

## **Jethro and Moses: the story of a successful intercultural and interreligious encounter**

Most members of my Lutheran congregation in Hanover (Germany) have never heard of Jethro. The same is true of many of my pastoral colleagues. In the worship-services of the Lutheran church – and I assume in many other Christian traditions as well – the story of Jethro is neither read nor preached. Thus, few people know of him. Even Google yields few results on Jethro from a Christian perspective in German or English. There are, however, many texts from a Jewish perspective, even videos on youtube. This is not surprising, since the story of Jethro is read and heard in the service of the synagogue once a year. Furthermore, *Jethro* is the name of one of the weekly Torah-portions.

Jethro, the Midianite priest and father-in-law of Moses, appears a number of times in the Bible. Most often his name is “Jethro”, but he is also called “Re´uel” (Ex. 2: 16, 18), “Chobab” (Num. 10:29) or “Heber” (Judges 4,11). Christian exegetes explain the different names with different traditions that were welded together by one or several editors of the Bible.

After slaying an Egyptian overseer who had mistreated the Israelites, Moses fled to Midian in order to save his own life. At a well in Midian, he encounters several young women whom he helps to water their sheep. In return, he is invited into the home of their father, a Midianite priest. The meal must have been extraordinary, for the next thing which we learn is, that “Moses was content to dwell with the man” and that “he gave Moses Zipporah his daughter.” (Ex. 2:21) Jethro and Moses came to an understanding very quickly. Yet, what Zipporah thought of this, the reader does not learn. In the company of her father and her husband, Zipporah is mute and does not have a voice. (This, however, does not mean that she is a woman who doesn´t know to act. On their way back to Egypt it´s Zipporah who circumcises her husband and thus saves him from God´s wrath – one of the most enigmatic stories of the Bible.)

Moses tends the flock of his father-in-law. One day, in a burning bush, he encounters the God of his fathers and mothers who commands him to return to Egypt to free the Israelites from the Egyptian bondage. Upon his return, Moses asks the permission of his father-in-law, who responds: “Go in peace.” (Ex. 4:18) Together with his wife and his two sons, Moses returns to Egypt. The negotiations with the Pharaoh prove to be difficult, but are eventually successful.

After the exodus from Egypt, the Israelites move towards Mount Sinai. Jethro, who had heard of the successful liberation from slavery, comes to visit Moses. With him are Zipporah and her sons Gershom and Eliezer. (The attentive reader wonders why Zipporah is together with her father, rather

than with Moses with whom she had left Midian for Egypt.) Moses bids his father-in-law a very respectful and cordial welcome: He bows down and kisses him. Then the two men retire to the tent and Moses tells his father-in-law in detail about the Israelite salvation from slavery in Egypt but also of the problems he has had with the people in the wilderness. Jethro listens attentively and rejoices “for all the goodness which the Lord had done to Israel.” (Ex. 18:9). He praises God: “Blessed be the Lord, who has delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians...” (Ex. 18:10). A non-Jew praises the God of Israel. It is noteworthy that this is the third time a non-Jew pronounces a blessing in the Torah. First, Noah blessed Shem (Gen. 9: 26), then Melchizedek blessed Abraham. (Gen. 14:20). Now Jethro blesses Moses. Jethro and Melchizedek have even more in common. Both are religious representatives of a different religion, both meet their partners with respect. They both rejoice in the success of their partners and both praise the God of Israel. Jethro recognizes the greatness of Israel’s God: “Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods.” For God had listened to the oppressed people and freed them.

In the eyes of Jethro, God’s greatness is reflected in his creation of justice. Jethro rejoices in the liberation of the Israelites: he demonstrates his joy and thankfulness by presenting offerings: one that belongs entirely to God and another that is jointly eaten by Jethro, Moses, Aaron and the elders of the people. (The reader wonders: were there women present?)

Jethro, the priest, is not one to stand on the side-lines. The next day, when he sees how Moses spends his time settling disputes among the Israelites, he voices his opinion: “The thing that you do is not good. You will surely wear yourself out and this people that is with you. You are not able to perform it yourself alone.” (Ex. 18:18) Then Jethro submits a plan to Moses. He should teach all of God’s commandments to the people, so that they know what they should and should not do. Then Moses is to select honest men as judges who settle the regular cases and only the difficult ones will be brought to Moses. Moses recognizes the value of his father-in-law’s advice and acts accordingly. (Ex. 18:24)

We are used to intercultural and interreligious encounters being full of tension and conflicts. European history gives many examples of this. For many centuries the relationship of Christianity toward Judaism was ruled by the theological paradigm of supersessionism, the idea that Christianity had taken the place of Judaism in the history of divine economy. The French historian Jules Isaac criticized this theology as a “teaching of contempt”. It is only in the past 60 years that the large churches have begun to revise their teachings. The very long path from a theology of contempt toward a theology of respect has not come to an end. The theology of respect that has been adopted

in different places is not yet universally shared by all Christians, not even in Europe and North-America.

The dialogue between Christians and Muslims in Europe – and especially in Germany – is much younger than the Jewish-Christian dialogue. At the moment, it is highly laden with fears, projections and often mistrust. Islamophobia or a general contempt of Islam is widespread. Against the background of an intercultural and interreligious history of encounters between Christians, Muslims and Jews in Europe that is laden with conflicts and tension, I find this biblical story valuable. In it we see a very different paradigm of interaction: men with a different cultural and religious background treat each other with respect, affection and appreciation.

The exegete Benno Jacob comments: “Interwoven in this story are empathy and cordiality, freedom dignity and wisdom... At the center of this story is the father-in-law, the foreign priest, held in high esteem by the elders of Israel.”

This story demonstrates that intercultural and interreligious life do not need to be characterized by conflicts and mutual contempt. How does Jethro meet the Other? Which are the elements of a culture of interreligious respect and appreciation which are inherent in this encounter?

Jethro invites Moses to dine with his family. He treats him with hospitality. Jethro lives a culture of an open house, an open heart and an open mind. The hospitality quickly changes into family life. Jethro shows empathy. He may be concerned with the well-being of his family, however, he also rejoices in the liberation of the Israelites. Furthermore, Jethro has a keen sense of justice. For him, God’s greatness manifests itself in the punishment of the Egyptians for their oppression of the Israelites. Jethro praises the God of Israel and he does this with a *Beracha*, a blessing. Jethro is religiously multilingual. Jethro participates in the Israelite cult: he brings two offerings in praise of God and out of joy about the liberation.

From Jethro we can learn that good social practice and community organization do not know ethnic or religious boundaries. Seeing a problem, he suggests a solution. He does not even hesitate to give advice that pertains to the center of the relationship between God and Israel. Jethro admonishes: “Listen now to my voice... Be you for the people before God, and bring you the causes unto God. And you shall teach them the statutes and the laws, and you shall show them the way wherein they must walk, and the work that they must do.” (Ex. 18: 20) Jethro gives advice that relates to the intimate relationship between God and Israel.

Had Jethro consulted me about giving advice concerning the inner affairs of the Israelites, I would have advised against it. As someone not belonging to a religious group it is generally not a good idea to get involved with their internal affairs. Often this leads to further problems and it may be inappropriate and disrespectful. Yet, the story shows: Moses not only listened politely to the words of his father-in-law, but heeded his advice successfully.

A keen reader may object that the story of Jethro is not an interreligious encounter, but a conversion story. The praise of God and the offerings may suggest this. Yet, if this were a conversion, then Jethro most probably would have remained with the Israelite people, after having become one of them. However, after the encounter with Moses and after having done his consultancy work, Jethro returns to Midian. (Ex. 18,27)

Unlike us, Jethro and Moses had not yet been the heirs to a long history of fears, defamation and projections. Yet, even if their situation cannot be compared to ours, the story gives me hope. It challenges us to search for similar encounters which are rare, yet exist.

It remains to be said that this is the story of a friendship between two men with all this entails. For as open as Jethro shows himself to be in dealing with Moses, so conspicuous is the lack of this kind of interaction with his daughters or other women. And yet: as a woman reading this text, joy prevails about this successful intercultural and inter-religious encounter of two men.

### **Dalia's response to Ursula's reading**

Thank you, Ursula, for your empowering reading of the meeting between Moses and Jethro. This is not merely an interfaith encounter but also an inter-generational, inter-social and inter-racial one. You bring us back to the wilderness, to the no-man's land, to the becoming before the forming, to the initial existence before the fears and the hatred, to a time and place in which everything is still possible. Your invitation to return for a moment to this ancient and unblemished is very valuable – hatred and prejudices are not “in nature”, they have to do with historical context, and therefore are changeable. Your reading is especially important in these difficult days we are experiencing in the State of Israel, when a wave of racism and bigotry is threatening to wash our country.

When I read what you wrote, I ask myself what are (and what should be) the horizons of such meetings and what are their boundaries. I think that there should be no limit for the closeness and confidence in multi-cultural, inter-generational and inter-racial encounters, the closer they are – the better. But interfaith encounters do have, in my opinion, clear boundaries – I find it pleasant and important to occasionally attend rituals and prayers of other faiths but I don't think that I should

take an active part in them. If we do not read the story of Jethro as a story of conversion (a very tempting reading, I admit), it is hard for me to accept his active participation in the worship of the Israelites. Another clear boundary in my eyes is the family realm – friendship and companionship between people of different faiths is essential for a healthy vivid society but family life should be kept in the framework of the people who share the Jewish religion and peoplehood.