

Reuel or Jethro

Jethro was the father-in-law of Moses and father of Zipporah. Jethro is first mentioned in the Bible in Exodus 2:16 where he is described as “a priest of Midian.” He is also referred to as Reuel (verse 18), which could indicate the equivalent of a last name.

The name Reuel means “friend of God,” so the fact that the Bible calls him first by this name may mean that he was a priest of the Most High God, rather than a pagan deity as some have suggested.

Many people in the Bible were called by two names such as Jacob (Israel, Genesis 35:10), Simon (Peter, Luke 6:14), Matthew (Levi, Mark 2:14; Matthew 9:9), and Paul (Saul, Acts 13:9). Sometimes the name change was due to an encounter with God. Other times it may have simply been a second name, in the way that a man named Ben Jones may be called both “Ben” and “Jones.”

Exodus 2 details the account of Moses’ first encounter with Jethro. When Moses was on the run from Pharaoh, after having killed an Egyptian, he found himself in Midian by a well. Jethro’s seven daughters were shepherdesses who came to the well to water their sheep. However, some men chased the women away, and Moses came to their defense. In gratitude for Moses’ care of his daughters, Jethro invited him for dinner.

Over the course of time, Jethro gave his daughter Zipporah to Moses for a wife, and they had two sons (Exodus 2:21; 4:20).

Moses stayed with the Midianites for forty years until God called to him from the burning bush (Exodus 3). Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, gave him his blessing to return to his people in obedience to God (Exodus 4:18).

Jethro is highlighted again in Exodus chapter 18. Moses had sent Zipporah and their sons back to Midian, rather than take them to Egypt, perhaps due to the dangers he would face in leading an entire nation out of slavery. Moses clearly trusted Jethro to take good care of his family and use wisdom in knowing when to reunite them.

In Exodus 18, Jethro brings Zipporah and the children to Moses at Sinai. The relationship between Moses and Jethro was always cordial (verses 7–8), and Jethro offers some fatherly advice when he sees the overwhelming responsibility facing his son-in-law (verses 13–27).

Moses takes Jethro’s advice on how to delegate authority: “Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said” (verse 24). Moses then sends Jethro back to Midian with his blessing (verse 27).

From all we can tell in the Bible, Jethro was a godly man of integrity who played a small part in God’s great story of deliverance for the Israelites. He is a good role model for in-laws. He offered wise counsel, stepped in to help when needed, and then got out of the way.