hobab gives ("I will not go…but return to my native land"), he must have ultimately acquiesced.

Sifre Numbers 80 records an explanation for this acquiescence:  when Jethro initially refuses to travel with the Israelites into the land, Moses responds, "if you do not take upon yourself the request, I decree against you a decree:  Now Israel will say, Jethro did not convert from love (of God), but Jethro was thinking that proselytes have a portion in the land of Israel.  Now that he sees they do not get a portion, he has abandoned them and left."[49]  In other words, Moses is suggesting that it will become known to the world that Jethro thought he and his descendants would receive a permanent home in the land of Israel; now that he knows no permanent land-grant will be offered, he is no longer interested in staying with the Israelites.  Therefore it is pressure to demonstrate true religious conversion that inspires Jethro (Hobab) to stay with the Israelites, and true religious conversion is demonstrated by the *willingness to dwell* among the Israelites, even for a finite period of time.  Cohen records that the act of living within Judean territory earned one the title of "Judean" at least until the 1st or 2nd century BCE; after

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[49] Horovtiz 76, lines 11-14.

that point in time, the geographical identity became an ethnic/social/religious one.  Non-Jews living among the Jews were able to move from outsider to insider status through incorporation, such as that experienced by the Idumeans under Hasmonean rule.   This incorporation was a function of living under Jewish rule, undergoing circumcision, and adhering to certain rules and traditions of the Jewish community.[50]  The act of living among the Israelites, sharing their land for a time, identifies Jethro's descendants with the Israelite community, albeit temporarily.[51]

However, not all of the Tannaitic midrashim that address Num 10:29-32 indicate that Jethro was successfully pressured into staying with the Israelites.  Some midrashim indicate that Jethro (Hobab) did *not* travel with the Israelites into the land, and some texts from these midrashim (such as Sifre Numbers 78) deny the notion of giving land to proselytes at all.  Mekilta appears to be unaware of the tradition of temporary settlement

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[50] Cohen, *Beginnings,* 109-39.  As noted above, however, there is no reference in Tannaitic midrashim to Jethro undergoing circumcision in his conversion, though the fact that Mekilta, Sifre Numbers, and Sifre Deuteronomy all record that later his descendants became Torah scholars and served on the Sanhedrin indicates that at least his descendants would have been circumcised.

[51] The halakhah generally prohibits a convert from owning land in Israel.  Sifre Numbers Qorah 119 (Horovitz 142, lines 8-13) and Pinhas 132 (Horovitz 174, lines 1-5) both indicate that converts cannot own land in Israel because of Num 26:55:  "The land shall be apportioned by lot; they shall inherit according to the names of their ancestral tribes (לשמות מטות אבותם)."  Because converts do not have ancestors among the tribes, they are excluded.  Sifre Numbers 78 (Horovitz 75, lines 20-24) interprets Ezek 47:21-23 against its literal meaning to exclude converts from land ownership.  The biblical text states, "You shall allot it as a heritage for yourselves and for the גרים who reside among you, who have begotten children among you; you shall treat them as Israelite citizens"; however, in Sifre Numbers, this is understood to indicate that converts may not own land, though they may receive atonement through it, or even bury their dead in it.  According to b. Yev. 47a-b, converts must learn about and take part in the various offerings presented to God from the produce of the land as well as agricultural gifts to the poor; as new Israelites, they are obligated to use the land as God intends, and their participation in this land-based system marks them as members of the Israelite community.  Yet some distinction is retained, according to b. Mak. 19a, in which Ashi states that converts cannot recite Deut 26:3 when offering their gifts at the pilgrimage festivals; the phrase "I have entered the land which YHWH swore to our father to assign us," cannot apply to a convert. In light of these texts, it is significant that according to Sifre Numbers 81, Abot de Rabbi Nathan 35, Sifre Deuteronomy 62, and Sifre Deuteronomy 352, Jethro's descendants are given space to dwell during the settlement, even if that space is only theirs temporarily.

for the Kenites: in Amalek 4,[52] it is reported that after Moses attempts to get Jethro to stay with the Israelites (by applauding his judicial advice), Jethro answers,

> A lamp is only of use in a dark place. Of what use is a lamp compared with the sun and the moon? You are the sun and Aaron is the moon. What would a lamp do amidst the sun and moon? Rather, I will go to my land and tell everyone and convert all the people of my country ( מגייר כל בני מדינתי), and I will lead them to the study of Torah and I will bring them under the wings of the Shekhinah.

The rabbis' Jethro is inspired by his new-found faith, but his loyalty to his own people and his own land remains, and it is those people and that land that will receive the benefit of his presence. Perhaps the rabbis of Sifre Numbers 80[53] were aware of the tradition found in Mekilta and provide a cryptic response to it, spoken to Jethro by Moses: "Are you thinking that you are increasing the glory of the Omnipresent? You are really diminishing it. How many proselytes and slaves are you destined to bring under the wings of the Shekhinah?" The rhetorical force of this statement is unclear. Is Moses arguing that Jethro will not bring in many converts by returning home and therefore should stay with the Israelites? Or is he arguing that Jethro should *not* stay with the Israelites because he is destined to gather converts in his own land? The text can be read either way; if the writers of Sifre Numbers 80 were in fact responding to the tradition recorded in Mekilta Amalek 4, then Moses is trying to convince Jethro to stay for the sake of proselytizing.

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[52] Lauterbach 2:185-6, lines 101-110.
[53] Horovitz 76, lines 16-17.

A different reason for Jethro's refusal to go is given in Sifre Deuteronomy 352.[54] When Moses pleads with Jethro to stay with the Israelites, he responds: "tomorrow when you divide the land of Israel for the tribes, which tribes from among you would give me a single vineyard from the midst of his (portion), or one furrow out of his (portion)? Rather, I will go to my land and eat the fruits of my land and drink wine from my vineyard." Once again, Jethro remains tied to his native land; in addition, he demonstrates the belief that he and his descendants will never be treated as fully enfranchised members of the Israelite community; they will not be offered land to live on, for all of the land will be for the Israelites. Thus the rabbis build on Num 10:31 to create a Jethro who honors the Israelite faith and even converts religiously, but persists in identifying *himself* primarily as the member of another people in another land. Jethro has adopted Judaism theologically (perhaps even ritually), but he does not adopt some other elements of Jewish identity—peoplehood and the land. If the interpreters behind this text felt anxiety about whether or not converts became Jews in every sense, they did not need to demonstrate that anxiety with direct statements from Moses or the Israelites: the rabbinized Jethro did it for them. The rhetorical force of this interpretive maneuver is to reassert boundaries between the Israelites and non-Israelites of the biblical text—and hence between the Jews and converts of the contemporaneous audience—by demonstrating that the converts neither expect nor desire full integration.

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[54] Finkelstein 412, lines 6-17. There are some potential textual problems with this narrative: Finkelstein states that this story was not originally part of Sifre Deuteronomy; he found it only in secondary commentaries. Hammer, however, notes that it is present in the Oxford ms (Hammer, *Sifre,* 510, n. 18). It does appear to be a baraita, and hence Tannaitic in origin, or, at least, attribution.

**Jethro as Torah scholar**

When Jethro chooses to return to his own land rather than accompany Moses and the Israelites into Canaan, Sifre Deuteronomy 352 draws a link between Jethro and the people who gathered at Jabez (1 Chr 2:55), but in an unusual way. The midrash states, "also you will find that some *Israelites* left a place (in Israel) of fruit, food, and drink, and went instead to hoe (the soil) in the wilderness and to study Torah with Jabez." The rabbis identify the men at Jabez as Israelites, not Kenites. The reasoning behind this identification is not made explicit: do the rabbis understand the Kenites to be Israelites? Or do the rabbis believe that only Israelites (not Kenites) can be Torah scholars? This is the only text among the Tannaitic midrashim to identify the various families listed in 1 Chr 2:55 as Israelites.

The rabbis of Sifre Deuteronomy 352 understand √בשי "sit, dwell" as the act of sitting in a *yeshiva,* studying Torah. This interpretation is facilitated not only by wordplay using √בשי, but also by the presence of the word ספרים in 1 Chr 2:55. Though modern biblical scholars have debated the appropriate translation for this word ("scribes" or "Sifrites"?), the rabbis of this midrash apparently understood these men to be scribes, who—in the time period in which the midrash was created and compiled—would have necessarily been Torah scholars as well.[55]

Though in the case of Sifre Deuteronomy 352, Jethro is linked to these scholars at Jabez only as a point of comparison or contrast, we find in other Tannaitic midrashim that Jethro was the progenitor of a line of Torah scholars, who are identified with the residents of Jabez. According to these texts, Jethro's connection to the scholars dwelling at Jabez

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[55] On this point, see A. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988), 247-9.

goes beyond the fact that both are identified as Kenites, even though that connection forms the textual foundation for the rabbis' interpretations. Mekilta Amalek 4,[56] for example, builds on the notion that Jethro said he would return to his land and convert his people, stating that when Jethro left the Israelites, "one might think that he merely went back and did nothing, but Scripture says (Judg 1:16): 'The descendants of the Kenite, Moses' father-in-law, went up with the Judahites from the city of Palms to the wilderness of Judah, which is Negev Arad, and they went and dwelt with the people.'" The midrash identifies "the people" with "wisdom", and a few lines later, the connection is clarified: "They went and sat with those sitting before Jabez." In the world constructed by this midrash, the Kenites who left Jericho and went into the wilderness of Judah ended up with Jabez, studying Torah and working as scribes, living a semi-ascetic lifestyle.[57] They were descendants of Jethro who had been converted and imbued with a love of Torah.

Jethro was able to pass on to his descendants a genuine love of Talmud Torah, because he himself had a special affinity for it. Sifre Numbers 78[58] utilizes a pun to make this point, saying that "he was called Hobab because he loved [חבב√] the Torah, for we find in none of the proselytes [הגרים] any who loved the Torah like Jethro." R. El'azar of Modiim reports in Mekilta Amalek 3[59] that Jethro came to Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness (Exod 18:1) not because he heard of the miracles surrounding the Exodus, but because he heard that Torah had been given.[60] In fact, according to this text, when Jethro

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[56] Lauterbach 2:186, lines 108-110.

[57] As discussed in ch. 2, there is some confusion about the identity of Jabez: 1 Chr 4:10 tells the story of a man named Jabez, while 1 Chr 2:55 appears to treat Jabez as a place. Mekilta Amalek 4 (Lauterbach 2:186-7, lines 115-118) clarifies the midrashic position: "They went and sat with those sitting before Jabez—for were there inhabitants of Jabez? There were only disciples of Jabez."

[58] Horovitz 72, lines 18-19.

[59] Lauterbach 2:162, lines 1-4.

[60] This explanation for Jethro's visit is structured in the midrash as the result of an event concerning Balaam: when the kings of the world notice that the earth itself is shaking, they go to Balaam to find out

arrives and Moses tells him "all that YHWH had done" (Exod 18:8), Moses is actually teaching Jethro about Torah.[61]

In contrast, Mekilta Amalek 4[62] presents Jethro as teaching Moses about Torah, utilizing Exod 18:20: "Enjoin upon them the laws and the teachings, and make known to them the way they are to go and the practices they are to follow." In this passage, Exod 18:20 is broken down into segments, which are then expanded to incorporate the major lessons Jethro passed on to Moses:

> "Enjoin upon them the laws": these are the interpretations [מדרש]. "And the teachings": these are the decisions [הוראות]—these are the words of R. Joshua.
> R. El'azar of Modiim says, "Laws"—these are the laws against sexual immorality…. "And the teachings": these are the decisions.
> "And make known to them the way": this is the study of Torah [תלמוד תורה]. "And the practices they are to follow": this is (a reference to) good deeds. These are the words of R. Joshua.
> R. El'azar of Modiim says, "And make known to them": show them how to live. "The way": this is visiting the sick. "They are to go": this is burying of the dead. "In it": this is acts of loving-kindness [גמילות חסדים]. "And the practices": this is the line of justice. "they are to follow": this is beyond the strict line of justice.[63]

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why. Balaam, in spite of his general wickedness as depicted in midrash, is nevertheless knowledgeable about the cause of all the rumbling, and informs the kings that Torah has been given. Jethro is not listed as one of the kings consulting Balaam, but this explanation immediately precedes the statement that Jethro had heard about Torah.

[61] The fact that the Torah has not yet been given in Exodus 18 is apparently not a matter of concern for the rabbis of this text from Mekilta. In fact, there are other examples within midrashic literature of pre-Sinai biblical figures demonstrating knowledge of Torah. For example, Abraham learns Torah as a young man (Genesis Rabbah 61:16 and 95:3) and Rebekah separates challah in a state of ritual purity (Genesis Rabbah 60:16). It is also possible that the rabbis assume the Torah has already been given, as is indicated in the story about Balaam's explanation to the kings of the world.

[62] Lauterbach 2:182, lines 48-58.

[63] It is unclear whether this discussion of the "line of justice" refers to using leniency or strictness with the wicked.

In this short text, R. Joshua and R. El'azar expound upon Jethro's instructions to Moses in a way that attributes to Jethro many of the major principles of Jewish life: study and interpretation of Torah, halakhic decision-making, acts of loving-kindness, and the justice system.  In other words, Jethro's instruction to Moses is presented here as if it refers to the entire Torah; Jethro is not only a lover of Torah, but a teacher of it as well, and quite acquainted with the building blocks of Jewish society!

Sifre Numbers 78[64] also explicitly links Jethro to the scribal communities at Jabez (1 Chr 2:55):

> Just as Jethro loved the Torah, so his descendants [בניו] loved the Torah, as it is said, "Go and speak the words of YHWH [דברי ה'] to the Rechabites" (Jer 35:2)…. Because they obeyed the command of Jonadab their father, the Omnipresent raised up from them scribes, as it is said, "The families of the scribes living at Jabez…" (1 Chr 2:55).

The names of the scribal communities at Jabez are then interpreted in both Sifre Numbers 78[65] and Mekilta Amalek 4[66] in ways that link this community directly with the wilderness wanderings and the revelation at Sinai:  they are called Tir'atim because they heard the shofar blast (תרועה) from Mt. Sinai (or because they *blew* the shofar, according to Mekilta Amalek 4), and because they trembled (from the same verbal root) and fasted; they are called Shim'atim because they heard (שמע) the shofar at Sinai; they are called Sukkatim because they lived in tents (סוכות) in the wilderness.  This community is lauded by Jeremiah for their fidelity in carrying out their ancestor's commands not to drink wine,

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[64] Horovits 73, lines 6-11.  Sifre Zutta shares this tradition with Sifre Numbers; see Horovitz, 263, lines 7-10.

[65] Horovitz 72, line 19 through 73, line 16.

[66] Lauterbach 2:187, lines 118-121.

plant food or build permanent homes.  Jeremiah 35:2, which states in the MT, " אל הלוך

בית הרכבים ודברת אותם והבאותם בית ה' (Go to the house of the Rechabites and lead them to

the house of YHWH)," is presented in Sifre Numbers 78 as " הלוך אל בית הרכבים ודבר אליהם

דברי ה' (Go to the house of Rechab and speak the words of YHWH to them)."[67]  The

central element of this misquote is the root דבר√; in the biblical text, the word functions

as "lead";[68] in our midrash text, it functions with another sense, "speak," and is indicative

of the "words of YHWH," that is, the Torah.  In other words, the faithfulness of these

people in adhering to their ancestors' wishes is rewarded by access to the Torah, and their

piety is interpreted by Sifre Numbers 78 as an intense sense of connection to the Temple:

"Since this house was going to be destroyed, they saw it as if it were destroyed now:

'You shall not build a house nor shall you sow seed.'"[69]  The lifestyle of these

descendants of Jethro is understood to be homage to the future destruction of the Temple!

It is hard to imagine a more pious, more Torah-worthy community.  Indeed, God himself

appears in Mekilta Amalek 4[70] to validate the honor bestowed upon these people; when

the Rechabites are scheduled to bring a sacrifice, an Israelite ridicules them and calls

them "water-drinkers"; a heavenly voice comes forth from the Holy of Holies and calls

out, "He who received their offerings in the desert, He will also receive their offerings

now."  This can be interpreted as a reference to Jethro's sacrifice in Exod 18:12, in which

case Jethro's sacrifice sets a precedent for the ongoing relationship between his

descendants and the God of Israel.

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[67] Horovitz 73, lines 1-2

[68] *HALOT* 1:209 ("turn aside, drive, pursue"); 1:210 ("speak").

[69] Horovitz 73, lines 2-3.

[70] Lauterbach 2:187, lines 122-125.

If Jethro is understood in these midrashim to be adept with Torah, the rabbis are in fact establishing a close connection between Jethro and a major symbol of Jewishness. The centrality of Torah to the self-understanding of the Jewish nation is apparent in several Tannaitic texts: Sifre Deuteronomy 311[71] and 345[72] as well as Mekilta Bahodesh 9[73] identify Torah study as exclusive to Israel. Mekilta Bahodesh 5,[74] Sifre Deuteronomy 343,[75] and Midrash Tannaim[76] each contain the famous midrash in which God originally approached the other nations of the world to give them the Torah, but they rejected it. If Torah is understood to be a realm in which Jethro and his descendants operate with authority, a significant barrier between them and the Jews—and, moreover, the rabbis—has been crossed.

The rabbis of Sifre Zutta Be-ha'alotecha to Numbers 10:29[77] also record a tradition linking Jethro to the scholars of Jabez, but their version of the tale adds an element:

> They went and found Jabez sitting in the house of study, with priests, Levites and kings sitting with him, along with all of Israel sitting there. They said, "We are גרים; how can we sit with these?" What did they do? They sat at the gates of the house of study and listened and learned, as it says, "The families of scribes that dwelt at Jabez are the Tir'atim, the Shim'atim, the Sukkatim; these are the Kenites who come from Hammath, the father of the house of Rechab" (1 Chr 2:55).

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[71] Finkelstein 352, lines 5-7.
[72] Finkelstein 402, lines 3-4.
[73] Lauterbach 2:269-270, lines 51-61.
[74] Lauterback 2:234-6, lines 63-92.
[75] Finkelstein 395 line 7 through 397 line 2.
[76] Hoffmann 210.
[77] Horowitz 264 line 36 through 265 line 4. See also S. Lieberman's critical examination of Sifre Zutta in *Sifre Zutta (The Midrash of Lydda)* (New York: JTS, 1968).

When the Kenites go to find Jabez because they want to study Torah, and find him studying with the whole community of Israel, they choose to sit at the gate of the Beit Midrash to listen, so that they learn Torah but quite literally retain outsider status. In this version of the story, the potential avenue whereby Jethro and his descendants could cross over into a world that is central to Jewish identity is hedged—Jethro and the Rechabites demonstrate love of Torah study, but they still cannot sit/dwell among the Israelites. Their love of Torah, however, is still worthy of a great reward: a place on the Sanhedrin.

### Jethro and his descendants sat on the Sanhedrin

Sifre Numbers 78[78] grapples with the meaning of Jer 35:19: "Thus said YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel: There shall never cease to be a man of the line of Jonadab ben Rechab standing before Me." The issue in this midrash is the meaning of the phrase, "standing before me." In biblical texts concerning the Temple rites, the phrase "before YHWH" often refers to a particular location within the Temple.[79] It appears, however, to be somewhat difficult for the rabbis of this midrash to think that the descendants of Jethro, even if they were proselytes, could serve in the Temple. In a revealing statement in Sifre Numbers 78,[80] R. Joshua asks incredulously, "Can proselytes [גרים] enter into the sanctuary? Isn't it true that not even all of Israel can enter into the sanctuary? Rather, they sat on the Sanhedrin and taught concerning words of Torah." Sifre Numbers 80[81] concurs on this point; Moses asks Jethro, "Isn't it enough for you that you should sit with

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[78] Horovitz 73, lines 14-20
[79] In fact, the phrase "stand before" is itself cultic language, appearing in (for example) Num 17:9; Deut 10:8, 19:17; Jer 9:10; Ezek 44:15; 1 Chr 29:11.
[80] Horovitz 73, lines 15-17.
[81] Horovitz 77, lines 2-3.

us on the Sanhedrin and be an expounder of words of Torah?" The statement "standing before me" is thus understood in these midrashim to be a reference to serving on the Sanhedrin, not serving in the Temple. However, that is not the only opinion recorded in Sifre Numbers; after stating that Jethro's descendants sat on the Sanhedrin, Sifre Numbers 78 records: "There are those who say that some of their (the proselytes') daughters married priests, and some of their grandsons offered [sacrifices] upon the sides of the altar."[82]

C. H. Knights argues that the tradition of Jethro's descendants serving on the Sanhedrin predates any of the explanations as to why, and hence there are divergent explanations about how their presence as judges came about.[83] In b. Sotah 11b, their presence in the Sanhedrin is Jethro's reward for refusing to take part in Pharaoh's evil plot against the Hebrews; other explanations for this reward include his kindness and hospitality to Moses,[84] his repentance and his conversion.[85] The rabbis quoted in b. Sotah 11b are supposedly 3rd century Tannaim, and a version of this tradition also appears in Mekilta de Rabbi Shimon to Exod 18:27;[86] it is therefore possible that the rabbis of these midrashim had in their possession a tradition which they felt obligated to include. Regardless of why these rabbis felt the need to discuss this option, it is significant that the presence of Jethro's descendants in the Sanhedrin is treated in our text as more plausible and more appropriate than the idea of Jethro's descendants serving in the Temple. Apparently the Jewish justice system is more permeable than Temple service, because

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[82] Horovitz 73, lines 17-18.
[83] C. H. Knights, "Jethro Merited that His Descendants Should Sit in the Chamber of Hewn Stone" *JJS* 41 (1990): 247-53.
[84] b. Sanh. 103b-104a, Tanhuma Yitro 4.
[85] Pesiqta of Rab Kahana 3d.
[86] Epstein and Melamed, 135 line 30 through 136 line 1; Nelson, 211.

Temple service is limited to a group of people who are defined by birth. The exception to this exclusion, as mentioned, is Sifre Numbers 78 (in which it is recorded that "some say" that some of the descendants of Jethro through the Rechabites married their daughters off to priests). This anonymous opinion, however, is only mentioned in passing, whereas several midrashic texts discuss the presence of Jethro's line in the Sanhedrin.

Ultimately, Sifre Numbers 78[87] utilizes this tradition to make an argument about repentance, including discussions of Rahab, the Gibeonites and Ruth, using the logic of *qal va-homer*:[88] "if these ones, who brought themselves near, were brought nearer by the Omnipresent One, how much more so (will God bring near) members of Israel who carry out the Torah!" In other words, Jethro and his descendants belong to a class of people who are outside the Israelite community but who, because of their own actions, are "brought near" by God. The fact that Jethro is included in this midrash in a list alongside Rahab, the Gibeonites and Ruth is noteworthy: each of these people belongs to a group that is proscribed in some way or another, forbidden to marry Israelites, and/or morally problematic. But for each of these representatives, the result of repentance and marriage into the Israelite community is offspring who contribute much to the genealogy of Israel. The force of this overall tradition of inclusion in Sifre Numbers is ultimately theological in nature: when people who are off-limits, ethnically outside the Israelite community, choose to "come near" the people and their God, God brings them even closer into the community, rewarding their initiative, in spite of biblical texts that prohibit close relations with these people. It is *God* who overcomes the laws of religious and ethnic separation established in the Torah, as a reward for repentance and commitment to Israel.

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[87] Horovitz 73, line 18 through 75, line 11.

[88] *Qal va-homer* is an argument *"a minori ad maius,* from the light (less significant) to the weightier (more significant) and vice versa." Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction,* 21.

Jethro, like his colleagues in this discussion, is understood to be from a religiously and ethnically distinct population, perhaps even a problematic one, but his own actions merit God's choice to overcome that distinctness and bring him, to some degree, into the Israelite community. The precedent is already there in the Bible: Ruth is an ancestor of David. There is clearly room for integration. Because God is the one who brings people near in this midrash, the inclusion of Jethro and the others bears the stamp of (ultimate) authority. It may be that the rabbis' reading of this phenomenon, their interpretation of these biblical texts, and their decision to depict God as the agent of inclusion, is a way of subtly deconstructing the boundaries erected in the Bible between those who are inside the Israelite community and those who are decidedly not.

### Conclusions

As Cohen has argued, there were several ways a non-Jew could relate to the Jewish community in antiquity; some behaviors even enabled the non-Jew to cross the boundary between Jews and non-Jews, though there were several levels to that boundary.[89] Several aspects of Jewish identity are reflected in Tannaitic interpretations of Jethro. He is generally presented as praise-worthy in the Tannaitic midrashim regarding beliefs: he is a "friend of God," he praises YHWH, and he utters a statement of admiration for the deity (Exod 18:11). Only Mekilta qualifies its presentation of Jethro's beliefs by acknowledging the monolatrous, not monotheistic, nature of Jethro's statement.

Ritually, Jethro's status is less clear; he is called a proselyte, but the ritual requirements for conversion mentioned in Sifre Numbers are not attributed to him.

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[89] Cohen, *Beginnings,* 140-74.

Mekilta even records a tradition that Jethro openly rejected the ritual of circumcision. R. Joshua argues in Sifre Numbers that converts could not serve in the priestly cult, but the same midrash *also* includes a tradition that Jethro's descendants could, through marriage, eventually serve in the Temple. This collection of contradictory traditions can only be explained as the result of a process of transmission and codification in which the desire to retain traditions was more important than the desire for consistency.

The status of Jethro's descendants in the land of Israel is also a common theme in the Tannaitic midrashim. Mekilta reports that even after his conversion, Jethro remained committed to his own land and did not want to stay with the Israelites. However, the inclusion of the Kenites in Judg 1:16 makes it necessary for the rabbis of the midrashim to explain the presence of Kenites among the Israelites generations after Jethro. The Tannaitic midrashim (other than Mekilta) explain Judg 1:16 with the tradition that the Kenites had temporary rights to settle in the land—that is, until the Temple was built. Thereafter, all of our midrashim report, the Kenites traveled to Jabez to study, becoming Torah scholars. Though none of the midrashim expresses concern that Jethro's descendants were Torah scholars, Sifre Zutta does remind the reader that the Kenites are not equal to the Israelites in the Beit Midrash. However, the equation of Jethro with the Rechabites of 1 Chr 2:55 becomes another opportunity for the rabbis to praise Jethro: the Rechabites, as models of fidelity, reflect well on their ancestor.

The Tannaitic midrashim universally accept Jethro's love of Torah. His role as a teacher of Torah, however, is presented with more ambiguity: according to Sifre Deuteronomy, Jethro was the creator of the Jewish system of jurisprudence, while in Sifre Numbers it is clear that God created this system and only allows Jethro to transmit

it. Mekilta records both opinions, but also includes a tradition that Jethro taught Moses about many of the most important aspects of Jewish law and practice. Jethro's connection to Jewish law is underscored by the tradition that appears in multiple Tannaitic sources concerning his descendants' role on the Sanhedrin. Hence Jethro is the progenitor of a line of Torah scholars and judges whose work is central to the Jewish community.

Ultimately, what is most praiseworthy about Jethro is his praise for and faith in YHWH: once Jethro experiences his conversion (theologically, if not ritually), he is committed to YHWH. Sifre Numbers reports that Jethro's act of bringing himself near results in God's decision to bring him still nearer, a decision YHWH makes on behalf of all of those non-Jews (even proscribed people) who choose to draw near to YHWH. Yet Sifre Numbers and Mekilta also contain traditions that problematize Jethro, reminding the reader that Jethro is a Kenite and has an idolatrous past. Though Jethro is valorized as a righteous proselyte, a man of faith, a wise man, and a hospitable father-in-law, he is not fully integrated into the Israelite community. This combination of interpretations serves to bring Jethro into the boundaries of Jewishness—sharing in some important symbols of Jewish identity such as the land and Torah—while still retaining distance, precluding full membership in the Jewish community. Appropriately enough, the way in which Jethro is simultaneously brought into the community and yet his outsider-status is maintained is best summed up by a statement in Mekilta Amalek 3[90] concerning proselytes:

> "'Behold, I am a God that brings near, says YHWH, and
> not a God who repels.' (Jer 23:23) 'I am He that brought
> Jethro near, not keeping him at a distance. So also you,

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[90] Lauterbach 2:173, lines 155-161.

when a man comes to you to become a proselyte and only comes for the sake of heaven, you should bring him near and not repel him.' From this you learn that one should always be ready to bring near with the right even while repelling with the left…"

## Chapter 4: Jethro in Later Midrashim

As is to be expected, there are traditions in Tannaitic midrashim that reappear in later midrashim, with some minor additions but few major changes. We again find the teaching that Jethro was called Reuel because he was a "friend of God" (רע אל).[1] Jethro continues to be identified with a variety of Kenite characters in the Bible, including the Rechabites and the people dwelling at Jabez.[2] The rabbis continue to discuss how Jethro's descendants became members of the Sanhedrin.[3] However, the later midrashim demonstrate little interest in the apportioning of land for Jethro and his descendants.[4] In addition, there are a number of significant developments that take place concerning traditions also found in the Tannaitic midrashim, as well as some teachings that do not appear in previous midrashic works. Ethnicity and nationality are addressed in ways that complicate Jethro's status among the Israelites, at the same time that his spiritual nature is praised even more than in the Tannaitic midrashim. The picture that emerges from the later midrashim concerning Jethro and his descendants is both more inclusive *and* more exclusive.

I will examine these developments in the treatment of Jethro throughout this chapter, but I begin with an examination of a text which does not directly discuss Jethro. Exodus Rabbah 19:4 is a lengthy midrash on the status of proselytes. Though it builds on other midrashic and Talmudic texts concerning proselytes, it introduces some startling and new ideas, and the way in which it combines a series of teachings creates a

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[1] Exodus Rabbah 1:32.
[2] Pesiqta of Rab Kahana supp. 5.
[3] Pesiqta of Rab Kahana 3d.
[4] The one exception to this lack of interest is found in Tanhuma Yitro 4, discussed below. In that text, however, Jethro's descendants do not settle in the land.

composite rhetoric that is greater than the sum of its parts.  Studying this midrash is an

important pre-requisite for understanding some of the hermeneutical maneuvers

demonstrated by the rabbis of the later midrashim, and as such, it merits a separate and

thorough investigation.


**The important case of Exodus Rabbah 19:4**[5]

> "This is the law of the Passover offering:  No foreigner
> (בן נכר) shall eat of it" (Exod 12:43).  It is written: "Let not
> the foreigner (בן הנכר) say, who has attached himself (נלוה)
> to YHWH, 'YHWH will keep me apart from his people'"
> (Isa 56:3).  Job said: "The *gēr* did not lodge in the street"
> (Job 31:32).  For God disqualifies no creature, but receives
> all.  The gates are at all times open and anyone may enter
> them; hence it says "The *gēr* did not lodge in the street,"
> corresponding to the words, "And the *gēr* that is within
> your gates" (Deut 31:12).  Job said: "My doors I opened to
> the roadside" (Job 31:32), emulating divine example by
> being patient with all creatures.  R. Berekiah said: Why did
> he say: "The *gēr* will not lodge in the street"?  Because
> *gērim* will one day be ministering priests in the Temple, as
> it says:  "And the *gēr* shall join himself (נלוה) with them,
> and they shall cleave (נספחו) to the house of Jacob" (Isa
> 14:1), and the word "cleave" always refers to priesthood, as
> it is said: "Put me (ספחני), I beseech you, into one of the
> priests' offices" (1 Sam 2:36).
> They will one day partake of the showbread, because
> their daughters will be married into the priesthood.  And so
> Aquilas, the proselyte, once quoted to the Sages the verse:
> "Love the *gēr*, giving him food and clothing" (Deut 10:18).
> He asked, Are the only promises offered to the proselyte
> that he [God] would give them food and clothing?  The

reply was: Jacob, whose name was Israel, asked only this of YHWH, as it says, "And will give me bread to eat, and clothing to put on." (Gen 28:20) Then for you who have joined us, is it not enough that we not only make you our equal but even liken you to Jacob, God's firstborn? Moreover, do not presume that Jacob actually asked for food and clothing; no, this is what Jacob asked for: 'Let the Holy One, Blessed be He, promise to be with me and build up the world from me. When will I know that he is with me and guards me? When he will raise up from me sons, who will be priests, eating of the showbread and clothed in the garments of the priesthood, as it says "And will give me bread to eat" (Gen 28:20)—this refers to the showbread, "and clothing to put on"—this refers to the priestly garments, for it says: "And you shall put the holy garments on Aaron"' (Exod 40:13). So in the case of, "Love the *gēr*, giving him food and clothing," it also means that he [God] will raise children from the proselyte who will eat the showbread and be robed in priestly garments. This is the meaning of: "The *gēr* will not lodge in the street." Hence God said, Do you complain of injustice after all the honor I will one day bestow on the penitent? Therefore it says, "Let not the foreigner say, who has attached himself to YHWH," etc.

A further explanation of this verse: It is written, "Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion" (Zech 2:14), and also, "And many nations will join themselves to YHWH in that day" (Zech 2:15). The Holy One Blessed Be He said: If I promise this to proselytes, how much more so to Zion and Israel?

"Let not the foreigner say…" God addressed the proselytes: You have misgivings, because I disqualified you from the Passover celebration by commanding: "No בן נכר shall eat of it" (Exod 12:43). Why don't you ask the Gibeonites how kindly I treated them, though they were men who acted deceitfully out of fear and came to my children so that they swore to them (to protect them)?[6]....God said: If I received the Gibeonites favorably, who are Amorites, and out of fear acted deceitfully with Israel, and I gave them satisfaction for their wrongs [by punishing] my children, shall I not receive favorably and also promote proselytes who come to serve me out of utter love? Hence it says, "Let not the foreigner say, who has attached himself to YHWH, 'YHWH will surely separate me from his people.'" This refers to the strangers who are

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[6] See 2 Sam 21:8f.

circumcised; but the idolaters are uncircumcised of heart and these God rejects and brings down to Gehinnom…. "And he established it for Jacob as a statute, for Israel an everlasting covenant" (Ps 105:10). No Israelite who is circumcised will go down to Gehinnom. R. Berekiah said: To stop the heretics and the wicked ones of Israel who say, 'We will not descend to Gehinnom because we are circumcised', what does the Holy One Blessed Be He do? He sends an angel who stretches their foreskin and then they descend to Gehinnom, for it says: "He has put forth his hand against them that were at peace with him; he has profaned his covenant" (Ps 55:21). When Gehinnom sees their hanging foreskins, she opens her mouth and devours them.

This midrash addresses the law of the paschal sacrifice presented in Exod 12:43, which states that no foreigner (בן נכר) may eat the sacrifice. Exodus 12:44, however, adds an important clarification to this law: "But any slave a man has bought may eat of it once he is circumcised." Exodus 12:48-49 continues to build on this stipulation:

If a *gēr* who dwells with you would offer the paschal sacrifice to YHWH, all his males must be circumcised; then he shall be admitted to offer it; he shall then be as a citizen of the country [אזרח הארץ]. But no uncircumcised person may eat of it. There shall be one law for the citizen [אזרח] and for the *gēr* who dwells among you.

Hence it *is* possible for a non-Israelite (male) to take part in the communal ritual, once he has been circumcised. Circumcision is, for this text, the mark *par excellence* of a person who has some degree of "insider status" in the Israelite community: a person who is circumcised has the right to partake in this particular ritual. There is tension evident in this biblical passage: on one hand, the boundaries between Israelites and non-Israelites are heavily emphasized concerning the commandment of the Paschal offering. This is

not surprising, as the practice under discussion is one which commemorates the unique experience of the Israelites in the Exodus. On the other hand, the mere act of circumcision (as painful as it might be) enables an outsider to be admitted into the congregation for this ritual event. Circumcision allows a person to cross through the boundaries separating him from the Israelites. Cohen has documented this concept in biblical material, noting that circumcision can grant an outsider access to the Israelite community, but generally does not in and of itself make a person Israelite. According to Cohen, the act of circumcision can be understood as an *ethnic* marker demonstrating kinship and political fidelity, rather than a particularly theological one; that is, the person undergoing circumcision in the biblical period need not demonstrate an accompanying religious mindset.[7] All we know about the non-Israelites under discussion in Exodus 12 is that they have a desire to participate in the Paschal ritual; this might indicate a theological affinity for Israelite religion, but that is not stated outright. Hence Exod 12:43-49 is perplexing; Cohen notes that in this passage, "the text can easily be read to mean that once the resident alien has been circumcised, he is to be treated before the law just like the native born. Circumcision effaces the distinction between alien and native."[8]

The biblical text is separatist (requiring the exclusion of outsiders from the paschal ritual) at the same time that it demonstrates porous boundaries around the community (which can be crossed through circumcision). The last passage of this text is even universal in tone: "There shall be one law for the אזרח and the גר who dwells among you." The terms used in this brief passage—בן נכר, גר, and אזרח—are themselves open to

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[7] Cohen, *Beginnings,* 120-1, 123-5.
[8] Cohen, *Beginnings,* 125.

interpretation.[9]  The term אזרח הארץ is used only in Exod 12:19, 48; and Num 9:14 (which quotes Exodus 12:49).  We are confronted with the question of its meaning: Is this a political identity?  What is the differentiation between a גר who lives in the land and an אזרח?  How does the notion of "citizenship" in a particular land relate to the religious and historical significance of the paschal sacrifice?  This biblical passage is ambiguous and multivalent, and as such, is an excellent text for the rabbis to use in their examination of the boundaries between Israelites and non-Israelites, the status of converts, and the centrality of circumcision.

A cursory reading of Exodus Rabbah 19:4 reveals that the rabbis are eager to demonstrate that proselytes need not feel eternally excluded.[10]  They work towards their goal by utilizing a few key biblical texts: Isa 56:3; Job 31:32; and Deut 31:12.  Isaiah 56:3 directly addresses the anxiety felt by those called בן נכר who are concerned that they will never be integrated into YHWH's people; the passage in which this verse is contained (56:3-8) presents YHWH's words to people (eunuchs and בני נכר) who fear their efforts will go unrewarded.  Isaiah's words are unequivocal: YHWH will not keep בני נכר and Israelites separate, and in fact, YHWH states in v. 7:

> I will bring them to my sacred mount
> And let them rejoice in my house of prayer.
> Their burnt offerings and sacrifices

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[9] See Saul Olyan, *Rites and Rank* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 68-81.  Olyan defines the גר as a "resident outsider," who could be a non-Israelite on Israelite land, or an Israelite outside the land (68).  He translates אזרח as "native" (69).  Olyan notes that throughout the Holiness texts (including Exod 12:43-49), the "resident outsider" is *not* an Israelite, but a foreigner; this distinction is made clear by the binary pairing of "native" and "resident outsider," in which the "native" is tied through lineage to the land of Israel, even without living there (69, 157 n.44).  "One teaching" (תורה אחת) applies to the "native" and the "resident outsider" once the latter has been circumcised, though the label "resident outsider" is still used.  According to Olyan, it is a unique feature of the Holiness texts to include circumcised resident outsiders in covenant obligations and privileges (72).

[10] This is in sharp contrast to the treatment of Exod 12:43 in Pesiqta of Rab Kahana 12:16, which will be discussed below.

> Shall be welcome on my altar;
> For my house shall be called
> A house of prayer for all peoples.

This passage presents a universalistic interpretation of Israelite religion, in that non-Israelites who come to worship at the Temple will be received. It is set in the future: a time will come when this ideal, as well as others, will be manifest on earth. Thus even if separatism between Israelites and non-Israelites is the norm in the present, this is not what YHWH intends or desires. The ultimate goal is for all peoples to be welcome in the Temple, the holiest of places. Non-Israelites will not be separate from Israelites.

This ideal of unity does not, however, render the identifier "Israelite" obsolete. What does it mean to welcome a non-Israelite "into" Israel? Job 31:32 provides an image to help complete this picture: Job himself opened his door to the street and welcomed the *gēr* into his home. This action accords with Deut 31:12, which states that on the holiday of Sukkot in the Sabbath year, the Torah must be read to everyone, including "your *gēr* that is in your gates." The location of the *gēr* "within your gates" enables the rabbis to link the verse from Deuteronomy to Job, taking language indicating local residence and turning it into language indicating personal hospitality. Hence, by using these texts, the rabbis are able to create the image of converts being welcomed "inside" the personal space of the Israelites.

The rabbis' statements, along with the biblical citations, identify this personal space as the Temple. YHWH's willingness to bring the convert into the proverbial fold is general ("For God disqualifies no creature, but receives all. The gates are at all times open and anyone may enter them"), but it is also specific. How will converts enter the

Temple? Practically speaking, their daughters will marry into the priesthood and produce priestly children; according to Sifre Numbers 78 and Exodus Rabbah 27:5, only three generations are needed to enable this to happen.[11] Because it is of utmost importance that the rabbis justify this notion through biblical text, they cite Isa 14:1 (ונלוה הגר עליהם ונספחו על בית יעקב), which further supports the connection made by Isa 56:7. The connection in Isaiah 14 is lexical: by using the word נספחו ("cleave"), a semantic field is created connecting the activities of these converts with Temple worship; the root √ספח is linked to priestly office via 1 Sam 2:36.[12] The rabbis then continue to explore this idea, utilizing the commandment given in Deut 10:18 ("Love the *gēr*, giving him food and clothing"); the items "food" and "clothing" are identified as the Temple showbread and the priestly garments, linking with Gen 20:28 and Exod 40:13. What is accomplished through this exegesis is manifold: First, the rabbis demonstrate that Jacob's relationship with God, which is the foundation for all Israel's relationship with God, is generative of the priestly system. Second, this interpretation makes it clear that converts are not only *able* to eventually enter the priesthood, but it is a *commandment given from YHWH* to enable them to do so. Third, converts are to be understood as following in Jacob's footsteps in pursuing this integration into the Temple cult. Hence converts have a place in the very arena that forms the heart of YHWH's relationship with Israel. This is remarkably different from the traditions found in the Tannaitic midrashim, which prefer to place Jethro's descendants in the Sanhedrin rather than the Temple. As noted in chapter 3,

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[11] Horovitz 73, lines 17-18; Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 6:12: "A *gēr* who married a daughter of Israel, and a daughter is born, and the daughter goes and marries a valid priest, and has a son: this one is eligible to be high priest, standing and offering (sacrifices) on the sides of the altar."

[12] There might also be word play with נלוה and לוי, "Levite"; this possibility is also suggested by John L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah* (AB 20; New York: Doubleday, 1964), 150: "*joined.* Heb. *hannilwah,* may contain a play on the name Levi; the foreigners are admitted to cultic acts…. This would imply that it is the 'joining' that makes the genuine worshiper of Yahweh, not merely carnal descent from Levi."

however, is it not abundantly clear whether or not Jethro is an actual convert in the Tannaitic midrashim. If we conclude that Jethro is not a convert in the Tannaitic texts, then any comparison between those texts and the later midrashim concerning integration of converts is invalid (and equivalent to comparing apples and oranges). After all, Exodus Rabbah 19:4 is clearly about converts. However, if we conclude that Jethro is actually a convert in the Tannaitic midrashim, then a distinction is evident between the Tannaitic texts and Exodus Rabbah 19:4: the rabbis of the Tannaitic midrashim were more comfortable granting converts acceptance into the Sanhedrin than into the Temple cult.

At the same time that our passage demonstrates this inclusive point, there is also a teaching contained in this midrash that subtly undermines it. At the conclusion of the exegesis demonstrating the place converts have in future of the priesthood, the midrash adds the *a fortiori* statement from God: "If I promise this to *gērim*, how much more so unto Zion and Israel?" Though the midrash as a whole focuses on the integration of proselytes, this statement indicates awareness on God's part of the difference between converts and Israelites: that which God will do for proselytes, he will do more so for actual Israelites who, perhaps, come back into the fold after some degree of alienation or sin.

The midrash ends with a discussion of circumcision that underscores the message of Exod 12:43-49: circumcision's importance cannot be overstated. It is so central that even Israelites who are not circumcised will be sent down to Gehinnom, and the only way God can punish wicked Israelites is by concealing their circumcisions. Hence we end where we started: through circumcision proselytes can enter into YHWH's people, and

integration is the promise extended to them. The overall message of the midrash is one of inclusiveness, hospitality, and integration, but it is not without ambiguity and complexity. This ambiguity will play an important role in midrashic treatments of Jethro; therefore, this midrash provides us with a useful introduction to the ways the rabbis of the later midrashim discussed those who chose to come into the Jewish fold.

## Jethro's spiritual nature and conversion

Some Jewish texts emphasize a convert's new-found identity: one who comes into Judaism should not be reminded of his past and is to be treated as a born Jew.[13] However, it is clear from other texts that a proselyte's previous history continues to be a factor in his life.[14] There is much interest demonstrated throughout the later midrashim in Jethro's personal history, his characteristics and practices, and how he merited eventual conversion.

It is reported in b. Sanh 11a; 106a and Exodus Rabbah 1:9[15] that Jethro was one of the advisers to Pharaoh at the time of the Hebrew enslavement.[16] Along with Job and Balaam (and, some say, Amalek[17]), Jethro was present for Pharaoh's declaration concerning his dastardly plan to wipe out all male Hebrew children. Unlike his colleagues, who either acquiesced or remained silent, Jethro objected and fled, and thus

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[13] Mishnah Gerim 4; b. Yev. 22a.

[14] b. Kid. 70b; Numbers Rabbah 8:9.

[15] Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 5:19-20

[16] Although Jethro is identified as one of Pharaoh's advisers, he is not identified as an Egyptian. Nor are any of the other advisers (Job, Balaam, Amalek) identified as Egyptian. This tradition does not appear to be interested in the ethnic/national identities of these figures. Rather, this tradition seems to serve a different function: to link biblical characters whose personal pasts are largely unknown to a *very* well known event in Israelite history, thereby justifying each character's fate. Balaam (and, some say, Amalek) encouraged Pharoah in his dastardly plans, and thus suffered a painful death at the hands of the Israelites. Job knew Pharaoh's plans were evil, but said nothing, and subsequently suffered a great deal later in life. Jethro openly disagreed with Pharaoh's plans, thus warranting praise and blessing later in life. This tradition teaches us about the personalities of each character, not their identities.

[17] So Exodus Rabbah 27:6 (Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah*, 6:12-13).

did not bear the same guilt as his comrades. This tradition is echoed in Exodus Rabbah 1:26,[18] in which Jethro is a magician in Pharaoh's court rather than an adviser. When the other magicians witness how deeply Pharaoh loves Moses, and the playful way Moses takes Pharaoh's crown and places it on his own head, they fear that Moses is the one foretold in prophecies who will destroy Egypt. Some of them advise Pharaoh to kill him immediately, while others suggest burning him, but fortunately for Moses, Jethro intercedes:

> Jethro was present among them and he said to them: "This boy has no understanding. Rather, test him by placing before him a gold vessel and a live coal; if he stretches forth his hand for the gold, then he has understanding and you can slay him. But if he reaches for the live coal, then he has no sense and there can be no sentence of death upon him." So they brought these things before him, and he was about to reach forth for the gold when Gabriel came and thrust his hand aside so that it seized the coal, and he thrust his hand with the live coal into his mouth, so that his tongue was burnt, with the result that he became slow of speech and of tongue.

Jethro suggests to the royal court that Moses is grabbing Pharaoh's crown playfully, and is attracted to the beautiful gold color rather than the symbolic power it possesses. He therefore suggests this test which will determine whether or not the boy is a real threat. Though the test ultimately results in Moses' survival, Jethro's actions are clearly not wholly benevolent. He speaks as a man who also wants to know if Moses will threaten the kingdom, and if the test reveals that to be the case, Jethro is not opposed to killing the boy. In addition, it is Gabriel and not Jethro whose action saves the child's life. Thus Jethro creates an opportunity for Moses' salvation, but is an ambiguous figure

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[18] Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 5:41-2.

in that role.  The rabbis have created a parallel narrative to the one that takes place later in Moses' life: after killing the Egyptian taskmaster, Moses' life is in danger because of Pharaoh, and Jethro provides him with safe harbor.  In the case reported in Exodus Rabbah 1:26, however, Jethro is still invested in Egypt's power structure and is not yet fully hospitable to Moses.

Another story featuring Jethro in Pharaoh's court appears in Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer 40.[19]  In this tale, he comes across the rod destined to be used by Moses:

> And Jethro was one of the magicians of Egypt and saw the rod and the letters which were upon it, and desired it in his heart,[20] and took it and brought it and planted it in the midst of the garden of his house.  And there was no man who could approach it any more.

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[19] Though I have included Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer in this chapter on midrashim, the nature of this text is the subject of some scholarly argument.  It is not accurate to describe this document as "midrash"; unlike other midrashic works discussed here, it does not follow the order of Scripture, nor does it consistently utilize biblical texts to explicate other biblical texts.  Strack and Stemberger (*Introduction,* 354-8) identify Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer as "narrative aggadah," similar to Seder Olam, Sefer ha-Yashar, and others. The work appears to be an incomplete compilation and contains traditions also found in pseudepigrapha, rewritten Bible, and midrashim.  A useful discussion of the date and characteristics of this text appears in Gerald Friedlander, *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer: (The Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer the Great) According to the Text of the Manuscript Belonging to Abraham Epstein of Vienna* (New York: Hermon Press, 1965), xiii-lvii. Friedlander identifies Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer as Palestinian in origin because of its close links to the Palestinian Talmud and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (xix), though he admits there is also evidence that could support a Babylonian provenance (lv).  He dates the final stage of the work to the early part of the 9th century (liii-liv), because of repeated references to the early years of Islam as well as clear indications that Rashi, Nachmanies, and Maimonides knew of and utilized this document.   For the Hebrew text, I have used D. Luria (RaDaL*), Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer* (New York: Om, 1946), based on the Warsaw manuscript. Lewis Barth notes that the various editions of Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer are sufficiently diverse to make it difficult to speak of "*the* text"; a critical edition is sorely needed, and he is in the process of creating one electronically.  (Personal communication, Oct. 15, 2008.)  The Hebrew text of Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer 40 is found in Luria, *Pirqe,* 94-6.

[20] In the Warsaw and Venice manuscripts, the subject of the verb "desired" is Pharaoh rather than Jethro. Friedlander, *Pirke,* 313 n. 5, reads with the versions that name Jethro as the subject; I concur, because the focus of the story is on Jethro, and it makes little sense to change the focus to Pharaoh for one phrase.

According to Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer 40, the rod was created at twilight on the eve of the Sabbath and delivered to the first man in the Garden of Eden.[21] It was then handed down through the generations, until Joseph took possession of it. When he died, it was taken and placed in Pharaoh's palace. Though there are differing traditions in other texts, concerning what was actually written upon the rod,[22] it is described in Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer as an object of great religious significance. Jethro sees it and desires it; however, lest we interpret Jethro simply as a collector of random religious miscellany, Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer goes on to tell us this:

> When Moses came to his house, he entered the garden of the house of Jethro and saw the rod and read the letters which were upon it and put forth his hand and took it. And Jethro saw Moses and said, this one will redeem Israel from Egypt; therefore he gave him his daughter Zipporah as a wife.

Jethro recognizes not only the significance of the rod, but of Moses as well. He discerns the truth about Moses and his destiny and interprets it positively: Jethro wants to establish a connection to Moses, perhaps to reward him for his future actions on behalf of Israel, or to secure his own safety once Israel has been redeemed. As the Merlin to Moses' Arthur, Jethro is a figure who knows and understands the import of God's

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[21] Tg. Ps.-J. to Gen 2:2; Pirqe Abot 5:6; Abot de Rabbi Nathan A 41; Abot de Rabbi Nathan B 37.

[22] The rod is described in Sefer ha-Yashar 77:49, 51; and Tg. Ps.-Jon. to Exod 2:21. The sources vary on the inscription on the rod: it was either the name of YHWH or the initials of the ten plagues. Sefer ha-Yashar explains that Jethro "resolved to give his daughter to the man who was able to remove the rod." Sefer ha-Yashar appears to be based on Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer and the targums, but the historical background of the book is the subject of much debate. Hence, this work cannot be used in my study to fill in the gaps evident in Amoraic midrash. See the discussion of Tg. Ps.-J. in ch. 5 of the present study.

redeeming activity on behalf of Israel, and plays his role in enabling it to happen.[23]  As M. Poorthuis notes, Moses' trip to Midian is more than random wandering:  "Moses' journey was a search for his vocation."[24]  That vocation could only be found with Jethro's help.[25]

The rabbis of some later midrashim believe that, regardless of his choice to convert, Jethro's kindness to Moses is worthy of its own rewards.  According to Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer 44,[26] the Kenites are preserved from the Israelite attack against Amalek (1 Sam 15:6) because of Jethro's hospitality to Moses.  Exodus Rabbah 27:7[27] builds on Eccl 11:1 to make this point as well:

> "Cast your bread upon the waters, for you shall find it after many days" (Eccl 11:1). [This is written] concerning Jethro, who gave his bread to Moses, for it says, "Call him that he may eat bread" (Exod 2:20).  "Cast your bread upon the waters"—"the waters" refers to Moses, of whom it says, "I drew him out of the water" (Exod 2:10).  Why so?—"For you shall find it after many days"—"And Aaron came, and all the elders of Israel, to eat bread with Moses' father-in-law before God" (Exod 18:12).

Jethro's kindness towards Moses is rewarded through the honor paid him by the leaders of Israel when they come to share in his sacrifices in the wilderness.  However, it

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[23] There are remarkably different versions of the this story in Sefer ha-Yashar and the Targums; in these texts, Reuel imprisons Moses and leaves him for dead, and it is only Zipporah's action on behalf of Moses that keeps him alive.  That Jethro demonstrates no resistance to Moses in Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer is significant.

[24] Marcel Poorthuis, "Moses' Rod in Zipporah's Garden," in *Sanctity in Time and Space in Tradition and Modernity* (ed. A. Houtman, M. Poorthuis, J. Schwartz; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 235.

[25] According to Exodus Rabbah 1:33, Jethro demonstrates knowledge of the patriarchal stories as well.  When Moses appears in Midian, Jethro makes him swear an oath to remain in Midian, and explains this requirement to Moses:  "I know that Jacob your father, when he took for himself the daughters of Laban, took them and fled without his knowledge, and perhaps, if I give you my daughter, will you do thus to me?"  Jethro knows the stories of the Torah and grants them historical validity.

[26] Luria, *Pirqe,* 104-6.

[27] Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 6:13-14.

is not only the elders who recognize Jethro's deeds and seek to reward him: God responds to Jethro's behavior as well. It is reported in Exodus Rabbah 27:2[28] that Jethro's decision to come and meet Moses in Exodus 18 earns him the honor of a permanent title that indicates his connection to Moses: "It is written, 'The wise shall inherit honor' (Prov 3:35). This is Jethro when he came to Moses; what is the honor he inherited? 'He said to Moses, I your father-in-law Jethro am coming to you with your wife and her two sons with her.' (Exod 18:6)."[29] His actions prior to this event—his hospitality to Moses, his gift of a bride for Moses—were commendable but not as significant as his decision to meet the Israelites near Mt. Sinai. That decision was rooted in wisdom—understanding the power of the Israelite deity. In return for his wisdom and his actions, Jethro is rewarded with the title of "Moses' father-in-law." As noted by W. Gilders, the root of this tradition lies in the oft-repeated title "Moses' father-in-law": "the rabbis are exploiting what to them is textual redundancy."[30] The title is superfluous, especially considering how often it is repeated, and Jethro is surely not reminding Moses that he has a father-in-law; therefore the rabbis assume the title must have another purpose: to honor Jethro. The fact that Jethro could refer to himself as Moses' father-in-law is a great honor in itself, one that he earned by coming to be with Moses. In addition to this honor, however, Jethro is "brought near" by God, who explains this honor as follows in Exodus Rabbah 27:2:

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[28] Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 6:10-11.
[29] Both Mekilta Amalek 3 (Lauterbach 2:172, lines 149-151) and Exodus Rabbah 27:2 engage in a discussion of the means by which Jethro sent word to Moses that he was coming (a letter, a messenger, etc.). It is clear that the text from Exodus Rabbah is either using Mekilta as its source or is using a source common to both midrashim because of the virtually identical reports found in both passages. Exodus Rabbah 27:2 as a whole appears to be dependant on Mekilta Amalek 3, with few changes.
[30] Personal communication with William Gilders, May 2008.

I am he who brings near, I am he who removes far [ אני הוא
שאני מקרב אני הוא שאני מרחק],[31] as it says, "I am a God near,
says YHWH, and not a God far away [ האלהי מקרב אני נאם ה'
ולֹא אלֹהי מרחק]" (Jer 23:23). I am he who brought Jethro
near and did not push him far away. This man is coming to
me only for the sake of heaven, and he comes only to
convert [להתגייר]; so you also bring him near and do not
push him far away. Immediately (we read): "And Moses
went out to meet his father-in-law" (Exod 18:7).

The meaning of this midrashic passage is clear enough: Jethro is coming to Moses

with pure motivations (fear of heaven and the desire to convert) and hence should be

warmly received. The fact that Exod 18:6 ("I your father-in-law Jethro am coming to

you") is interpreted as a statement of intentional conversion is worthy of note: it appears

that the verb "come" (בוא√) has the connotation of conversion for the rabbis. The

language of this midrash is very similar to a passage from Mekilta Amalek 3;[32] in the

latter text, God states that he brings near and does not repel, utilizing the same biblical

text as Exodus Rabbah 27:2 (Jer 23:23). However, in Mekilta, the summation of the

passage is strikingly different: "From this you learn that one should always be ready to

bring near with the right even while repelling with the left." Why does the passage from

Mekilta end with a reference to boundaries, while the passage from Exodus Rabbah ends

with a message of hospitality? And why in Mekilta does God explain himself as a deity

who brings near but does not repel, while in Exodus Rabbah, God presents himself as

both bringing near *and* pushing away? In both cases, the prooftext that is used could be

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[31] The opening statement of this portion of Exodus Rabbah 27:2 is a version of Jer 23:23, in which the
negative particle (לֹא) has been removed. In one sense, this opening statement (God brings near *and* pushes
away) is at odds with the message conveyed in the rest of the paragraph (God brings near but does not push
away).
[32] Lauterbach 2:173, lines 155-161.

the source of some of the ambiguity.  The Masoretic text of Jer 23:23 is relatively straightforward:

האלהי מִקָּרב אני נאם ה׳ ולא אלהי מֵרָחק

The words קָרב and רָחק are nouns which, with the preposition מִן, function adjectivally.  As such, the passage should be translated as a message of God's omnipresence, as above: "Am I a God near, says YHWH, and not a God far away?"  It is likely, however, that the rabbis of the midrashim from Mekilta and Exodus Rabbah were working from unvocalized manuscripts; if that is the case, the words מקרב and מרחק could be translated as verbs: "Am I God who brings near, says YHWH, and not a God who pushes away?"[33]  The biblical text itself could present the rabbis with a degree of ambiguity concerning God's actions towards non-Jews.  In one case (Mekilta), the rabbis read the passage as if God does *not* push away, but retain the sense of pushing away in their overall message.  In the other case (Exodus Rabbah), the rabbis read the biblical passage as a statement of God's twofold actions regarding non-Jews, but choose instead to highlight the act of welcoming converts through their exegesis.  Hence both texts maintain some complexity and nuance in their readings, but with very different results.

Exodus Rabbah 27:2 assumes Jethro's desire to convert, an assumption that is shared in several other passages from later midrashim.  Tanhuma Yitro 7[34] states it

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[33] For √קרב (D) meaning, "bring near, conciliate, attract, befriend, invite," see Jastrow, 1410.  For √רחק (D) meaning "to remove, alienate, reject, expel," see Jastrow, 1469.  Lauterbach, 2:173 n. 17, concurs that these words are operating as verbs.

[34] S. Buber, *Midrash Tanhuma* (2 vols.; Jersulam: Eshkol, 1971), 1:315.  A good translation with notes can be found in John T. Townsend, *Midrash Tanhuma* (2 vols.; Hoboken, N. J.: Ktav, 1989).  Tanhuma is a homiletical midrash on the whole Torah, cited by Rashi, the Shulkhan Arukh, and the Yalqut.  It is also called Yelamdenu because of the introductory phrase, "ילמדנו רבינו (let our master teach us)".  There are two

directly, with wordplay: "Do not read ויחד ["he rejoiced"], but read ויהד, for he became a Jew."  In most of these texts, Jethro is dependent upon Moses to enact his conversion.  In Leviticus Rabbah 34:8,[35] Moses' act of drawing water for Jethro's daughters ( וגם דלה דלה לנו, Exod 2:19) is interpreted according to another definition of the root √דלה: "to lift up, raise up."  According to the rabbis of this midrash, Moses lifts up Jethro and his descendants by bringing them to a better religion, and Moses does this in part because of the merit of Jethro's ancestors, who are not named.  Hence it was necessary for Moses to be present for and perhaps responsible for Jethro's conversion, but it could not have taken place without Jethro's meritorious ancestors.

The exception to the idea that Jethro's conversion depended on Moses is found in Exodus Rabbah 1:32.[36] The midrashic passage opens with an incredulous question asked by the rabbis:  "Doesn't the Holy One, Blessed be He, hate idolatry, and yet he allowed

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major recensions of Tanhuma, known as A (first printed in 1520) and B (published by S. Buber, based on MS Oxford 154, but it is possible he used fragment texts as well).  However, the discovery and publication of numerous other manuscripts has made it clear that Tanhuma-Yelamdenu has a complex history as a midrash compilation; Townsend refers to eight recensions (*Tanhuma,* 1:xi).  Strack and Stemberger see evidence for a relatively early date for the collection as a whole (early 5th century), though the text continued to undergo transformation at least up until the 9th century (Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction,* 329-333).  Though Townsend rightfully points out that we do not know the exact date, origin or nature of the text(s) underlying Buber's recension, I have chosen to use Buber because a) it is a standard edition, one which is generally available and accessible to other scholars; and b) it contains traditions about Jethro that are pertinent to this study.

[35] Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 8:164-5.  For a critical edition, see M. Margulies, *Midrash Wayyikra Rabbah: A Critical Edition Based on Manuscripts and Genizah Fragments with Variants and Notes* (2 vols.; New York: JTS, 1993).  For translation, see J. Israelstam and Judah Slotki, *Midrash Rabbah: Leviticus* (London: Soncino Press, 1939).  Leviticus Rabbah is a homiletical midrash on the book of Leviticus.  It appears to be based on the Palestinian lectionary cycle, and shares five chapters with Pesiqta of Rab Kahana.  In addition, much material is shared with Genesis Rabbah.  Leviticus Rabbah quotes Tannaitic texts and halakhic midrashim, and is in turn used in Midrash Rabbah on the five megillot; hence, Strack and Stemberger date its redaction to sometime between 400 and 500 CE (Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction,* 316).  Many scholars have examined the homilies in Leviticus Rabbah in search of evidence on their usage: were these sermons delivered in congregations, or texts for private study?  For discussions of the homilies and overall structure of Leviticus Rabbah, see: J. Heinemann, "Profile of a Midrash: The Art of Composition in Leviticus Rabba," *JAAR* 31 (1971): 141-50; R. S. Sarason, "The Petihtot in Leviticus Rabba: 'Oral Homilies' or Redactional Constructions?" *JJS* 33 (1982), 557-67; J. Neusner, *Judaism and Scripture: The Evidence of Leviticus Rabbah* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 7:5-35.

[36] Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 5:49.

refuge for Moses with one who serves idols?" Jethro's identity as a priest of Midian (Exod 2:16) is a significant problem for these rabbis, who do not understand how Moses could agree to live with this man. It is therefore necessary for the rabbis of this midrash to believe that Jethro's conversion took place, at least in belief if not through the appropriate rituals, *before* Moses' arrival. The midrash reports:

> Jethro *was* a priest of idolatry, but he saw that there was no truth [ממש] in it so he despised it and decided to repent even before Moses came. He called the men of the city and said to them: "Until now I have been ministering for you, but now I am old. Choose for yourselves another priest [כומר]." He stood and brought out all the implements of idolatry and gave them all to them. They stood and excommunicated him [נדוהו] so that no one would be in his company nor do work for him nor shepherd his flock. He sought from among the shepherds one to shepherd his flock and they did not accept. Because of this, his daughters went out (to water his flock).

Jethro's own religious sensibilities led him to reject idolatry and decide to repent before he even met Moses. He saw the falsehood of idolatry and resigned his post as priest of Midian. He was, therefore, spiritually ready to receive Moses and undergo conversion. His decision to pursue this course had a great cost: his people rejected him entirely. He could find no help (thereby explaining why his daughters had to shepherd his flock for him) and was sufficiently alienated from his original kin that he became an outsider in his own community. His liminal status in Midian made him ready for integration into a new life. Thus when Moses arrived, Jethro intermarried with him and did not have to justify that choice to his community of origin. Through this midrash, the rabbis demonstrate Jethro's religious and ethical superiority over his neighbors at the

same time that they emphasize the need for an idolater to be separated from his religion of origin before he can pursue conversion to Judaism.

In other texts, the rabbis debate whether Jethro repented and converted before or after the Torah was given; arguments on this point are recorded in Genesis Rabbah 22:5; 34:9;[37] Leviticus Rabbah 9:6;[38] and Numbers Rabbah 13:2.[39] What is at stake for the rabbis of these midrashim is the nature of Jethro's sacrifice in Exod 18:12: was it the kind of sacrifice offered by all the בני נוח (anyone), or did he present an offering that adhered to Torah law? In other words, was Jethro acting as a friendly Gentile or a new, Torah-observant Jew (or somewhere in between)? The rabbis engaging in these arguments do not come to a single solution, though they agree that generally, Jethro is the paradigm of a convert. According to Exodus Rabbah 27:4[40] and Songs Rabbah 1:3:3,[41] Jethro serves as a symbol for all of the non-Jews who will eventually hear what God did for Israel and come to be converted. It is reported in Exodus Rabbah 27:4 that both Jethro and Rahab heard about God's deeds and subsequently "cleaved" (דבק√) to God, even when others

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[37] Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 1:166-7; 2:50-2. For translation, see: H. Freedman, *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* (2 vols.; London: Soncino Press, 1951); Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary on Genesis: A New American Translation* (3 vols.; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985). A critical edition is also available: J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck, *Midrash Bereshit Rabba: Critical Edition with Notes and Commentary* (Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1965). Genesis Rabbah is an exegetical midrash on Genesis, containing proems, maxims, and explanations of biblical text. It appears that the redactor of Genesis Rabbah knew and utilized material from tannaitic texts, halakhic midrashim and Targums. See Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 1:5-17. Strack and Stemberger believe the text was redacted some time after 400 CE. Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction,* 304.

[38] Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 7:94-5.

[39] Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 10:44-45. For a translation, see J. Slotki, *Midrash Rabbah: Numbers* (2 vols.; London: Soncino Press, 1951). Numbers Rabbah is generally divided into two parts: the first , sections 1-14, treats Numbers 1-7 closely; the second, sections 15-23, treats Numbers 8-36 in a more succinct fashion (Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction,* 338; Slotki, *Numbers,* vii.) Suggested dates of compilation and redaction range from before the 9th c. (Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction,* 339) to the 12th c. CE (Slotki, *Numbers,* vii.) See also Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 9:5-41.

[40] Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 6:12.

[41] S. Dunsky, *Midrash Rabbah: Shir ha-Shirim* (Jerusalem: Devir, 1980), 23. For translation, see M. Simon, *Midrash Rabbah: Song of Songs* (London: Soncino Press, 1951). Song of Songs Rabbah is an exegetical midrash on Song of Songs, which interprets it allegorically. The work as a whole is dated to the 6th century CE, but it contains older material that can probably be dated to the first few centuries CE. Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction,* 342-4; Dunsky, *Shir ha-Shirim,* 5-30.

(such as the Queen of Sheba) heard about God's miracles and did not choose to cleave to him. As in Mekilta Amalek 3,[42] the rabbis point out that only Jethro, who had worshipped every idol in existence, could truthfully say that YHWH is greater than *all* the gods.[43] Tanhuma Yitro 2[44] uses the radical transition from Jethro's idolatrous past to his new life as a proselyte to demonstrate the power of repentance: "Though he had been an idolatrous priest (כומר), he joined Moses, and entered under the wings of the Shekhinah; for that he became worthy of adding the portion dealing with judges to the Torah of Israel." This transition is made possible because of the power of hearing; Exod 18:1 states that "Jethro heard," and the rabbis of Exodus Rabbah 27:9[45] see this as the ultimate act of obedience to God. According to this midrash, the Israelites took on a two-fold obligation when they accepted the Torah: נעשה ונשמע, "we will do and we will hear" (Exod 24:7). With the sin of the Golden Calf (Exodus 32), the Israelites disobeyed and nullified their first promise: "we will do." It is that much more important, therefore, that the Israelites continue to hear, and in fact, the act of hearing can bring about complete renewal: "Man has two hundred and forty-eight limbs, and the ear is but one of them; yet even though his whole body be stained with transgressions, as long as his ear hearkens, the whole body is vivified…. In the case of Jethro, likewise, you will find that because he heard, he merited life, as it says, 'And Jethro heard' (Exod 18:1)."

In spite of all of this praise for Jethro as a model proselyte, he still compares unfavorably to other converts in Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:28,[46] as in Mekilta Amalek 3.[47]

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[42] Lauterbach 2:176, lines 207-212.
[43] Deuteronomy Rabbah 1:5: Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 11:11.
[44] Buber, *Midrash Tanhuma,* 310.
[45] Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 6:15-16.
[46] Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 11:46.
[47] Lauterbach 2:176, lines 207-212.

In Deuteronomy Rabbah, the rabbis report that even after his conversion, "Jethro attributed truth [ממש] to idolatry, as it is said, 'Now I know that YHWH is greater than all the gods' (Exod 18:11)." This statement is in opposition to Exodus Rabbah 1:32,[48] which reports that Jethro knew there was no truth in idolatry even before converting. Two inclinations, accepting Jethro and keeping him at a distance, are evident here in the distinction between these texts. This tension is very evident in the exploration of the relationship between converts and Israel presented in Songs Rabbah 6:2:3.[49] In this midrash, converts to Israel are described as plants brought into a royal garden:

> R. Samuel b. Nahman said: It is like a king who had an orchard in which he planted rows of nut-trees and apple-trees and pomegranates, and which he then handed over to the care of his son. So long as the son did his duty, the king used to look out for good shoots wherever he could find one, and pick it up and bring it and plant it in the orchard. But when the son did not do his duty, the king used to look out for the best plant in the orchard and remove it. So when Israel does its duty to God, he looks out for any righteous person among the other nations, like Jethro or Rahab, and brings them and attaches [מדבק] them to Israel. But when Israel does not do its duty to God, he picks out any righteous and upright and proper and God-fearing man among them and removes him from their midst.

The analogy presented in this midrash is rich in interpretive potential. The essential message of the midrash is this: when Israel behaves properly, adhering to Torah and God, God rewards Israel by bringing in the best of what is "outside" Israel—the best among the non-Jews. Those people are then "planted" inside Israel and become, quite literally, *insiders* whose gifts and blessings are Israel's to share. When Israel does not

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[48] Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 5:49.
[49] Dunsky, *Shir ha-Shirim,* 141.

behave, however, God removes the best from within Israel. This is interpreted in the following passage (6:2:4)[50] to be a reference to righteous Jews such as R. Hiyya, a particularly noteworthy scholar whose death was greatly lamented.[51] Thus Israel is rewarded by making the best outsiders into insiders, but punished by removing the best insiders. Converts are, consequently, seen as a blessing. But there is a qualitative difference between the outsiders whereby God rewards Israel, and the insiders who were born within the garden walls who are ripped out as punishment. Though there is room within the proverbial garden for born Jews and converts alike, God remembers which is which and enacts different treatment concerning each of them. This motif indicates that righteous converts are welcome, but even the best converts never fully become identified as "Israel."

## **Jethro as Friend, but not Brother**

One exegetical trend that appears in a few later midrashim is praise of Jethro as a *friend* of God and Israel, in contrast to those who are *family,* Israel's immediate relatives. Exodus Rabbah 27:1[52] utilizes Prov 27:10 to make this point: "Do not abandon your friend and the friend of your father; do not enter your brother's house in the time of your misfortune; a close neighbor is better than a distant brother." The exegetical potential for this verse is rich, and the rabbis build on it eagerly. The initial discussion in the midrash identifies the "brother" from Proverbs as either Ishmael or Esau; in both cases, the rabbis report that these siblings of the patriarchs proved to be trouble for the people of Israel. They explicitly cite the report in Lamentations Rabbah [כמו שכתוב במדרש איכה] that the

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[50] Dunsky, *Shir ha-Shirim,* 140-1.
[51] Dunsky, *Shir ha-Shirim,* 140-1 n. 6.
[52] Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 6:9-10.

Ishmaelites taunted Israel with water while they were being deported into exile. The exposition concerning Esau is saved for the following דבר אחר:

> "A close neighbor is better": this is Jethro, who was more "distant" from Israel than Esau, Jacob's brother. For what does it say of Jethro? "And Saul said to the Kenites....for you showed kindness to all the children of Israel when they came out of Egypt" (1 Sam 15:6); while of Esau it is written: "Remember what Amalek did to you" (Deut 25:17). You will find many things written of Esau to his discredit, but of Jethro in praise.

The midrash continues with a list of offenses committed by Esau (identified as Amalek and Rome) which Jethro did not commit.[53] Esau attacked the women of Israel during the destruction of the First Temple (Lam 5:11); he "ate up" Israel as if they were bread (Ps 14:4); he did not fear God (Deut 25:18); he put an end to the sacrifices (through the destruction of the Temples); he came to destroy Israel when they came out of Egypt (Exod 17:8). Jethro, on the other hand, gave his daughter to Moses as a wife; he offered Moses bread; he feared God and even offered a sacrifice; and he aided Moses and the Israelites during the Exodus. Hence Jethro is to be praised in *precisely* the ways Esau is vilified. This "friend" of Israel proves to be more valuable than Israel's own brother.

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[53] Esau is identified with Amalek because Amalek was the son of Eliphaz, Esau's firstborn. He is generally identified with Rome throughout Tannaitic and later midrashim, and that identification enables the rabbis to identify Esau with the enemies who destroyed both the First and Second Temples. For scholarship on Esau's representation as Rome in rabbinic literature, see: Irit Aminoff, *The Figures of Esau and the Kingdom of Edom in Palestinian Midrashic-Talmudic Literature in the Tannaitic and Amoraic Periods* (Ph.D. diss., Melbourne University, 1981); C. Bakhos, "Figuring (out) Esau: The Rabbis and Their Others," *JJS* 58 (2007):250-62; Bakhos, *Ishmael,* 3-4, 54-5, 63-4, 79-80; Stern, *Jewish Identity,* 19-20.

Exodus Rabbah 4:2[54] utilizes Prov 17:17 to make much the same point: "A friend loves at all times, but a brother is born for adversity." Jethro is identified in this midrash as the "friend" who loves at all times: because he took Moses in when he was fleeing from Pharaoh, he set a precedent for hospitality to Israel during times of trouble:

> From here you learn: he who takes it upon himself to do a *mitzvah*, that *mitzvah* does not cease from him. The *mitzvah* of Jethro was that he received into his house a redeemer who fled from the enemy; one arose from his house who took in the enemy, who was fleeing from the redeemer, and killed him. Who is this? This is Sisera, as it is said: "Sisera had fled on foot to the tent of Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite" (Judges 4:17).

This midrash links Heber, whose wife defended Israel by killing Sisera, with Jethro because both are Kenites. Jethro established this *mitzvah* in his lineage permanently; he established a pattern of helping the Israelites that was carried on among his descendants (the Kenites). The genetic trait of helping Israel marks the Kenites as Israel's eternal friends. The Kenites—and their treatment of Israel—are praiseworthy and very important in Israel's history. Yet it is noteworthy how the rhetoric of "friend, not brother" is reiterated continuously in these midrashic texts. Even in moments of praise such as these, the distinction is highlighted; in the last discussion in Exodus Rabbah 4:2, for example, the rabbis point out that because of Jethro's hospitality, Moses owed him more honor even than that due to a mother and father!

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[54] Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 5:84-85.

How, then, are we to understand the meaning of Exodus Rabbah 27:3?[55]

> See how many benefits and blessings came to Jethro from the moment he intermarried with Moses!  For what does it say?  "And Aaron came, and all the elders of Israel, to eat bread with Moses' father-in-law before God" (Exod 18:12).  Similarly, you will find that when Balaam came to curse Israel, not only did he not curse them, but he even blessed them….  To Jethro, what did he say? "Your dwelling place is firm, and your nest is set in the rock…" (Num 24:21).  He said to him: "O Kenite, you were with us in counsel; who would have thought you would be with the mighty ones of the world?"

The emphasis in this midrash is on Jethro's intimate connection to Moses and its effects.  Moses' intermarriage has positive metaphysical consequences for Jethro and his family.  As one of Pharaoh's advisers during the time of Hebrew enslavement,[56] Jethro should have been subject to punishment similar to Job and Balaam.  Yet when Balaam speaks of the Kenites in Num 24:21, he comments on their security.  The rabbis interpret Balaam's words as a reference to Jethro's link to Israel: because he intermarried with Moses, he is protected with them.

The analogy drawn in the next paragraph of this midrash makes this abundantly clear:

> It is like a bird who escaped from the hunter and fell into the hand of a royal statue; when the hunter saw he began to praise it, saying: "what a fine escape you have made!"  So Balaam praised Jethro, saying, "Your dwelling-place is firm."

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[55] Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 6:11.
[56] b. Sanh. 11a; 106a and Exodus Rabbah 1:9.

Jethro is likened to a bird who, while trying to escape from a hunter, lands on a statue that provides asylum, and the hunter has no choice but to praise the bird's wise escape. In some sense, therefore, Jethro has entered the confines of the Israelite people and receives shelter with them. It is noteworthy that in this midrash, the rabbis have chosen to ignore the rest of Num 24:21; the verse which starts out with praise of the Kenites' security ends with a prediction of inevitable defeat at the hands of the Assyrians. This lack of concern for context is not unusual in midrash; it is not uncommon for the creators of midrash to engage in atomistic interpretation, in which individual parts or even words of a verse can be used to make an argument counter to the overall meaning of the verse. However, in this case, it is abundantly clear that the choice to ignore scriptural context is rooted in the desire to make a particular point: it was very important to the rabbis of this midrash to emphasize the safe haven Jethro and his descendants earned within the Israelite camp. This midrash shows that those who align themselves with Israel are given shelter.

We have seen how a few midrashim emphasize Jethro's outsider status: he is a friend who is praiseworthy but distinctly *other*. We have also seen an example of a midrash concerning benefits enjoyed by Jethro and his descendants when they found shelter among the Jewish people. The picture that is emerging from later midrashim concerning Jethro, therefore, is one which highlights Jethro's liminal status: he is neither fully inside nor fully outside. Numbers Rabbah 3:2[57] is a potentially helpful source in this discussion; it provides language for discussing Jethro that might explain how he can be both inside and outside the boundaries of the community. In this midrash, the rabbis are addressing Num 3:6, in which the Levites are brought forward to serve Aaron and his

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[57] Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 9:49-51.

sons.  It appears that the rabbis are using Num 3:6, along with Ps 65:5, to identify two separate dynamics in God's relationships with people: *choosing,* and *bringing near.*[58]

> "Bring the tribe of Levi near…" (Num 3:6).  It is written: "Happy is the one whom you choose and bring near to dwell in your courts" (Ps 65:5).  Happy is he whom the Holy One Blessed Be He has chosen [בחר√], though he did not bring him near; and happy is the one whom he brought near [קרב√] though he did not choose him.

The rabbis give a few examples of the first category (those who are chosen but not brought near).  Abraham, as reported in Neh 9:7, was chosen by God, but that verse does not contain the root קרב√; the midrash explains that this is because "he brought himself near of his own accord."  Similarly, Jacob was chosen but also brought himself near (using Gen 25:27 as the prooftext, and understanding the "tents" mentioned therein to be the tents of learning).  Moses was also chosen, though the midrash does not mention whether he brought himself near (perhaps alluding to the fact that Moses did not enter the land).  Jethro fits into the second category, those who were not chosen but were brought near:  "Come and see: the Holy One, Blessed be He, brought near Jethro, but did not choose him….  Happy are those whom he brought near even though he did not choose them."  The concept explored in this midrash—the difference between those who are chosen and those who come to God without being chosen—has incredible significance for our understanding of Jethro vis-à-vis the Israelites.  The rhetoric of "choseness" is bold and direct.  Why wasn't Jethro chosen?  What is the significance of his being "brought near" by God?

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[58] It is interesting to compare this text with Sifre Numbers 78 (Horovitz 73, line 18, through 75, line 11), which mentions non-Israelites who are "brought near"; the rhetoric of chosenness is not part of that text.

The following paragraph of Numbers Rabbah 3:2 provides some clarity: a story is related in which a Roman lady expresses contempt that God should pick and choose whomever he likes; R. Jose brings her a basket of figs, and when she chooses the best, he says to her: "You know how to choose but the Holy One, Blessed be He, doesn't know how to choose? The one whose actions he sees to be good, he chooses him and brings him near to him." Hence there is a value judgment associated with this concept: the best are chosen *and* brought near. Jethro deserved God's attention, but lacked the merit to be chosen; he required God's help to be brought near, and no matter what praiseworthy deeds he commits, he will never be part of the "chosen people."[59]

## Jethro and the Giving of the Torah

A question that occupies the rabbis of the later midrashim is whether or not Jethro was present during the giving of the Torah. Tanhuma Vayakhel 8[60] articulates a universalistic view of Torah:

> Why was the law given in the desert? To teach us that just as the desert is free to all men, so the words of the law are free to all who desire to learn them. Also, lest a man should say: I am a student of the law that was given to me and my ancestors, while you and your ancestors are not students of the law; your ancestors were *gērim*. Hence it is written: "An inheritance of the congregation of Jacob" (Deut 33:4.) This tells us that the law was an inheritance for all who associate themselves with Jacob. Even outsiders who devote themselves to the law are equal to the

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[59] The final section of this midrash underscores this point: the rabbis explore various figures who were chosen, then cast off; some of them are subsequently brought near, while others remain far away. Though the preamble to this exploration states that "Not all who are far off, are far off," no examples are given of a figure who was not initially chosen but becomes a member of the chosen people. The only examples given are of those who somehow lost their chosen status and either regained it or remained distant.

[60] Buber, *Tanhuma,* 1:445.

> high priest, as it is said: "by the pursuit of which a man
> shall live; I am YHWH" (Lev 18:5).  It does not refer to a
> priest or Levite or Israelite, but merely a *man*.  Thus, "One
> law and one ordinance shall be both for you and for the *gēr*
> who sojourns with you" (Num 15:16).

This passage is unequivocal in its message:  the Torah is for anyone who decides to embrace it.  Israelite identity is in no way required for a person to take on the yoke of Torah.  This message is underscored by the venue in which the Torah was given: the wilderness belongs to no one; it is a wild and free place, highlighting the freedom of Torah-study.  This midrash goes on to state specific evidence supporting its view, in the form of Jethro:  "Observe what is written concerning the sons of Jethro: 'The families of the scribes that dwelt at Jabez' (1 Chr 2:55)."  As in Tannaitic midrashim, this text links Jethro to Torah scribes through 1 Chr 2:55, and presents this text as proof of the Torah's universality.

Jethro's love of Torah is not in doubt; according to Tanhuma Yitro 4,[61] Jethro chose Torah over land:

> When he came to the Holy Land, they offered him the
> fields of Jericho, but he said, "I brought none of my
> possessions with me, and I abandoned all I owned in order
> to study the Torah.  Shall I now sow and reap when I
> should be studying Torah?"  They told him, "There is a
> man studying the law in a certain area that is in a desolate
> place in the desert, and it lacks even wheat."  When they[62]
> heard this they went there.

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[61] Buber, *Tanhuma,* 1:312.
[62] The midrash assumes Jethro had others with him during this exchange, who joined him on his journey to Jabez and founded the scribal families there.

Note that this midrash contradicts the Tannaitic midrashim discussed above.[63]   In

Tanhuma, Jethro refuses to live in the land near Jericho, and thus the Kenites are depicted

as never having been co-residents of the land with the Israelites.  The rhetorical force of

the tradition in Tanhuma is to distance Jethro and the Kenites from the Holy Land—

which served as a point of integration in Tannaitic midrashim—in favor of emphasizing

Jethro's love of Torah.  Jethro's religious sensibilities outweigh his impulses towards

ethnic or geographical integration, but his religious sensibilities are praiseworthy.

In spite of this treatment of Jethro and Torah in Tanhuma, Jethro is generally

excluded from the Sinai event in the later midrashim, regardless of his potential

conversion.[64]   The rabbis of Exodus Rabbah 4:4[65] see Jethro as sympathetic to the

struggle of the Israelites and supportive of their participation in the coming revelation,

but he is not interested in being present for the giving of Torah; when Moses informs

Jethro that he has to take his family to Egypt, Jethro responds in this way:

> He said to him, "Those who are in Egypt wish to go out,
> and you are taking them there?"  He (Moses) answered
> him: "Tomorrow they will go out and stand upon Mt. Sinai
> to hear from the mouth of the Holy One, Blessed be He, 'I
> am YHWH your God' (Exod 20:2).  Shall my sons not hear
> it like them?"  Immediately, Jethro said, "Go in peace."

Though Jethro supports Moses' journey to bring the Israelites to Mt. Sinai, he

does not express the desire to go himself.  This is the only midrash that suggests Jethro

himself did not care to be at Mt. Sinai.  This interpretation is supported by the biblical

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[63] Sifre Numbers 81; Abot de Rabbi Nathan 35; Sifre Deuteronomy 62 and 352.
[64] Note, however, Exodus Rabbah 5:5, which states that *Zipporah* was at Sinai with Moses.  This is logical, as it is reported in Exodus 18 that Jethro brings Zipporah and the children to Moses, but at the end of the chapter only Jethro is reported to leave.
[65] Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 5:86.

text: Exod 18:27 reports that "Moses sent his father-in-law away, and he went to his own land." In Exodus Rabbah 4:4, the rabbis interpret this verse not only as the conclusion of a narrative (Jethro's meeting with Moses in the wilderness), but as an intentional component of the flow of action leading up to Exod 19:1: "In the third month." It is not enough to simply state that Jethro went away before the giving of Torah at Sinai; rather, Jethro went away *because* of the imminent theophany, and this becomes a crucial part of the rabbinic conception of Jethro and his relationship to the people of Israel.[66]

Pesiqta of Rab Kahana 12:6[67] emphasizes the point that no stranger (זר) could be present at the moment of intimate connection between Israel and God, and roots this statement concerning strangers in Isa 43:12: "I have declared, I have saved, I have announced, and there is no זר among you; you are my witnesses."[68] According to Pesiqta of Rab Kahana, the זר mentioned in Isa 43:12 specifically refers to Jethro: "and there is no זר among you—this is Jethro."[69] The rabbis of Pesiqta of Rab Kahana 12:6 explain

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[66] I have not encountered a single rabbinic text that explicitly includes Jethro at Sinai.

[67] B. Mandelbaum, *Pesiqta of Rab Kahana: According to an Oxford Manuscript with Variants from All of the Manuscripts and Genizah Fragments, With Commentary and Introduction* (2 vols.; New York: JTS, 1962), 1:208, lines 5-9. For translations, see William G. Braude and Israel J. Kapstein, *Pesikta de-Rab Kahana* (2nd ed.; Philadelphia: JPS, 2002); Neusner, *Pesiqta de-Rab Kahana: An Analytical Translation* (2 vols.; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987). Pesiqta of Rab Kahana is a homiletical midrash for feasts and special Sabbaths; hence, its chapters are discrete units focused on particular readings from various biblical books. It demonstrates connections with other works of rabbinic literature: it shares five chapters with Leviticus Rabbah and 12:12-15 appear to derive from Tanhuma Yitro (Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction,* 317-322). Kapstein dates the compilation of Pesiqta of Rab Kahana to the 5th c. CE (Braude, *Pesikta,* xii.) For discussion of the structure of Pesiqta of Rab Kahana, see: Braude, *Pesikta,* xi-ci; Neusner, *From Tradition to Imitation: The Plan and Program of Pesiqta Rabbati and Pesiqta deRab Kahana* (BJS 80; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987).

[68] The same concept is developed in Exodus Rabbah 29:5. The two midrashim are virtually identical.

[69] The use of the word זר here is fascinating: one might expect the rabbis to utilize a biblical text about *gērim* instead. How does a זר differ from a *gēr*? It is possible that for the rabbis of this midrash, the terms זר and *gēr* are interchangeable. Jastrow, 411, defines זר as "stranger; non-priest; layman." Based on its usage in biblical texts (such as Exod 30:33; Leviticus 22 passim; Prov 2:16 and 7:5), the word carries the connotation of "unauthorized." The New JPS translation even translates this word (in this verse from Isaiah) as "foreign god" (per Ps 44:21). A person who offers a sacrifice incorrectly or without the proper authority has committed an act characterized as זר; a forbidden woman (whether she is non-Israelite or already married) is referred to as זרה. If the range of meanings present in the biblical text applies to our midrash as well, the impact is significant: not only is Jethro a 'stranger' among the Israelites (religiously or

the various parts of Isa 43:12 as illustrating a single idea: God's communication with and redemption of Israel took place during the Exodus, as he spoke to Moses and Aaron and as he wrought plagues upon Egypt. These events, therefore, were done for Israel alone, and God's ongoing relationship with Israel is dependent upon there being no זרים in the community; Israel's role as witness to God cannot be filled if outsiders are present. God will save Israel because he needs Israel; without them, he is not really God (so R. Shimon b. Yohai). The mutually exclusive nature of the relationship, therefore, is of tantamount importance, and there is no room for someone who is *not* a member of Israel. Therefore, Jethro is not welcome at this event.

In Pesiqta of Rab Kahana 12:9[70] and 16,[71] the rabbis build on this idea, using Prov 14:10: "The heart knows its own bitterness, and with its joy no זר can intermingle." The זר in this case is also identified as Jethro: God states, "When Israel was enslaved with mortar and bricks in Egypt, Jethro dwelt in his house with quiet and security, and now he would come to see the joy of Torah with my children?" Hence, Moses had to send Jethro away before the revelation at Sinai. Because Jethro was not part of Israel's bitter experience in Egypt, he was not permitted to participate in Israel's joy. His *zar*-ness, therefore, is the result of his not having shared in the collective experience of the people. Though his character is not impugned in this discussion, Jethro is decidedly an outsider, an interloper. The דבר אחר found in Pesiqta of Rab Kahana 12:16[72] emphasizes this point even further. Moses states:

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ethnically); he is forbidden and unauthorized to participate in their experiences. The rhetoric of this choice of biblical verse, therefore, serves to exclude Jethro even more than if he had been referred to here as a *gēr*.

[70] Mandelbaum 209 line 13 through 210 line 4.

[71] Mandelbaum 216 lines 4-13.

[72] Mandelbaum 216 lines 9-12.

> If concerning one commandment, when the Holy One, Blessed be He, came to give the commandment of the paschal offering, he said "no בן נכר shall eat of it"[73] (Exod 12:43), now that he comes to give the entire Torah to Israel, should Jethro be here and see with us?

Out of Moses' own mouth comes the argument to exclude his father-in-law from the revelation. Moses is arguing *a fortiori*; if concerning only one commandment (albeit an important one), foreigners are to be excluded, then it is only logical that upon the occasion of the reception of *all* the commandments, the audience should be solely Israelite. It is not made explicit what the rabbis of Pesiqta of Rab Kahana 12:9 and 16 meant by using this biblical verse: do they understand the בן נכר in this case to be an un-circumcised non-Israelite (as in the Bible), or an outsider in general? What *is* clear from this text is that Jethro is identified as a בן נכר, and as such, he cannot participate in the receiving of Torah. Through this text, Pesiqta of Rab Kahana denies Jethro any identity that would enable him to participate: he is viewed as a total foreigner, not even as a circumcised outsider or a convert.

Even if Jethro was not present at the giving of the Torah, his advice about the juridical system, which comes before the Sinai theophany, grants him the character of a "pre-empter": how do Jethro's own teachings relate to the revealed Law? And how do we explain the fact that Jethro came and taught Moses *before* the giving of the Torah? Does his precedence indicate his importance? Pesiqta of Rab Kahana 12:11[74] addresses this issue through the use of a complex *mashal le-melekh*:[75]

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[73] It appears that the rabbis are conflating the terms זר and בן נכר.

[74] Mandelbaum 210 line 12 through 212 line 16.

[75] A *mashal le-melekh* is a rabbinic parable that utilizes the figure of a king to illustrate a theological point. David Stern's study remains the most comprehensive work on the *mashal,* and includes examination of the

> R. Joshua ben Levi said: It is like a king's son who was wandering in the market, where a friend of the king met him and filled his bosom with precious stones and pearls. The king said, Open the storehouses for me, so my son will not say, "Were it not for my father's friend, he [my father] would not have been able to give me anything." Thus the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Moses, "Lest Israel say, 'Had Jethro not come and taught you laws, (God) would not have been able to give us the Torah,' I am now giving them the Torah full of laws: 'And these are the laws you shall set before them' (Exodus 21:1)."

This midrash has a profound message concerning the giving of the Torah. The king of the parable is concerned about his son's interpretation of his inheritance: it is possible, he believes, that his son will think that the only riches he will receive from being the king's son will come from the king's friends. Hence, the king must demonstrate to his son that he has his own gifts to give. This parable, when applied to the revelation at Sinai, results in this message: God is concerned that the Israelites will believe that the only laws they will receive as a result of being God's people will come from God's friend, Jethro. Hence, God opens up his storehouse of laws and teachings to demonstrate to the Israelites that he has an abundant inheritance to give to them personally. This midrash shows that Jethro's gift—the laws concerning the judicial system—is negligible compared to the vast riches God shares with the people. Nevertheless, Jethro's gift is given out of friendship with God, and contains genuine riches; it is, in however small a way, real Torah. In addition, Jethro's actions prompt God into giving the Torah; Jethro is, consequently, an important factor in the revelation at Sinai, and could even be partially responsible for it, even if he is not present for it.

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*mashal le-melekh:* Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

Though the rabbis generally exclude Jethro from attending the revelation at Sinai, and though he does not share in the experience of Israel and hence is separated, standing outside the boundaries of peoplehood concerning this crucial event in the formation of Israel, the rabbis do not divorce him totally from the experience, nor do they prevent him from having a connection to Torah.  His relationship with Torah is rooted in his personal interest in the Israelites, as well as friendship with God and love of God's teaching. Thus, it is not impossible for the rabbis to believe that this man, who could not stand at Sinai, would produce offspring who would one day serve as scribes for the Torah of Israel.

### The Midianites

The treatment of Midian in later midrashim is universally negative.  The Midianites are enemies of Israel and their women are snares and temptresses who cause the Israelites to sin egregiously.  Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer 47[76]  tells the story of Numbers 25 (the incident at Baal-Peor), adding some details. In this midrash, Balaam managed to lure the men of Israel away by instructing the Midianite women to "paint their eyes like whores"; when the prince of Simeon, Zimri, lusts after Cozbi, he forgets about the zeal of his ancestors against the men of Shechem (Genesis 34) and decides to fornicate with the Midianite princess (Num 25:14-15).  Moses and the elders do nothing; only Pinhas responds, taking Moses' spear in hand and killing Zimri and Cozbi.  God rewards him and his descendants with an eternal covenant, whereby they will enjoy the choicest parts of the sacrifice.

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[76] Luria, *Pirqe,* 112-4.

Pinhas is a great hero in Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer 47, the perfect choice to lead the Israelites in battle against Midian. It is fascinating, therefore, that Exodus Rabbah 7:5[77] records the tradition that Pinhas is a descendant of Jethro:

> "And Eleazar, Aaron's son, took one of the daughters of Putiel as a wife, and she bore him Pinhas" (Exod 6:25). It does not say "the daughter of Putiel" but "the daughters of Putiel" because his wife belonged to two families: to the tribe of Joseph who conquered [פטפט] his passions, and also to Jethro who fattened [פטם] calves for idolatrous purposes.[78]

In the Bible, Exod 6:25 makes an innocuous statement concerning the marriage between Aaron's son Eleazar and one of Putiel's daughters, which produces Pinhas. Exodus Rabbah 7:5 utilizes word-play to establish a link between Pinhas on the one hand, and Jethro and Joseph on the other. Pinhas is descended from Putiel, whose name is used to represent *both* Jethro and Joseph. This midrash establishes a *literary* genealogy rather than a literal one. The fact that no other text in the Bible links Jethro to Putiel is irrelevant; the word-play of this midrash enables the rabbis to engage in a discussion about inclinations and self-control. Pinhas the hero has lineage that includes a practitioner of idolatrous worship.

This problematic lineage is very important because of Numbers 25. The fact that the women causing idolatry in Numbers 25 are Midianite (according to v. 6) makes this chapter ripe with exegetical potential for an interpreter interested in addressing Jethro's relationship with the Israelites. The rabbis of the Talmud were apparently aware of the tradition recorded in Exodus Rabbah 7:5 that Pinhas is a descendant of Jethro, and hence

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[77] Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 5:116.
[78] The same tradition appears in b. B. Bat. 109b; b. Sotah 43a; and b. Sanh. 81b-82b. See discussion below.

had to confront his troubled genealogy. The fact that the lineage established in Exodus

Rabbah 7:5 is literary—a play on words used to teach a lesson—is irrelevant to the rabbis

of b. Sotah 43a:

> A Tanna [taught]: Not for nothing did Pinhas go into battle [against Midian], but to exact judgment for the father of his mother, as it says, "And the Midianites sold him to Egypt, etc" (Gen 37:36).[79] Is this to say that Pinhas was a descendant of Joseph? But behold it is written, "And Aaron's son Eleazar took as a wife one of the daughters of Putiel" (Exod 6:25). Isn't it to be supposed then that he was from Jethro, who fattened calves for idolatry? No, he was from Joseph who mastered his *yetzer*. But did not the other tribes despise him, [saying], "Look, a son of Puti is this: a son whose mother's father fattened calves for idolatry; shall he kill a prince in Israel?" Rather, if his maternal grandfather was descended from Joseph, then his maternal grandmother was descended from Jethro. And if his maternal grandmother was from Joseph, then his maternal grandfather was from Jethro.[80]

The word play of Exodus Rabbah 7:5 is presented as an actual genealogy in b.

Sotah 43a. The purpose of this text is to demonstrate that Pinhas has both valorous *and*

problematic lineage. Two ancestries are given, and two are necessary. A passage in b.

Sanh. 82b adds to this tradition, arguing that by demonstrating zeal against Zimri and

Cozbi, Pinhas has made atonement for his idolatrous ancestry and is thus worthy of an

everlasting priesthood. Pinhas' dual identity makes him precisely the person who needs

to oppose the events that took place at Baal-Peor. It is significant that in neither of these

Talmudic passages (nor in Exodus Rabbah) is Jethro identified as Midianite; in other

words, it is not the fact that Jethro is Midianite that makes Pinhas' lineage problematic, it

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[79] This is the end of the baraita; what follows is post-Tannaitic commentary. I thank Dvora Weisberg for her assistance with this passage.

[80] b. Sotah 43a.

is the fact that he is an idolater. Though the rabbis have the opportunity to draw the link between Jethro and the Midianites explicitly, they do not do so.

The issue of Moses' Midianite in-laws is raised in the Talmud, in a conversation concerning Zipporah. In b. Sanh. 82b, Zimri grabs Cozbi by the braid and brings her before Moses, saying: "Son of Amram, is this woman forbidden or permitted? And if you say, 'She is forbidden,' who permitted you Jethro's daughter?" Zimri voices a criticism that, though it is not mentioned in Numbers 25, emerges from the biblical incident at Baal-Peor: if the Israelites were punished severely because of sexual relations with Midianite women, why was Moses allowed to marry one? The Talmud offers no response, other than Moses' silence.

This collection of texts raises some important questions. Exodus Rabbah 7:5, b. Sotah 43a, and b. Sanh. 82b each link Pinhas to Jethro, but without mentioning the fact that Jethro is Midianite. Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer 47 shows no knowledge of this tradition at all, focusing only on Pinhas' valor. It is significant that in the Talmud[81] we find the tradition that Pinhas had to overcome his lineage, as well as the tradition recording Zimri's attack on Moses' hypocrisy. The midrashim do not engage in the level of polemic present in the Babylonian Talmud.[82]

In the midrashim addressing the war against Midian (Numbers 31), it is logical that Midian is presented very negatively. In Numbers Rabbah 22:2-3,[83] the execution of vengeance is described. The rabbis interpret Num 31:2 as a causal statement: "Avenge the Israelite people on the Midianites; then you shall be gathered to your people." Only

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[81] This tradition also appears in Tg. Ps.-J.; see next chapter.
[82] The Palestinian Talmud contains very little material about Jethro. See y. Ber. 20a, 8 and y. Rosh. Hash. 7a, 3 (Jethro and Rahab as ideal proselytes); y. Meg. 15a, 11 (Did Jethro offer his sacrifices before or after the giving of the Torah?).
[83] Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 10:299-300.

after vengeance has been served can Moses die: "Scripture makes his death dependent on the punishment of Midian." It is a mark of Moses' great commitment to God and Israel that he willingly goes to war against Midian, knowing the fate that awaits him. Yet the midrash depicts Moses arguing with God on this point:

> Sovereign of the worlds, if we had been uncircumcised, or idol-worshippers, or had denied the binding force of the commandments, the Midianites would not have hated us. They only persecute us on account of the Torah and the commandments which you gave us![84]

In other words, Moses blames God for Midian's hatred of Israel. Yet Moses does accept his task and commits to it thoroughly. When the Israelites balk at going to war because they want to preserve Moses' life, he forces them to fight. His discussion with God, however, reveals an important interpretation of the hatred between Midian and Israel: the former hate the latter because of their distinctness, because of their relationship with God and commitment to God's commandments. Midian is antithetical to Israel in every way. There is no discussion recorded here of Moses' own Midianite wife or father-in-law.

One midrash does, however, recognize Moses' history in Midian. In Numbers Rabbah 20:4,[85] the alliance between Midian and Moab (against the Israelites) is explored, as well as the choice to enlist Balaam against Israel in Numbers 22-24:

> "And Moab said to the elders of Midian…" (Num 22:4). Why are the elders of Midian mentioned? They [the Moabites] saw Israel conquering in an abnormal manner

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[84] Numbers Rabbah 22:2, Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 10:300.
[85] Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 10:251.

> and thought: their leader was reared [נתגדל] in Midian; let us ascertain from them what his characteristics are. The elders of Midian said to them: His power is only in his mouth. The Moabites said to them: We shall also come against them with a man whose power is in his mouth!

Moses' background in Midian provides Israel's enemies with the opportunity to learn about Moses' special traits. The Midianites are happy to share what they know of Israel's leader. Neither Jethro nor Zipporah is explicitly mentioned, though they are the primary figures in Moses' life in Midian.

Jethro's Midianite identity is mentioned in other midrashim, but only in relation to the power of his ultimate repentance. In Exodus Rabbah 27:6,[86] the rabbis utilize the same biblical text used in Pesiqta of Rab Kahana 3d:[87] "When you smite a scorner, the simple will become prudent" (Prov 19:25).

> Amalek and Jethro were among the advisers of Pharaoh, but when Jethro saw that God had wiped out Amalek from this world and the next, he felt remorse and repented…. He said, "The only thing for me to do is join the God of Israel." How do you know that both the Amalekites and the Midianites were the enemies of Israel? Because it says, "And the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed" (Num 22:7). Also, "The Midianites and the Amalekites and all the people of the east" (Judg 7:12)….But when [Balaam] saw that Jethro had repented, what is said? "He looked at the Kenite, etc." (Num 24:21).

The discussion centers on the punishment delivered against all those who were advisers to Pharaoh during the Hebrew enslavement. As one of Pharaoh's advisers, Jethro witnesses the punishment meted out to Amalek, who is wiped out from this world

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[86] Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 6:12.
[87] Mandelbaum 1:36 lines 11-14.

and the next (hence the infinitive absolute in Exod 17:14: "I will utterly blot out [ מחה
אמחה] the memory of Amalek…").[88] Jethro subsequently repents and hence is protected

from punishment.[89] Once he repents, he is referred to as the "Kenite." The rabbis of this

midrash demonstrate awareness of Jethro's Midianite-ness, but do not attempt to

rehabilitate Midian in any way, and in fact call him a Kenite once he has repented.

The Midianites receive especially negative treatment in Numbers Rabbah 21:3-
5.[90] Unlike with other enemies, the Israelites are forbidden from making peace with the

Midianites (Numbers Rabbah 21:5[91]):

> "Harass the Midianites" (Num 25:17) Although I have
> written that "when you approach a city to attack it, you
> shall offer it terms of peace" (Deut 20:10), you must not do
> so to these. "You shall not seek their peace nor their
> prosperity" (Deut 23:7) You find that one who did
> approach them in a spirit of mercy ultimately brought upon
> himself insult, war and trouble. Who was it? It was David.
> Thus, "David said: I will show kindness to Hanun son of
> Nahash" (2 Sam 10:2).

Though in Deut 20:10, God instructs the people to attempt negotiation whenever

possible when moving through the lands outside Canaan, he explicitly reveals to Israel in

this midrash that they are not permitted to do so with the Midianites. However, the

biblical text presented for this instruction, Deut 23:7, actually refers in context to the

Ammonites and Moabites. In addition, the example given of one who ignored this

commandment—David, in relation to Hanun—does not fit the context of the midrash

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[88] The idea that Amalek was one of Pharaoh's advisers is unique to this midrash.
[89] It is clear that this midrash identifies the Midianite and the Kenites as members of the same group;
biblical texts referring to Midianites and Kenites are brought together to discuss Jethro's initial role in
Pharaoh's court and his subsequent repentance.
[90] Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 10:280-282. It is not surprising that the Midianites receive such harsh
treatment here; after all, these midrashim are presenting interpretations of the war against Midian.
[91] Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah,* 10:281.

either; Hanun was Ammonite. The rabbis of the midrash choose, however, to read these texts in relation to Midian. This conflation of Midian with other enemy peoples is not surprising; the overlapping references to Midian, Moab, Amalek, and Ammon found in this midrash demonstrate that the rabbis either could not distinguish these groups from one another or, more likely, were not interested in doing so, because the lines are not always hard and fast even within the biblical text.[92] In Numbers 25, for example, the offending women at Baal-Peor are identified as both Midianite and Moabite. The lack of clarity present in the Bible serves the rabbis' purpose quite well: they are able to search through Scripture to find justifications for their opinions of Midian, and to make their primary point: there should be no peace with Midian.

## Conclusions

The diversity of views expressed throughout the later midrashim precludes the formation of a clearly delineated, systematic hypothesis concerning Jethro's presentation in these texts. It is possible, however, to see certain themes and patterns emerging in the discussion above. The terminology for discussing outsiders in these texts is fascinating: apparently, the terms גר, זר, and רכן וב are used interchangeably. An outsider is an outsider, whether he is a resident sojourner or a person who lives in another land. Gradations in the boundary between "us" and "them" are not addressed through this terminology, even if such gradations are present.

Throughout the majority of these texts, Jethro is treated favorably: he is a lover of Torah; he demonstrates praiseworthy belief in the Israelite deity; he undergoes

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[92] In addition, it appears that the rabbis are more concerned with the general dynamic of "us vs. them" than with accurately depicting traditions concerning specific groups of people.

conversion (spiritually and/or ritually); and he is generally a model for good deeds. Jethro's past as an idolatrous priest is highlighted, but in most cases, it is mentioned only in order to emphasize his sincere repentance.

Those aspects of Jewish identity that are rooted in ethnicity, nationality, and land are handled quite differently in the later midrashim than in the Tannaitic midrashim. In the Tannaitic midrashim, Jethro's descendants are allowed access to the Holy Land, albeit only temporarily. This tradition virtually disappears by the time of the later midrashim. In addition, we find in the post-Tannaitic period texts that greatly problematize Jethro's Midianite-ness and openly question the validity of Moses' own marriage to a Midianite woman. Jethro's connection to Midian was clearly problematic to the interpreters of this time period: for the rabbis of the Babylonian academies (represented in the Talmud), this resulted in direct critique (Pinhas has to overcome his Midianite lineage; Moses' marriage is designated, rhetorically, as hypocritical). For the rabbis of the midrashim, Jethro's Midianite-ness is de-emphasized and his Kenite identity is emphasized instead. The villainization of the Midianites and the valorization of the Kenites is certainly due, in part, to the constraints the rabbis experienced working with biblical text: after all, the Kenites are depicted in the Bible as having generally favorable relations with Israel, while the Midianites are usually depicted in the Bible as enemies. The rabbis could not overcome Jethro's Midianite lineage entirely, but they could emphasize his repentance, separate him from his people or, alternately, ignore his lineage all together.

Pesiqta of Rab Kahana is unique among these texts. According to this collection of midrashim, experiences rooted in the shared national history of the Jewish people, such as the Paschal sacrifice and the theophany at Sinai, are denied to Jethro. Pesiqta of

Rab Kahana uses Exod 12:43 in a way that is remarkably different from the biblical interpretation present in Exodus Rabbah 19:4. In the latter text, the rabbis go to great lengths to demonstrate that God fully accepts *gērim*, and in fact will create priests from them. What we see here is evidence of competing ideologies in the later midrashim: on the one hand, the rabbis are determined to uphold the integrity of the Sinai event and the singularity of the Jewish people; on the other hand, there is a genuine desire to demonstrate inclusiveness and acceptance of converts. Exodus 12:43 is one of the battlegrounds upon which these ideologies wage war. In the treatment of Exod 12:43 in Exodus Rabbah 19:4, inclusiveness is emphasized, but in Pesiqta of Rab Kahana 12:9 and 12:16, which explicitly address Jethro, exclusion is the dominant paradigm. It is significant that the rabbis felt it was permissible to interpret Exod 12:43-49 inclusively *in the abstract*, but not in the case of one specific figure, Jethro. Hence we find in the later midrashim developments that add more complexity to the treatment of Jethro and his status among the Israelites.

# Ch. 5: Jethro in the Targums

The word *targum* means both "translation" and "interpretation."[1]  The Targums

present not only translations of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic, but also interpretations of

the biblical text.[2]  In Neh 13:23-24, we learn that "Jews had married Ashdodite,

Ammonite, and Moabite women; a good number of their children spoke the language of

Ashdod and the language of those various peoples, and did not know how to speak

Judean." Languages such as Aramaic and Greek became the spoken languages for many

Jews during the late Second Temple period, rendering the Hebrew text of the Bible

somewhat inaccessible.[3]  The Jewish people in the Second Temple period were closely

identified (by themselves as well as others) with their "Book";[4] hence it became

necessary during this time period to present the Bible in a way that could facilitate

engagement and understanding.  Because of the sacred nature of the Hebrew text itself,

readers continued to read from the original text in public settings, but translations into

Aramaic, as well as interpretations, were also offered.   The purpose of this activity was

to render the biblical text intelligible: part of the task of the *meturgemanim* was to

translate the text into Aramaic, but the other part of the task was to *explain* the text;

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[1] Jastrow, 1695.

[2] Bowker, *Targums,* 3-5.  Levine, *Aramaic Version,* 6: "The Aramaic Version of the Bible, with all of its diversity, variants, and internal inconsistencies is, *par excellence,* 'strong reading': not simply mastering and translating a canonized document, but a creative process which itself produces other meanings."

[3] Hence it became necessary for the Jewish community of Alexandria, for example, to offer a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible for Greek-speakers.  The LXX was subsequently presented in the Letter of Aristeas as if it had a divine origin.  Though this attempt to legitimate the designation of "Holy Scripture" for the LXX was successful for some communities (hence the prevalence of the LXX in early Christianity), it appears that the Greek verion of the Bible never took the place of the Hebrew in public Jewish worship. See Leonard J. Greenspoon, "Jewish Translations of the Bible," in *The Jewish Study Bible* (ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2000-20; E. Tov, "The Septuaginit," *Mikra,* 161-88.

[4] See the discussion of the relationship between Second Temple Jews and the Bible in Levine, *Aramic Version,* 3-7.  He identified Second Temple Jews as a "textual community," rooted in their experience of landlessness during the Babylonian Exile.  The lectionary cycle and the practice of utilizing *targumim* developed from this orientation.

therefore, expansions and glosses were a natural part of the process.  It is only logical that these explanations would develop over time and present variants in different communities.[5]  We can, therefore, speak of a "Targum tradition" that dates to the Second Temple period, even though much of the textual evidence we have today is dated much later.

Our knowledge of how the Targums were used is dependant, in large part, upon references in Mishnah,[6] Tosefta,[7] midrash,[8] and Talmud;[9] though these are not objective, value-free sources of information on the Targums, they are nonetheless the most direct and plentiful source of information.  The Targums appear to have been suitable for usage in public and private contexts.  Statements about the Targums in Talmudic texts refer to three settings for their usage: the synagogue, private study, and the Beit Midrash.[10]  Most of the references to Targums in rabbinic literature concern their usage in public worship (the synagogue), in which the Targum was a part of the public Scripture reading.[11] According to m. Meg. 4:4 and b. Meg. 32a, the reader of the original text could use a scroll, while the Targum reader had to present the translation from memory ("lest the people should say that the translation is written in the Torah").  The Targum reading could not overlay the presentation of the original text; rather, the Hebrew reader would present one line of text, followed by the presentation of the same text from the Targum. (During the reading of the Prophets, the Hebrew and Targum readers could alternate in a

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[5] Levine, *Aramaic Version,* 9.

[6] m. Yad. 4:5; m. Meg. 4:3-5.

[7] t. Sotah 33a.

[8] Sifre Deuteronomy 161; Abot de Rabbi Nathan 12; Pesiqta Rabbati 14b.

[9] b. Qidd. 31b and 49a; b. Ber. 8a-b and 45a; b. B. Bat. 134a; b. Sukkah 28a; b. Yoma 20b; b. Pes. 50b; b. Mo'ed Qat. 21a; b. Ketub. 8b; b. Sotah 37b and 39b; b. Hul. 142a; b. Erub. 62a; b. Sanh. 7b; b. Shab. 115a-b, 155a, and 175a; b. Meg. 3a, 17a, 21a, 23b, and 32a; y. Meg. 4:1, 4-5; y. Ber. 9c; y. Bik. 65d.

[10] Alexander, "Jewish Aramaic Translations," 238 n. 18; 248; Levine, *Aramaic Version,* 10.

[11] Some of the Targums would not have been used in the public synagogue reading (such as those to certain non-Haftarah prophetic texts).

3:3 ratio.) The original text had pride of place; not only was it presented first, but the presence of the Torah scroll during the reading served to underscore the holiness of the text—physically as well as orally. In addition, certain limits were placed on the presentation of Targums: it was forbidden to translate certain biblical verses, and some translations were censured.[12] And yet, the two readers presented the text to the community together, standing side by side. The presentation of the Targum with the Hebrew text served to grant authority to Targumic interpretive changes and additions to the Bible; in fact, Alexander argues that, "The rabbinic view of the function of the targum does not envisage it as an independent version: targum should always stand in the presence of Scripture; original and translation should always be juxtaposed and live in dialectical tension."[13] Yet we also find evidence of great ambivalence concerning the act of creating a translation: according to m. Meg. 4:4, it was forbidden to leave the synagogue while the Torah reader was reading, but not while the *meturgeman* was translating; in addition, m. Meg. 4:5 and b. Meg. 8b-9a indicate that the Targums "do not render the hands unclean." The very act of translating holy Scripture into another language also presented the leaders of the Jewish community with a quandary: b. Qidd. 49a states that, "He who translates a verse verbatim is a liar, and he who alters it is a villain and a heretic!"

Though we find texts recording great concern about fixing constraints on the act of translation, we find in the Targums some of the most daring and creative expansions of biblical stories and themes; in fact, the Pentateuchal Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (Tg. Ps.-J.) is roughly twice the length of the Hebrew original. In addition, even in relatively literal

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[12] See m. Meg. 4:9, 10; t. Meg. 4(3): 31, b. Meg. 25a-b. For example, the *meturgeman* was prohibited from translating Gen 35:22, Num 6:24 ff., and 2 Samuel 11-12.

[13] Alexander, "Jewish Aramaic Translations," 239.

Targums (like Onqelos) we find a tendency to translate words or phrases in a way that preserves the length and grammatical patterns of the Hebrew original, but introduces surprising new ideas. Frequently, traditions appear in the Targums that also appear in midrashim. In fact, many scholars have noted the links that exist between Targums and midrash.[14] This is not only because both Targumic and midrashic literature grew and flourished during the same historical period (beginning, arguably, during the Second Temple period and developing at least through the Talmudic period); nor is it only because of the many shared traditions that appear in each kind of work. Midrash and Targum as literary genres are often examined in relation to one another because it is clear that in both genres, there is a definite exegetical aim. The midrashists and the Targumists sought, in varied ways, to promote understanding of the biblical text.

Certain concerns dominate Targumic portrayals of Jethro: the identity of the figure (and his various names), his daughter's marriage to Moses, his conversion (or lack thereof), his statement of faith in Exod 18:11, his sacrifice in Exod 18:12, his advice to Moses, and the identity of his descendants. In addition, several of the Targum texts analyzed below intersect with Talmudic texts that provide a great deal of information about the boundaries between the Jewish and non-Jewish players in the story of Jethro. Though the Targums frequently differ in their presentations of Jethro, a general anxiety about his religious identity and Moses's intermarriage with his daughter tends to figure prominently.

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[14] See, for example, two articles by Robert Hayward: "Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan," *JJS* 42:2 (1991): 215-246; "The Date of Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Some Comments," *JJS* 40 (1989): 7-30. Bowker, *Targums,* 3-92, presents his introduction to the Targums in the context of other (predominantly midrashic) Jewish literature. See also P. Flesher, "The Targumim in the Context of Rabbinic Literature," in *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature* (ed. Neusner; New York: Doubleday, 1994), 612-29.

### Who is Jethro? Names and titles

Both Targum Onqelos (Tg. Onq.)[15] and Targum Neofiti (Tg. Neof.)[16] retain the

variety of names for the figure of Moses' father-in-law; he is called Reuel, Jethro and

Hobab throughout the pertinent texts.  This is not surprising, since Tg. Onq. tends to

translate more literally than other Targums, and Tg. Neof. is certainly less expansive than

Tg. Ps.-J.[17]  It is remarkable, therefore, that both of these Targums do choose to change

Jethro's *title* in Exod 2:16: rather than referring to him as a priest (כהנא, see Tg. Onq. to

Exod 19:24, among numerous other places), both Tg. Onq. and Tg. Neof. refer to Jethro

as a רבה/רבא, a "chief."  Hence a designation of religious leadership turns into an ethnic,

political title.[18]  Perhaps the Targumists[19] had fewer problems with the notion of Jethro as

a leader of his ethnic group than as a "priest."  It is interesting to note, however, that

neither Tg. Onq. nor Tg. Neof. alters Jethro's speech in Exod 18:23, in which Jethro

speaks to Moses on behalf of God (expressing God's will).  Thus it appears that it is not

Jethro's proximity to the Israelite deity, his relationship with that deity, or his wisdom as

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[15] The primary texts utilized in the present study of Tg. Onq. are: A. Sperber, *The Bible in Aramaic: The Pentateuch according to Targum Onkelos* (Leiden: Brill, 1992); B. Grossfeld, *The Targum Onkelos to Exodus* (The Aramaic Bible 7; Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1988); Grossfeld, *The Targum Onkelos to Leviticus and Numbers* (The Aramaic Bible 8; Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1988); I. Drazin, *Targum Onkelos to Numbers* (New York: Ktav, 1998).

[16] The primary texts utilized in the present study of Tg. Neof. are: M. McNamara, R. Hayward and M. Maher, *Targum Neofiti 1: Exodus and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Exodus* (The Aramaic Bible 2; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgcal Press, 1994); McNamara and Ernest G. Clarke, *Targum Neofiti 1: Numbers and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Numbers* (The Aramaic Bible 4; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgcal Press, 1995); A. Diez Macho, *Neophyti 1 Tomo II Exodo* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Cientificas, 1970); Diez Macho, *Neophyti 1 Tomo IV Numeros* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Cientificas, 1974).

[17] In addition to previously mentioned texts, I am utilizing E. G. Clarke, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of the Pentateuch: Text and Concordance* (Hoboken: Ktav, 1984).

[18] Note that the Samaritan Targums retain the title כהן, while Peshitta utilizes *komer* in this verse (which is a word used in Tg. Onq. to refer to idolatrous priests).

[19] I use the term "Targumist(s)" to refer to the sources of the translation found in each Targum; by referring to the authorship in this fashion, however, I am not assuming single authorship of any given Targum, nor am I assuming that the identities of these translators can in fact be discovered.

an advisor to Moses in matters of religious significance that is the problem in Exod 2:16.
Nor is the problem religious officiation in a *valid* (Yahwistic) cultic setting: both Tg.
Onq. and Tg. Neof. present Jethro as the officiant of his own sacrifice in Exodus 18
(though in Neofiti, it is the "wise men" [חכימיא] and not the "elders" [זקנים] who partake).
What, then, leads the Targumists of Tg. Onq. and Tg. Neof. to alter Jethro's title?  The
only conclusion justifiable from the evidence is that in both cases, the goal was to avoid
designating Jethro as a כהן; perhaps this title is to be reserved for Israelite officials of the
Israelite Yahwistic cult.[20]

In Tg. Ps.-J. we find the most creative presentation of Jethro, his various names,
and his title.  In Exodus 2, Tg. Ps.-J. introduces us to Reuel, Zipporah's *grandfather*, the
אוניס of Midian.[21]  This title can have several meanings.  Jastrow translates the word as
"priest, tyrannus, lord, ruler."[22]  McNamara notes that there are only two occurrences of
this word in Tg. Ps.-J. (the other is in Exod 18:1), and draws a link between this title and
√ענס meaning "take by force, oppress"; Levy suggests the title comes from the Greek
ευνοος, a "well-minded, benevolent" master.[23]  It is possible, therefore, that Tg. Ps.-J. is
retaining the sense of "cultic officiants," while purposefully refraining from using the
word כהן to identify Reuel.  In Exodus 3, Tg. Ps.-J. introduces Jethro, the רבא of Midian,
Moses' father-in-law.  Thus Reuel and Jethro are two separate figures with different
titles: Jethro is Moses' father-in-law, Reuel is Zipporah's grandfather.  This translation
maneuver seems to clear up confusion concerning two of the names given to Moses'

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[20] It is noteworthy that Tg. Onq., Tg. Neof. and Tg. Ps.-J. to Gen 41:45 refer to the father of Asenath, the priest of On, as רבא.  Targum Jonathan uses the term כומרא to describe the idolatrous priests in Judges 17.
[21] Reuel is also identified as Zipporah's grandfather in Sifre Numbers 78. Tg. Onq. and Tg. Neof. retain the name "Reuel" in this text but do not offer any explanation or interpretation of that name.
[22] Jastrow, 29.
[23] J. Levy, *Chaldaisches Worterbuchuber die Targumim und einen grossen Theil des rabbinischen Schrifttums* (Leipzig: G. Engel, 1881), 15.

father-in-law.  Tg. Ps.-J. to Num 10:29 reports events concerning "Hobab the son of Reuel the Midianite, father-in-law of Moses"; this implies that Hobab and Jethro are the same figure.

An impressive tradition is recorded in Tg. Ps.-J. concerning Reuel's behavior upon taking Moses into his home.  Though the tradition does not appear in any of the other Targums, it does appear in The Chronicle of Moses and Sefer ha-Yashar.[24]  It is likely that the Targumist of Ps.-J. drew upon a legend (or body of legends) concerning Reuel's treatment of Moses and the origin of Moses' staff that would have been widely known; for this reason, the Targumist includes the following story in somewhat abbreviated form, leaving out significant details.  According to M. Maher, this is characteristic of Tg. Ps.-J.; Maher notes that the Targumist "was satisfied to allude to the traditions and to allow his readers to complete the picture for themselves."[25]

According to Tg. Ps.-J. to Exod 2:21, when Reuel learns about Moses' past his hospitality is significantly lessened:

> But when Reuel learned that Moses had fled from before
> Pharaoh, he threw him into a pit.[26]  Zipporah, the daughter

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[24] For The Chronicle of Moses, see A. Shinan, "The Chronicle of Moses our Master," *HaSifrut* 24 (1977), 100-116.  For Sefer ha-Yashar, see L. Goldschmidt, *Sepher hajaschar. Das Heldenbuch, Sagen, Berichte und Erzahlungen aus der israelitischen Urzeit* (Berlin: Harz, 1923); M. M. Noah, *The Book of Jasher; referred to in Joshua and Second Samuel* (New York: M. M. Gould & A. S. Gould, 1840).  M. Maher engages in a thorough and useful analysis of Tg. Ps.-J. to Exod 2:22 in relation to The Chronicle of Moses and Sefer ha-Yashar; see Maher, "Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of Exodus 2:21," in *Targumic and Cognate Studies*, 81-99.  The purpose of Maher's article is to explore the general body of traditions informing Tg. Ps-J.'s exegesis of Exod 2:21 and to make basic arguments about the development of these traditions in The Chronicle of Moses and Sefer ha-Yashar.  This argument is outside the scope of my task, and I therefore refer the reader to Maher's article for details.

[25] Maher, "Targum Pseudo-Jonathan," 87.  See also A. Shinan, "A Word to the Wise is Sufficient," *Criticism and Interpretation* 18 (1982), 69-77.

[26] Both The Chronicle of Moses and Sefer ha-Yashar provide more information on Moses' conversation with Reuel before the former was thrown into a pit; in each case, Moses tells Reuel about his heroic travels among the Ethiopians. See Shinan, "The Chronicle," 109-12, §§8-13; Goldschmidt, *Sepher hajaschar,* 249-58.  Reuel's motivation for throwing Moses into the pit was, therefore, to return him to Ethiopia and ingratiate himself with the Ethiopians.  Though this aspect of the story is not recorded in Tg. Ps.-J. to Exod

of his son, sustained Moses in secret for ten years.  At the
end of the ten years, he [Reuel] brought him out of the pit
and Moses ascended into Reuel's garden, where he gave
thanks and prayed before the LORD, who worked for him
miracles and mighty deeds.[27]  And he was shown the rod
that was created at twilight, and clearly engraved upon it[28]
was the Great and Glorious Name through which he would
perform wonders in Egypt, and through which he would
divide the Reed Sea and bring forth water from the rock.  It
was affixed in the midst of the garden.  Immediately, he
stretched forth his hand and took it.  Behold, because of
this Moses consented to dwell with the man, and he gave
Zipporah, the daughter of his son, to Moses.[29]

This story accomplishes several hermeneutical aims.  First, it villainizes Reuel to

some extent, at best showing him to be loyal to the evil Pharaoh, at worst demonstrating

his untrustworthy and malevolent character.   This villainization is not necessarily

problematic for Tg. Ps.-J.'s general treatment of Jethro, because these two names are

presented as belonging to two separate people; however, he is still Zipporah's grandfather

and hence part of the Midianite family into which Moses marries.  Second, the story

explains where and how Moses acquires the rod that appears in Exodus 3.  While it

would be sensible for most readers to assume that rod to be a simple shepherd's staff

(after all, Moses is a shepherd), the Targumist apparently felt the need to explain the

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2:21, the Targumist does allude to this tradition in its interpretation of Num 12:1, 8: "And Mirian and
Aaron spoke words against Moses that were not worthy regarding the matter of the Cushite woman whom
the Cushites had married to Moses during his flight from Pharaoh."

[27] An expanded version of this part of the tradition appears in Sefer ha-Yashar, in which Zipporah engages
Reuel in a conversation that results in his decision to see if Moses is still alive; see Goldschmidt, *Sepher
hajaschar,* 262-3.

[28]This is a translation of וחקיין ומפרש, a common idiom in Tg. Ps.-J..  So McNamara, 166 n. 28.

[29] Several works that are generally designated as "later" midrash contain elements of this tradition: Pesiqta
of Rab Kahana 19:6, Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10, and Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer 40 each mention the rod
engraved with God's name; Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer even explains how the rod ended up in Reuel's garden.  It
is difficult, because of Tg. Ps.-J.'s complicated composition and redaction history, to determine the
"direction of borrowing" concerning this tradition: Did these later midrashim have access to Tg. Ps.-J., or
to some form of the tradition contained therein?  Do the presentations of this tradition in Tg. Ps.-J. and the
midrashim represent some sort of common, unknown source?  Or was this story added into Tg. Ps.-J. at a
much later date, in response to the innovation of the midrashim?

origins of this miracle-performing staff. Third, it valorizes Zipporah and, consequently, provides support for the notion that she is worthy of Moses's love. Fourth, it explains why Moses would have agreed to stay with this אונים of a foreign religion: he has acquired an important religious tool and a loyal wife! Fifth, it fills in a large gap of time. After all, Moses is reported to be an old man by the time of the exodus, and the events leading up to the exodus begin in Exodus 3. Sixth, and finally, it shows Moses to be a man who overcomes great obstacles with spiritual fortitude and a strong connection to God.

If the Targumist intended to malign Reuel, this tale can accomplish that goal. If, however, the Targumist felt bound to include this tradition and wanted to avoid maligning Jethro, this would explain the choice to separate Reuel from Jethro in Exodus 2 and 3. It is important to note, however, that Jethro is presented negatively as well, in Tg. Ps.-J. to Exod 4:24-26. Why, then, is it necessary for the Targumist to separate these two figures? Why not simply conflate Reuel and Jethro, presenting them as one figure? Perhaps the Targumist was constrained by already-existing traditions about Reuel and Jethro that would have been known to the general public, and hence their depiction in the Targums is not uniform.

### Moses' Midianite Family

The Targums demonstrate a great deal of interest in Moses' marriage to Zipporah, especially concerning their offspring. This is arguably one of the more anxiety-producing elements of the biblical story, combining several challenging concepts: intermarriage, patrilineal and matrilineal descent, and even circumcision. The Targums

seek to justify Moses' choice to marry Zipporah while simultaneously problematizing it; they valorize Zipporah while also directly critiquing Moses for his infringement of a central precept (against cohabiting with a "heathen" woman). Some of this is accomplished in direct and obvious language, while other critiques are only implied.

It is not surprising that Exod 2:22 undergoes some exegetical development in the Targums. The biblical text of this verse explains Moses' choice to name his son Gershom: "For he said, 'I have been a stranger in a foreign land' (גר הייתי בארץ נכריה).'' The terms "stranger" and "foreign" are of primary interest in this analysis, and it is useful to view the Targumic treatments of this verse together:

Tg. Onq. דייר הויתי בארע נוכריה

Tg. Ps.-J. דייר הויתי בארעה נוכריה דלא דידי

Tg. Neof. דייר ותותב אנא בארע נוכראה

There are notable differences between these texts, besides variant spellings. Tg. Ps.-J. adds the explanatory phrase "that is not mine," further establishing Moses' existence as an outsider in the land. Apparently the Targumist felt the need to clarify that "foreignness" is a concept rooted in notions of belonging and ownership; the land is foreign because it is not Moses' own homeland. However, Tg. Onq. and Tg. Ps.-J. retain the perfect form of the verb "to be," thereby maintaining ambiguity concerning the referent of this statement: is the "foreign land" to be understood as Egypt or Midian? Tg. Neof.'s rendering of the phrase is quite different from the other two Targums: first, Tg. Neof. doubles the translation of the Hebrew word גר, translating it with two Aramaic

terms, דייר and תותב.[30] The addition of the second term, meaning "settler" or "immigrant," indicates that for Tg. Neof., Moses' experience in Midian is qualitatively colored by his experience as a new resident: he was not born or raised there. We can be certain that the referent for Tg. Neof. is in fact Midian, because of the Targumist's choice to translate as the predicate pronoun that which the other Targums kept in the perfect tense (הויתי): "I *am* a דייר and תותב in a foreign land."[31] Tg. Neof., more than the other Targums, makes a statement about Moses' experience of being an outsider in Midian.

In spite of these differences, it is clear that these Targums share a common tradition which translates the Hebrew גר as דייר. This Aramaic term has a wide semantic range; throughout rabbinic literature, דייר refers to a tenant, inhabitant, lodger, or temporary dweller;[32] however, in portions of the Talmud, the term is also used to signify "proselyte."[33] This is similar to the post-Biblical semantic range of the word גר; in the biblical text, גר most frequently refers to a sojourner, someone who is out of his/her native context, but in post-biblical interpretation, the word comes to mean "convert" as well. Hence we see that the Targumists have presented a truly masterful rendering of the Hebrew text, using a word that carries many of the same connotations that the Hebrew גר would have had for its audience.

Tg. Neof.'s use of the double דייר ותותב is especially interesting in light of the Targumic renderings of Gen 23:4 (גר ותושב); Tg. Onq. and Tg. Ps.-J. each renders this phrase דייר ותותב, while Tg. Neof. translates simply דייר. Why does Tg. Neof. omit the

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[30] This kind of double-translation is common throughout Tg. Neof. See discussion of the phenomenon in B. Barry Levy, *Targum Neophyti 1: A Textual Study* (New York: University Press of America, 1986), 52-84, esp. 52-3; Alexander, "Jewish Aramaic Translations," 227.

[31] So McNamara, *Targum Neofiti and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Exodus,* 16-7; Diez-Macho, *Neophyti 1: Exodo,* 410.

[32] Jastrow, 297.

[33] See b. Git. 54a, b. Bekh. 30a.

second term in Gen 23:4, while adding it in Exod 2:22?  This question, combined with other examples of Tg. Neof.'s translations for biblical Hebrew גר, presents a puzzling picture.  In Exod 12:48-49, for example, Tg. Neof. translates גר two different ways: דייר (v. 48) and ייירויגה (v. 49).  There is no obvious difference between the usages of biblical Hebrew גר  in vv. 48 and 49; in fact, the two verses discuss the very same stranger.  Hence, no discernible pattern can be detected in Tg. Neof.'s translations of גר.

Tg. Onq. and Tg. Ps.-J., on the other hand, demonstrate a more deliberate pattern.  When the biblical word גר is used to describe a non-Israelite (such as in Exod 12:48-9, 22:20; Num 9:4, 15:14), these Targums translate the word as גיור.[34]  If, however, the biblical word גר is used to describe an 'insider' such as Abraham or an Israelite, these Targums translate the word as דייר.  Hence in Tg. Onq. and Tg. Ps.-J. we find that דייר refers to an insider who is somehow on foreign soil (or, in the case of Numbers 9 and 15, in an altered state), while גיור refers to an actual outsider.  The choice to render Exod 2:22 with the word דייר indicates that, for Tg. Onq. and Tg. Ps.-J., Moses was on foreign soil, out of his element, but was still an "insider" vis-à-vis Israel.

Because circumcision is such an important indicator of identity, it is no surprise that the Targumists seek to explain the mysterious story in Exod 4:24-26 in a way that illuminates the significance of this covenantal act.  The biblical text itself is famously cryptic: God seeks to kill someone (either Moses or Gershom) at a night encampment on the way to Egypt; Zipporah acts quickly, circumcising Gershom, and uses the foreskin to somehow placate God, ending the attack.  Each of the Targums substitutes an angel of God as the attacking figure, to avoid the anthropomorphic and theological implications of

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[34] See Sokoloff, "גיור", 127; "גייר", 127-8; "דייר", 146. Sokoloff notes that the first two words bear the primary meaning of "convert", whereas דייר  primarily refers to residence.

God serving as his own hit man. What is most interesting is the way in which the Targums establish a concrete and direct link between the attack and the act of circumcision. Onqelos is, once again, the most brief: After Zipporah circumcises Gershom and brings the foreskin forward (it is unclear if she presents it to Moses or the angel), she states, "with this circumcision blood may the groom be given back to us." Tg. Ps.-J. and Tg. Neof. go further, implicating Jethro in this event. This implication is not created *ex nihilo;* rather, it is Zipporah's use of the root חתן in the Hebrew text which enables the Targumist to bring Jethro into the picture; after all, he is continuously identified in the Hebrew text as Moses' חותן (while in Aramaic, the word חמא is used instead). This word creates a lexical link: its significance vis-à-vis Jethro *in Hebrew* is exploited even though that particular interpretation is *out of context* and *in a different language* in this verse. The hermeneutical world of the word is more important than the confines of this particular biblical verse. This maneuver demonstrates the richness of Targumic exegesis: the word חתן is used in this text to refer to Moses while simultaneously establishing a lexical link with Jethro. Words can, in fact, serve multiple purposes (in several languages!), making each sentence of the biblical text—and the Targums—rich with interpretive potential.

In Tg. Neof., Zipporah completes the circumcision and brings the foreskin near the feet of the attacking angel, stating, "Because the groom (חתנא) sought to circumcise, but his father-in-law (יומה) did not permit him, may the blood of this circumcision now atone for the sins of his son-in-law (חתניה)." Thus Tg. Neof. states directly that Moses' failure to circumcise Gershom—the cause for this sudden attack—is the result of Jethro's preventative action! The Targum does not tell us how or why this situation came to be.

Tg. Ps.-J. contains the same tradition, and includes some enticing clues. In v. 24, the Targumist explains that the angel of God has come to kill Moses:

> because of Gershom his son, who was not circumcised, because of the matter concerning Jethro his father-in-law, who did not permit him to circumcise him. But Eliezer was circumcised, according to *the condition that the two of them agreed upon.*[35]

This Targumic expansion appears to reflect the tradition we encountered in Mekilta Amalek 3,[36] which presents the details of an agreement between Moses and Jethro concerning Moses' first-born son. It is curious that the Targumist does not include more information about that agreement; are we to assume that the ancient readers of the Targum knew about that tradition? What the Targums do make clear is that Jethro is the enemy in this situation: he has prevented the performance of a central covenantal act, one that has life-or-death ramifications. He has rejected—and prevented—performance of one of the most defining acts which separates God's people from everyone else. Not only is he an outsider, but he is a threat and a hindrance to insiders as well. Indeed, the Targums underscore the centrality of circumcision and its power; in all of the Targums discussed here, Zipporah goes on in v. 26 to extol the virtues of the act and its power to save her husband's life, thereby translating the confusing Hebrew phrase "a bridegroom of blood" into a hymn of praise.[37]

A statement concerning Moses' marriage to Zipporah and the implications for their offspring comes in Tg. Ps.-J., in its treatment of Exod 6:25 and Numbers 25:

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[35] My emphasis.

[36] Lauterbach 2:168-169, lines 92-102.

[37] This treatment of Exod 4:24-26 also appears in b. Ned. 31b-32a. I will not attempt to discern where the tradition originally appeared, nor how it came to appear in more than one text.

Exod 6:25:

ואלעזר בר אהרון נסיב ליה מברתוי דיתרו הוא פוטיאל ליה לאיתנו ויילדת ליה ית פנחס.

Aaron's son Eliezer took one of the daughters of Jethro (who is Putiel) as a wife, and she bore him Pinhas.

Num 25:6:

והא גבר מבני ישראל אתא ואחד בבלוריתא דמדינתא וקריב יתיה לות אחוי למחמי משה ולמחמי כל כנישתא דבני ישראל עני וכן אמר למשה אן מה דא למקרב לגבה ואין אמר אנת דאסירא היא הלא אנת נסיבת ית מדייניתא ברת יתרו וכדי שמע משה רתח ואישתלי ואינון בכן וקריין שמע וקיימין בתרע משכן זימנא.

Then an Israelite man came and took hold of the braid of a Midianite woman, and brought her to his kinsmen in the sight of Moses and in the sight of the whole congregation of Israel. He spoke and said to Moses, "What is wrong if I approach her? And if you say it is forbidden, did you not marry a Midianite woman, the daughter of Jethro? When Moses heard, he became hot and erred.[38] But they wept and recited the Shema, standing at the door of the Tent of Meeting.

The Targum continues, describing Pinhas' reaction: he remembers the penalty for cohabitation with an idolatrous woman and proceeds to kill the couple who have offended Moses and the Israelites. After a lengthy description of the twelve miracles that occurred for Pinhas because of his zeal, the Targum returns to the issue of Pinhas' own ancestry in Num 26:13: "Because they disgraced him, saying, 'Is he not a son of Puti the Midianite?', I will distinguish him by the high priesthood."

Several themes emerge from these verses of the Targum: Pinhas' genealogical link to Jethro, the issue of cohabitation with Midianite women, the question of Moses' own marriage to a Midianite woman, and Pinhas' status vis-à-vis his lineage. We have seen most of these themes before: Exodus Rabbah 7:5 utilizes wordplay to identify Putiel with Jethro, thereby establishing Jethro as an ancestor of Pinhas; b. Sotah 43a raises the same genealogical point and addresses the implications for Pinhas' status in the

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[38] b. Sanh. 82b: "Moses forgot the halakhah concerning marriage with an idolatrous woman."

community; and b. Sanh. 82 b contains a critique of Moses' marriage, voiced by Zimri. Tg. Ps.-J. presents elements of this larger body of traditions, stating directly that Jethro *is* Putiel (leaving out a justification for the link), raising Zimri's question about Moses' marriage, and describing Pinhas' reward for his deeds even in the face of ridicule by his fellow Israelites. Tg. Ps.-J. is less concerned with rehabilitating Pinhas' lineage than b. Sotah 43a, but it is also possible that the Targumist assumed the audience's awareness of the many elements to this tradition cycle and simply abbreviated a few points.

The overall effect of this Targumic expansion is dependant, to an extent, upon how one interprets the relationship between different texts within the same Targum. It is possible, of course, that the Targumist included the link between Jethro and Putiel in Exod 6:25 without awareness of or concern for the implications of that link in Numbers 25. In other words, it is possible for a single Targum to demonstrate evidence of tension; not all texts in Tg. Ps.-J. need to demonstrate awareness of or agreement with every other text in the same Targum. Hence it is possible that the Targumist of Ps.-J. did not intend to make a bold statement concerning Pinhas' ancestry and behavior. However, if we read the Targumic treatments of Exod 6:25 and Numbers 25 together, a compelling picture emerges. Pinhas is definitively a descendant of Jethro, and Pinhas is the one who recalls the law Moses uttered (that cohabitation with a Midianite woman is forbidden, and that the punishment is death); in addition, it is Pinhas who administers the punishment. This is quite significant: the descendant of Jethro, the result of an intermarriage with a Midianite woman, is the upholder of laws banning such couplings.[39] The Targum's criticism of Moses' intermarriage is evident. Moses is openly rebuked for marrying

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[39] It would be fascinating to examine this text from a psychological perspective, highlighting the phenomenon of a figure *rejecting* a problematic part of his own identity.

Zipporah, and experiences a momentary loss of leadership capabilities as a result. Does this mean Moses is guilty of the same crime as Zimri? Not exactly: after all, Moses did not misbehave specifically at Baal Peor, nor did he commit idolatry.[40] But his silence in response to Zimri's statement demonstrates a degree of acquiescence: it would indeed be hypocritical for Moses to outlaw behavior he himself has demonstrated, at least to some extent. The text is curiously silent concerning the implications of Zimri's attack on Moses; though Zimri ultimately receives the punishment he has earned, Moses himself is not rehabilitated. Finally, because Pinhas is the one who rises to take action, we see that the descendants of Jethro can demonstrate merit among the Israelites. It is reasonable to assume that the tradition recorded in the Targum is related to and somehow interacts with the traditions recorded in the Talmud and midrashim, and based on that assumption, this treatment of Pinhas has even further implications for our understanding of Jethro's role in the Targum: as a descendant of Jethro, Pinhas can serve as a positive reflection of his great-grandfather; however, the tradition recorded in b. Sotah 43a makes it clear that any strength demonstrated by Pinhas is a result of his *Israelite* lineage and its mitigating effect upon his idolatrous ancestry. Thus in the Talmud, Pinhas, Jethro's descendant, is a valorized figure and a member of the Sanhedrin *because* he contains pure Israelite blood. Within the hermeneutical world generated by the Targum and its Talmudic intertexts, Jethro and his kin are simultaneously brought near and yet kept at a distance.

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[40] Or did he? See b. Sanh. 81b: "R. Hiyya b. Abuiah said: He who is intimate with a heathen woman is as though he had intermarried with an idol."

**Jethro the proselyte**

In spite of the treatment of Jethro just discussed, Tg. Ps.-J. also contains the tradition that Jethro became a proselyte to Judaism. Tg. Ps.-J. is unique among the Targums in this regard. Though Tg. Neof. and Tg. Onq. alter Jethro's statement of faith in Exod 18:11 (see discussion below), only Tg. Ps.-J. states that Jethro formally converted. In its version of Exod 18:6, the Targum tells us that Jethro sends word to Moses concerning his arrival, saying, "I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you to convert (לאתגיירא)." The Targumist has turned the statement in the Bible, "I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons" into a statement of intention to convert combined with an appeal to be received. In Exod 18:7, the Targumist expands the text with a few significant details (in italics): "Moses went out *from under the clouds of Glory* to meet his father-in-law; he bowed and kissed him *and converted him*; each man asked after the other's welfare, and they went into the tent *of the house of study*."[41] The text does not reveal how the conversion takes place, but it does indicate that immediately afterward, Jethro enters into study with Moses. Perhaps study is the pre-eminent marker of a new convert, or perhaps the act of studying completes the conversion; at any rate, it is clear that in the mind of the Targumist, study is not a *prerequisite* for conversion. Later on, when Jethro leaves the Israelite encampment (Exod 18:27), he goes to convert (לגיירא) all of the people of his own land. Thus he has the power, as a new convert, to convert others.

Tg. Onq., Tg. Neof. and Tg. Ps.-J. all expand Num 10:29-32 in ways that demonstrate their interpretations of Jethro's potential conversion. Tg. Onq. notes that

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[41] Note that in Tg. Neof., Moses does not bow to Jethro; he simply kisses him and the men ask about each other's welfare. In the Samaritan Targum, Jethro, his daughter and his grandchildren bow to Moses.

Hobab should accompany the Israelites into the land because of what he has learned (Num 10:31): "You know how we encamped in the wilderness, *and the mighty deeds which were done* (אתעבידא) *for us, you have seen with your own eyes*." The italicized phrase is a Targumic expansion which interprets the MT והיית לנו לעינים. According to Tg. Onq., the Hebrew phrase should be understood as a reference to the miracles performed by God for the Israelites during the exodus. The perfect-tense of the verb "were done" indicates that Hobab has either personally seen or intimately learned about the miracles of the exodus, demonstrating conflation of Jethro with Hobab; after all, Jethro was the one who learned about the exodus from Moses. However, no element of conversion is mentioned in Tg. Onq. Tg. Neof. adds an element to Num 10:31 that serves as a *potential* referent to conversion: "You know the marvels that the LORD has worked with us in every place we have encamped or while traveling in the wilderness, so you shall be testimony (סהדותה) for us." The word "testimony" can be interpreted in (at least) two ways: either Jethro can testify to the miracles that have occurred in the wilderness, for the benefit of the Israelites or the people they encounter; or, Jethro can testify to the fact that the Israelites are welcoming of others who wish to join the community.[42] In light of the direct context of this text, however, it is more likely the Targumist intended the former than the latter. Tg. Ps.-J. goes the furthest in establishing Jethro's role as a convert, rendering Num 10:29 in this way: "We are decamping from here to the land of which the Lord said 'I will give it to you.' Come with us, for the Lord spoke to Israel about doing good to proselytes (גיוריא)." Hence, Jethro should accompany the Israelites

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[42] The idea that Jethro/Hobab can testify to the Israelites' hospitality towards converts is suggested by McNamara, *Targum Neofiti and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Numbers,* 68 n. 15.

because he knows what God did and can corroborate the Israelites' claims. Tg. Ps.-J. refers directly to conversion, while Tg. Onq. and Tg. Neof. do not.

The variations in these traditions can be seen as evidence of inconsistency in Targumic exegesis:  we have seen how Jethro is held at a distance, retaining outsider status vis-à-vis the Israelites, and yet we also learn that he underwent conversion. However, this is not necessarily an inconsistency: it is possible that the Targumists had different ideas, or that some held the notion that conversion did not result in unfettered entrance into the Israelite people.  The fact that Jethro has converted in Tg. Ps.-J. is stated as fact, but his relationship with the Israelites is not characterized by complete access: Jethro refers to the Israelites *not* as "my people" in Exod 18:18, but as "your (Moses') people."   Tg. Ps.-J. indicates, therefore, that as a convert, Jethro has undergone a theological change, but not a social one.  In Tg. Ps.-J., Jethro demonstrates Cohen's point that there are several layers to the boundary around "Israel," and that a theological change does not necessarily constitute a social one.[43]

**Jethro's statement of faith (Exod 18:11)**

It is remarkable that in Tg. Ps.-J., Jethro is presented as a convert to Judaism, and yet his statement in Exod 18:11 remains theologically problematic.  The biblical text reads, "Now I know that YHWH is greater than all the gods"; other gods still exist, they are simply less impressive than the Israelite deity.  Tg. Ps.-J. renders this phrase, "Now I know[44] that the LORD is stronger than all of the gods."  Jethro, the convert to Judaism, is still only able to attest to the power of the Israelite deity *in relation* to other deities.  Does

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[43] Cohen, *Beginnings,* 1-10, 152.
[44] Or, have learned (חכימית).

this reflect on his status as a convert?  Can a convert retain theologically problematic

ideas?  Or is this a vestige of his idolatrous past?  One could argue that the Targumist

retained the wording of this sentence out of fidelity to the Hebrew text.  Complicating

this issue is the fact that in Exod 15:11, the Targumist also chooses to retain the

problematic statement uttered by the Israelites upon crossing the Reed Sea: "Who is

similar to you among the gods on high?"   It appears that in spite of the Targumist's

pietistic changes to the biblical text elsewhere,[45] there is no perceived problem with

Jethro's statement in Exod 18:11 *or* with the Israelites' utterance in Exod 15:11.

Jethro's statement in Exod 18:11, however, undergoes change in both Tg. Onq.

and Tg. Neof.  Tg. Neof. alters the utterance slightly:  "Now I know and it is revealed to

me that the Lord is stronger than the gods and lord over all of the lords."  In one sense,

Tg. Neof. appears to be "beefing up" Jethro's statement, doubling the MT's single

reference to God's might over the other gods by stating this fact in two separate clauses.

However, Tg. Neof. does not do away with the monolatrous tone of the original

statement: God's greatness is still being established in relation to other deities.  Tg. Onq.

makes the most dramatic change to this troublesome verse, turning Jethro into a genuine

monotheist:  "Now I know that the LORD is great, and there is no god other than him…"

Though Tg. Onq. makes no reference to conversion, it does present Jethro as undergoing

a significant theological change.  Apparently, the monolatrous content of the Hebrew text

troubled the Targumist of Tg. Onq. more than the other Targumists.  In fact, Tg. Onq.

alters more than one text in this way: both Exod 15:11 and Deut 3:24 are changed into

monotheistic statements.  Thus it is not the fact that *Jethro* is the speaker in Exod 18:11

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[45] See Sperber's treatment of Targumic changes that appear to be motivated by piety in *Aramaic Version,*
45-61.

that warranted interference by the Targumist; rather, the content of the verse required change, just as monolatrous statements uttered by the Israelites and Moses himself must be changed.  In this way, Tg. Onq. demonstrates a more overarching concern: monolatry is unacceptable regardless of who espouses it.


**Jethro's sacrifice (Exod 18:12)**

As noted in ch. 2, Jethro's presentation of a sacrifice in Exodus 18 is a source of interpretive anxiety.  It is possible to view Jethro as ineligible to present such sacrifices; he is—or at least was—an idolater.  However, the biblical text reports that the elders (and Aaron) come to partake in the sacrificial meal, thus bestowing honor on Jethro's sacrifice.  Tg. Onq. and Tg. Neof. do little or nothing to alter this verse.  Tg. Onq. presents a literal translation, while in Tg. Neof., it is reported that the "wise men" (as opposed to the elders) participate with Jethro.  It is Tg. Ps.-J. that presents the most significant changes to this verse.  Jethro takes (נסיב) "burnt offerings and holy sacrifices" before God, and all of the elders and Aaron come to participate with him, but Moses stands and officiates (הוה קאי ומשמש) before them.  The Aramaic word נסיב is a relatively literal rendering of the Hebrew ויקח; in both the MT and the Targum, the word utilized to describe Jethro's action is *not* equivalent to "offer" (קרב√ in both Hebrew and Aramaic).  In other words, the verb utilized in the Hebrew text of Exod 18:12 leaves the question of officiation somewhat open to interpretation; it is clear that Jethro brought the appropriate gifts, but there is no word present that definitively indicates his officiation of the sacrifice.  It appears that Tg. Ps.-J. presents this verse with a particular interpretation: Jethro brought gifts, and Moses offered them up.  In fact, the Aramaic word used to

described Moses' action, משמש, clearly means "officiate" throughout the Targumim.[46] Serving as a "priest" is an honor unique to Moses and the priestly line; though at this point in the story, the Israelites have not yet received the sacrificial laws, the Targumist demonstrates concern that they be followed. Moses acts as a priest in Exod 24:3-8 and Leviticus 8. Jethro, on the other hand, is not a priest, and Tg. Ps.-J.'s interpretation underscores that fact. Tg. Ps.-J. demonstrates a concern for priestly law.

This does not, however, belittle Jethro's offering. After all, any lay person would be prohibited from performing a sacrifice. In addition, Tg. Ps.-J. identifies the day on which the sacrifice took place in its introduction to Exod 18:13: "On the day after Yom Kippur, Moses sat to judge the people…."[47] This addition to the biblical text indicates that the day before the events recorded in Exod 18:13 and following, the day on which Jethro brought offerings for a sacrifice, was Yom Kippur. That Jethro affirmed the superiority of the Israelite deity and brought offerings on Yom Kippur is a great honor, indeed.

All three of the Pentateuchal Targumim indicate that Jethro had knowledge of the Torah. In Exod 18:16, each text takes the references to God's statutes (חוקים) and laws (תורות) and alters them: Moses reports to Jethro that he advises the people according to "God's laws and *his Torah* (אורייתא)." That which had been general has been made specific: Moses knows and judges according to God's official law code, the Torah.[48] Thus Torah is present, and it is at least possible that Jethro knows of it. But it is Jethro's remarks in Tg. Ps.-J. to Exod 18:23 that provide a clearer picture of Jethro's understanding of Torah:

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[46] Sokoloff, 559.
[47] See also Mekilta Amalek 3; Lauterbach 2:179 line 1.
[48] Tg. Onq. and Tg. Neof. also refer to *the Torah* (אורייתא) in their renditions of Exod 18:16.

> If you do this thing, so that you become free from [the task of] judging, then God will command to you his commandments, and you will be able to stand and hear them. Aaron too, and his sons and the elders of this people, will come in peace to the place of their courthouse.

Jethro informs Moses that it is only by taking his father-in-law's advice, and freeing himself from the arduous task of judging the people all day, that he will be able to climb Mt. Sinai and receive the Torah. The implications of this statement are significant indeed: it is only through following Jethro's advice that Moses can be ready to receive Torah on behalf of Israel. Perhaps more importantly, Jethro is conscious of this fact, and instructs Moses to listen to him *so that Moses may* receive Torah!

A methodological point is warranted here: I do not mean to suggest that the Targumist had a standardized, monolithic opinion concerning Jethro's awareness of Torah. I do not assume that the Targumist and contributors/redactors who followed wanted to demonstrate a clear argument. It is not only possible for Targums to contain contradictory texts, it is part of their richness (and the richness of rabbinic texts in general). Rather, it is fascinating that according to this Targumic tradition, Jethro was aware of Torah, knew of its importance, and sought to foster its presentation to the people of Israel.

## Jethro's advice to Moses

The content of Jethro's advice to Moses in Exod 18:19-23 involves a division of labor in order to guide the people; Moses will serve a major function, but it is also

necessary to appoint judges. It is Jethro's instruction to Moses (Exod 18:19-20) that is the focus of later expansion most significant to our analysis here:

> Now listen to me; I will give you counsel, and God be with you! You represent the people before God: you bring the disputes before God, and enjoin upon them the laws and the teachings (את החוקים ואת התורות), and make known to them the way (הדרך) they are to go and the practices they are to follow.

It is not surprising that Tg. Onq., Tg. Neof. and Tg. Ps.-J. each render ואת התורות as אורייתא, the Torah.[49] Thus Jethro instructs Moses to teach the people *Torah*. In Tg. Ps.-J. to Exod 18:20, however, Jethro instructs Moses to teach the Israelites other specifically Jewish matters as well:

> You enjoin upon the people the laws and the Torah; and make known to them the prayer they should pray in their synagogue; and the way to visit the sick and to go about burying the dead; and performing deeds of loving-kindness; and the work of the line of justice, and that they should work within the line of justice with the wicked.

The Targum expounds upon Jethro's instructions to Moses in a way that is similar to the tradition recorded in Mekilta Amalek 4.[50] The effect of including this tradition is to attribute to Jethro knowledge and perhaps creative authorship of some major principles of Jewish life: prayer, acts of loving-kindness, and the justice system. Central components of Judaism are thereby presented as coming from Jethro's mouth, making him the source of a good deal of the Jewish community's beliefs and practices.

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[49] See Levine's discussion of the prevalence of Torah in Targumic interpretation in *Aramaic Version,* 135-41.
[50] Lauterbach 2:182, lines 48-58.

Tg. Ps.-J. to Num 10:31-2 refers back to Jethro's good advice with an addition that has major implications: "For when we were encamped in the wilderness you knew how to judge and you taught us the business of judging…. And if you go with us, then the good which the LORD shall do to us we shall do to you in the distribution of the land."[51]  As reward for Jethro's good advice (as well as his conversion?) the Israelites will share some of their land with him.  This is the only reference among the Pentateuchal Targums to the apportionment of land among Jethro's descendants.[52]  The theme of land apportionment, which is prevalent among the Tannaitic midrashim, is largely ignored in the later midrashim (in favor of emphasis on Torah study), and is absent from the Pentateuchal Targumim aside from this reference.  We see that Tg. Ps.-J. drew upon rabbinic material more heavily than the other Pentateuchal Targumim.

Tg to Chronicles

The Targum of Chronicles (Tg. Chr.)[53] contains a mixture of types of Aramaic, demonstrating affinities to the other Targums and the Babylonian Talmud.  It appears to have undergone a final redaction only after the Talmudic period.[54]  There are three extant manuscripts, dating to the 13th and 14th centuries.[55]  Rashi, David Kimchi and other medieval scholars appear to be unaware of any Targum to Chronicles.[56]  Nor is Tg. Chr. mentioned in the first edition of the Rabbinic Bible (17th century).  It is difficult to

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[51] Tg. Ps.-J. identifies Hobab with Jethro, as demonstrated above.

[52] Targum Jonathan to Judg 1:16 translates the biblical text quite literally, hence retaining the reading that the descendants of Moses' father-in-law dwelt "with the people."

[53] A. Sperber, *The Targum to Khetuvim* (The Bible in Aramaic 4a; Leiden: Brill, 1968); D. R. G. Beattie and J. Stanley McIvor, *The Targum of Ruth and the Targum of Chronicles* (The Aramaic Bible 19; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1994).

[54] Alexander, "Targum," 328.

[55] Beattie and McIvor, *Targum of Ruth and Chronicles,* 14-5.

[56] Beattie and McIvor, *Targum of Ruth and Chronicles,* 14; Zunz, *Die gottesdienstlichen Vortrage,* 68 n. d.; Sperber, *Targum to Khetuvim,* 70-1.

establish dates for this work, and even more difficult to determine how well it was known and used in the Jewish community.  In spite of this difficulty, I am including this Targum in my analysis because its presentation of 1 Chr 2:55 (which is an extremely important text in post-biblical exegesis concerning Jethro) presents traditions that figure prominently in midrashic literature.  Whether these traditions came from midrashic collections and were imported into the Targum, or originated in the Targum, is a matter of debate.  Because manuscript and other textual evidence indicates that the Targum came into existence relatively late, it would be logical to surmise that the Targum drew from earlier midrashic works already in existence.  However, Tg. Chr. provides explanatory statements that are helpful for understanding the midrash, filling in hermeneutical leaps that are made by the midrash without explanation.  For this reason, it could be argued that the version of the Targum retained in Tg. Chr. is relatively old, retaining vestiges of a tradition that appears later in shorthand.  Further evidence for an early date can be drawn from analysis of the language of the Targum, which is a combination of Aramaic with Greek and Latin loanwords; this linguistic mixture compels Sperber to set an early date for the Targum as a whole and envision it in use by a community whose spoken language was Aramaic with a good deal of Greco-Roman influence.[57]

The expansion presented in the Targum to 1 Chr 2:55 is so great and so creative that it is worthwhile to see it in its entirety.  The biblical text upon which it is based is significant vis-à-vis Jethro because it describes the activities of the Kenites: "And [these are] the families of scribes dwelling at Jabez: Tir'atim, Shim'atim, Sukkatim.  These are the Kenites who descended from Hamat, father of the house of Rechab."

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[57] Sperber, *Targum to Khetuvim,* 71-2.

The Targum to this text is presented here in full:

וגניסת רחביה בר אליעזר בר משה תלמידיא יעבץ הוא עתניאל בר קנז.  יעבץ הוו צווחין ליה דאוקים
בעיצתיה תרביצה לתלמידיא, תרעתים הוו צווחין להון דהוה קלהון במשבחיהון הי כיבבא, שמעתים דהוון
מסברין אפין בשמעתא, סוכתים דהוון ממללין ברוח נבואה.  הנון שלמאי בני צפורה דמתיחסין עם גניסת
ליואי דאתין מזרעית משה רבהון דישראל דטב להון זכותיה מפרשין וארתיכין.

[These are] the families of Rechabiah son of Eliezer son of Moses, the students of Jabez who is Othniel son of Kenaz.  He was called Jabez because by his counsel an academy was set up for the students.  They were called Tir'atim because their voices when they sang praises were like the trumpet blast.  They were called Shim'atim for they were favorable to traditional law.[58]  They were called Sukkatim for they spoke with the spirit of prophecy.   These are the Shalmaites, the descendants of Zipporah, who were connected with the Levite families who came from the descendants of Moses, the leader of Israel, whose merit was worth more to them than horseman and chariots.[59]

The Targum uses a Greek loan word, גניסת, at the beginning of the text.  Borrowed from the Greek γενος, the term means essentially the same thing as משפחה: gens, family, gentry.[60]  According to Tg. Chr., this text is about the family of "Rechabiah, son of Eliezer, son of Moses."   Thus the reference to scribes is replaced with a lineage demonstrating Mosaic ancestry: Rechabiah is a descendant of Moses (and Zipporah) through Eliezer.  What the Targum does with this phrase is link Rechab (2 Kgs 10:15-23; Jeremiah 35; and of course 1 Chr 2:55) with Eliezer's son, who appears in 1 Chr 23:17; 24:21 and 26:25.  Rechabiah, the chief of the Levites, is not presented in the MT as related in any way to Rechab of the Kenites, and yet the Targum draws Rechabiah (whose name is even based on a different root from Rechab's) into this hermeneutical picture.  This is a particularly interesting endeavor because Rechab himself is not mentioned in this Targumic text (though there is an allusion to his name in the reference

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[58] Jastrow, 1600.
[59] For the translation "chariots," see Sokoloff, 78.
[60] Jastrow, 260.

to chariots). Thus the Targumist has replaced Rechab of the Kenites with Rechabiah who, as the Targumist points out, also has lineage from Jethro, through Zipporah.[61]

The names of the disciples who study at this academy are interpreted vis-à-vis desirable scholarly qualities.[62] The Tir'atim sing praises and their voices sound like trumpet blasts.[63] The Shim'atim are favorable to the traditional laws.[64] The Sukkatim[65] speak with the spirit of prophecy. In other words, these are unusually gifted and praiseworthy scholars, and, as the Targumist then explains, "these are the Shalmaites…" The word "Kenite" is not utilized in the Targums; rather, the Kenites are called Shalmaites, which is probably a reference to an Arabian tribe known to the Jews of the Talmudic period.[66] We know these figures to be identical to the Kenites not only because of Talmud texts that make such a link explicit,[67] but also because the Shalmaites are identified here as "the sons of Zipporah, who are מתיחסין with the family of the Levites, because they came from the descendants of Moses."

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[61] This family line is identified, as in the biblical text, with a group of scholars. While in the Bible, it is possible to understand "Jabez" as a reference to a person *or* to a place, it is clear that in this Targum, the former is the case: Jabez is a person who assembled disciples, whose advice (עיצה) resulted in the creation of an academy, and who is understood to be the same figure as Othniel son of Kenaz. Why this link to Othniel? No reason is offered in the Targum, but it is possible to suggest a biblical source for the connection: in Josh 15:15-17 and Judg 1:11-13, Joshua offers his daughter to the man who captures Kiriath-Sepher, and Othniel answers the call. The Targumist apparently interprets the name "Kiriath-Sepher" as a reference to scribal activity; thus Othniel captured for the Israelites a place of scholarship. Othniel comes to be seen as a man who is passionate about learning; in b. Tem. 16a he restores teachings that had been forgotten after Moses' death. Two learned men are synthesized into one figure. This synthesis is also present in Sifre Deuteronomy 352 (Finkelstein 412, lines 6-7); the midrash states that a group of people traveled to study in the wilderness "from Jabez, and this is Othniel son of Kenaz."

[62] Sifre Numbers 78 (Horovitz, 72 line 19 through 73 line 16) and Mekilta Amalek 4 (Lauterbach 2:187, lines 118-121) also interpret the families' names in terms of desirable qualities.

[63] The root תרע means "to sound an alarm, to blow the Shofar"; Jastrow, 1700. It is interesting that the Targumist does not use this root itself in its exegesis, but opts for יבב instead.

[64] שמעתא, derived from שמע "to hear", because of the notion that these laws represent the Oral Torah. See Jastrow, 1600.

[65] A סכואה is a seer or prophet, and the verbal root סכה means "to foresee". Jastrow, 989.

[66] McNamara, *Targum Neofiti and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to Numbers*, 19 n. 57. This word is also used in Targum Jonathan to Judg 1:16, 4:11; and 1 Sam 15:6.

[67] See y. Sheb. 6:36b; Genesis Rabbah 44:23; b. B. Bat. 56a; y. Qidd. 1:61d.

The verb utilized here, מתיחסין, can have a few significant meanings: it can refer to the act of enrolling or recording someone in a genealogical list, to demonstrate legitimate descent.[68]   It may also mean "to intermarry", based on the sense of the root as "connection, family relation."[69]   Were the Shalmaites thus recorded along with the Levites as a mark of honor, or were they intermarried into that clan?   In reality, it is arguable that the Shalmaites that descended from Zipporah were *already* Levites, because of their Mosaic origin (and the Targum appears to concede such a fact).   Why, then, is such a comment necessary from the Targumist?

Apparently the Targumist perceived a differentiation between the descendants of Zipporah and Moses on the one hand and the rest of the Levites on the other.   Whether or not that differentiation bears a value judgment is unclear.   It is simply evident that the Levites through Moses and the other Levites are somehow qualitatively different.   They were incorporated into the rest of the Levite clan through the action of a genealogist, or through intermarriage.   The fact that they required such incorporation is not an indication of problematic character: Tg. Chr. reports that Moses' "merit was worth more to them than horsemen and chariots."   Thus these were pious people whose love of Moses and Mosaic law was worthy of praise.

Tg. Chr. establishes the presence of some of Jethro's descendants in a scholarly setting, though it limits those descendants to those born to Moses and Zipporah.   By emphasizing the fact that the Shalmaites who studied with Jabez descended from Moses (and Zipporah), the Targumist establishes the fact that their lineage could, in fact, support their participation in Torah study.   In spite of the uncertainty concerning whether or not

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[68] Jastrow, 575; Sokoloff, 239.
[69] Jastrow, 578.

Jethro himself is to be seen as a proselyte, the children that result from Moses'
intermarriage are nonetheless eligible for the great honor of proximity to Torah. Their
qualification for this honor, however, is not due to any merit of Jethro's, but due to their
Mosaic blood. One identity must supercede another. It is as if the Targumist is aware of
the midrashic tradition connecting the scribes of 1 Chr 2:55 with Jethro, and has
constructed a narrative whereby that connection is maintained[70] but Jethro's role is
virtually non-existent: his name is not mentioned, the identifier "Kenite" is replaced with
"Shalmaite," and it is the Mosaic/Levite identity of these people that is emphasized.[71]
Tg. Neof. significantly undermines the tradition connecting Jethro to Torah scholarship.

**Conclusions**

The wealth of material in the Targums concerning Jethro reveals a great deal
about the Targumists' ideologies and interpretive practices. Tg. Onq. is the least
expansive of the three Pentateuchal Targums, though this Targum still makes significant
interpretive choices: Jethro is an ethnic leader (רבא) rather than a כהן; the term רג
apparently bears the connotation of "community outsider" and hence is reserved for non-
Israelites; and Jethro's statement of faith in Exod 18:11 undergoes a significant change,
becoming a monotheistic confession. Tg. Neof. is similar to Tg. Onq., but is slightly
more expansive: Jethro is implicated in Exodus 4 as a figure opposed to circumcision,
which is highly problematic if the Targumist views him as a convert. Because Tg. Neof.
does not explicitly refer to Jethro as a proselyte, however, we have no way of knowing

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[70] Because of the prevalence of this tradition in other texts, it is safe to assume it was a strong tradition and could not be completely discarded.

[71] I thank W. Gilders for helping me articulate this point, via personal communication (May 2008).

how the tradition recorded in Exodus 4 (which also appears in Tannaitic midrashim) bears significance vis-à-vis his conversion.

Tg. Ps.-J. is the most expansive and complex in its treatment of Jethro. According to this Targum, Reuel and Jethro are separate figures, and Reuel's treatment of Moses is highly negative. Jethro is the villain who prevents Moses from circumcising Gershom, and yet we learn that Moses cooperates with him in the scheme. Only in Tg. Ps.-J. is Jethro identified explicitly as a convert, though his "confession" in Exod 18:11 is not unproblematic, and he does not identify him with the Israelite people in Exod 18:18. Yet he is offered land in Numbers 10. He is conscious of prayer, acts of loving-kindness, and the Torah, and helps usher the Torah into the world, and yet he may not officiate at his own sacrifice, because to do so would be a violation of priestly law. His daughter is a valorized figure, a worthwhile mate for Moses, and yet her marriage to Moses is the subject of pointed critique. Zimri exposes the hypocrisy of the marriage directly, while the figure of Pinhas is more subtly problematic; though he is identified with Jethro through Putiel, the implications of that genealogy for his behavior in Numbers 25 are ignored in the Targum.

In general, Tg. Ps.-J. demonstrates greater interaction with Talmudic and midrashic texts; it appears that the Targumist knew a great deal about the traditions surrounding Jethro recorded in other texts, and included these traditions in his interpretation, albeit with varying degrees of completeness and clarity.[72] The Targum's commitment to these traditions is so great that at times, it includes material that is contradictory and creates a complex portrait of Jethro.

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[72] Hayward, "Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan", explores the specific connection between Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer and the Targum, concluding that there is a great deal of shared material, but Tg. Ps.-J. is not directly dependant upon the midrash.

Tg. Chr. addresses the identity of the scholars who study with Jabez. This Targum's presentation of 1 Chr 2:55 has a significant impact on the tradition concerning Jethro's role as the ancestor of the wilderness scholars; this tradition, which appears throughout the midrashim and Talmud, is undermined by the Targum's omission of Jethro's name and tribal identity, and by the emphasis the Targum places on the scholars' Mosaic genealogy. Hence Tg. Chr. demonstrates the desire to exclude Jethro from Israelite community, thought it cannot completely ignore the tradition that Jethro's descendants studied with Jabez. Each of these Targums demonstrates an interpretive stance that consequently influences its treatment of Jethro, and yet all of these Targums demonstrate particular theological, social and halakhic concerns regarding Jethro's place in the Jewish community.

## Chapter 6: Conclusions

The purpose of this study has been to examine rabbinic Jewish biblical interpretations of Jethro to discern how he is understood, and how he serves as a locus of attention concerning Jewish identity. Each of the texts discussed above has concentrated on elements of identity that the rabbis felt bound to address. As noted in the introduction, the works of G. Porton (*The Stranger Within Your Gates)* and S. Cohen (*The Beginnings of Jewishness*) on Jewish identity and converts are useful for structuring my analysis. Therefore, I will discuss some of the trends apparent in rabbinic texts according to categories drawn from their combined studies:[1] Temple; ethnicity and peoplehood; belief and spirituality; law and Torah; conversion to Judaism; and land. It should be noted that the following conclusions are broad-based. Each body of literature discussed above is complex and nuanced, full of conflicting ideas. Ambiguity, contradiction, and tension are evident throughout the midrashim and the Targums; this chapter is simply my attempt to paint a general picture of the trends present within these texts.

Certain themes—both positive and negative—appear and reappear throughout the Tannaitic midrashim, later midrashim, and Targums (as well as some Talmudic texts). In each collection of texts, we find that Jethro is praised for his beliefs, spiritual sensitivity and wisdom; honored for his hospitality to Moses;[2] and lauded as a Torah scholar, even the progenitor of a line of scholars. His connection to Torah, however, does not supercede the fact that he is not an Israelite: Jethro is excluded from the revelation of the

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[1] These are related to the categories used by Porton and Cohen to examine textual evidence; I have gleaned from their works categories I find useful for examining the texts in my study.

[2] Tg. Ps.-J. to Exod 2:21 is not an exception to this general trend: after all, the villain in the story about Moses and the pit is Reuel, who is distinguished from Jethro.

Torah at Sinai.  He is frequently viewed as a convert, both subtly and directly, but little information is given about his conversion process.  His idolatrous past is frequently addressed, but often with hospitable overtones: Jethro is treated as a paradigmatic convert because of the change he undertakes.  Each body of literature also contains traditions that record an unyielding ethnic distinction between Jethro and the Israelites—even after he has converted, a boundary remains.

Among the Tannaitic midrashim, we find that the rabbis were more comfortable with the notion of Jethro's descendants serving on the Sanhedrin than in the Temple.  Though in Sifre Numbers 78 it is noted that a convert can marry an Israelite and, within three generations, produce a valid priest, this single inclusionary reference is overshadowed by the many traditions about the Sanhedrin.  Jethro is distinguished from the Israelites as a Kenite; however, the identifier "Kenite" is explored primarily as wordplay and metaphor, rather than an ethnic designation.  These midrashim generally affirm Jethro's sacrifice in Exod 18:12: the sacrifice is valid, indexing fraternity between Jethro, the Israelites, and God; or, alternately, it is not designated a Yahwistic sacrifice, but is an act of good faith which is received by Aaron and the elders with hospitality.  Though Sifre Numbers 108 lists three ritual requirements for conversion—circumcision, immersion, and sacrifice—the Tannaitic midrashim do not attribute the first two ritual acts to Jethro.  In fact, Jethro is viewed as somewhat of a threat in Mekilta concerning circumcision: he forces Moses to dedicate Gershom to idolatrous worship, which results in the life-threatening encounter with God in Exod 4:24-26.

What is most noteworthy about the Tannaitic midrashim is also what distinguishes them from the later midrashim and the Targums: a tradition that grants

Jethro and his descendants a place in the Land of Israel. That place is temporary—it is occupied by the Kenites only until the Temple is built and the land is otherwise needed. But the implications of this tradition are significant: the Kenites settle among the people (as recorded in Judg 1:16), live among the people for some centuries, and hence enjoy semi-insider status for that time. Mekilta appears to be unaware of this tradition, and in fact reports that Jethro could not be convinced to remain among the Israelites. The Tannaitic tradition about the Kenites' participation in the allotment of land is virtually ignored in the later midrashim and the Targums. It is possible that the rabbis of the Tannaitic period were influenced by their proximity to the land: the rabbis of the Tannaitic period would have more recent memories of the Jews living in the land, worshipping at the Second Temple, and enjoying some degree of sovereignty. As people with a "landed" sensibility—that is, people who consider land to be an important component of identity—it would be necessary for these rabbis to address Jethro's relationship to the land of Israel. If they viewed Jethro as connected to the Israelites, he would have to demonstrate some connection to the land. The rabbis of the later midrashim might not have viewed land as such an important component of identity, and hence would spend less time addressing the issue.

The later midrashim contain texts that demonstrate great hospitality to converts, at least in the abstract. Exodus Rabbah 19:4 takes great pains to show how converts will be fully included in the people of Israel, even serving in the Temple. Concerning Jethro's descendants, however, the tradition that they served on the Sanhedrin, not in the Temple, persists. Ethnically, Jethro is identified as a "friend, not family": he is praised for his hospitality to Moses and the Israelites, but he is decidedly "outside" the fold. In addition,

the rhetoric of chosenness appears (in Numbers Rabbah 3:2) in a tradition that identifies Jethro as one who was brought near, but not chosen. More significantly, the later midrashim and the Talmud demonstrate concern about Pinhas' lineage, which is traced to Jethro (=Putiel). This lineage must be examined, and the rabbis take pains to note that Pinhas is not *only* descended from Jethro, but comes from Israelite blood as well.

A great deal more information about Jethro's earlier life appears in the later midrashim. As an advisor to Pharaoh, Jethro has an ambiguous past; however, this narrative serves as a fascinating parallel to Jethro's redemption of Moses in Midian. These midrashim wonder when Jethro experienced his conversion: before or after the Torah? Before or after Moses arrived in Midian? Among the answers offered to these questions, we find the tradition that Jethro experienced a spiritual change and renounced idolatry before Moses appeared at the well. This particular text demonstrates how important it is for a potential convert to separate from his people and religion of origin. Jethro's actual conversion is not described in the later midrashim, as in the Tannaitic midrashim. In fact, only in b. Sanh. 94a is it reported that Jethro was ritually circumcised.

Pesiqta of Rab Kahana is unusually negative concerning Jethro. In this text it is reported that God gave the Torah to *prove* that Jethro was not the only source of guidance to the Israelites. In addition, Pesiqta of Rab Kahana is adamant about Jethro's exclusion from the revelation at Sinai: he is a זר, and if he is present at Sinai, the bond between Israel and God is not valid. For this midrash, it appears that the Torah is a document that represents the unique connection between Israel and God. Even if it is acceptable in many of the later midrashim for Jethro to study Torah, according to Pesiqta of Rab

Kahana, the Torah symbolizes exclusive peoplehood, and Jethro is *not* a part of the Israelite people. Piska 12 of Pesiqta of Rab Kahana is read on Shavuot, the Jewish holiday commemorating the Sinai event. It is possible that this liturgical context influenced the development of the midrashim which are so negative concerning Jethro: on an occasion on which the Jews celebrate the gift of Torah and the theophany experienced during the exodus, a more exclusive mentality might be expected. In addition, the Torah portion studied on Shavuot begins with Exod 19:1; the rabbis of Pesiqta of Rab Kahana would take note of the context of this passage, which immediately follows the notice that Jethro left the Israelites to return to his homeland (Exod 18:27). The focus of the holiday of Shavuot, combined with detailed study of the theophany recorded in Exodus 19-20, would naturally lead the rabbis of Pesiqta of Rab Kahana to focus on Jethro's departure, and hence to seek explanations for his absence from the Sinai event.

The Targums contain interpretive materials that are quite succinct, as well as some traditions that expand significantly on the biblical text. There are no traditions recorded in the Targums concerning Jethro's descendants and the Temple; this may be due to the fact that none of the biblical texts about Jethro actually mention the Temple. The word "Kenite" is frequently replaced in the Targums by the word "Shalmaite," which likely referred to a contemporaneous tribe. This act of updating the text also makes the word play associated with the word "Kenite" in the midrashim largely unnecessary. Other references to ethnicity, however, are revealing. Tg. Ps.-J. contains the tradition concerning Pinhas' genealogical link to Jethro. The fullest version of this tradition is found in the Talmud, but because of the Targumist's tendency to cite in a fragmentary

fashion traditions that would have been well known, it is unclear whether or not the Targumist intended to make the case that Pinhas is a problematic figure. It *is* clear that Tg. Ps.-J. is aware of the fact that Zipporah is Midianite, and Moses' marriage to her is problematic in light of the events at Baal-Peor. In this way, Tg. Ps.-J. demonstrates similarity to the Babylonian Talmud, which contains traditions that are more critical of Moses' marriage than the traditions recorded in the midrashim. Tg. Chr. also demonstrates sensitivity to the issues of lineage and ethnicity, by rewriting the reference to the scholars of 1 Chr 2:55 in a way that removes Jethro from the equation.

Each of the Pentateuchal Targums changes Jethro's title from כהן to רבא, indicating a reluctance to afford anyone the title of "priest" who is not an Israelite. Tg. Ps.-J. is especially concerned with priestly matters; even though the Targum states that Jethro officially converted (using the verb לאתגיירא), the sacrifice of Exod 18:12 is presented with *Moses* as the officiant. Jethro's exclusion in this matter, however, is due to his lay status, not to other aspects of his identity. Jethro is a more problematic figure for Tg. Neof. and Tg. Ps.-J. concerning an important element of Israelite identity: circumcision. Like the Tannaitic midrashim, these two Targums record the tradition that Jethro somehow prevented Gershom's circumcision, and the events of Exod 4:24-26 have to rectify that fact. The fact that Jethro is also presented as a convert in Tg. Ps.-J. is not necessarily contradictory; after all, his statement of intent to convert comes long after Gershom's birth.

It is noteworthy that throughout all of these texts, positive, inclusive treatments of Jethro highlight his identity as "Kenite", while texts that directly address his (or Zipporah's) Midianite identity are negative and exclusionary. This may demonstrate the

unique constraints of biblical interpretation: the Bible contains a good deal of negative material about Midian, while the Kenites enjoy neutral or positive treatment.  If Jethro is to be praised, his Midianite-ness must be ignored; if, however, he is to be vilified, his connection to Midian can serve interpreters well.  We see, therefore, that ethnicity mattered to the Jewish interpreters of these texts.

It becomes clear from these texts that, even if contemporaneous halakhic texts outlined the specific ritual acts that defined conversion, there is little concern for proving that an individual figure performed these acts.  It is sufficient, in most cases, to call Jethro a convert; ambiguity can still remain concerning his adherence to particular laws or practices.

Though it is difficult to date many of the texts examined in this dissertation, it is possible to make a few statements about the development of traditions concerning Jethro and identity.  The land of Israel was a less significant marker of identity for the rabbis of the later midrashim and the Targums than it was for the Tannaim.  Though certain aspects of identity are afforded to Jethro with relative consistency—Torah study and belief in YHWH—the problem of ethnicity and lineage consistently places a barrier between Jethro and the Israelites.  The later midrashim demonstrate more extreme traditions in this regard; they are more radically inclusive *and* more virulently exclusive than the Tannaitic midrashim, indicating the fact that anxiety about boundaries continued to be a component of Jewish thought during the rabbinic period, and continued to grow in significance with time.

What is most interesting about the way these rabbis read Jethro can be stated as a general principle, and is two-fold: 1) these texts praise Jethro's spirituality but subtly

prevent his full social, cultural and ethnic inclusion in the Israelite community, often through statements presented in the midrashim as if they came from Jethro himself; and 2) it is clear that the rabbis had concern for the boundaries of the Jewish community *in mind* when they interpreted biblical text; they made hermeneutical choices based on a pre-existing sense of who was inside and who was outside. When evaluating Jethro's beliefs, deeds, and relationship with the Israelites, the rabbis responded as if these were elements of identity that did not produce a good deal of anxiety. The Torah is available to all who seek its wisdom; belief in YHWH is to be praised in anyone who expresses it; hospitality to Israel is praiseworthy. However, peoplehood and covenant are exclusive concepts. Though a proselyte's descendants could be woven into the people of Israel through a few generations of marriage and procreation, an individual who converted would remain, somehow, an outsider for the duration of his life. Though certain rabbinic authorities expressed the desire to overcome this separation, it remains evident in classical rabbinic texts.

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