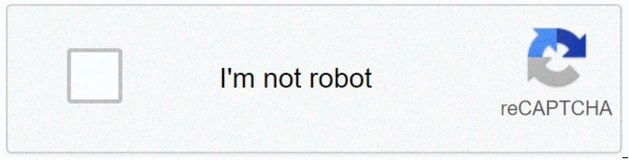

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When you read Exodus 2 and 3, you may have noticed something that appears to be a discrepancy in the naming of Moses' father-in-law. This post gives a brief overview of this apparent problem and will find out who is who who is who. For the purposes of this blog we will avoid getting too deep into each side of the debate as that is the field of biblical scholars and unnecessary for the average person who is just looking for answers. When we first met this man in Exodus 2:18 (ESV), we read: When they came home to their father Reuel, he said... then we see in verse 21 that Moses marries one of the man's daughters named Zipporah. Where the apparent controversy lies in Exodus 3:1 (ESV): Now Moses kept the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian ... A few other cases muddy the water further. In numbers 10:29 (ESV) we read : And Moses said to Hobab the son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law... but when judges 4:11 (ESV) reads: Now Heber had separated the Kenite from the Kenites, the descendants of Hobab, the father-in-law of Moses... So we have three names: Reuel, Jethro and Hobab, all of which seem to refer to Moses' father-in-law, but are confused by the issue hobab that seems to be both Moses' father-in-law and Reuel's decendent, which we also argue, moses' father-in-law! Who was Reuel? Let's deal with who Reuel is first. There are three basic views on this. The first is that Reuel is just another name for Jethro, just as Jacob is also called Israel (both of which were used interchangeably). The second idea is that Reuel could be the father of the clan (or household) and the daughters of Jethro were therefore attributed to Reuel. This would be consistent with the practices of the day (such as Jacob claiming Joseph's children as his own children in Genesis 48:5 (ESV). However, this would also force the character called Hobab into the role of Moses' father-in-law, who while seeming to work just fine later raises difficulties when considering that Hobab is recorded as staying with the Israelites as a guide after their exodus from Egypt while Jethro is recorded as returning home. The third idea is that Reuel was Jethro's real name, while Jethro was his priestly title (Jethro means excellence [Who was Moses' Father?, Tektonics, . & Daily Bible Study--Jethro, Wayne Blank. Keyway.ca.). This is a possibility that can be merged with the first option (Reuel and Jethro are two names for the same person). After much study, I believe Reuel and Jethro are the same person. Whether Jethro was actually a title is not important for the issue, but it might explain why the two names are for a man without any explanation. Hobab: father-in-law? Now that we have decided that Reuel and Jethro Jethro Namely, Moses' father-in-law, we must determine how Hobab is related. As mentioned we read in numbers 10:29 (ESV): And Moses said to Hobab the son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law... and then in Judges 4:11 (ESV) Now Heber Kenite had separated himself from kenites, the descendants of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses.... In the first passage, Hobab is described as the son of Reuel the Midianite -- then note that the comma's placement shows that we describe Reuel as Moses' father-in-law. This would make Hobab Moses' brother-in-law. However, Judges 4:11 (ESV) says hobab is Moses' father-in-law! This is quite the point of contention, but is just resolved. The Hebrew language originally consisted only of consonants (for example, the last sentence, minus consonants would read: TH HBRW LNGG ORGNLL CNSSTD EN F CNSNNTS). Later, small markers were added above and below each word to guide in pronunciation and make for easier reading. This is Hebrew for father-in-law: it sounds like this: ħōθēn. On the other hand, this is Hebrew for brother-in-law: it sounds like this: ħāħān. Note how, in the original Hebrew manuscripts the small tags above and below would not have existed leaving both words identical. As the Expositor's commentary put it: Hobab's name is Reuel's son in Numbers 10:29 (ESV); so 'brother-in-law' is a very likely view. 'Father-in-law' can be 'brother-in-law' without a change in consonants(Expositor's Commentary: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel. Zondervan, 1992. Page 405). The New Living Translation (NLT) and the New International Version (NIV), various translations of the original manuscripts, agree with the making of this as brother-in-law. That's why I believe Reuel and Jethro are one person: Moses' father-in-law, and Hobab is Moses' brother-in-law. Reliability of the BibleWhen we start looking at this kind of answer it may make us wonder if the Bible is as accurate as we want to think. I think so. There are many checks and balances that have gone into making copies of manuscripts and checking them against each other. The Biblical manuscripts are some of the most reliable ancient texts that exist. Much more reliable, in fact, than most manuscripts on which we base much of our ancient history. For more information on how the Bible has been preserved I recommend reading the article from the Institute of Religious Research called Is the Bible of today the Real Bible?. If you still have questions or need help on another topic, leave your comments below!--Pastor Stephen Valcourt Extrovert, Psyched all the time. H. callum, Content Writer, BA, Birmingham, Albama Answered February 7, 2019 Jethro was named a priest of Midian and became the father-in-law of Moses he had given his daughter Zipporah in the marriage. Given. Moses. It is introduced in Exodus 2:18. Jethro's daughter, Zipporah, became Moses' wife after Moses fled Egypt after he killed an Egyptian who beat a Hebrew slave. After fleeing to Midian, Moses intervened in a water access dispute between Jethro's seven daughters and the local shepherds. Jethro therefore invited Moses into his home and offered him hospitality. Moses, however, remained aware that he was a stranger in exile, and named his first son, Jethro's grandson Gershom, which means stranger. In traditional New Guinea society, if a New Guinea happens to encounter an unknown New Guinea while both were away from their respective villages, the two engaged in a long discussion about their relatives, trying to establish a relationship and thus some reason why the two should not try to kill each other.-Jared Diamond, Guns, Germs , and Steel , 271-272 The Israelites pause their wilderness travel on Mount Sinai for a long stay. They arrive on the mountain in Exodus 19, and they don't pick up to march back to Number 10. At this point, the travel log is interrupted by a conversation between Moses and his father-in-law (חֹתֵן), Hovav son of Reuel. [1] 10:29 וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לְחֹבָב בֶּן רְעוּאֵל הַמִּדְיָנִי חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה נֹסְעִים, אֲנַחְנוּ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אָמַר יְהוָה אֹתוֹ אֶתֵּן לָכֶם לְכָה אִתָּנוּ וְהֵטַבְנוּ לָךְ כִּי־יְהוָה דִּבֶּר טוֹב יִשְׂרָאֵל: ווע-וע Moses said to Hovav son of Reuel de Midianite, Moses' father-in-law: We are on our way to the place where Yhwh said, I will give it to you. Come with us and we will be generous with you; for Yhwh has promised to be generous to Israel. 10:30 וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו לֹא אֵלֵךְ כִּי אֶל אַרְצִי וְאֶל מוֹלַדְתִּי אֵלֵךְ: ש:עו He said: Please do not leave us behind, as far as you know where to camp in the wilderness and be our guide. 10:32 So if you come with us, we'll pay you the same premium that Yhwh us. 10:33 ...מֵהַר יְהוָה דֶּרֶךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים They marched from Mount Yhwh at a distance of three days... (adjusted NJPS) This conversation is unexpected. The last time we heard of Moses' father-in-law was when Jethro came in Exodus 18, but he returns home at the end of that chapter. [2] Moreover, his name there is Jethro; The Torah has never mentioned Hovav. [3] Just as the conversation appears out of nowhere, it disappears back into the air. In the next verse, the Torah continues the journey of the Israelites into the wilderness, and never records what Hovav decides. Hovav and his Clan Life in Israel Later, in the book of judges, when Judah conquers his territory, we are told that along with them came the sons of Keni (the Kenites), explicitly the clan of Moses' father-in-law (Jur. 1:16). וּבְנֵי קֵינִי חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה עָלוּ מֵעִיר הַתְּמָרִים אֶת־בְּנֵי יְהוּדָה מִדְבַּר יְהוּדָה אֲשֶׁר בַּנֶּגֶב עֲרַד וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיֵּשֶׁב אֶת־הָעָם: The descendants of Keni, the father-in-law of Moses, took the Judahites of the Palm City to the wilderness of Judah; and they went and settled among the people in the Negev of Arad. Here we are told that the clan of Moses' father-in-law lives in Israel. This would mean that Moses' father-in-law decided to continue with the Israelites towards Canaan. Although this ostensibly answers one question, it raises another. In the book of Numbers, Moses' father-in-law Hovav is identified as a Midianite. (This works with the description of Moses' father-in-law Reuel in Exodus 2:16, 18 and the references to Jethro in Exodus 3:1 and 18:1.) Why is Moses' father-in-law in the book judges a Kenite, not a Midianite? That this Kenite father-in-law is exactly the same person described in Numbers as a Midianite is confirmed in the story of Deborah (Jur 4:11), who introduces us to a character named Hever, who would be a descendant of Moses' father-in-law, Hovav: וְחֶבֶר הַקֵּינִי נִפְרַד מִקַּיִן מִבְּנֵי חֹבָב חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּט אָהֳלֹו אֵלֹון בְּצַעֲנַנִּים אֲשֶׁר אֵת קֶדֶשׁ: Now Heber de Kenite had separated himself from the other Kenites , descendants of Hovav, father-in-law of Moses, and had set up his tent in Elon-betzaanannim, which is near Kedesh. The description of Hever's ancestor Hovav, explicitly identified as Moses' father-in-law, as a Kenite is consistent with the earlier description of him in Judges 1 (quoted above), but contradicts those of Numbers. Moses' father-in-law: names and preferences In short, rules on two questions about Moses' father-in-law: what is his name and from which tribe does he call? Below is a table with the possibilities as they appear in the Bible: Name Tribe Verses Reuel Midianite Exotic 2:16-21 Jethro (* Jether) Midianite Exotic 3:1, 4:18, ch. 18 Hovav am Reuel Midianite Num 10:29 Hovav Kenite Judg 4:11 Nameless/Keni Kenite Judg 1:16 The Sages in the midrash actually identify more possible names for him, adding Hever (from the Deborah story) and Putiel (Elazar the priest-in-law in Exod 6:25) to the above five (Reuel, Jethro, Jether, Hovav, Keni) to make seven and explain them all. In this essay, I will omit the issue of name and focus on the issue of tribal affiliation: Midianite or Kenite. Kenites vs. Midianites Despite the midrashic attempts to make the contradiction disappear,[4] Midianites are not Kenites; These are two different peoples. Midianites are descendants of midian son of Abraham and Keturah (Gen 25:2). Kenites, twice mentioned in the Torah, are considered descendants of Kain (Num 24:22),[5] and, according to Genesis (15:19), they occupied all the land of Canaan when Abraham arrived, and therefore cannot be identified with the Midianites, which did not yet exist. The Torah presents the Kenites in a negative light. Not only are they one of the indigenous peoples who will be displaced by the descendants of Abraham, but they are actually cursed by Balaam in the collection of predictions against the gentiles (Num 24). [6] 21 וַיַּרְא אֶת הַקֵּינִי וַיִּשָּׂא מְשָׁלֹו וַיֹּאמַר אֵיתָן מוֹשָׁבֶךָ וְשִׂים בַּסֶּלַע קִנֶּךָ: כאוע-כי יִהְיֶה לְבֵעֹר קָיִן עַד־מָה אַשּׁוּר תִּשְׁבְּךָ He saw the Kenites and, recording his theme, he said: Although your stay are safe,And your nest (וע) will be fixed between cliffs,22 Still Kain will be consumed,When Assyria takes you prisoner. While there seems nothing positive in the biblical passage to make a reader think that there was or should be an alliance between Kenites and Israelites, some passages in judges and Samuel say otherwise. Kenite Allies We saw above that the Kenites go with the Judahites as partners in conquering and establishing the land (Jur. 1:16). The text doesn't say why the Kenites are Judah's allies. [7] Another reference to the alliance between the Israelites and the Kenites comes from the story of Saul's struggle with the Amalekites. When Saul attacks the city of Amalek in the south, he warns the Kenyans to leave the area (1 Sam 15:6). וַיֹּאמֶר שָׁאוּל אֶל הַקֵּינִי לְכוּ סֻרוּ רְדוּ מִתּוֹךְ עֲמָלֵקִי פֶּן אַסִּפְךָ וְאַתָּה עָשִׂיתָ חֶסֶד עִם־כָּל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בַּעֲלוֹתָם מִמִּצְרָיִם וַיִּסַּר קֵינִי מִתּוֹךְ עֲמָלֵקִי: Saul said to the Kenites, Come, withdraw immediately from the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them; for you showed kindness to all Israelites as they left Egypt. So the Kenites withdrew from the Amalekites. That the Kenites lived near the Amalekites is implied in the Balaam poem quoted above, because he sees the Kenites immediately after he has finished cursing the Amalekites (Num 24:20). Remarkably, this source in Samuel does not mention a marriage to Moses, but points to a general kindness that the Kenites performed for the Israelites in their exodus from Egypt. Such a story is not included in the Torah; this probably reflects a lost tradition. [8] Since both Samuel's bill and Judges Bill agree that Israelites and Kenyans are allies, but don't give the same reason for this, we see that the fact of the alliance is more important than the reason. In other words, the authors of these texts know that there is (or was) an alliance between the Israelites and the Kenites, but they have more than one explanation as to why that is. Intriguingly, both explanations belong back to the wilderness period, a period of which hoary antiquity can give authority to traditions associated with it. A tradition-historical approach There is no way to reconcile the different traditions about Moses' father-in-law. It seems likely that a tradition-historical approach – an approach that seeks to trace the development of traditions over time – works best to explain the discrepancy between the various accounts of Moses and his father-in-law. Moses was an important figure in the history of Israel (=cultural memory)[9] and it is not surprising that in the history of Israel there have been several attempts to strengthen an alliance between Israel and a neighboring people — Midianites, Kenites, perhaps even the Kushites (see Num 12:1)- by claiming that the great Moses married in their clan during his wanderings in the wilderness. This would fit with the reality of how genealogies were used in the ancient Near East. In ane literature and treaties, relationships – for example father-son, father-in-law – were not meant literally, but were ways of expressing geographical proximity or political affinity. [10] Allied kings would refer to each other as brothers, as their subordinates would when communicating with allies. [11] A revealing example of this phenomenon comes from a letter written by Ibubu, steward of the King of Ebla (named Irkab-Damu; c. B.C.E.) to an envoy of the ruler of Hamazi (named Zizi): I am (your) brother and you are (my) brother. What is suitable for Whatever you wish to express, I will grant you whatever desire (I speak) will grant you. [12] Familial language was not only the province of kings, but extended to peoples and clans as well. Neighbouring countries or affiliated clans – the twelve tribes of Israel, Moab and Ammon – were 'brothers'. Conflict between such groups were cases of sibling rivalry. Thus, the rivalry between Edom and Israel is reflected in stories of their ancestors Jacob and Esau. The rivalry between Aram and Israel is also reflected in the stories of Laban and Jacob. In fact, genealogy was more than just about treaties and enmity; it was the prism through which ancient peoples understood the world. Genesis 10, with its description of the 70 nations of the world coming from the 70 grandsons and great-grandsons of Noah, is the parade example of this phenomenon. The biblical text is often not concerned with true historical genealogy when it describes families, children, and marriage alliances. On the contrary, the genealogical description is an attempt to explain the nature of the relationship between Israel and its neighbors. In this case, the Israelites explain themselves (and perhaps to their subordinate allies) that the reason their clans are in competition with each other is because they have been brothers since the great Israelite ancestor Moses married into the family of the great Kenite ancestor Hovav. Genealogy as Treaty Language in the Old Levant: The Maccabean Treaty with Sparta The strategy to find common ancestors with its allies to solidify the bond was a common trope in the Old Near East and in classical Mediterranean cultures. A poignant example of this phenomenon appears in the Book of Maccabees, when Jonathan, succeeding his brother Judah Maccabee, wants to form an alliance with Sparta (1 Maccabees 12:7, NRSV), he writes: Already in the past, a letter has been sent to the high priest Onias of Arius, who was king among you, stating that you are our brothers. Jonathan contains a copy of the letter to demonstrate the truth of his claims (1 Macc 20-23, NRSV): King Arius of the Spartans, to the High Priest Onias: Greetings. It has been found writing about the Spartans and the Jews that they are and are brothers of abraham's family. And now that we have learned this, please write to us about your well-being; We for our part write to you that your cattle and your property are ours, and ours yours. We therefore recommend that our envoys report to you accordingly. The claim made by Arius and Onias of familial relationship between the Spartans and the Jews has little to do with history but everything to do with facilitating a treaty between the two nations, and is quite similar to the ane practice described above. Tribal from New Guinea to the old Near East alliances change over time, different texts from different periods offer conflicting genealogies. The question of whether Moses' father-in-law was Kenite or Midianite is just one example. Israel's relationship with the Kenites and the Midianites changed over time. Some texts reflect alliances; hostility to others. [13] In the Text of Torah, the story of Moses and his father-in-law is an attempt to explain the nature of the alliance between Israel and the Midianites. In judges, it explains the alliance between Israel and kenites. The quote from Jared Diamond's, Guns, Germs, and Steel with which I opened this essay describes how strangers from different tribes in New Guinea relieve their anxiety and overcome hostility at the meeting. (We often call this practice Jewish geography, but in tribal culture the rings are much higher.) The nervous tribesmen look for common relatives, for somehow that have connected their family or friends in the past. When they finally find it, this creates a bond and they can feel safe with each other and lower their defenses. Similar tactics were used to form alliances between neighboring peoples in ancient times. Because it is human nature to feel comfortable and safe with family, the opposite is easy to understand: we name people with whom we feel close or with whom we want to be allies, family. TheTorah.com is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. We rely on the support of readers like you. Please support us. Us.

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