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Jethro and the reordering of the people. Jesus' teaching on divorce.

Some passages referenced:

Numbers 10:11, 29-32, Deuteronomy 1:9-17 (other references to the reordering of the people and Jethro at Sinai); 1 Samuel 15:6 (the Kenites and the Amalekites); Genesis 26:30, 31:54 (other covenants).

Deuteronomy 24:1 (Moses on divorce).

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Exodus 18. Jethro the priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moses and for Israel, his people, how the Lord had brought Israel out of Egypt. Now Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, had taken Zipporah, Moses' wife, after he had sent her home along with her two sons.

The name of the one was Gershom, for he said, I have been a sojourner in a foreign land,

and the name of the other Eliezer, for he said, The God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, came with his sons and his wife to Moses in the wilderness, where he was encamped at the mountain of God. And when he sent word to Moses, I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons with her, Moses went out to meet his father-in-law and bowed down and kissed him.

And they asked each other of their welfare and went into the tent. Then Moses told his father-in-law all that the Lord had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardship that had come upon them in the way, and how the Lord had delivered them. And Jethro rejoiced for all the good that the Lord had done to Israel, in that he had delivered them out of the hand of the Egyptians.

Jethro said, Blessed be the Lord who has delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and out of the hand of Pharaoh, and has delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians. Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods, because in this affair they dealt arrogantly with the people. And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices to God, and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses' father-in-law before God.

The next day Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood around Moses from morning till evening. When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, and all the people stand around you from morning till evening? And Moses said to his father-in-law, Because the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have a dispute, they come to me, and I decide between one person and another, and I make them know the statutes of God and His laws.

Moses' father-in-law said to him, What you are doing is not good. You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone.

Now obey my voice, I will give you advice, and God be with you. You shall represent the people before God, and bring their cases to God. And you shall warn them about the statutes and the laws, and make them know the way in which they must walk, and what they must do.

Moreover, look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people, as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. And let them judge the people at all times. Every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves.

So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. If you do this, God will direct you, you will be able to endure, and all this people also will go to their place in

peace. So Moses listened to the voice of his father-in-law, and did all that he had said.

Moses chose able men out of all Israel, and made them heads over the people, chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. And they judged the people at all times. Any hard case they brought to Moses, but any small matter they decided themselves.

Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went away to his own country. In Exodus chapter 18 there's a reordering of the nation of Israel as a structured polity. This occurs after the fight with Amalek, where we saw Aaron, her, and Moses on the mountain with Joshua fighting the battle.

There the relationship between Aaron, the high priest, her, a chief character in the royal tribe, and Moses represented something of the structure of the nation as a whole, the way that the different offices within it should support each other. In this chapter we see an elaboration of this, a filling out of this fundamental pattern, as there are elders and leaders established for each tribe and each group, the nation being broken down into administrative groups that could be overseen by particular persons. Some have suggested that this narrative is out of chronological sequence, and I think there's a good argument for this.

They're already camped at the mountain of God, and there seems to be a functional altar there, the way it's described in the chapter. In Numbers chapter 10 we read something similar. The reordering of the people of Israel is also mentioned in Deuteronomy chapter 1, verses 9 following.

At that time I said to you, I am not able to bear you by myself. The Lord your God has multiplied you, and behold, you are today as numerous as the stars of heaven. May the Lord, the God of your fathers, make you a thousand times as many as you are, and bless you as he has promised you.

How can I bear by myself the weight and burden of you and your strife? Choose for your tribes wise, understanding, and experienced men, and I will appoint them as your heads. And you answered me, the thing that you have spoken is good for us to do. So I took the heads of your tribes, wise and experienced men, and set them as heads over you, commanders of thousands, commanders of hundreds, commanders of fifties, commanders of tens, and officers throughout your tribes.

And I charged your judges at that time, hear the cases between your brothers, and judge righteously between a man and his brother, or the alien who is with him. You shall not be partial in judgment. You shall hear the small and the great alike.

You shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God's. And the case that is too hard for you, you shall bring to me, and I will hear it. And I commanded you at that time all the things that you should do.

Then we set out from Horeb, and went through all that great and terrifying wilderness that you saw. Putting this passage together with the passage from Numbers chapter 10, it suggests that the reordering of Israel occurred at the very end of their time at Sinai. It was followed by their leaving Horeb.

Now, why is it out of sequence? Well, one of the first things that it does is it highlights the contrast between the Midianites and the Amalekites. Jethro is an example of one of several leading Gentiles who supports and sponsors God's people. Maybe think of Melchizedek, of Hiram, of Tyre, the Queen of Sheba, of Cyrus, or the wise men in the story of Matthew chapter 2. In 1 Samuel chapter 15 verse 6, there's some weight given to this theory by the connection between the Kenites, or the Midianites, and the Amalekites.

Then 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 people of Israel when they came up out of Egypt. So the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites.

There we see a contrast between the Amalekites and the Kenites, or the descendants of Midian. The Kenites showed mercy and showed compassion and concern for the people of Israel, whereas the Amalekites are judged and under the ban as a result of their hostility and inhospitality towards the Israelites. The other thing to ask is, if this is out of chronological order, where else would it go? If it were actually placed in its chronological sequence, it would either be dropped out of the book of Exodus altogether, or would disrupt the climax of the book, which is about the tabernacle.

By putting it at this particular point, it highlights the larger structure of Israel, the way that Israel is being established as a polity at Sinai. It also connects some other themes, and I think we'll see some of these as we go through. Jethro comes with Moses' wife, who seems to have departed from him.

The last we saw Zipporah, she was involved in the circumcision of presumably Gershom at the end of chapter 4. It seems likely then that she went back to her father when the plagues were going on in Egypt. It was not a pleasant time to be within Egypt, and the wife of Moses, the liberator, would be someone who would be under threat, presumably, by Pharaoh and others. And so being out of the land, avoiding the impact of the plagues, and having a bit more security with her father would make sense.

At this point, she's brought back, and there's no suggestion that there was a divorce or anything like that, as some people have seen within this text. She's brought back as his wife by his father-in-law. There's no angry words, they're completely at peace, and so it seems very unlikely that we are dealing with a situation of divorce here.

It might also be worth contrasting the character of Jethro with the character of Laban. Laban is a bad father-in-law, whereas Jethro is the good father-in-law. In the story earlier

on, Jethro welcomed the man who met his daughter at the well, and then they got married, and the son-in-law served the father by looking after the sheep, and finally left to return back to the land from which he had come.

All of this is similar to the pattern of the story of Jacob and his sojourn with Laban. And at this juncture, much as there was in chapter 31, there's a covenant formed between the two, a covenant made with Jethro and the leaders of Israel. A covenant was formed with Abimelech in Genesis chapter 26 verse 30, and with Laban in chapter 31 verse 54.

After the arrival of Jethro, having this special meal which presumably creates some sort of covenant arrangement between the two people, and being reunited with his family, Moses faces a problem. Day by day he's having to judge the people, and the people are coming to him with all their problems, looking for him to adjudicate in their situations. They come to him to inquire of God.

Moses has to make known to them the laws and the teachings of God. Now this sets things up for the event of Sinai. It begins with Moses judging the people alone, and it's a movement towards the nation being judged by wise judges by a law that has been revealed to them by God.

The burden of judgment will be spread out throughout the people, and also the gift of judgment. It will no longer be for Moses alone, as a prophetic revealer of God's law, to be the one who judges. No, the work of judgment will be spread among the elders and the rulers and the various chiefs of the people.

It will be something that can be borne more generally. It's not good for Moses to be alone. Notice some of the subtle creation themes that have been playing throughout the story of the Exodus to this point.

In the whole account of the plagues there's themes of de-creation, but then following the plagues and the release from Egypt, there are themes of new creation, evening followed by morning, division and provision of water, the light, all these sorts of things. And here we may think back to the story of Genesis chapter 2. It's not good for Moses to be alone. And that same sort of language occurs here in Jethro's mouth, as was found back in Genesis chapter 2, as God declared concerning Adam that it was not good for him to be alone.

And just as Adam had a woman brought to him to be his helper, to assist him in his task, so Moses has people from Israel brought to him to assist him in his task. There are ways in which this account might make us think back to the earlier encounter with Jethro in chapter 2. There Moses fled from Egypt and Pharaoh and sat down by a well. He encountered the daughters of the priest of Midian and delivered them from the shepherds.

And they went home and told their father that they had been delivered by an Egyptian and that he drew water for them and that he watered the flock. And once again we're seeing something very similar here. As Moses recounts to Jethro how God has saved them from the hand of Pharaoh, how God has defeated the shepherds that were troubling the people and how God has brought, as it were, this bride out and delivered her, provided water for her in the wilderness.

After that event Jethro gave Moses his daughter Zipporah and here maybe we're having something similar that's being set up. There was a marriage back then and there's a marriage coming up. A marriage between God and his people.

A marriage where God will take his people for himself. And this will change the relationship between Moses and the people too. To this point Moses has been related to God.

Moses has been as God to Aaron and representing God to the people. When the people want to relate to God they have to go to Moses and Moses has to inquire of God for them. But God is going to take Israel as his bride at Sinai.

It's going to be a new form of relationship and that new form of relationship is maybe hinted at by the presence of Jethro at this point. The establishment of judges among the people and the giving of the law will establish a new intimacy between God and his people. They will no longer just have to go to Moses and learn from him.

Each one of them as they receive the law and learn from the law will be able to know God for themselves in a new way. This is moving us towards the event of Sinai and all that that represents. A question to consider.

There is a prudential ordering of the people here. An ordering of the people according to the wisdom of a foreigner. Nevertheless this wisdom and this reordering of the people is placed within the context of the story of God's deliverance of the people and his establishment of them as a new polity.

What are some of the lessons that this might have for us in the ordering of Christian societies in the present day where we are trying to bring together divine instruction and establishment and also the wisdom that we can find in the world. Matthew 19 verses 1-15 And said, Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother, and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh.

What therefore God has joined together? Let not man separate. They said to him, Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away? He said to them, Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, Whoever divorces his wife except for sexual immorality and marries another commits adultery.

The disciples said to him, If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry. But he said to them, Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.

Let the one who is able to receive this receive it. Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.

And he laid his hands on them and went away. In the first half of Matthew 19 Jesus leaves Galilee and enters Judea and is immediately tested by the Pharisees concerning his teaching. Jesus is asked by the Pharisees to weigh in on the debate between schools of legal opinion of the day, between Hillel and Shammai.

The difference is related to the interpretation of Deuteronomy 24 verse 1 following. When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favour in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house. The school of Hillel had a very extensive list of things that could be included under the some form of indecency in the wife, whereas the school of Shammai held a far more restrictive understanding.

They are trying to test him. We should bear in mind that John the Baptist had just lost his life for speaking out against the divorce and remarriage of Herod. The Pharisees knew that Jesus, if he spoke out on this issue, would be placing himself in dangerous political positions relative to the Herods, but also taking a controversial view on the meaning of the law that would put him on one side or another of a pretty fractious debate.

And they cunningly thought that this would give them some sort of leverage over him. So there are two things going on here. An attempt to entrap Jesus in a dangerous political statement, and also an attempt to get Jesus to take a side in a divisive Jewish debate on the meaning of the law.

Jesus does not answer their question directly, rather he challenges them concerning the biblical teaching. Where do we find Moses' actual teaching regarding divorce and marriage? If we start with Deuteronomy chapter 24, an obscure case law, we are going about it all wrong. Rather we must begin at the very beginning.

It begins with Genesis chapter 1 and 2. God made them male and female, and a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. That is where we find the teaching on marriage. What Deuteronomy chapter 24 does is come in as an allowance for the sake of the hardness of the heart of the people.

It allows them to divorce their wives, but it's a departure from the fundamental intent of marriage, which is lifelong union. What God has joined together, let no man separate. And this allowance, this concession, is not a command concerning divorce.

It's a falling away from that thing that should give us a clear perspective of what marriage and divorce truly are. Divorce is an undermining of God's fundamental intent concerning marriage. That two people should become one flesh in an indissoluble union.

The difference between a concession and a command is very important. A concession is an accommodation to human weakness and sin, a recognition that in our fallen state human beings are imperfectible, and good laws will make allowances for the sinfulness and the immaturity of people in their societies. Good laws are not counsels of perfection.

They must deal with the reality, the messy reality of sinful human lives. And the law that Moses gave is an example of such a law. It's a good law for a hard-hearted people.

But it is not good that people are hard-hearted, nor is a concession given to a hard-hearted people a good north star by which to guide our understanding of marriage and God's values concerning it. Among many other things, for instance, parenting is an exercise in the establishment of justice and the ordering of a just society. And parents will know that there are a great many suboptimal and even bad behaviours that they may have to accommodate or mitigate in their children, because their children currently lack the wisdom or the good character to act as they would in some ideal world.

And the law that Moses gives in Deuteronomy chapter 24 is an example of this. Good laws are accommodated to the societies and the persons for which they are designed. They are informed by the deeper and the absolute moral law, but they are accommodated to particular circumstances and persons.

If you allowed your teenagers the same liberties as you do your toddlers, it would not be a good thing. Rather, you need to give certain liberties to your toddlers that you don't give to your teenagers, because they still have a lot to learn. When the Pharisees respond to Jesus, Jesus highlights the problem with their response.

They ask about what Moses commanded, but yet they are like teenagers who are reminding their parents of all the things that they allowed them to get away with as toddlers. But yet as teenagers they are supposed to have grown up beyond those things. They don't need the same allowances, they don't need the same concessions.

They should be mature enough to know how to act themselves. Moses' concessions concerning divorce allowed for divorce, but they did not approve of it. It was an accommodation to the sinfulness and the imperfectibility of human society, not a practice that was to be viewed in any respect positively.

We might think of the practices of slavery or polygamy in a similar light, practices that

were permitted and regulated, but never celebrated or encouraged. These practices were never God's good intention for humanity, but tolerated for a time as an accommodation to sin, weakness, immaturity and imperfectibility. To find out what is really commanded, what God really wants, we have to look back further to God's creational intent for humanity.

And so Jesus joins Genesis 1 and 2 together to highlight the permanent unity that was always God's intent for marriage. This is different and distinguished from laws that are accommodated to the hardness of human hearts. Jesus' teaching more generally draws us back to these two great horizons, the horizons of the original creation and of the future restoration of all things.

And this has the effect of significantly reframing the question of divorce. The Hillites and the Shammaites both approach the question of divorce primarily within the horizon of the Mosaic body of laws and fail adequately to consider the horizon of God's creational intent. The result is a loss of our sense of the way that divorce undermines God's intent for humanity.

Divorce is a tragic accommodation to human sinfulness, not something that is positively allowed. Jesus may here contrast Moses and God. Moses is the divinely inspired prophet administering the moral law in a particular historical situation, but God is the author of the timeless moral law.

There's a sort of legalism which can snatch at all sorts of allowances that are given in a law accommodated to human sinfulness and imperfection, rather than pursuing the righteousness that it should direct us towards. Such allowances excuse us from the higher standard of the divine righteousness. Note that Jesus doesn't teach that Moses was wrong to allow for divorce under such circumstances.

Such allowances were made on account of people's sinfulness and hardness of heart. But they were not themselves sinful allowances. The Old Testament law provides us with a number of conditions in which divorce is treated as permissible, and I believe that the New Testament does not just abrogate those.

Accommodation to the reality of human sinfulness and weakness really is necessary for good law. Whether it's serious abuse, desertion, adultery, or some other sort of sin or failure, divorce may be appropriately permitted. We should also recognise that in such circumstances we can't abstract the specific action of divorce from the broader failures of permanent exclusive union that might have precipitated it.

While the act of divorce is an act of very grave moral weight, a purposeful act that ends a marriage, the one who initiates it should not be treated as if they bore the entire weight of the blame for the failed marriage. What Jesus' teaching does then is not to delegitimise the teaching of Moses, or even to suggest an alternative legal code to

replace it. Rather what it does is relativise it.

The law of Moses and all other legal codes that are necessarily accommodated to human sinfulness are not the North Star of righteousness. Where necessary accommodations to this sinful age exist, they are signs of how estranged we have become from God's good purpose for humanity. Because we are a hard-hearted and a sinful people, God permits divorce in the case of adultery.

But lifelong, permanent, and indissoluble and exclusive unity was always His intent. We see the same thing in 1 Corinthians 7, where at all possible a couple are supposed to pursue reunion, to pursue reconciliation and forgiveness. Now that will not always be possible.

There will be situations where it is wise to divorce. Divorce in itself is not a sin, but it is a sign of how badly things have gone wrong. And where at all possible we should be people of the Kingdom, people who pursue reconciliation, restoration, healing, setting things right that have gone wrong.

This teaching can all be very troubling for us. We live in a society in which both divorce and serial extramarital relations are rampant. It is a very hard teaching today, just as it was in Jesus' day.

We would like God to tell us that it is OK to divorce under conditions X, Y and Z. But that isn't what we are told. Rather we are given the original intent of creation as the standard of our measure, with the concessions appearing more clearly for what they are against that background. Tolerated, but not positively validated, ways of negotiating human rebellion against God's purpose in marriage.

The fact of God's creational establishment of marriage is a measure by which we must consider divorce. We may break faith with and reject our prior vow in the self-contradiction of divorce, but not in such a way as places us beyond the bounds of God's grace. And the Church is bound both to uphold the institutions of marriage and to present God's grace to those in the tragic situation of failed marriages.

The possibility of a calling back to the abandoned task of marriage to a particular person can often be there. Sometimes, however, the conditions for this don't exist. And the difficult question of whether someone should, not just can, get married again is one that people will often struggle with.

There is some gospel to be seen in Moses' law. God is not allowing people to slip beyond the reach of his grace and restoration, even in the messiness of their compromised lives. God can speak his law even into the lives that have been tangled up by sin and failure, by things that have gone wrong.

God can still speak his grace into those situations. Divorce and remarriage don't cause

people to slip off God's map. But yet, that truth must always be held alongside the other truth that this was not God's intent from the beginning.

The disciples are startled by the toughness of Jesus' teaching. If marriage is really this serious, it would seem to be a trap that you don't want to get caught in. If you have to stick with your wife under all these circumstances, and you can't just abandon her for various reasons, then it's maybe not something that you want to get in.

Jesus responds with another startling teaching. He talks about those who have become eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven. Now, there are many different types of eunuchs.

Some are born eunuchs. You can think of intersex persons particularly. People who can't bear children.

People who may even, in some extreme cases, have indeterminate sex. Then there are those who have been made eunuchs by other human beings. Castrated and made to serve in particular capacities.

And Jesus talks here about a further type of eunuch. Those who have become eunuchs for the kingdom. When we think about eunuchs, probably what we think of first is their giving up of sexual pleasure and partnership.

But in Jesus' day, what was probably most prominent was the fact that they gave up progeny and legacy. They committed themselves completely to the cause of the kingdom that they aligned themselves with. So if a eunuch served a particular king, they were completely personally invested in serving that kingdom.

Because their entire hope and destiny for the future lay upon the destiny of the kingdom. They had no children to bear their name after them. What they were going to leave behind was the kingdom itself.

In speaking about those who have become eunuchs for the kingdom of God, Jesus is likely talking about people who have given up the prospect of having marriage and children to commit themselves completely for the kingdom of God. Now this isn't the same thing as singleness. It's not just a statement about how good singleness is as a thing in itself.

Rather, it's about people who have given up marriage for the sake of throwing in their lot completely with the cause of the kingdom. You can think about Paul as an example of this. As one who did not take a wife, or maybe was widowed and did not take another wife, in order that he might serve the kingdom of God completely.

One can also imagine people being a bit shocked by Jesus using the example of eunuchs as associated with the kingdom of heaven. Eunuchs were seen among other things as unmanly, as those who had been quite literally emasculated. We should not miss the

scandal of the association that Jesus is drawing here.

The people who would serve his kingdom would often seem unmanly to other people of their day. They were not playing the games of honour that people of their day were playing. They were peacemakers, rather than men who were constantly looking for chances to prove their manliness in war.

They were people who would turn the other cheek when offended, when their honour was attacked. And what man will not defend his honour? They were defined by suffering, rather than by the infliction of violence and power. They were people defined by service of and concern for the weak, rather than mastery over others.

They were people who forgave, rather than pursuing vengeance. And in this particular example they were also people who were prepared to give up having children, and give up having marriages for the sake of serving their Lord by following him to the final unmanly indignity of the cross. While Jesus very clearly extols manly virtues in certain other contexts, and calls for his disciples to express and display some of these virtues, and we see these things celebrated elsewhere in scripture, we should never forget the scandal that his teaching presented to men of his day, and to men of our own.

After this teaching, children are brought to Jesus to be blessed. The disciples rebuke those bringing the children. Children are distractions from the business of men, and they lack honour and status, but yet Jesus pays attention to them.

He places a child in the midst of his disciples and says that they need to be made like that child. Once again Jesus is challenging some of the reigning values, particularly among men of his day, values that constantly privileged the strong over the weak, men over women, adults over children. Jesus, without denying or undermining the differences between these groups, radically reconfigures the orders of value that lead people to exalt one group over another.

Not only does he welcome such children, he declares that to such belongs the kingdom of heaven. A question to consider, looking at our own societies and our churches, an outside observer would probably not be led to believe that the exemplary society that we hold up above all others is one in which children are at the centre. What are some of the ways in which we can reform the lives of our churches and societies so as more fully to express Jesus' teaching at this point?