

## Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 284

Exodus 18

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### Episode Summary

This chapter of the book of Exodus features the idea of Jethro, Moses' father-in-law- to appoint judges in Israel to help Moses render judgment on disputes within the community. There is some confusion about the relationship of these judges to elders in Israel. This episode discusses eldership in Israel and the relation of these judges to the elders. Earlier episodes of the podcast (#249 – Did the Israelites Believe Their Judges Were Gods? and #109 – John 10, Gods or Men?) cover how the passage is used by those who wish to deny divine plurality in Psalm 82 and other passages.

### Transcript

**TS:** Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 284: Exodus 18. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike. How are you doing?

**MH:** Pretty good. Can't complain. [laughter] Even though sometimes I want to, I really can't.

**TS:** Football is almost starting, so I'm starting to perk up, just knowing that that's around the corner. [laughter]

**MH:** You don't like baseball. That's just un-American.

**TS:** Yeah, I don't like baseball. I enjoyed *playing* it. I enjoy *going* to the ballpark every now and then. But I can't watch 100+ games. It's so slow. You can't watch it on TV. It's fun to play or go. But forget about it on TV.

**MH:** Yeah, well I have MLB Network. Man, I just... Game after game after game.

**TS:** You just have it on... Do you actually watch the games?

**MH:** No, I just listen to them. You know, if something interesting happens then I can flip over and replay the video. But I listen to them. That's how I grew up, man, sitting in the backyard listening to baseball.

**TS:** Yeah, it is the American pastime... emphasis on *past!* [laughter]

**MH:** I won't let my enthusiasm for that dampen my desire to win the football league again this year.

**TS:** That's good. How's your Fantasy Baseball team doing?

**MH:** In the Naked Bible league, I did pretty poorly. I had a terrible start. But in my two brothers' leagues, I'm in the playoffs.

**TS:** It's pretty sad that we have a Naked Bible Baseball Fantasy league and I'm not even in it. That's how badly I don't like baseball.

**MH:** You don't like it.

**TS:** That's what I'm saying.

**MH:** I'm not going to torture you. You have to look at your lineups every day. It's not like football.

**TS:** Now I can sympathize with all of our listeners who probably fast-forward through our Fantasy Football talk. Because I can sympathize with them about Fantasy Baseball talk. [MH laughs] So I hear all you listeners out there who just hate our sports talk. But it is what it is. It's what we like, Mike, so I'm not going to apologize for it. So I take that back.

**MH:** It's the only thing that distinguishes me from a robot, I guess. [laughter]

**TS:** A biblical robot. There you go. Well, how do we get baseball and Exodus 18... Did the elders and all those guys play any kind of sports back then?

**MH:** No. We'll just say that baseball is older than football, and therefore better.

**TS:** What kind of games did they have back in the ancient Israelite days?

**MH:** The only thing you really get in that vein is a game called "senet" known from Egypt. It was a board game. So they did have board games, but it's mostly stuff that you would do for fun that kind of mimics life skills. I would imagine they played with animals and stuff like that. And balls. Balls are known. That kind of thing.

**TS:** That's interesting.

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**MH:** But there are no diamonds. [Laughs] It's not like you get these megalith complexes where patterns are laid out on the ground with stone. You don't have any baseball diamonds, unfortunately.

**TS:** No sports betting? No wagering back then on sports?

**MH:** I'm sure they did that. I'm sure that people bet on just about everything.

5:00 Well, let's jump in to Exodus 18. And as I telegraphed at the end of the last episode, we have talked about this chapter in other episodes. So for those who might be new to this podcast, you can go back to episode 249, and that was the one called "Did the Israelites Believe Their Judges Were Gods?" And that's something that pertains to Exodus 18 because of the incorrect idea that references to plural gods (like in Psalm 82) were just references to the Israelite judges who helped Moses decide cases. And there are various passages people use try to defend the idea. Never mind that the council of Psalm 82, if you go over to Psalm 89, the council was in the heavens. Never mind that "sons of God" language everywhere else is divine beings. But people in the evangelical tradition especially don't like multiplicity of *elohim*, even though that's what's in your Hebrew Bible.

So one of the theories that's invented to explain it away is that the Israelites thought their judges were gods, and people go back to Exodus 18 because that's where Jethro and Moses have their conversation about, "Hey, Moses, this is kind of stupid to sit here all day long and decide all of these cases. You need to appoint judges." And you can listen to that passage. I would recommend actually *reading* Exodus 18 yourself. And you will notice that the judges that are appointed there are never called *elohim*. Period. Never. So you could listen to that episode for that point. You could also listen to episode 109 (even further back). That one is on Jesus' use of Psalm 82 in John 10. It's called "John 10: Gods or Men?" It taps into this idea of Psalm 82 talking about just people. So we hit Exodus 18 in both of those episodes.

So what I'm going to do in this one is spend the time in our episode really on our... It's going to be a topical episode: elders in the Hebrew Bible, elders in the Old Testament. And there's a lot more variety here. If we were doing historical books like Samuel or Kings, when you actually get into the titles of individuals in the bureaucracy, sometimes it really matters to help understand sort of the "Game of Thrones" (even though I've never seen an episode of that show, but I'm going to use it because so many people know what it is)—the palace intrigue that goes on in the Bible in different reigns (especially David and Saul). It helps to know who the players are and who they aren't and where they overlap. And we're going to get into some of that in this episode with elders, because one of the articles I'm going to reference uses the episode with Absalom to flesh out who the players are. That episode helps us understand a little bit more about

elders (at least one group of them). So we're going to do something topical this time because we've already covered the theological turf in this passage elsewhere. I do want to point out one thing, though, before we run into it. I'm going to read the first five verses of Exodus 18, and then I'm going to go to the last verse, because we have another issue here that makes a Sinai in Midian equation really difficult. So just a geographical note here. So Exodus 18 reads as follows:

**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. <sup>2</sup> Now Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, had taken Zipporah, Moses' wife, after he had sent her home, <sup>3</sup> along with her two sons. The name of the one was Gershom (for he said, "I have been a sojourner in a foreign land"), <sup>4</sup> 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"). <sup>5</sup> *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.***

Now let's go down to the last verse of Exodus 18. So in the meantime, we're going to get this conversation, and I'll read that when we get into the elders thing here in a moment. But the last verse says this:

**<sup>27</sup> Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went away to his own country.**

That tells you that where they were at the mountain of God is not in Midian proper, because Jethro *goes back* to Midian. In the first five verses, Jethro comes from Midian, and now he goes back to Midian. So the Sinai-Midian equation has a rough time with that. You have to do something with that. We're not going to spend another episode on the location of Sinai, but there you go.

10:00 Now in Exodus 18, Jethro comes and he greets Moses: "Blessed be Yahweh [verse 10] who has delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and the hand of Pharaoh." So on and so forth. So they have a nice get-together and verse 13:

**<sup>13</sup> The next day Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood around Moses from morning till evening. <sup>14</sup> 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?" <sup>15</sup> And Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God; <sup>16</sup> 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.”**

And Moses' father-in-law said, “Oh, you're dumb.” [laughs] That's my translation. He said, “What you are doing is not good.”

**<sup>18</sup>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.**

And we know the rest of the story. What I want you to notice... I'm going to go back up to verse 12. Catch this.

**<sup>12</sup>And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices to God [MH: they have a nice get-together]; and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses' father-in-law before God.**

And then the next day, Moses sat to judge the people. See, the elders and the judges that are going to be appointed in this passage are two separate things. They're two separate bodies. The elders already exist. We're going to see that today. The people who are appointed here are called “judges.” They make judicial decisions. So he gets this idea from Jethro. Jethro says, “Hey...”

**<sup>21</sup>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. <sup>22</sup>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. <sup>23</sup>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.”**

And then Moses does that. So that's what Exodus 18 gives us—the backstory to how we get judges (these people who have judicial authority in Israel).

Now what we're going to find as we get into the issue of elders is that it's not that neat of a division. We're going to see the elders have this authority as well. You say, “How does that work? Why is there overlap?” We're also going to see there's more than one group of elders. It can get a little muddled as to what's going on here. This episode will take us a little bit into how Israel as a people (dare I say a country or something like that?) was run. And there's a really important point of demarcation here. There's how things went before the monarchy and how things go after the monarchy. Once you get a king, things change. Everything is run through the bureaucracy of the king. He has his own

bureaucratic ways of dealing with things now. He is going to have to deal with what has gone before. But the power of the elders and the judges (but especially the elders) is going to fade. It's going to decrease once you get into the monarchy.

But let's just start with the terminology, generally. And on the episode website I'm going to have a couple of documents. One is just going to be a lot of references to the term "elders" so that you don't have to look them up. I'm going to try to do some summary here, but you can refer to the document later on if you want the information. But generally, the term for elders is *zaqenim* in the Hebrew (the plural). It can mean "old men," just guys that are old. But its use overwhelmingly points to a social-political class (and more than one) that had some sort of governing function in ancient Israel. What I mean by "more than one" is that we're going to see that there are tribal elders and clan elders and then there are going to be in a different kind of group that are composed of (in some cases) those other elders, and in some cases, not. It's a little muddy.

15:00

Elders, though, are mentioned nearly 150 times. Occasionally, the context is another country besides Israel. Genesis 50:7 talks about the elders of Egypt, and Numbers 22 is another one for the Moabites. But typically, the references are overwhelmingly to elders in Israel. Now just to give you a few examples here, some sample references, there are general references to "elders of Israel" (Exodus 12:21, Exodus 24:1, Leviticus 9:1...). There are lots of these. You can use the document for this. So you get general references to elders... There's a body. There's a group that has some authority in Israel. Just generic.

You also get the phrase "elders of the house of Israel" and the references here are Ezekiel 8:11-12, Ezekiel 14:1, and Ezekiel 20:1. Now we did a whole series of episodes on Ezekiel. "Elders of the house of Israel..." Israel, the northern kingdom, is gone by the time of Ezekiel. They're history. They're toast. They're lost. Those are the lost ten tribes. So we talked about how Israel, in a sense, just means the people of God who are left, which would technically be Judah. But this is a title that would have had a long history in the nation when we had all 12 tribes. So the terminology stays the same and is really a reference point to the people of God—the Israelites collectively in whatever form they take.

You also have phrases like "elders of the congregation" (Leviticus 4:15, Judges 21:16). So this basically says that you have men in Israel who represent the congregation in various ways. So it's very general. Deuteronomy 31:28, though, is an example where we get "elders of the tribes." So each tribe has elders as well. We also get a phrase "elders of Judah" or "elders of Jerusalem." This is when we get into the monarchy period. So is that just the southern kingdom? Yeah. When you get past the point where the monarchy is split, the ten tribes to the north have their own elders and the tribes in the south have elders, too. And Jerusalem as a city has its own set of elders.

So you can see that you get these multiple groups. Major phrases... A lot of the occurrences are “elders of the people,” “elders of the land” (that’s another way of saying elders of the people)... You can look at those on the separate document on the episode webpage. You also have “elders of cities” (“city elders”). There are lots of these.

So what you have is the same term being used of national representation, tribe representation, clan representation, city representation, and even (in the days of the divided monarchy) both kingdoms’ representation. The same terms apply to all of them. Sometimes there could be overlap. Sometimes there won’t be. Most of the time, you don’t know which group is even being talked about. There are lots of different elders here.

You say, “Who cares? Why point it out?” I point it out for this reason. Because there are some (theologians, biblical scholars, Bible students) that will, in an effort to articulate or flesh out the role of elders in churches, indiscriminately pull passages in the Old Testament that talk about elders and use that information. I’m sorry, but local churches are *not* theocracies. They are not the northern kingdom or the southern kingdom. They are also not tribes and clans. So you need to exercise a little more care than you might think on occasion to try to determine the best you can what is the context... What kind of elder are we talking about in the Old Testament at any given verse that we might want to use to explain to our people what our elders in church do? You can’t just pull them all because they had different roles. And some of those roles are national political roles (or maybe advisor-to-kings roles) that aren’t really going to overlap to the care of sheep in the local church.

20:00

So I’m not going through a host of these... I mean, there are 150 of these. You can look them up yourself or use the sheets for some of the ones that have multitudes of hits for the phrase. But I’m just pointing out that you need to exercise a little bit of care here because “elders” doesn’t always mean the same group in the Old Testament. You have five or six groups. They all have different spheres of authority for what they’re doing. So let’s be a little careful.

A few more phrases: “Elders of the Jews.” That’s an interesting phrase because it occurs only in the later books (Ezra 5:5, Ezra 6:7-8, Ezra 6:14). That’s where we get the term “Jew”—those from Yehudi (from Judea)—because of the Exile. The people who were there who were taken to Babylon and let go, they were from the kingdom of Judah because that was the only one that was left. The place is called Judea, so what used to be Israelites get referred to as Jews. And it’s a term that’s applied to them by foreigners (the people who captured them and deported them), but the term sticks among the people. When they come back, they refer to themselves this way. This is why in the later books (it’s kind of interesting) you get “elders of the Jews” or “elders of the house of David.” So David has his own elders (2 Samuel 12:17). And you even have (curiously enough) “elders of the priests” (2 Kings 19:2, Jeremiah 19:1).

So you get a lot of variety here with elder stuff. So let's not be indiscriminately using Old Testament references... The good way to say it is to explain the role of elders in the church. The negative way to put it is to prop up some idea in your church. Let's try to take things in context. You do the best you can and determine which group you might be dealing with and what the groups do.

So functions of the elders in Israel... let's talk about that a little bit. Generally, their role is representational. They represent the entire Israelite community in a political or governmental sense—whoever the leadership is. They represent the people to those leaders. They're sort of go-betweens. And occasionally, they do that in a religious context.

Some examples: Elders are witnesses to the striking of the rock at Massah (Exodus 17:5-6). They apparently represented the people in that episode, bearing witness to what's going on there. Not every person in the Israelite camp can crowd around and watch that. Another example would be their elders are given Passover instructions back in Egypt (Exodus 12:12). And naturally, they're supposed to go back to the people and tell them what to do. Elders approach Moses on behalf of the people in Deuteronomy 5:23, along with heads of the tribes. This is curious. You have tribal elders and you also have heads of tribes. So now we have a different phrase. Well, what's the difference? Are they the same—two ways of referring to the same bunch? Well, it's hard to know, because sometimes you could read that in a passage. Other times, they seem to be distinct groups. It's hard to know. The elders of Israel ask Samuel for a king (1 Samuel 8). When Samuel gets the request, it comes from "the elders of Israel." Psalm 107:32 seems clearly a representational body, but it also is likely about decision-making. Let me go to that passage and just read that to you. It's kind of an interesting verse.

**<sup>32</sup>Let them extol him in the congregation of the people,  
and praise him in the assembly of the elders.**

25:00

Now are we to read that and say that this congregation of the people *is* the assembly of the elders? Or is the assembly of the elders a distinct body, distinct from the congregation of the people? This is the kind of verse that becomes important when people are trying to discern whether Israel had any sense of representative democracy in biblical Israel. Certainly, when it comes to the monarchy the answer to that is going to be, "No, not really." You're going to have elders representing the people, sure. But a monarchy is a monarchy. The Israelite monarchy was not like the British monarchy. David was not a figurehead, and then the country was really run by a prime minister with a parliament. No, that's not what's going on in Israel. You don't have any sense that the next king didn't need to be a lineal descendant from David (from the



previous dynasty). And the people don't have a say in that. Monarchies are monarchies in the ancient world. They're not modern constitutional monarchies. We don't have that in Israel.

Nevertheless, you do have phrases like this "congregation of the people" and "assembly of the elders"—two ways of referring to the same thing. In other words, it's still a small group of guys. And they represent the people. Or do the people have some other means of representation? The answer to that seems to be no, that the representation of the people in whatever era is going to be through this small group. And it's not like they have elections every two years for this group. It's not like we have today. We don't have a representational democracy in Israel. We do have representation through a group of elders, and once you get the monarchy you have kingship and the bureaucracy and the army and all that kind of stuff.

So I want to disabuse listeners of the idea that ancient Israel was run like the United States. It wasn't. We don't have their system; they don't have ours. There's going to be some point somewhere where something's going to look or sound similar. But these are not carbon copies by any stretch of the imagination.

Now I'm going to reference an article here by John L. McKenzie, "The Elders in the Old Testament." It's an older article (1959) but a pretty good one. It's from the journal *Biblica*, Volume 40:2. And he has a bit of a summary here as far as corporate representation. He writes:

When Saul asks Samuel to honor him "before the elders of my people and before Israel," he must be thinking of the elders of his clan and tribe as representing the whole group. David sent gifts to the elders of Judah in order to win the favor of the tribe (1 Samuel 30:26). Abner confers with the elders of Israel about changing their allegiance from Ishbaal to David (2 Samuel 3:17), and it is the elders of Israel who make a covenant with David at Hebron (2 Samuel 5:3) on behalf of the people (2 Samuel 5:1).

So you can see (just in that little excerpt), you have passages where you have represent... especially before the monarchy... In these instances, David is trying to get tribes of Israelites on his side, to be the next king after Saul. So this is political machination on David's part—sending gifts to the elders of Judah to have them favor him. Because what's going to happen is each tribe is going to have their own representatives. They're called elders. And those elders of the tribes are going to decide who they will throw their allegiance to as king. So in that sense, "the people" have a say, but through a very small group. And in the early days of the monarchy, when you don't have the big standing army, you don't have conscription and all the things that go with the bureaucracy that Samuel warned about. This is in its infancy. You have to have the tribes follow you. Why? Why is it important that you have these small groups of elders from

each tribe throw their allegiance to you? Because guess where you're going to get your fighting men from? The tribes. If you can't count on getting a certain number of men (warriors) from each tribe, your effort to be king is going to die pretty quickly because they're going to throw their weight, their resources, their fighting men, to somebody else.

30:00

So in that sense, you have some kind of representation through the tribal elders going on here who decide who's going to be king and all that stuff. Once the king is installed down the road, it becomes a bit of a different story. It's much more difficult for the tribal elders at that point. When you've started a dynasty and you're a couple of kings in, it's much more difficult to wrest control away from a particular king (a particular individual). Because not only do you have the risk of the army (and especially if the king treats the soldiers well, they're going to be on his side), but you also have to convince the other tribes to rebel with you, which is a tall order. It's very risky, obviously. You essentially would have to create a coup. Even in modern times, we know how those things tend to go. Back to McKenzie, just for some other examples:

Likewise David sends a message concerning his restoration after the defeat of Absalom to the elders of Judah.

**In other words, he has to let them know, "I'm king. Absalom's not."**

Josiah summons the elders of Judah and Jerusalem to hear the reading of the code of the law discovered in the temple (2 Kings 23:1). Jeremiah invites some of the elders of the people and the elders of the priests to witness the symbolic breaking of the flask (Jeremiah 19:1). On behalf of the people seventy elders of Israel [MH: this is interesting] (no doubt seventy-two, six for each tribe) ascend the mountain with Moses, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu to ratify the covenant in the name of Israel (Exodus 24:1 ff). Aaron and the elders of Israel share the sacrificial banquet of Moses and Jethro (Exodus 18:12). Moses sets the words of Yahweh before the elders of the people (Exodus 19:7) and all the people answer.

**The people answer that covenant—the words of Yahweh in Exodus 19:8. So you get the idea of representation there. And in that case (the ratification of the covenant) the people are there en masse and they answer yea or nay.**

The elders of the 'edah [MH: the congregation] are to lay their hands upon the head of the bull which is slain as a sin-offering for the entire 'edah [MH: the entire congregation].

So in that particular ceremony in Leviticus 4:15, it's the elders of the congregation. Now does that mean that all of the elders of each tribe have to walk up and lay their hands on the head of the bull? Maybe. Or maybe you have a separate group now called the elders of the congregation (the elders of the '*edah*'). It's not completely clear.

The elders of Israel are summoned with Aaron and his sons to hear the words of Moses (Leviticus 9:1). It is as representatives of the people that twenty-five elders are called to witness the disaster which overtook Dathan and Abiram (Numbers 16:25). The law of Deuteronomy was delivered by Moses to the priests and the elders (Deuteronomy 31:9).

It just gives you an idea of the representational role. There's a lot of that kind of thing going on. Secondly, the elders also seem to be some sort of advisory group for whoever the recognized leader is, whether they serve some sort of... In some cases, they might serve as some sort of extension of the leader's authority. Deuteronomy 27:1. That would be:

**Now Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people, saying, "Keep the whole commandment that I command you today.**

So there you have the elders either mouthing with (or by virtue of the fact that they're with) Moses when this command is issued. They therefore become an extension of the enforcement of the command. In Joshua 7:6, the elders pray with Joshua. Joshua 8:10, they may be there to give Joshua advice in that instance. I'm not going to read that passage, but it's very clear they're not soldiers in the army that are with Joshua. The elders are still there when they're going to go into battle. Are they advising Joshua militarily on what to do? We're not told. We just don't know. But in this general regard about giving advice, it's interesting to note that the elders of Israel existed as a group before Moses heard Jethro's idea about appointing judges.

So you have elders exist prior to that point, and they are giving advice. So this might suggest that the judges are a lesser authority than the elders. And I think that is the case. I think the elders *are* a higher authority. You never have the judges that are appointed in Exodus 18 doing some of the things that the elders are, like showing up at a ceremony and approving something or becoming extensions of governing authority or receiving gifts so that they'll throw their allegiance one way or the other. You don't have that of judges. Judges are just completely judicial. They're deciding cases between disputants in regard to the law. That's what they do.

35:00

Now what's the big deal? Why point that out? Would you really call the lower guys on the totem pole *elohim*? No. Not only are they not called *elohim* in Exodus 18, but neither are the elders ever called *elohim*. And in fact, if you want to really get picky about it, when it comes to Moses' role before and after his conversation with Jethro about deciding all the cases or now the big ones, Moses isn't called *elohim* either. The only place we get that language of Moses is when it's Pharaoh, when God says, "Look, you're going to be like *elohim* to Pharaoh." Like, "I'm the one who's instructing you. You're going to be the one instructing

Pharaoh.” That sort of thing. And he’s showing power and whatnot. We talked about that when we hit that language earlier in the book of Exodus. So it doesn’t make much sense (again) to view the judges that are appointed in Exodus 18 as *elohim*, because they’re even lower than the elders. That just doesn’t make any sense.

Third, elders are authorized to go beyond advice to making decisions (in some cases) on behalf of the people. This relates a bit to the earlier category of representation, but there are some verses that clearly have them making decisions or participating in decisions. So let’s go to Judges 8 for one of these. I’m not going to read all of them, but we’ll go to Judges 8. There are a couple of interesting ones here, where we get the elders doing here something that really amounts to making a decision. I’m going to start in verse 4:

**<sup>4</sup> And Gideon came to the Jordan and crossed over, he and the 300 men who were with him, exhausted yet pursuing. <sup>5</sup> So he said to the men of Succoth, “Please give loaves of bread to the people who follow me, for they are exhausted, and I am pursuing after Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian.” <sup>6</sup> And the officials of Succoth said, “Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand, that we should give bread to your army?” <sup>7</sup> So Gideon said, “Well then, when the LORD has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, I will flail your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers.” And from there he went up to Penuel...**

And so on and so forth. So Gideon shows up at this particular place and he asks for food for the men who are with him. Now the elders aren’t mentioned there, but if we go down to verses 13-16:

**<sup>13</sup> Then Gideon the son of Joash returned [MH: this is after he defeats Zebah and Zalmunna] from the battle by the ascent of Heres. <sup>14</sup> And he captured a young man of Succoth [MH: that was the place that just refused and questioned him] and questioned him. And he wrote down for him the officials and elders of Succoth, seventy-seven men. <sup>15</sup> And he came to the men of Succoth and said, “Behold Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you taunted me, saying, ‘Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand, that we should give bread to your men who are exhausted?’” <sup>16</sup> And he took the elders of the city, and he took thorns of the wilderness and briers and with them taught the men of Succoth a lesson.**

[laughs] That’s a great translation there. The point here is that in the first request, the elders aren’t mentioned. He just talks to the men of Succoth. But in the

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second, the elders are mentioned along with officials. So apparently, the elders were part of the decision-making process (in this case, a very poor decision) to not give Gideon and his men food. So the elders here have some decision-making authority, decision-making capacity.

Let's look at another one, 1 Samuel 4:3. This is the ark of the covenant with the Philistines episode:

**<sup>3</sup> And when the people came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, "Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the LORD here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies."**

So apparently, the elders have the authority to go to the priest and say, "Cough up the ark. Bring the ark here." They have the authority to do that. They make the decision. They carry it out. And, of course, it ends in disaster. Now this is 1 Samuel. This is prior to the kingship. Things are a little bit chaotic. It's the extension of the period of the judges, so maybe we can't read a whole lot into it. But anyway, before the monarchy, apparently you had elders somewhere who could do this and make decisions.

40:00 One that's later in Israel's history is Jeremiah 29:1:

**These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.**

Now apparently what this verse implies or suggests is that in the exile, you have people who were elders of Judah (the two tribes who were still in existence at the time Nebuchadnezzar shows up) and they get deported and they're still considered elders in the exile. So even in the exile, it seems that you had a small group called elders who represented the community and could make decisions for the community.

Now there are lots of examples of judicial roles where elders are deciding cases. I'll just read one or two of these. Deuteronomy 19:11-12:

**<sup>11</sup> "But if anyone hates his neighbor and lies in wait for him and attacks him and strikes him fatally so that he dies, and he flees into one of these cities, <sup>12</sup> then the elders of his city shall send and take him from there, and hand him over to the avenger of blood, so that he may die.**

They're giving him up here. So maybe these aren't the avengers, the cities of refuge. I'd have to read the whole passage here. Oh yeah, it *is* the cities of refuge. So the elders have the authority in these cities to hand over somebody who does this to the avenger of blood. So that's judicial authority in these cities. I'm not going to read the other passages, but others have this ability as well.

So at this point we have several groups emerging. We have a royal elder group (or a group of elders that advises whoever is the leader, whether it be a king or somebody like Moses or whomever). We have city elders. We have family and clan elders. So we have at least three distinct groups. Before the monarchy, the function of elders might be further nuanced this way. There are passages where the term "elder" occurs in relation to other individuals (like officers). Joshua 8:33 distinguishes the elders from officers, judges, and priests. Judges 8:5-6, 14-16 did the same thing, distinguish them from princes. Psalm 105:22 does that, too. Deuteronomy 5:23 distinguishes the elders from the leaders (the "heads") of the tribes. Joshua 23:2 and 24:1 actually mention four groups of leaders. I'll just read one of those. Joshua 23:2:

**<sup>2</sup>Joshua summoned all Israel, its elders and heads [of the tribes], its judges and officers...**

So you have four layers of authority there. Now what do we do with that? Again, it's hard to know exactly who does what and who can't step over the line, and you're infringing on somebody's authority or turf. But the point of the episode is not to do all that. The point is that you have elders... They're not priests. At least we know that. They're not judges, although they can exercise judicial authority. Officers are probably (this is an academic guess)... The term for officers is distinct from all those other terms. And those are probably what you might call enforcements, maybe like a... "police force" sounds a little too clunky, but these are people who make sure that the decisions of the elders or the judges get carried out. They enforce the law. That's a broader way to say it. They enforce the decisions.

So you have a basic system here—a system of representation, a system of advice, a system where decisions are made and they're enforced. And then, of course, you have the priests doing their things. Now that's all before the monarchy. After the monarchy, things get a little sketchier. The monarchy is complicated because of kingship.

Now another article... I can put these in the protected folder—the one by McKenzie and this one, called "The People' and Kingship in ancient Israel." This is by Hayim Tadmor in the *Journal of World History* in 1968. So it's also a bit older. And this is the guy who uses the Absalom incident to illustrate the hierarchy (the bureaucracy) that's going on. So I don't know how much of this I really want to get into, because this is an extensive article. And you know the

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Absalom story. Absalom... I'll just read the first few verses here from 2 Samuel 15. So Absalom's conspiracy, just to set it up a little bit.

**After this Absalom got himself a chariot and horses, and fifty men to run before him.<sup>2</sup> And Absalom used to rise early and stand beside the way of the gate. [MH: This is where the elders are going to meet.] And when any man had a dispute to come before the king for judgment...**

Now wait a minute. Don't other passages say that the elders met...? Yes they do. But here, it says they're coming before the king. Well, this is the monarchy. So the king's bureaucracy, you can already see in something like that, is beginning to usurp a little bit of the elder role. We don't know exactly how this looked. Do the elders work for the king now? Are they getting usurped? We can't really tell.

**And when any man had a dispute to come before the king for judgment, Absalom would call to him and say, "From what city are you?" And when he said, "Your servant is of such and such a tribe in Israel,"<sup>3</sup> Absalom would say to him, "See, your claims are good and right, but there is no man designated by the king to hear you." [MH: Basically, he intercepts them before they ever get there.]<sup>4</sup> Then Absalom would say, "Oh that I were judge in the land!**

Judge? Are we supposed to conclude now that the judges are meeting at the city gates? Or is the elders? Or somebody that works for the king? It's muddy.

**Then every man with a dispute or cause might come to me, and I would give him justice."<sup>5</sup> And whenever a man came near to pay homage to him, he would put out his hand and take hold of him and kiss him.<sup>6</sup> Thus Absalom did to all of Israel who came to the king for judgment. So Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel.**

**<sup>7</sup> And at the end of four years [MH: he's doing this for four years!] Absalom said to the king, "Please let me go and pay my vow, which I have vowed to the LORD, in Hebron. [MH: Is this a lie?]"<sup>8</sup> For your servant vowed a vow while I lived at Geshur in Aram, saying, 'If the LORD will indeed bring me back to Jerusalem, then I will offer worship to the LORD.'" <sup>9</sup> The king said to him, "Go in peace." So he arose and went to Hebron. <sup>10</sup> But Absalom sent secret messengers throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, "As soon as you hear the sound of the trumpet, then say, 'Absalom is king at Hebron!'"**

**And we know the rest of the story. Now Tadmor in his article goes through the whole Absalom incident and gets into the political machinations—the biblical Game of Thrones here, as it were. He writes this:**

The forces arrayed behind Absalom are generally “the elders of Israel”... and “the men of Israel” [MH: two groups]. At the very beginning of the revolt David is told: “The hearts of the men of Israel are after Absalom”; when David flees from Jerusalem and Absalom comes to the city “all the people, the men of Israel” will come with him (1 Samuel 16:15); it is before the king “and all the elders of Israel” that Ahithophel gives his advice about how to capture David, and it is before Absalom “and all the men of Israel” that Hushai the Archite gives his advice to the contrary. Absalom “and all the men of Israel” cross the Jordan in pursuit of David (1 Samuel 17:24). Absalom’s camp is referred to in shorter form as “Israel” —“So the people (i.e. David’s army) went out into the field against Israel: (1 Samuel 18:6). It is clear that “the elders of Israel” and “the men of Israel” are not used synonymously, but that there is a clear distinction between them. Whereas the king and the “elders of Israel” accepted the advice of Ahithophel, “the men of Israel” rejected it. This, then, was a higher authority...

**So the men of Israel, it seemed, were a higher authority. Well, who are the men of Israel? We’ll get to that in a moment.**

This, then, was a higher authority, which could overrule the decision of the elders; “the men of Israel” constituted a broader body than the elders not only in name but also in substance. Whom did “the men of Israel” encompass in this case?

**Let me just stop here. You can see already that in the monarchy there’s this different group that has the greater authority. Who are they?**

It cannot be assumed that the reference is to the heads of the clans or to the tribal notables, since these seem to be identical with “the elders of Israel”, or at least the two overlapped to a large extent. The comprehensive definition of the concept “the men of Israel” is clearly emphasized, for example, in the words of Hushai the Archite (1 Samuel 16:18): “and this people, and all the men of Israel.” Now, the only body before which David was likely to have fled from Jerusalem with his professional army when news of the rebellion reached him—could only have been the [MH: other] army: we will thus not err in proposing that “the men of Israel” was the army of Israel. This assumption explains why “the men of Israel” accompanied Absalom when he entered Jerusalem, and why it was that body (rather than “the elders of Israel”) that later crossed to trans-Jordan to fight against David: “Absalom passed over the Jordan, he and all the men of Israel with him” (1 Samuel 17:24). On the basis of this distinction, we can understand the contrast between the nature of the counsel of Ahithophel—the moving spirit behind Absalom’s revolt—and that of his rival, Hushai the Archite—David’s “fifth

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column” Ahithophel’s advice [MH: he opposes Ahithophel’s advice]—“Let me now choose out twelve thousand men, and I will set out and pursue David tonight” (1 Samuel 17:1). [MH: That advice] was meant to give an all-[Israel] expression to the war against David, since the intention was—one thousand men from each tribe [MH: 12,000 men]. Ahithophel’s aim was a quick action to capture David alone without touching the people who were with him. But Hushai the Archite likewise offered military-tactical arguments against this advice and urged that “all Israel be gathered to you from Dan to Beersheba, as the sand by the sea for multitude” (1 Samuel 17:11) and that this reinforced army be used to attack David and his camp and to destroy all his supporters.

**So Hushai says to Absalom, “Look. Don’t send the 12,000 out right now (which is what Ahithophel wants). Go and let all... Let your army grow. Let all Israel be gathered to you from Dan to Beersheba. It’s going to take some time. And then that reinforced army should go and get David.” It buys David time. That’s why Hushai is saying this. Of course, Absalom doesn’t know Hushai is loyal to David. Back to the Tadmor’s quote:**

We know, of course, that it was Hushai’s advice that was taken, but it is worth noting some fine distinctions in the wording: Absalom’s army which was fighting David’s army is called simply “Israel” or “the people of Israel”, whereas David’s army is referred to as “the servants of David”. And the people of Israel were smitten before the servants of David (1 Samuel 18:7). The contrast here is clear and sharp: David and his “servants” versus the whole people of Israel, including the tribe of Judah. [MH: Judah is part of this.] Indeed, there is no basis for the assumption that the tribe of Judah took no part in Absalom’s revolt and remained neutral throughout. Moreover, it is inconceivable that Absalom would have been crowned in Hebron—the sacred city of Judah—without the tribe’s active cooperation or consent [MH: really, without the elders’ consent]. And only on the assumption that Judah participated in the revolt together with the other tribes of Israel is it possible to explain the appointment of Amasa, a Judahite and a relative of the kings, as Absalom’s general.

There’s a lot of intrigue that’s going on here, but the point is that when you get to the monarchy, it’s the army that calls the shots. You have representation, and in the best of circumstances the representation is honored by the king. And Absalom uses the old institutions (the elders by the gate, the judges by the gate) over the course of four years to have them throw their weight behind him when he goes to Hebron under ostensibly one reason, but of course his reason is to launch the coup.

So he uses the old institutions to ingratiate himself and get into power. But when push comes to shove, you don’t succeed in a coup through democracy. That’s not how it works. And he’s so effective at it that even the tribe of Judah (David’s

own tribe) is against him in the whole thing. We know the rest of the story. We know Absalom's revolt fails. So on and so forth.

55:00

But you can already see that eldership in a monarchical setting starts to give way to power. As far as how this relates to our own considerations here in Exodus 18, for our purposes, the thing I want to point out as we wrap up here, is that Exodus (and what it describes) is obviously long before the monarchy in the biblical storyline. The elders existed prior to the appointment of judges in Exodus 18, so if we're going to be precise in our language, Exodus 18 isn't about appointing elders; it's about judges. In addition, the men appointed at the suggestion of Jethro don't seem to be tied to specific tribes (they're not like the elders). You have elders of the individual tribes. These are just random individuals that fear God and won't take bribes and so on and so forth. So they're different from the elders. The judges in Exodus 18 are different from the elders. But nobody is called *elohim*. And in fact, the judges have a lesser status. They are not decision-makers. They are adjudicators.

If we can use our own judicial system in the United States (Congress and the court system), the judges don't make laws; they interpret them. That's what they do. They make decisions. So that's what the judges are doing in Israel. The ones who are participating (at least in theory, especially before you get a monarchy) in laws would be the elders. Now granted, we have the giving of the law in Exodus. That's going to happen in Exodus 20. Later chapters in Exodus are going to expand upon the original commandments. You're going to have case law that develops. We don't know if the elders directly had a hand in any of that or how that all came to be in the biblical storyline. But we do have indications in a few passages where elders do participate in making decisions. So in theory there could've been some participation there with making law. If anybody enforces the law, it's going to be the "officers" in Israel. They're the ones that are going to be charged with doing this. The priests, of course, are off doing their own things. They can police the laws that pertain to them, obviously.

So we're talking about a civil situation here. But the guys appointed in Exodus 18 are a lower level than the law-makers. We'll just make that general statement. They're also lower than the priesthood. And they are not called *elohim*. They're important, but they have a lower level. They are referred to consistently by judging terminology.

The second thing is, let's go back to this "seventy" thing. It's kind of interesting. The men appointed in Exodus 18 are referred to by judging terminology. They're called judges—the noun or the verb or the participle—the judging words in Hebrew. They have a judicial role—something elders might do, but for the most part the judges are going to be doing this. So at this point, you could say the elders are tribal leaders, because the judges aren't said to be specific tribal leaders. They're not even said to be from specific tribes. So the elders are the tribal leaders. The judges are underneath them.

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It's kind of interesting though that the elders as tribal leaders... McKenzie's article that I read from suggested that there would have been 72. Even in Exodus 24, they're numbered at 70. Some scholars say that 70 is probably a rounded number because 72 would mean six from each tribe and you'd have equal representation. It's interesting if you go with the Septuagint to the table of nations, you get 72 there instead of 70. So if you went with the Septuagint and you bought this idea (six from each tribe), you'd have 72 representatives in Israel and you'd have 72 nations in the table of nations. They would mirror each other. It's kind of interesting. Whether that's true or not, who knows. On the flip side, if you just go with the 70 (70 nations in Genesis 10 and 70 elders in Exodus 24), you still have a mirror.

But regardless of the math... How do we know there was any concern that each tribe had the same number? That's just something scholars like to argue about and assume. We don't know. But the point is there seems to be some sort of mirroring going on here between the nations who are outside of Israel, who by covenant with Abraham (by covenant with Israel) are going to be back into the fold, into the family of God. There seems to be some mirror opposition between that number and the number of elders—equal halves of the same family. Think cosmic theological terms. The numbers might be useful for transmitting the idea that both Israel and the nations are two equal halves of the same family, just by virtue of the numerical structure. Just something interesting to think about.

Third, duties of the men appointed in Exodus 18 “judging” are not going to be the same as later judges in the period of judges who are military deliverers. And they sort of operate alone. You don't have a committee. You have Gideon, Samson, Jephthah, all these guys. They're not going to operate by committee. And they're military leaders. So just because the same term is used of the leaders in the period of the judges, don't assume that there's a one-to-one or an equivalent relationship here. It's not really the case. The judges of Exodus 18 are low-level judicial authorities. They're not military deliverers.

And lastly, just to reinforce the point again, in no case is any official in Israel called *elohim*. None of these are called *elohim*. There is no group of human authorities in Israel that is ever called *elohim*. Zero. So this idea is artificial from the get-go to avoid divine plurality in certain passages. But if you want a treatment of that, go back to the earlier episode (109), which was Jesus quoting Psalm 82. But the big one on this would be episode 249 “Did the Israelites believe their judges were *elohim* (gods)?” The answer is no. But you get a full treatment of that subject there. For our purposes here, I just wanted to do a topical episode. What were elders? What did they do? How many different groups are there? It's a lot more complicated than you would think. And the takeaway for us today is, in churches where we have elder rule (elder authority)... If your church does, then this is going to be pertinent. If it doesn't, I think you can still take the principle. We are wise to not just indiscriminately go to

the Old Testament, pull out the word elder, and say, “This is for the church.” Maybe it’s applicable. Maybe it’s not. Because there are different groups of these guys and they had different spheres of authority and different functions.

**TS:** Alright, Mike. That was very interesting. Next week is going to be interesting as well because we’re going to be talking about Satan with Archie Wright, who was at our first Naked Bible Conference last year. So it’ll be interesting. I think he has a new book about it coming out. So be looking for that. We’ll take a break from Exodus. Then after that, we’ll pick back up in Exodus 19. And we’re getting close to the Ten Commandments.

**MH:** Yes we are.

**TS:** We’ll be looking forward to that. Alright, Mike, with that, I just want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.