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Inside Out: Jethro, the Midianites and a Biblical Construction of the Outsider*

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Abstract

Attitudes toward the outsider exist on a continuum in the Hebrew Bible. He or she may be attacked, critiqued, brutalized or praised, respected, and at times intentionally included. The treatment of the Midianites is an interesting case in point because it encompasses both ends of that continuum. The Midianite priest Jethro represents an outsider who is welcomed as a trusted advisor and valued participant. The Midianites as a group represent a sexual and idolatrous threat and are ruthlessly attacked by the Israelites. In this article, a close reading examines how such diametrically opposed views of Jethro and the Midianites are constructed, represented and maintained. Violence does not need to be the inexorable outcome of difference.

Keywords: Outsider, Midianites, father-in-law, priest, distinctions, boundaries.

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> The 'other' has appeared as an object of desire as well as an object of repulsion; the 'other' has rarely been an object of indifference.[1]
>
> Cultural identity…is a matter of 'becoming'…a production which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.[2]

Fleeing for his life from an Egyptian Pharaoh, Moses finds sanctuary in the tent of a Midianite priest. A few years later that same priest, Jethro, by then father-in-law to Moses, finds his Israelite son-in-law camped at the foot of Mt Sinai just before the people of Israel hear the words of YHWH. When informed that Jethro is approaching the camp, Moses hurries to greet him: '…and he bowed low and kissed him and each asked after the peace of the other and they went into the tent' (Exod. 18.7). The tents of Jethro and of Moses provide the backdrop for an intimate and enduring connection between the priest of Midian and the prophet of Israel. Yet such a promising collaboration is brutally disrupted forty years later in front of yet a different tent, the sacred tent of meeting (Num. 25.6). Phinehas, grandson of Aaron the priest, unhesitatingly stabs an Israelite man and the Midianite woman he brought into the camp in front of the entire community of Israel (Num. 25.8).[3]

As these vignettes suggest, attitudes toward the outsider exist on a broad spectrum in the Hebrew Bible. He or she may be attacked, critiqued, and brutalized or praised, respected, and at times quite purposefully included: 'And you shall celebrate in everything good that YHWH your God has given to you and to your house, you and the Levite and the stranger that is in your midst' (Deut. 26.11). The treatment of the Midianites is an interesting case in point because it appears to encompass both ends of that spectrum. The Midianite priest Jethro represents an

1. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 259.

2. Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in Jonathan Rutherford (ed.), *Identity, Community and Cultural Difference* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), pp. 222-37 (222-23). I wish to thank Jonathan Krasner for drawing my attention to Hall's work.

3. The negative portrait of the Midianites found in the book of Numbers 'is overdetermined by the values or ideology of the producers of the document', according to F.V. Greifenhagen, *Egypt on the Pentateuch's Ideological Map* (JSOTSup, 361; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), p. 6. Greifenhagen reminds us that Midianites briefly appear in Genesis and sell Joseph into slavery (p. 142). Thus a more negative appraisal of the Midianites precedes Jethro's appearance and perhaps is associated with the later condemnation of the Midianites in Numbers.

outsider who is welcomed as a trusted advisor and valued participant in the communal life of the people at a crucial stage in their formation.[4] In contrast, the Midianites as a group come to represent a sexual and idolatrous threat and are ruthlessly attacked by the Israelites. Taken together, the stories of Jethro and that of the Midianites allow one to ask 'upon what basis is one sort of outsider to be tolerated and another to be banned…?'[5] A close reading of the pertinent texts may begin to answer that question, at least in the case of the Israelites and the Midianites. I will examine how the Bible's diametrically opposed views of Jethro and the Midianites are constructed, represented, and maintained; what interests that opposition might serve; the extent to which those views interact; and the assumptions or possible anxieties of the ancient writers that fueled such diametrically opposed stories.[6]

A brief consideration of terminology and methodology is in order. As outsiders, Jethro and the Midianites constitute one category of 'other' in the Bible. The 'other' is both a broader and more imprecise term since it encompasses not only outsiders but relative insiders—men vs. women,

4. Nahum Sarna emphasizes the remarkable role of Jethro, 'not least because so important an Israelite institution as the judiciary is ascribed to the initiative and advice of a Midianite priest', *Exodus: The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), p. 100. The present study uses that observation as a starting point in developing a fuller portrait of the Midianite priest and his role in the life of Moses and of the people of Israel.

5. Preface to Jacob Neusner and Ernest Frerichs (eds.), *'To See Ourselves as Others See Us': Christians, Jews, 'Others' in Late Antiquity* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1985), p. xiv.

6. A study of the Midianites provides only one example of the many possible relationships depicted in the Bible between Israelite and outsider. A broader discussion lies outside the purview of the present study. A recent full-length study on the subject is offered by Claudia V. Camp, *Wise, Strange and Holy* (JSOTSup, 320; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000). Camp focuses on the importance of gender as a key component in biblical attitudes toward the other in an analysis of the Strange Woman of Proverbs. While my focus is not on gender per se, I do extend some of Camp's methods to the present reading of Jethro and am a beneficiary of many of her insights. Jethro is clearly another figure at the border, triggering enough anxiety in his crossing that border with Moses that other biblical writers respond by emphasizing a separate tradition of enmity between the Israelites and Midianites as recorded in the book of Numbers. Unfortunately, I was not aware of Camp's book when I published my work on Numbers, *Memory and Tradition in the Book of Numbers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Her discussion of the Levites vs. the sons of Aaron complements my analysis of that internal priestly struggle as the crucial context for the redaction of Numbers.

the familiar vs. the strange, and even the sons of Aaron vs. the Levites. As has been shown in prior studies, the other and the outsider play crucial roles in the development of a subject's identity and allow him/her to formulate a self in opposition to what he/she is not. Values are clarified and particular beliefs or practices confirmed through interactions with outsiders.[7] At other times, the outsider may represent a legitimate threat. At still other moments, an outsider may become a scapegoat, providing a convenient explanation for the failings or punishments of the subject. Whether as ally, threat, or scapegoat, the presence of outsiders galvanizes and unifies a group. In our present case, both an individual subject (Moses) and a collective subject (the people of Israel) are depicted at a very early stage of formation. Moses and the people must determine how to structure their fledgling community. Who belongs and who does not is an urgent question in their endeavor. Strikingly, Jethro and the Midianites play crucial roles in the process as captured and developed by means of the extended narratives in which they appear.[8]

Insider or out, both Israelite and Midianite are creatures of language, narrated into being by means of rhetoric and literary art. I will illustrate the extent to which language does the work of fashioning self and outsider by means of precisely deployed epithets, key words, contrasting characterizations of important personages, and framing devices. Only through a close reading may we glimpse the narrative process in which self, outsider, and the relations between them are constituted and challenged in the Hebrew Bible.

7. Camp, *Wise, Strange and Holy*, pp. 13, 323, 329. Since self/other is an important distinction in the development of identity both on an individual and on a national level it is no coincidence that in the founding stories of Israel as a people we have a patriarch, Abraham, who is entangled with different kinds of foreign leaders (Pharaoh and Abimelech) and who is married to an Egyptian woman named none other than Hagar (the stranger). Moses follows that pattern in his own relationships—both with a Pharaoh and an ally, Jethro the Midianite, as well as with his own foreign wife, Zipporah. For a discussion of Abraham and his outsiders, see my 'Reading the Seams', *JSOT* 29 (2005), pp. 259-87. Joel Kaminsky would label these outsiders as the 'nonelect', that is, 'those many other peoples, often portrayed positively, in relation to whom Israel works out her destiny' (*Yet I Loved Jacob* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007], p. 12).

8. I am not making an historical argument in the present study, but a literary one. As James Kugel put it in *The God of Old*, I intend to 'allow a text to tell everything it knows…' (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), p. 2.

In the Tent of Jethro

Chapter 2 of Exodus introduces us to the land of Midian before we actually meet the priest himself. It is a land that exists outside of the sphere of Pharaoh:

> And the Pharaoh heard of this thing [that Moses had slain an Egyptian] and sought to kill Moses and Moses escaped from Pharaoh and settled in the land of Midian and sat down beside a well. (Exod. 2.15)

Thus the land of Midian offers Moses a possible refuge in contrast to the land of danger—Egypt. Physical location signals its importance as a significant variable in a construction of the outsider.

Moses begins his life in Midian by defending the seven daughters of an unnamed local priest against shepherds who drive the girls away as they attempt to water their flock (Exod. 2.17).[9] The choice of verb in this scene is quite precise. The shepherds 'drive away' (ויגרשום), a word choice that precisely hints at recent events in Moses' past. Just as the shepherds drive away the daughters, so too has Moses been driven away from the land of his birth.[10] That parallel leads him to realize the extent to which he has become, or perhaps always was, alienated from Egypt. The past soon reasserts itself forcibly in the name Moses gives his son—Gershom. In an echo of the verb 'drive away', the name literally means 'a stranger there'. As we will see, temporality as well as space provides Moses with perspective and influences the way in which he comes to see not only the family of Jethro but himself.

Noticing that his daughters have returned earlier than usual from the well, Reuel (Jethro) demands an explanation.[11] When they recount the

9. See Greifenhagen, *Egypt on the Pentateuch's Ideological Map*, pp. 65-67 and 142, for a briefer but insightful discussion of the texts concerning Jethro.

10. While the result appears the same, the Hebrew verbs are not identical. In Exod. 2.15 Moses 'escapes' the Pharaoh, while in 2.17 the shepherds 'drive away' the daughters of Jethro.

11. The narrator calls the Midianite priest Reuel in Exod. 2.18, a name mentioned only one more time in the Torah—in the book of Numbers. One proposal for the meaning of *Reuel*, 'friend of God', anticipates his important role in the subsequent narrative. *Jethro* could be considered an honorific as suggested by the Akkadian *atru* (*watru*), 'preeminent or foremost'. Both suggestions are found in Sarna, *Exodus*, p. 12 n. 18. William Propp identifies the J source as the origin for Reuel and lists seven different explanations for the name. Propp also provides a useful summary of the names not only of Reuel but also of Jethro and Hobab. See William H.C. Propp, *Exodus 1–18* (AB, 2; New York: Doubleday, 1998), pp. 172-73.

events, including their rescue by an Egyptian, Reuel immediately reproaches them for leaving the Egyptian behind: '…And where is he? Why did you leave this man? Call him and he shall break bread' (Exod. 2.20). 'And where is he?' is uttered in such a succinct and direct fashion as to imply that the daughters should have brought the stranger back with them. Their father is incredulous at their failure to express their gratitude by bringing the outsider, whose name he does not even know, into his tent. That the Midianites are the first to speak in this episode, and that they speak of Moses as an Egyptian, is noteworthy. In the ordering of the narrative Moses is the first to be considered an 'outsider'.[12] The text itself points out that the identification of self and other in biblical narrative is unstable and based on shifting perspectives.

Does Jethro consider Moses a threat, an ally, or a superior whom he must placate? Is Jethro acting out of self-interest (identifying Moses as a prospective partner for one of his daughters)? Or is the Midianite culture one that prizes hospitality? The laconic text gives us little upon which to answer those questions. Yet it does seem to suggest that in inviting the outsider into his tent, Jethro senses no threat. He expresses no fear. Breaking bread (rather than reaching for a weapon or placating the stranger with a gift) is a generous act dictated by Moses' behavior as a protector of Jethro's daughters. If so, then Moses' actions, rather than his alleged ethnic affiliation, are the chief influence in shaping Jethro's attitude toward him.[13] That Jethro evaluates Moses based on a concrete instance rather than a theoretical abstraction nicely confirms a claim made by Jonathan Z. Smith: 'Despite its apparent taxonomic exclusivity,

12. On this point see Greifenhagen, *Egypt on the Pentateuch's Ideological Map*, p. 66.

13. What might the notion of an 'ethnic affiliation' mean in the biblical period? As argued by Claudia Camp, 'We may not…be able to imagine a pristine "Israel" at any point in time; Israel emerged from and as a mixture' (*Wise, Strange, and Holy*, p. 22). Elizabeth Bloch Smith suggests that the emergence of 'Israelite' as a term did indeed occur over time and in changing circumstances. She identifies two types of affiliations, primordial and circumstantial, as key components in defining an ethnic self. Primordial affiliations are those based on kinship, tribe (captured in genealogical lists), and territory. Circumstantial affiliations are those activated in response to changing situations. See Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, 'Israelite Ethnicity in Iron I: Archeology Preserves What is Remembered and What is Forgotten in Israel's History', *JBL* 122 (2003), pp. 401-25 (403). She concludes that ethnic identity in general in the biblical context is unstable and characterized by fluidity and dynamism. As a consequence, one's identification of the other over against the self, along with those traits that would most define the self vs. other, must of necessity partake of such instability and flux. We clearly observe such flux in the early relations of Jethro and Moses.

"otherness" is a transactional matter…'[14] In fact, as Jethro and Moses engage in such transactions the perspective of the observer vs. the observed shifts from one to the other. At least at the outset it is not at all clear who is the other, and who is the subject. Of course, Moses is a striking example of such fluidity as he is an Egyptian who is actually an Israelite about to settle in the tents of a Midianite.

This happens almost immediately. After Jethro's order to his daughters to bring the Egyptian stranger into their tent, we learn that Moses consents to 'settle with the man' who gives Moses his daughter Zipporah as his wife (Exod. 2.21).[15] Family ties make Jethro a proximate 'other' to Moses. Those ties are poignantly, though subtly, defined. The preposition 'with' (אֶת) may connote a positive and intimate connection or partnership, as when Eve has a male child 'with' the implied aid of God in Gen. 4.1.[16] Thus, while the early interactions between Moses and Jethro may register the labels of 'outsider' and 'insider', those labels seem of glancing consequence and little tangible import.

This first description of Moses' relations with Jethro concludes with the birth and naming of Moses' son. As noted above, now that he finds himself outside of the land of Egypt, Moses gains the perspective to be able to look back at his life there. As he does, so he recognizes feelings of alienation and estrangement. In naming his son, Moses acknowledges: 'I have been a stranger in a foreign land' (Exod. 2.22). This brief speech suggests not only that Moses the Egyptian first appeared as an outsider to Jethro, but that he has long been an outsider to himself. Self and other are momentarily fused. The other in Moses' early life is none other than Moses himself. Could this sense of an alienated self who existed in the past but not in the present contribute to Moses' experience and treatment of Jethro as a benign figure, allowing Moses not only to define, but to reintegrate, his own self? After all, in just a few verses a great deal has happened to Moses, all of it thanks to Jethro. Safely settled, protected from a threat to his life, married and now a father, Moses has found Midian to be a land in which he can flourish. It is a place in which Moses can be transformed.

14. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion*, p. 275.

15. Not only does Moses consent, but the verb denotes a willingness, even perhaps delight, in the offer. See Greifenhagen, *Egypt on the Pentateuch's Ideological Map*, p. 67 n. 82, on this point.

16. For an insightful reading of the preposition and its interpretative possibilities in Gen. 4.1, see Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 40-47.

Indeed, Moses' statement suggests that he does not feel like a stranger *here*, in Midian, but only *there*, in Egypt. Thus, location and territory—Midian vs. Egypt—plays an increasingly important role in reinforcing and influencing his perspective on otherness, a perspective that is situational. That Moses remains in Midian for a long time is confirmed in the very next verse, Exod. 2.23, which announces that many days later (the JPS translation captures the passage of time: 'A long time after that…') the Egyptian king who had threatened Moses has died.

Exodus 3 opens with Moses' tending the flock of Jethro, designated as 'his father-in-law, the priest of Midian'. But Moses must leave Jethro behind as he goes on to encounter God at the burning bush, outside the geographic sphere of the Midianite. As soon as that encounter ends, however, Jethro is again mentioned since Moses returns to the tents of Jethro (Jether) in Exod. 4.18 to seek his permission to return to Egypt. Moses does not divulge his encounter with God or God's instructions. Nor does the narrator offer the reader an explanation for Moses' reticence. Yet in a striking contrast to that omission, a few verses later Moses will meet and tell Aaron 'all the words of God' (4.28). This narrative detail serves to highlight Moses' reserve with Jethro. The narrator appears to be establishing a distinction or boundary between the kind of inclusive relationship that Moses will develop both with YHWH and with Aaron (who will later become the high priest of Israel) and the more distant relationship he maintains with Jethro, the priest of Midian (though, as we shall see, that distance is not permanent). In spite of his earlier intimacy with Jethro, a boundary has now been established between them. The episode at the burning bush and its report illustrates that *religious* identity—God versus gods—may create a clear distinction between Israelite and Midianite. As a result, Moses exits the tent of Jethro, never to return.

Jethro's response to Moses' departure introduces a word that is associated with Jethro twice more in Exodus 18. He simply tells Moses to go in 'peace'. Does the narrator want this word to shape our view of Jethro since it is mentioned in connection to Jethro three times? Only later will the religious distinctions that have emerged in the early chapters of Exodus become violent.

In the meantime, Moses exchanges the safety of Midian for that of a dangerous land, Egypt, in order to take his people to a yet another land, this one flowing with milk and honey. Moses will lead his people to the land of his fathers (Exod. 3.16-17), not to the land of his father-in-law.

Notice how pronounced is physical territory as a background canvas for experiences and shifting affiliations in the life of Moses. Egypt is a land he must escape, Midian a land that shelters him, but only temporarily, while Israel is a land of the past and of the future but ultimately, of course, a land that Moses himself will never reach. The major portion of Moses' life, as well as God's repeated revelations to him, occur in none of those lands, but rather in the wilderness.

God inexplicably attacks Moses as he travels to Egypt. He is only saved thanks to the quickness of his wife Zipporah. Thus, a Midianite continues to protect Moses from the dangers that he encounters. Only after Zipporah rescues Moses can the story of Israel's liberation from slavery and oppression unfold. It is striking that the act she performs—circumcision—is of great ritual significance since it serves as a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham.[17] It is also striking that the divine attack, 'along the way', occurs outside the arena of safety provided by the tent of Jethro. Yet through her quick intervention, Zipporah has transformed a threatening spot in the wilderness into a safe place for Moses. Note that God's 'encounter' with Moses (Exod. 4.24) is followed, thanks to Zipporah, by Aaron's successful 'encounter' with Moses the next day (4.27). The Midianites prove crucial to the very survival of Moses and his mission.

Let me briefly summarize what we have observed thus far. In biblical narrative the distinctions of self/other or insider/outsider are not necessarily fixed, but may be fluid and interchangeable categories. Behavior is a variable that may be a more important criterion for interaction and the building of trust than ethnic classification. Biblical attitudes toward the outside are situational rather than automatic, at least in the present example.

Perhaps surprisingly, considering the rarity of individual introspection in biblical characters, 'self' and 'other' also exist as internal states in a single individual. Moses acknowledges himself to be other than his previous Egyptian self once he is away from Egypt. He learns to know who he is through his relationship with Jethro. Physical location and temporality, along with the perspectives they make possible, are important variables in the process. The distance between Midian and Egypt is symbolically meaningful, creating both mental space and perspective so

17. For an extended analysis of this enigmatic scene and Zipporah's role in it, see Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible*, pp. 79-97. See also Camp, *Wise, Strange and Holy*, particularly Chapter 6, pp. 227-78.

that Moses can reflect on events taking place not only elsewhere in space, but elsewhere in time.[18]

However, as this period in the life of Moses ends, the reader comes to see that the intimacy depicted in the text between Jethro and Moses, even after being strengthened by familial ties, has its limits. Religious distinctions begin to emerge, most significantly after Moses encounters God at the burning bush. The literal land of the fathers vs. the land of the father-in-law reinforces the figurative boundary being established.

In the Tent of Moses

The reader must wait 14 chapters before encountering Jethro again. In Exodus 18 the Midianite priest plays a crucial role in the development of the people of Israel. But before examining his role in detail, the question of chronology must first be considered. Based on 18.5, Jethro apparently meets Moses at the mountain of God. Yet the people of Israel do not arrive there until the next chapter. The present order of events triggered an interesting proposal by the medieval Jewish commentator Radak that happens also to directly address the issue of Israelite and outsider. Radak proposed that the present story in Exodus 18 is placed where it is in spite of its contradiction with the arrival at Sinai in ch. 19 because it creates a purposeful juxtaposition with the chapter that precedes it, Exodus 17, in which Israel battles the Amalekites.[19] Two peoples, Amalekites and Midianites, encounter the Israelites in the wilderness. Perhaps the people of Israel must learn the lesson of Abraham who had to distinguish the threats of the Pharaoh of Egypt from the just protestations of mistreatment leveled against him by Abimelech, king of Gerar. Moses also must learn to distinguish between an Egyptian Pharaoh and a Midianite priest. So too must the people of Israel learn to make distinctions: not all outsiders should be viewed the same way. They must distinguish the making of war against Amalekites from the making of peace with Midianites. Such a distinction seems a crucial one for the newly formed

18. Spatial distance or closeness can also be quite concrete a variable, referring to whether the other is located topographically at the center, on the periphery, or entirely outside of the group. Linguistic closeness or distance is also relevant. See Smith, *Relating Religion*, p. 231.

19. For this proposal, as well as other evidence that the episode is out of order chronologically, see the commentary of Jeffrey H. Tigay on 'Exodus', in Adele Berlin and Marc Brettler (eds.), *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 143. See also the comments of Sarna, *Exodus*, p. 97.

children of Israel and their leader. Thus the two chapters create an 'intentional antithesis between the wicked foreigner Amalek and the righteous foreigner Jethro'.[20]

In Exod. 18.1 Jethro is reintroduced as a priest of Midian and father-in-law of Moses. There are three occasions in the texts concerning Jethro in which 'priest of Midian' introduces the scene (Exod. 2.16; 3.1; 18.1). Could these three references to Jethro as priest have some significance? Each occurs at a particularly important juncture in the life of Moses. In the first scene, Moses settles in the tents of Jethro and is protected. In the second scene, he must leave those tents in order to encounter God at the burning bush and receive his mission. Now, in Exodus 18, it is Jethro who will temporarily enter the tent of Moses in order to provide Moses guidance in his new role as leader. Jethro's identity as a Midianite priest is highlighted precisely at the moment in which borders are crossed—at the time of arrivals and departures—as if to emphasize and reinforce that it is his status as a figure who comes from elsewhere—that is, the quintessential outsider—that allows him to contribute to the life of Moses and even to that of the people of Israel. In the present context, as an outside priest, Jethro's favorable evaluation of YHWH has greater weight. As an outsider he possesses a clarity that allows him to offer useful advice to Moses, advice that will greatly benefit the people of Israel. In fact, Jethro's advice gives the Israelite community a structure in which to implement God's laws after Mt Sinai. His contribution to the religious life of Israel is timely, even crucial. It also illustrates the benefits of creative interaction between Israelites and Midianites.

However, at all other times in Exodus 18 the narrator refers to Jethro not as the 'priest of Midian' but as 'father-in-law' to Moses. Jethro seems to exemplify the porousness of boundaries. The use of 'father-in-law' is particularly pronounced in Exodus 18, occurring 13 times, thus requiring an explanation. That connection, of course, makes him an insider. Perhaps the biblical writer can accept Jethro's role as important advisor to Moses (and by extension assume that the reader will accept it as well) only after emphasizing Jethro's familial connection. In fact, we

20. Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, p. 634, paraphrasing Umberto Cassuto. Propp proposes a different explanation for the sequencing of Exod. 17 and 18, suggesting that the former chapter represents the establishment of a military administration and the latter a civil administration. While this is undoubtedly true, the two chapters also communicate an important distinction between different outside groups, a distinction that the burgeoning people of Israel must quickly grasp.

will momentarily observe how the narrator relies on both epithets for Jethro.

Of course, by bringing Zipporah and Moses' sons on the journey with him, Jethro reminds Moses of the family connection: 'And Jethro, father-in-law of Moses took Zipporah, wife of Moses after she had been sent' (Exod. 18.2). Only now do we learn that Zipporah had been sent back to her father. 'Taking' and 'sending' capture the ways in which the Israelite and the Midianite must negotiate both their closer and more distant interactions. In reuniting Moses and Zipporah Jethro acts as a father and father-in-law, not as a priest. In listing the sons and their names (including a word-for-word repetition of the phrase 'I was a stranger in a foreign land'), the next two verses not only remind us that Moses is still a father, but recapitulate key events in Moses' biography, including his earlier realization of his alienation from himself. Does Jethro seek to reintegrate Moses' past in Egypt and his life in the tents of Jethro with the present moment? If so, what better way to do so than seeking Moses at the place where he is now camped, the Mountain of God. Jethro reminds Moses of his familial tie: 'I, your father-in-law Jethro…and your wife and her two sons with her' (Exod. 18.6). Jethro not only reaches out to Moses, but also asserts a claim, reminding Moses that he has bonds of kin that obligate him to Jethro.[21] Genealogy becomes a means through which insider status is re-established. Might not family connections resolve the tensions between insider/outsider?

Yet the present example is equivocal in this regard. Moses appears welcoming and attentive to his father-in-law but strikingly detached from his wife and children. Perhaps this reflects the conventions of the period concerning the interactions of a father-in-law and son-in-law. The crucial connections and negotiations are often those that occur between men. But the passage also serves to remind us of the extent to which Moses is depicted as a character who stands alone. As pointed out by William Propp, while Moses is portrayed as 'superior to sentiment and

21. In his study of the Israelite family Leo G. Perdue reminds us that Israelite families were patrilocal. A woman would leave the home of her father and join that of her husband. For elaboration, see Perdue's 'The Israelite and Early Jewish Family: Summary and Conclusions', in Leo Perdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp, John Collins, Carol Meyers (eds.), *Families in Ancient Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), pp. 163-222 (175). Thus, one of Jethro's motives for seeking Moses could include his desire to see his daughter properly situated in her husband's tent. Jethro's visit does not accomplish that particular goal.

domesticity…the Torah is almost entirely indifferent to Moses' role as procreator… His office isolates him not only from his people but even from his own family.'[22] Nonetheless, as the present case signals, Moses' connection to Jethro survives that isolation and confirms that Moses' relationship with Jethro continues over time. The earlier intimacy between father-in-law and son-in-law provides the basis for Jethro's contribution to Moses' development as a leader. Yet that intimacy does not ensure the continuation of Moses's intimacy with the rest of his immediate family. In sum, a familial tie may have some influence in negotiating closeness and distance between insider and outsider, though its extent varies significantly, even within the same family. Ultimately, as we will later see, Moses remains a singular figure. Jethro returns to his own tent and land.

Moving back and forth between taking and sending, coming and going, Moses goes out to greet his father-in-law and show him proper respect. He overcomes the distance created between them both in space and in time by kissing his father-in-law (Exod. 18.7). They speak in 'peace' to one another, certainly the idiom of encounter, but also as an echo of Jethro's earlier wish that Moses go in peace (Exod. 4.18). Jethro remains a safe figure to Moses, a figure of peace. The home and land in which Moses resided with Jethro was a safe haven. As a result, Moses can and does bring Jethro into his tent.

Now that the events of the Exodus and his role in them are behind Moses, he drops his earlier reticence with Jethro. He quickly informs his father-in-law of everything that God did to Pharaoh and the Egyptians on behalf of Israel. Moses calls God YHWH in his recounting of the events of the Exodus. He also describes the 'hardships' encountered so far on their journey (Exod. 18.8). That additional phrase hints at the intimate nature of the relationship between the two men. The conversation is not just a chronicle of God's glorious actions, but a chronicle of the reality of Moses' life as he took this people out of Egypt. Moses' disclosure suggests that he sees Jethro at the very least as a confidant and perhaps even as a mentor.

Jethro's response to Moses' description of the journey provides a possible explanation for the highly positive way in which he will momentarily be viewed and treated in the camp not just by Moses, or by Aaron and the elders, but by the writer. It would seem that just as Jethro

22. Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, p. 635.

initially judged the Egyptian Moses favorably because of his actions without regard to ethnic identity, now the positive Israelite appraisal of Jethro is due to the actions he is about to take regardless of his being a Midianite. In fact, an even more nuanced appraisal takes place. Jethro is appreciated precisely *because* he is a Midianite who comes to praise God.

After listening to Moses, Jethro immediately recognizes the essential point: God has delivered Israel from Egypt. The text states:

> And Jethro rejoiced at all the good that YHWH did for Israel when He rescued them from the hand of Egypt. And Jethro said 'Blessed is YHWH who rescued you from the hand of Egypt and from the hand of Pharaoh, who saved the people from under the hand of Egypt'. (Exod. 18.9-10)

Jethro draws the implication of what he has realized in a clear and highly public manner: 'Now I know that YHWH is greater than all the gods…' (Exod. 18.11). This type of public acknowledgment of God's superior might is precisely what God sought in inflicting the ten plagues on Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Yet Pharaoh was disastrously slow in grasping the power of this Israelite God. In contrast, upon hearing the news, Jethro immediately recognizes and acknowledges God's superiority. In spite of the repeated use of 'father-in-law', this is, after all, a Midianite priest who proclaims God's superiority over the gods. Since God cares about God's reputation among the nations of the world, I would argue that it is Jethro's status as a Midianite that makes his praise and acknowledgment of God so noteworthy and significant.[23]

Perhaps ironically, as a Midianite, Jethro's praise of God is also contrasted to that of the insiders, the Israelites themselves, in a way that throws a negative light on the Israelite behavior since their departure from Egypt. Jethro celebrates God's liberation of Israel from Egypt in pointed contrast to the Israelite desires to return to Egypt, as noted already in Exod. 16.3 ('if only we had died in Egypt') and Exod. 17.3 ('Why did you bring us up from Egypt…?'). Jethro sees clearly what Israel can only glimpse in fleeting moments punctuated by hunger, thirst, and complaint. Thus, as an outsider, a Midianite, Jethro stands in contrast with that other outsider, the Pharaoh, in acknowledging God. But it is

23. Based on Exod. 3.1 and 18.10-12, Propp (*Exodus 1–18*, p. 171) suggests that biblical authors probably considered Jethro to be a Yahweh-worshiper. For the present purposes, it is the placement and function of Jethro's public proclamation, coming as it does before his suggestion for a new organizational structure, that is noteworthy. It paves the way for his counsel to be accepted by Moses.

also as an outsider that Jethro creates a shocking contrast with the Israelites. The contrast between his praise and their grumbling constitutes a withering critique of their complaints and preoccupations. This passage suggests a possible use of the figure of the outsider as one who heightens, by contrast, the failures of the Israelites.

Not only does Jethro recognize the superior power of the God of Israel, calling God by name, YHWH, but he also pays homage to God ritually through sacrifice and a shared meal with Aaron and the Elders of Israel.[24] By taking these actions, Jethro becomes more 'like us' than 'not like us'.[25] On the other hand, it is important that he be different enough from the Israelites for his praise and acknowledgment of God to matter.

The Outsider as Advisor

Having successfully established Jethro's legitimacy as one who admires YHWH, the narrator observes him observing Moses. Jethro's gaze suggests his usefulness as an outsider who can analyze a situation because he is not part of the community. He has no stake in it and therefore can be objective. What Jethro sees dismays him. He realizes that Moses does not know how to govern the tribes effectively. Jethro expostulates with Moses: 'What is this thing that you are doing to the people?' (Exod. 18.14) and 'This thing is not good that you are doing' (18.17). The outsider is challenging the very assumptions under which the camp has been run until this point.

Jethro launches into an astonishingly long speech when compared with the usually laconic speeches of biblical narrative. His monologue lasts seven verses. He proposes a more efficient organization of the process of adjudication, suggesting that Moses share his responsibilities with other Israelites. The order of events in Exodus 18 suggests that Jethro can only make such a speech because he first established himself and gained credentials as one who recognized and praised the God of Israel.

24. Sarna suggests that in fact the 'ceremonial most likely possessed a juridical function' (*Exodus*, p. 99 n. 12).

25. Smith, *Relating Religion*, p. 27. Smith proposes a directional or relational structure in which to consider the other that includes: 'four specifications of the We/They duality… (1) They are LIKE-US, (2) They are NOT-LIKE-US, (3) They are TOO-MUCH-LIKE-US…or (4) We are NOT-LIKE-THEM…' These options are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

In offering his advice, Jethro is careful to make repeated references to Elohim, doing so at least five times (Exod. 18.19, 21, 23). He also shows himself to be a sensitive and shrewd counselor, careful to distinguish between major and minor matters. He instructs, and perhaps reassures, Moses that he should continue to listen to major matters while appointing others to deal with more minor affairs. Jethro also exhibits wisdom in the criteria he sets out for Moses in picking his assistants. Moses is to discern among the Israelites men who fear God, men of truth, who hate ill-gotten gain. At the same time Jethro gives Moses good reasons for listening to him, having to do with the preservation of Moses' strength over the long term. Jethro concludes his counsel in 18.23 with the assurance that if his instructions are followed, the people will return to their places in peace. Note that this word 'peace' has now been uttered at least three times in connection to Jethro's presence in the narrative (Exod. 4.18; 18.7, 23). In fact, it is the last word uttered by Jethro. As the last word *on* Jethro, it affirms his figure in wholly positive terms.

Jethro is a master of effective rhetoric. Note that later in the narrative it will be Moses who will hold this same reputation as a master of rhetoric due to his powers of persuasion in convincing God to rescind various punishments against the Israelites. In the present case, Moses does exactly as Jethro counsels: 'And Moses heard the voice of his father-in-law and *did all that he said*' (Exod. 18.24). The next two verses basically repeat Jethro's suggestions as Moses immediately implements them. Quite remarkably, Moses has listened to the 'voice' of his father-in-law—the precise language that anticipates God's revelation and Israel's response in Exodus 19 (in vv. 5 and 19). The placement of Jethro's advice to Moses in ch. 18, just prior to God's revelation in Exodus 19, suggests that the building of a nation requires both human and divine wisdom. The necessary human wisdom, so our example indicates, includes that of a Midianite priest. The placement of these two chapters offers an obvious and clear-cut valorization of the outsider Jethro.[26]

26. See Waldemar Janzen, 'Jethro in the Structure of the Book of Exodus', in Jon Isaak (ed.), *The Old Testament in the Life of God's People* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2009), pp. 159-72, for an alternative reading of Exod. 18's placement before that of Exod. 19. He argues that Jethro's counsel has little to do with the creation of the necessary judiciary in preparation for the giving of the law in Exod. 19–24 and points out that: 'The measures for administering the covenant law that are later introduced at Sinai will take a very different form. They will revolve around Aaron and his priesthood…' (p.

In spite of his importance, Jethro does not have a permanent position in the camp of Moses. Just as he came from elsewhere and was then led into the camp by Moses, in the very last verse of the chapter he is sent away: 'And Moses sent his father-in-law and he went to his land' (Exod. 18.27). 'Send' strikes an ominous tone, reminding us of how Moses 'sent' away his wife Zipporah. Just as Moses discarded his Egyptian past, he now disengages from this significant figure from his Midianite past. In the present and in the future that stretches ahead of him, Moses must remain the unquestioned leader of the Israelite community, advised ultimately by God, not by Jethro. To do so, he must re-establish a clear distance from his father-in-law. Just as we observed a frame around the story of Moses' life in Midian, so too here we observe another frame that contains Jethro's life in the camp of Israel. These frames function to limit the contact between Jethro and Moses.[27]

Israelites and Midianites

The intimate portrait of a Midianite priest and Moses at the very beginning of Israel's life as a people is not the last we hear of the Midianites.

169). In fact, according to Janzen, Jethro's counsel is actually disrupted and upset by God's theophany in Exod. 19. Instead, Janzen finds the explanation for Jethro's presence in Exod. 18 earlier in Exodus, in chs. 2–4. Janzen identifies a narrative parallelism between Moses' early experience and that of Israel's that consists of: 'flight, welcome by Jethro, settling down in Jethro's world, unexpected theophany, election and commission, and setting out under God's orders toward an unanticipated task' (p. 169). The future that Jethro first offered Moses and now offers the people of Israel is disrupted by that of God. That disruption results in a '*change of masters*' (p. 170). I find this latter idea to be persuasive since it explains the reticence displayed by Moses with Jethro upon his return from encountering God at the burning bush, as noted in my argument above. On the other hand, contra Janzen, Jethro's counsel in Exod. 18 is also absolutely crucial in preserving Moses' strength for the future challenges that he will face as leader during the long journey through the wilderness, starting immediately in Exod. 19. In fact, Jethro is correct in warning Moses against marshalling too much authority in his own hands (see Num. 11–17 for the many political revolts that rocked the Israelite camp and threatened Moses' leadership). Janzen's reading strangely diminishes the importance of Jethro's role in the life of the people. Jethro becomes a tool of God's machinations, a character whose influence is upended and ignored, rather than a visionary outsider who clearly sees not only the needs of Moses and his people, but the accomplishments of YHWH, a clarity sorely lacking in Israel.

27. Kaminsky (*Yet I Loved Jacob*, p. 109) argues that 'non-elect peoples were always considered fully part of the divine economy, and in a very real sense, Israel was to work out her destiny in relation to them, even if in separation from them'.

While the story we have just examined depicts a close, creative, and peaceful relationship between individuals, the violent story in the book of Numbers that we are about to discuss depicts its opposite—open hostility and warfare—between two peoples.[28] The opposing views found in Exodus and Numbers confirm that within the Torah there is a 'dialectic of sharing and distancing, of inclusion and estrangement'.[29] Of course, in its violence, the Israelite treatment of the Midianites in Numbers leads to far more severe consequences than estrangement.

Ideas of what it means to be an Israelite insider and a Midianite outsider have obviously changed in a radical way by the time we reach the book of Numbers. Regardless of the actual dating of the texts in Numbers, their placement sequentially at a later date in the wilderness journey turns the broader conflict between the Israelites and the Midianites into a de facto response to the close relationship of Jethro and Moses at the outset of the journey. In other words, the violent exchanges in Numbers function in the Torah's final form as a commentary on the earlier stories. The Midianites are now presented as seductive and threatening idolators. Reading the story of Jethro alongside the later conflicts illustrates that the outsider is 'available as an all-purpose topos; it little matters what they are "really" like'.[30]

28. According to Kaminsky, the violent rejection of the Midianites in Numbers suggests the type of treatment that is usually reserved for the 'anti-elect'. Israel executes God's vengeance against them in Num. 31.3 and practices policies that will later be implemented against the Canaanites. However, the positive portrayal of Jethro both complicates the category and challenges the treatment of the Midianites as the 'anti-elect'. See Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob*, p. 112.

29. Ronald Hendel, 'Israel Among the Nations', in David Biale (ed.), *Cultures of the Jews* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), pp. 43-76 (46).

30. Jonathan Boyarin, 'The Other Within and the Other Without', in Laurence J. Silberstein and Robert L. Cohn (eds.), *The Other in Jewish Thought and History* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), pp. 424-52 (438). It was not even clear if the offending party was Moabite or Midianite since a conflation between Moabite and Midianite occurs at this juncture within Numbers (see Num. 25.1 vs. 25.6). Baruch Levine (*Numbers 21–36* [AB, 4A; New York: Doubleday, 2000], p. 445) accounts for the mention of the Midianites in Numbers by priestly editors who sought to 'lay a foundation in the Pentateuchal prehistory of Israel for the actual battles fought between Israelites and Midianites during the premonarchic period of settlement'. It is, of course, possible that the priestly editors were also creating a pre-history of Israelite problems with foreign women to account for the tensions present in the early Second Temple period, a time frame in which the book of Numbers was most likely edited into its final form.

At the outset in Numbers 25, Israelite men are interested in Moabite women: 'The people began to whore with the daughters of Moab' (Num. 25.1). In an earlier episode, in Num. 22.7, Moabites are closely paired with Midianites; and as we shall see, the real target in Numbers 25 appears to be the Midianities rather than the Moabites. Such a blurring of labels confirms the notion of the outsider not as a particular individual but as an 'all-purpose topos'. In the immediate continuation of the story in Num. 25.2, the daughters of Moab 'call' the people of Israel to their sacrifices. The Israelites now eat and bow low to the Moabite gods. The narrator then announces in v. 3 that Israel has 'attached itself' to Baal-peor. They have fled the God of Israel for the gods of the Moabites/Midianites, paradoxically reversing Jethro's celebration and worship of YHWH and overturning the good will engendered by his acts. Within a mere three verses the people of Israel appear to have adopted the worship of Moab. These verses argue that sexual encounters with outsiders will immediately lead to religious promiscuity and idolatry. Those who engage in such behavior are targeted for death.

Immediately after this episode, another crisis follows. The new threat is identified and extinguished by Phinehas, grandson of Aaron. It too relates to a sexual encounter between an Israelite and an outsider. In Num. 25.7, spear in hand, Phinehas marks out a clear boundary, providing a deterrent against such future encounters by graphically slaying an Israelite man and Midianite woman who dare, together, to be seen in intimate contact by the children of Israel as they come into their midst: 'And behold a man from the children of Israel came and brought close to his brothers a Midianite woman, [in sight of]…the eyes of Moses and the eyes of all the assembly of the children of Israel and they were crying at the opening of the tent of assembly' (Num. 25.6). Note the sacred space suggested by the tent of assembly. Again, according to the logic of these two episodes, sex with an outsider threatens religious boundaries. Phinehas, grandson of Aaron, follows the Israelite man and Midianite woman and kills them. In stark contrast to Jethro, who was welcomed into the wilderness camp, the Israelite man and the Midianite woman he has brought into the camp are now 'kept out' through death.

Phinehas's connection as grandson of Aaron is a crucial dimension of the story. He is given an eternal covenant of priesthood by God. The story suggests that the priests of Israel will not tolerate the intermingling of Israel and Midian even if Moses had a Midianite wife and a wise priestly father-in-law who freely entered the tents of Israel, and even if Aaron himself shared a meal with Jethro. In fact we are reminded of

Moses' first marriage to Zipporah in Exodus by the fact of his second, mentioned in Numbers 12.[31] The story in Numbers 25 offers an unmistakable critique of both of Moses' marriages by establishing a clear boundary against foreign (Midianite/Cushite) women in the next generation, turning them into forbidden partners. The later texts in Numbers violently renounce the close relations not only between Moses and Zipporah, but, by implication, also between Moses and Jethro, in no uncertain terms. That Midian was once a safe haven for Moses is now ignored. The peace of Jethro and Moses is replaced by a covenant of peace between God and Phinehas (Num. 25.12).

Phinehas certainly has God on his side, as the end of the chapter testifies. God announces: 'Assail the Midianites and strike a blow against them' (Num. 25.17). The word for 'assail', צרור, also means 'to show hostility, harass, and treat with enmity'. The same verb is used in the next verse, 25.18, to describe what the Midianites did to the Israelites. According to this verse, the Midianites, not the Moabites, induced Israel to go astray in the affair of Peor. The two verses capture the cycle of recrimination that seems to take over so often in violent conflict. The same verb, 'assail', is also used two other times in Numbers. In Num. 10.9 it refers to an attack by an unnamed aggressor against Israel once the people are settled in the land. In Num. 33.55 the verb refers to those inhabitants of the land whom the Israelites fail to dispossess. Remaining in the land, the inhabitants will 'harass' the Israelites. Taken together, the events in Numbers suggest that outsiders present ongoing sexual, religious, and military threats.

31. Greifenhagen (*Egypt on the Pentateuch's Ideological Map*, p. 12) lists several markers of an ethnic boundary that include 'blood, bed, territory and culture…[concern] over endogamy and mixed marriages…' Camp highlights the important role of Num. 12 in *Wise, Strange and Holy*, pp. 241-42, 274. She also examines the role of Phinehas in extinguishing the threat presented by Moses' relationships to Jethro and Zipporah and in resolving the competition between the line of Aaron and the Levites (pp. 215, 225, 267). Karina Hogan first drew my attention to Num. 12 as a reintroduction of the issue of Moses' marriage partners. Propp (*Exodus 1–18*, p. 174) reminds us that Zipporah's marriage to Moses led to the reunion of 'two sundered branches of the house of Abraham: Midian is descended from Keturah (Gen. 25.1-4) and Israel from Sarah'. On this point, see also Janzen, *The Old Testament in the Life of God's People*, p 165. On one hand, those shared genealogical origins further cement the possibilities for closeness between Jethro and Moses as portrayed in Exodus. From that perspective, father-in-law and shared ancestor serve the same function, making Jethro more of an insider. On the other hand, in the narratives concerning Jethro and Moses, a shared genealogical origin in the distant biblical past is not mentioned or used in any explicit way.

In fact, Numbers 31 takes up the military threat by depicting an Israelite battle against the Midianites. God announces to Moses that he shall 'avenge' the children of Israel against the Midianites (omitting the stated reason of Num. 25).[32] In 31.7-8, the Israelites slay every Midianite male, including five Midianite kings. Moses announces that this is not good enough. They must also slay male Midianite children and sexually active women. I suggest that this excessive brutality, in a text considered to originate in priestly circles (P), has its source in the pronounced concern of the Israelite priests with issues of genealogical purity. The priestly writers could not tolerate the invitation to the mingling of Israelite and Midianite provided by the example of Moses taking a Midianite wife, Zipporah and his close connection to her father. Therefore, in the present passage, the priestly writer pointedly depicts Moses himself as demanding the massive slaughter.[33] This passage seems to reveal 'Israelite fears of seduction by the Other, of the horror of exogamy, and of the cracking of those internal codes and secrets that keep Israel distinct'.[34] The example provides much more than a mere reversal of past closeness to the other. The violent act just described would create a considerable amount of enmity between Israelite and Midianite in the future, preventing any further collaboration. Resorting to such an extreme measure suggests the extent of the threat. The Midianites, once 'like us', are now decisively 'not like us'.[35] The movement

32. Jacob Milgrom (*Numbers: The JPS Torah Commentary* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1990], p. 255) suggests that God is referring to the events of Num. 25 as justification.

33. Propp (*Exodus 1–18*, p. 176) succinctly summarizes the priestly outrage in Numbers at the positive assessment of Midianites in non-priestly texts. Note also that the brutal treatment of the Midianites parallels a growing autocratic and authoritative style of leadership in Moses.

34. Excerpted from a description of Israelite attitudes toward Philistines by Trude Dothan and Robert l. Cohn, 'The Philistine as Other: Biblical Rhetoric and Archaeological Reality', in Silberstein and Cohn (eds.), *The Other in Jewish Thought and History*, pp. 61-73 (63-64).

35. Presumably a perception that the outsider is 'like us' leads to a positive portrayal, while 'too much like us' might lead to ambivalence. 'We are not like them' might motivate acts of violent separation and/or be used to justify such acts. As we have seen, within the biblical materials these contradictory specifications and the reactions they engender may all be aimed at a *single* group such as the Midianites. Thus the observer may perceive complex attitudes at one and the same time, as well as hints of the interconnections between such differing perspectives. In the present case, tracing these attitudes reveals that there is not a unified biblical view of the Midianites.

from a valorization of Jethro to the murder of Midianite idolators exemplifies the dangerous volatility of the conflict that raged between different biblical attitudes toward the other and the high stakes in how they were resolved.

Conclusion

From the perspective of the writer(s) who gave us the tale of Jethro and Moses, the early Israelite community, and Moses himself, could not have succeeded without the assistance of an outsider. Their story is a 'narrative of connection…focused not on boundaries…but on the intertwined patterns of descent that muddy boundaries…and create shared narrative spaces'.[36]

Yet we can not ignore the presence of counter-voices that emerge to denounce and attack such interactions and models of collaboration. Jethro's fellow Midianites are treated in violent fashion. Can we take comfort in the idea that the 'more sharply they [biblical texts] affirm the boundary, the more we can be certain that the reality was muddier and more fragile…the sharpness was there precisely to make sense of the reality—to affirm an "us" whose existence its members…felt was threatened'?[37] I think not. A biblical portrait that reflects a conception of the outsider as an idolator and sexual seductress leads to horrifyingly violent consequences.[38]

What do these different tales of self and other communicate about biblical understandings of the outsider? From the outset there is dependency and complexity. Even a figure such as Moses, who towers over all other biblical characters in the fullness of his characterization,

36. Stephen Cornell, 'That's the Story of Our Life: Ethnicity and Narrative, Rupture and Power', in Paul R. Spickard and W. Jeffrey Burroughs (eds.), *We Are a People: Narrative and Multiplicity in the Construction of Ethnic Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), pp. 41-53 (50).

37. Peter Machinist, 'Outsiders or Insiders: The Biblical View of Emergent Israel and its Contexts', in Silberstein and Cohn (eds.), *The Other in Jewish Thought and History*, pp. 35-60 (51).

38. Joel Kaminsky (*Yet I Loved Jacob*, p. 17) argues against such a reproach, suggesting it originates in a modern sensibility far removed from the ancient culture that produced these texts. Nonetheless, I am willing to raise misgivings about the biblical depiction of violence in Num. 31 in my conclusion in order to acknowledge the continuing and significant influence of such biblical conceptions on contemporary readers.

depends on an interaction with a non-Israelite 'other' in order to conceive of, and define, a self. But views of the other can also shift over time and are clearly not consistent. As Israel continues on its journey, the people, as depicted by a narrator and later editor, discover that an individual is far less threatening than outsiders as a group, especially if they once shared a great deal. According to Numbers, the Midianites as a group present sexual attractions that seem to lead inexorably to religious violations. Collaboration and creativity are replaced with destruction.

Why does such an analysis of the biblical outsider matter? The story of Jethro and Moses offers the reader a biblical tradition that can generate a creative and constructive view of the outsider. Such a perspective can and must counter the many negative uses made of the outsider in other biblical passages, including the way in which fear and suspicion of the outsider can be manipulated to create an enemy. A problematic model is not inevitable or intrinsic. Violence does not need to be the inexorable outcome of difference. After all, the Torah—most likely a redacted text in the hands of those very priests who are so scrupulous about boundaries—dramatically preserves both stories of Midianites encountered in the Wilderness. As noted by Ron Hendel, 'moral and philosophical issues are debated in this book, and often they are not settled. Cultural identities are constructed in one part, only to be deconstructed in another.'[39] By preserving both ends of the continuum, the final redactors of the Bible have left behind a positive portrait of Jethro the Midianite which challenges the rage-inducing stereotyped version of the Midianites. Jethro exemplifies a biblical conception of the other 'in which the "other" or the "them" do not represent the contrary of "us" but rather form, in a more positive sense, the ground of possibility or the complement…of "us"'.[40] Such a reimagining of the possibilities can find no better text from which to begin than the fruitful interactions of Jethro, priest of Midian, and his son-in-law Moses.

39. Hendel, 'Israel Among the Nations', p. 69.
40. Greifenhagen, *Egypt on the Pentateuch's Ideological Map*, p. 270.