

## Jethro and Moses: A Biblical Model for Supervision from Exodus 18

Leslie Veen

Supervising those who are in ministerial formation training can be both exciting and daunting. Taking care to create a space and build relationships that will allow for exploration and growth takes attention and intention in order to find the right balance of modeling, demonstrating, and teaching as well as to give room for supervisees to practice and learn on their own. And yet, seeing supervisees flourish and grow in their gifts and skills for ministry can bring great joy as well as opportunities for growth and flourishing for the supervisors.

The practice of supervision as it is currently understood is less about seeking out a sage who will oversee and impart wisdom from above to one who is seen as a blank slate and more about striving for mutuality in the learning process. As Geraldine Holton explains in *The Soul of Supervision*,

Supervision has evolved from its historical meaning of overseeing the supervisee to a more collaborative process between supervisor and supervisee. Supervisors act as facilitators of collaborative learning who support and challenge supervisees' strengths, limitations and resources, and provide a safe learning environment in which the supervisee is helped to take responsibility for their own learning and practice.<sup>1</sup>

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Current practice most often has supervisors and supervisees acting as a team in the learning process by drawing on and sharing their own knowledge, experience, and faith understanding in order to come to a fuller understanding together of the work of their callings.

The practice of supervised ministry in Christian settings often invites supervisors and supervisees to engage in theological reflection together by contemplating biblical stories, figures, and passages that epitomize, speak to, or illuminate in some way a situation that has arisen at the ministry site. This practice is encouraged because, as James and Evelyn Whitehead point out in *Method in Ministry*, "When we assertively and critically set some Scriptural passage in relation to a contemporary cultural or personal experience, we can expect the sacred texts to illumine human action. In this interaction we should also expect these texts themselves to take on new meaning."<sup>2</sup> The supervisees' and supervisors' understanding of a situation deepens and offers opportunities for growth through the process of viewing the situation through the lens of scriptural texts or figures. In this process, Scripture takes on new meaning and is given the opportunity to speak in a new time and a new place.

The critical aspect referred to by the Whiteheads includes being aware of the vast differences between the cultural setting of the text and that of the modern-day supervisor and supervisee. When using Scriptural texts, images, and characters to illuminate any given situation in ministry, great care should be taken to not push the metaphor too far and thus draw conclusions that distort or are foreign to the original meaning of the text. Approaching biblical stories, figures, and passages with this awareness allows for new insights into the current situation; Scriptural references should not be chosen in order to support or embolden previously held beliefs about the situation being examined.

Drawing on this practice of theological reflection, let us consider the passage about Jethro and Moses in Exodus 18<sup>3</sup> to see what insights it offers into the role and tasks of supervision. I argue that this passage contains three core elements for effective supervised ministry: relationships, reflection, and re-action. The first, relationships, refers to the vital web of personal rapport and support that is necessary for creating a space for deep learning to occur. The second, reflection, alludes to the vital work of observing and pondering not only the actions that make up the work of ministry but also the meanings the said actions give to that ministry. And finally, re-action

indicates the all-important work of giving space for supervisees to try on new ways of ministry (new actions) that spring from the work of reflection while they are still being held in a safe, supported, supervised setting. Let us consider how Exodus 18 speaks to each of these core pieces of supervised ministry.

#### RELATIONSHIPS

The first ten verses of Exodus 18 present many and various ways that Jethro establishes a supportive relationship with Moses. First, he relieves Moses of the burden of having to split his time between trying to get a new ministry up and running while also trying to keep his family fed and well cared for. By receiving Moses' wife and children in his home, Jethro allows Moses time and space to focus on establishing himself as a leader of the fledgling community of the recently freed Hebrew people. Once Moses has his feet somewhat firmly planted, Jethro joins him, bringing Moses' wife and children with him. They are now able to be a support to him, keeping him from the loneliness that can develop in ministerial leadership. All of these acts communicate to Moses that he is not alone in his ministry and that he can rely on Jethro and others to support him in and through it all.

Strong relationships that create a safe and trusting place for learning to occur are vital for effective growth through a supervised ministry experience. Martin McAlindin underscores the importance of these acts when he asserts, "Ministers . . . need to feel safe in order to share personal issues and experiences of ministry. Successful supervision requires good supervisory relationships."<sup>4</sup> Good relationships that put supervisees at ease are key to encouraging the honest reflection that leads to real growth opportunities. Without strong relationships, supervisees could tend to stay on the surface of the issues that they face without doing the necessary deep work of examining the motivations behind them. In such situations, supervisees might also strive to say what they think the supervisors wish to hear instead of feeling free to open up and honestly reflect on their actions and the theology that these actions express.

Once Jethro is with Moses in person, he continues to build their relationship through several additional means. First, he joins with Moses in conversation in which each talks with the other about their welfare (v. 7). In this way, Jethro signals to Moses the importance of mutuality in their rela-

tionship. Next, he invites Moses to share extensively about all that has happened leading up to and following the escape of the Hebrew people from the hands of the pharaoh in Egypt. This act of deep listening allows Moses to consider the whole picture and not rush to give just the highlights, which could lead to missing important pieces for contemplation. Following the accounting by Moses, Jethro rejoices with him “for all the good that the Lord had done to Israel . . .” (Exod. 18:9). This leads Jethro to participate in an important ritual of Moses’ faith—presenting a burnt offering and sacrifice to the Lord (v. 12). Through this joint act, Jethro deepens his bond with Moses and offers Moses the opportunity to connect with his God, who has done great things for him and the Hebrew people.

All of these various activities in which Jethro engages with Moses and builds their relationship highlight different aspects of the work of supervised ministry. As McAlindin encapsulates, “At the heart of an integrative reflection on ministry, space needs to be given for clergy . . . to talk about their lives, their dreams and hopes, their vision of ministry, and what ministry is doing to them.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Michael Paterson, co-director of the Institute of Pastoral Supervision and Reflective Practice in Scotland, draws on the definition of pastoral supervision of the Association of Pastoral Supervisors and Educators (APSE) to summarize the work of supervision in this way: “pastoral supervision offers an invaluable opportunity for ‘theologically rich, psychologically informed, contextually sensitive’ exploration in which the inevitable friction that arises in the gap between the kingdom of God and pastoral life can be aired, shared, received and reframed in a hospitable environment.”<sup>6</sup> The various moments presented in Exodus 18:1–12 offer one model of what this work could look like. This picture shows that both supervisors and supervisees should bring their whole selves to this work in order for effective growth and learning to occur. It falls to the supervisors to ensure that space is made for this to be possible.

#### REFLECTION

Once Moses is feeling comfortable with Jethro and understands that Jethro wants the best for him, he is then able to open up and share his ministry fully with Jethro. In verse 13, Moses invites Jethro to accompany him as he goes about the work of his ministry. After observing a full day’s work, Jethro has questions (v. 14) and Moses is ready to hear and consider them (vv.

15–16). After hearing Moses' response, Jethro offers a critique: This is not good; you are wearing yourself out (v. 17). This act of giving helpful feedback is vital to the supervised ministry experience. Lee Carroll, who served as a field educator for twenty-six years, examines this part of the supervisory role in *Welcome to Theological Field Education!* He posits, "As a supervising pastor or mentor, one of your ongoing responsibilities is to provide timely and appropriate feedback to the intern. Indeed, feedback is a core function of theological field education."<sup>77</sup>

Through reflecting on and attempting to address the questions from Jethro, Moses is led into a space of being able to accept the feedback that Jethro offers—feedback that might feel rather harsh were it not presented in the context of the mutual care and respect that has previously been established. Jethro's questions and the comments that follow shake Moses out of the rut that he has gotten himself into and allow him to consider that there may be other, better ways to go about his ministerial work. This work of interrupting unhelpful behaviors and giving space for conversation about them is another important part of the role of supervisor. According to Charlene Jin Lee, who researches contextual theologies, narrative theory, and identity formation, "As a student experiences the course of learning typical of a formational internship, dialogue that both complicates and illuminates the learning process arises. This dialogue contains questions, ponderings, imaginations, hopes, and fears now named and considered."<sup>78</sup> In his mentoring role, Jethro is holding up a mirror to Moses in order to show him that his current ministerial practice is unsustainable both for him and for the people he serves. In so doing, he allows Moses to come along with him on the path toward considering another model for ministry.

Having led Moses to this point, Jethro is then able to offer Moses an alternative model that takes Moses' original idea and refines it (vv. 19–20). In this way, Jethro both affirms Moses' ministerial instincts and offers him a way to expand upon them. Here, Jethro is engaging in the supervisory work outlined by Jin Lee: "By authentically engaging this dialogue about our human limitations and simultaneous propensity for living into a holy vocation, a supervising pastor creates space for others to contemplate, explore, discover, and release their own expressions of being and becoming."<sup>79</sup> We see that Jethro's actions of coming alongside, observing, and affirming create the space necessary for Moses to receive the critique and the ensuing offering of another model in a constructive way. In verse 24, we are told that

“Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said.” Moses has received Jethro’s suggestions and is now ready to engage in ministry in a new way. That leads us to the final core piece of supervised ministry highlighted by this passage.

#### RE-ACTION

Moses goes out and puts the new model into action (vv. 25–27). This is the vital third step in the action-reflection-action model that is employed in supervised ministry settings. Drawing on the work of Jennifer Moon, Jane Denniston expounds on the practice of this learning model in *Enriching Ministry: Pastoral Supervision in Practice*. She asserts that “in reflective practice meaning is constructed through lived experience, rather than distilled from wisdom imparted by didactic means.”<sup>10</sup> The work of theological reflection is only truly meaningful if it leads to deepening or expanding on a current practice or to a new way of going about the work that the supervisees have spent time reflecting on. The time spent considering, processing, and discussing the acts of ministry should lead to new insights on how to go about the work of ministry if it is to be a fruitful activity in which to engage. For real learning to occur and take root, supervisees need the chance to put into practice the new ideas that emerge from this work.

It is important to note that Moses doesn’t go about practicing this new model of ministry alone. Rather, his mentor Jethro continues with him, offering support and encouragement. Only after he has implemented the new way of leading and has had a chance to evaluate its effectiveness does Moses allow his father-in-law to depart (v. 27). This final portion of our selection from Exodus 18 gives a glimpse into what field educators believe makes for successful learning in supervised ministry settings. Matt Floding, former chair of the Association for Theological Field Education, explains that successful learning is possible when supervised ministry “provides hospitable ministry environments where [supervisees are] encouraged to try on various ministry roles so that [they] can practice ministry, receive helpful feedback, and enjoy space to reflect on [their] experience”<sup>11</sup> Having engaged in such a process with Jethro and feeling satisfied that his new model for ministry will allow for more effective and sustainable work, Moses lets his father-in-law return home while Moses continues in his ministry on his own.

## CONCLUSION

The story of Jethro and Moses contained in Exodus 18, although it is not strictly a supervised ministry relationship, offers a good model for those engaged in the process of supervised ministry. It is important, however, to keep in mind the reminder to be aware of the cultural differences between the text and modern-day settings. In this text, Moses is leading a band of people who have recently escaped the bonds of slavery and are seeking to find their own land where they will establish themselves as a nation. They do not, as yet, have set rules for their life together, nor do they have firmly established religious norms by which they are spiritually led and fed. These rules and norms will begin to be established in the following chapters in which God's covenant with the people is established at Sinai. As contemporary readers firmly entrenched in well-formed nations with long-held religious traditions, we need to approach our reading of this text with caution, understanding that our conceptions about the roles and functions of governments and religious practices are very different from those of Moses and Jethro.

Additionally, we also need to be aware of the differences in the relationship of Moses and Jethro, son-in-law and father-in-law, to that of a supervisee and a supervisor. The familial relationship is much more intimate and brings with it patterns and expectations that would not and should not be present in a supervisee/supervisor relationship. The necessary work of establishing trust and building a space where the supervisee will feel safe to engage in the reflective work described above requires a different attentiveness to boundaries than is necessary in a familial setting.

With these cautions in mind, we can appreciate the reflections on supervised ministry that Exodus 18 affords us. In the actions presented, three core components of effective supervised ministry come to light: relationship, reflection, and re-action. Jethro takes steps to build the kind of relationship with Moses that is crucial for honest reflection and deep wrestling with established patterns. Once this relationship is established, Jethro is then able to enter into a time of reflection with Moses to observe and offer timely feedback on the ministry in which Moses is engaged. Following this time of reflection, Moses embarks on a path of re-action while still under the supervision of his father-in-law, putting into practice the model that Jethro offered for him to consider. In the end, Moses has established a new way of ministering to and with the Hebrew people and feels secure enough in his

leadership to send his father-in-law back home. Using this passage of Scripture as a lens helps us to gain a clearer picture of what we are asking of supervisors in the supervised ministry setting and at the same time gives us a new way to view the story of Moses and Jethro in Exodus 18.

## NOTES

- 1 Geraldine Holton, "Wisdom's Garden: A Metaphor for Cross-Professional Supervision Training," in *The Soul of Supervision: Integrating Practice and Theory*, ed. Margaret Benefiel and Geraldine Holton (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2010), 17.
- 2 James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton, *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 38.
- 3 All quotations from this passage are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).
- 4 Martin McAlindin, "Learning on the Road: Pastoral Supervision as a Form of Ongoing Formation," in *The Soul of Supervision: Integrating Practice and Theory*, ed. Margaret Benefiel and Geraldine Holton (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2010), 61.
- 5 McAlindin, "Learning on the Road," 58.
- 6 Michael Paterson, "Pastoral Supervision: From Therapeutic Leftovers to Public Theology," in *Enriching Ministry: Pastoral Supervision in Practice*, ed. Michael Paterson and Jessica Rose (London: SCM Press, 2014), 12.
- 7 Lee Carroll, "The Forming Work of Congregations," in *Welcome to Theological Field Education!*, ed. Matthew Floding (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2010), 97.
- 8 Charlene Jin Lee, "The Art of Supervision and Formation," *Welcome to Theological Field Education!* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2010), 24.
- 9 Lee, "The Art of Supervision and Formation," 26.
- 10 Jane Denniston, "Theory into Practice: A Challenge for Supervisors in Formation for Ordained Ministry," *Enriching Ministry: Pastoral Supervision in Practice*, ed. Michael Paterson and Jessica Rose (London: SCM Press), 111.
- 11 Matthew Floding, "What Is Theological Field Education?," in *Welcome to Theological Field Education!* ed. Matthew Floding (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2010), 8.