Is Jethro an Ingroup or an Outgroup? Group Analysis of the Hebrew Bible and Its Early Interpretations

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ABSTRACT

A social scientific approach to the Hebrew Bible allows us to ask questions that were not central to writers of the biblical narrative. Thus, the article uses concepts from group processes in social psychology to analyse the group identity of Moses' father-in-law as he is portrayed in the Bible and early Jewish and Christian interpretations. Jethro is a particularly interesting figure as he displays characteristics of both an ingroup and an outgroup member. This analysis illustrates how tools from social sciences can contribute not only to a better understanding of group relations in the narrative of the Hebrew Bible but also in the communities of early Jewish and Christian interpreters of these texts.[1]

KEYWORDS: Jethro, group identity, Origen, Mekhilta

A   INTRODUCTION

A social scientific approach to the Hebrew Bible has a long history and has been used more and more in recent years, particularly in the form of social identity theory.[2] There are clear benefits to studying the Hebrew Bible using tools from social sciences. Jan Bosman, who is one of the first authors to use social identity theory extensively in his research of the Old Testament,[3] writes that, among other things, sociology and anthropology help us to "interrogate the texts and try to find answers to questions that were not necessarily viewed as important questions by the ancient authors/editors or audiences."[4]

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[1]   The first draft of this essay was presented at the EABS conference on July 7, 2022.
[2]   For bibliography on social identity approach to the Hebrew Bible, see Linda M. Stargel's book, *The Construction of Exodus Identity in Ancient Israel: A Social Identity Approach* (ebook; Eugene: Pickwick, 2018), loc. 750. See also Coleman A. Baker, "Social Identity Theory and Biblical Interpretation," *Biblical Theology Bulletin: Journal of Bible and Culture* 42 (2012): 129–138.
[3]   See Baker, "Social Identity," 134.
[4]   Jan P. Bosman, "Social Identity in Nahum: A Theological-Ethical Enquiry," (DTheol thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 2005), 47.

This article is the result of such an investigation. It uses concepts from group studies in social psychology, which have not been used widely before in the social studies of the Hebrew Bible. Social psychology is chosen here in order to contribute to the discussion of the portrayal of ingroup–outgroup dynamics in the Hebrew Bible. Using discourse analysis and elements from literary criticism, this article analyses the social psychology patterns of the people who wrote and edited the Scriptures as well as the first interpreters of these texts. Thus, this investigation examines the biblical text and the community that created it as much as the subsequent communities that have used the Hebrew Bible as their sourcebook on how to create groups and how to interact with other groups.

The focus of this study is the book of Exodus and one of its descriptions of an interaction between the Israelites and outsiders—Jethro's visit to the Israelite camp (Exod 18). In the Exodus narrative, there is no other interaction that is so positive between the newly formed group that has left Egypt and a group of foreigners.[5] It is important that this story is found in the book of Exodus which is a foundational narrative of Israel's group identity. In her recent study of identity formation of ancient Israel, Linda Stargel writes that the "Exodus identity" is particularly important to Israel's social identity because "narratives of these particular events have a greater 'mnemonic density' in the Hebrew Scriptures than any other single narrative theme."[6] Thus, we can say that intergroup patterns described in the book of Exodus would have a significant impact on the group identity of the communities that consider the Hebrew Bible as their sacred Scriptures.

Most of Israel's encounters with other groups in the Exodus story are negative or hostile, such as Pharaoh's army's attack of Israel or the war between Israel and Amalek. Some other intergroup encounters are not as openly hostile,[7] but even so Israel's relationship with Moses' father-in-law Jethro is particularly striking in its positive description. Apart from the exceptionally positive interaction, Jethro's case is also interesting because it illustrates the struggle that the biblical authors had with Jethro-Israel relationship—it shows ambiguity in defining Jethro who is sometimes portrayed as an insider and at times as an outsider. As will be shown below, this struggle of defining Jethro is retained in different ways by early Jewish and Christian interpreters of this passage as they

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5   Some commentators note that the positive interaction between the Israelites and Jethro is particularly emphasised by its location—it is directly after the story about hostile encounter with outsiders, the war with Amalek in Exod 18. On this view see U. Cassutto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (trans. I. Abrahams; Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 1982), 211.

6   Stargel, *The Construction of Exodus Identity*, loc.143.

7   For example, the Egyptians giving the Israelites gifts on their departure; see Exod 11:2–3.

developed the description of Jethro's relationship with the ingroup further in their own ways.

Jethro's case was and is particularly important for those communities which seek a biblical model for describing the ingroup's attitude towards an outgroup that shows interest in the ingroup's internal affairs and their religious beliefs. Jethro's story can serve as a text to discern, for example, whether outgroups with religious views that are similar to the ingroups can be treated as respectable outgroups or they should be required to merge with the ingroup (become converts).

The following investigation will start with a short introduction of what group studies in social psychology understand by the terms "group," "ingroup," "outgroup" and "intergroup relations" and whether we can talk about Jethro in such group terms. It will be followed by a discussion of how Jethro's group identity is portrayed in the Bible. In the second part of the article, two early interpretations of Jethro's group identity will be presented—Origen's homilies on Exodus and the Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael.

B   INGROUP AND OUTGROUP

The following analysis uses the terms "group," "ingroup and outgroup" and "intergroup relations" as understood in group processes research in social psychology. The most basic of these is a "group," which is a collective of people, at least a dyad or two people. Groups have been defined in different ways by social scientists,[8] but the most important element of all the definitions is social interaction. Thus, Donelson Forsyth defines a group as "two or more individuals who are connected by and within social relationship."[9] The author outlines several basic group types, namely primary (e.g. family, friends), social (e.g. workplace, parish), associations (e.g. spectators in a theatre) and categories (e.g. women, Christians, Jews). A well-known example of a group is the primary group, which Forsyth defines as ""a small, long-term group characterized by frequent interaction, solidarity, and high levels of interdependence among members that substantially influences the attitudes, values, and social outcomes of its members."[10]

The members of the other group types have increasingly less interactions, solidarity and interdependence and usually participation in these groups affects one's attitudes, values and social outcomes to a lesser degree. Individuals would consider one or several of these different groups as their "ingroups" if they felt that they belonged to them. One or several of these groups could also be "outgroups" when a person does not see him/herself as belonging to them. People interacting from different groups create intergroup relations. According to Muzaffer Sherif, "Whenever

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[8]   See Donelson R. Forsyth, *Group Dynamics* (7th ed.; Boston: Cengage, 2019), 4.
[9]   Forsyth, *Group Dynamics*, 3.
[10] Ibid., 5.

individuals belonging to one group interact, collectively or individually, with another group or its members in terms of their group identification, we have an instance of intergroup behaviour."[11]

There are two basic modes of intergroup relations, pro-social and anti-social. The outgroups that evoke pro-social attitudes create positive emotions such as admiration and respect, leading the ingroup to help this group, collaborating with it, etc.[12] Anti-social relations, on the other hand, evoke negative emotions such as fear, disgust, anxiety and enmity, leading to actions that either avoid or harm the outgroup.[13] In some other instances also, an ingroup has no particular emotions or opinions about an outgroup and can be thus considered neutral towards it. This mode of intergroup relations is harder to define but in general, it means that an ingroup is less engaging with the outgroup than in either of the other two modes.

The investigation below considers whether Jethro's group is described as a primary, social or category group and as an ingroup or outgroup. But before we turn to these questions, let us consider whether Jethro is described as a group at all. Is Moses' father-in-law described as part of a group or rather a unique individual?

An individual is a single human being, one person outside any group, who is considered unique and not representing a group at any level of reading the text. There are several biblical characters that can be described as unique individuals. They are usually ingroup members in a leadership role (e.g., Abraham, Moses or David) or have a particular role in the ingroup's social history (e.g., David's progenitor, Ruth). Some characteristics of these individuals are they have a name, there are lengthy stories about them,[14] they are marked by particular piety[15] and their unique status is often explicitly stated.[16] Jethro has several of these characteristics, which would encourage interpreting him as a unique individual who cannot be generalised and discussed as a group.

However, there are levels of reading the text that indicate that Jethro was considered more than just one unique individual. For example, his name that

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[11] Muzaffer Sherif, *In Common Predicament: Social Psychology of Intergroup Conflict and Cooperation* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), 12.

[12] See John F. Dovidio, Jane Allyn Piliavin, David A. Schroeder, and Louis A. Penner, *The Social Psychology of Prosocial Behavior* (New York: Psychology Press, 2012).

[13] Marylinn B. Brewer, "Intergroup Relations," in *Advanced Social Psychology: The State of the Science* (ed. Roy F. Baumeister and Eli J. Finkel; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 549–550. It is worth noting that group processes research mostly focuses on anti-social group relationships and how to overcome them; much less research has been done on pro-social group relations.

[14] Cf. the Book of Ruth.

[15] Note, for example, God's covenant with Abram in Gen 15.

[16] For example, Moses' uniqueness is stated in Deut 34:10.

would otherwise show his uniqueness may just as well indicate a category group in this case. In the Hebrew Bible, people with a name can be generalised, representing more than just one particular individual; "Israel" is a good example of this, as the name refers both to a patriarch and to a whole nation. In addition, it is interesting to remark that Moses' father-in-law has several names in different biblical stories. He is called Jethro, Jether, Hobab and Reuel.[17] Even though the presence of different names for the same individual is not exceptional in biblical literature (Joshua was also called Hoshea), in no other case is the same individual known by three completely different names. This diversity indicates that biblical writers and their tradition emphasised the general character of Moses' father-in-law and regarded him more as a category representing a group of people.

The group is also implied in several stories about Jethro. For example, when Jethro visits the Israelite camp in the wilderness, he does not arrive alone. He is accompanied by Zipporah, Gershom and Eliezer and more likely by a larger group of people. The group identity of Moses' father-in-law is found in later biblical literature—the book of Judges mentions a group that seems to consider itself Jethro's descendants and identifies with him (see Judg 1:16).

In short, Moses' father-in-law can be seen as a unique individual but in general, he can be considered a representative and member of a group and thus can be used in the analysis of group relations in the Hebrew Bible.

C   JETHRO'S GROUP IDENTITY IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Moses' father-in-law is mentioned in two major story cycles in the Torah, namely Moses' youth (Exod 2–4) and the Sinai traditions (Exod 18; Num 10).[18] From these stories, we learn that Jethro had a special relationship with Moses and that he was keen to establish and maintain a relationship not only with Moses but also with the Israelites in general. We also learn that Moses had great respect for his father-in-law (for example, Moses asked Jethro's permission before returning to Egypt) and not only Moses, but also other Israelites received Moses' father-in-law in their midst (he ate with the elders and Aaron).

Stories about Moses' father-in-law show that it was not a one-on-one relationship, Jethro's encounter with Israel was a case of intergroup relations. We can observe several characteristics of Jethro's group in these encounters. First, Moses' father-in-law is introduced as one representing a social group—he is a priest of Midian (Exod 2:16). However, the whole point of this first story is to show his transformation to Moses' and by extension Israel's primary or family group (Exod 2:21). Interestingly, in Exod 18:1, he is introduced in this order:

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[17] On Jethro's different names, cf. Kevin G. O'Connell, "Jethro," *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* (ed. P. J. Achtemeier; New York: HarperSanFranciso, 1996), 524.

[18] Moses' father-in-law is also mentioned in Judg 1:16; 4:11 in the context of his descendants.

first his name (Jethro), then his social status (priest of Midian) and then his primary group (Moses' father-in-law). All these elements of Jethro's identity play a role in the subsequent story. It is interesting to note that there is no clear identification of Jethro with a category group "nations" or even "Midianites"; his group seems to be more particularly defined than a category.

Thus, the Exodus narrative describes Jethro as representing a social and a primary group, keeping both group identities in tension throughout the descriptions of Moses' father-in-law. We see the same tension when we try to analyse Jethro's ingroup-outgroup status. On the one hand, Jethro and his group are clearly described as an outgroup. Not only do they live far away (his encounter with Moses and the Israelites always involves some travel), but Jethro himself is regularly identified as "the priest of Midian," a term that implies clear foreign elements.

On the other hand, Jethro's group is always described in highly pro-social terms which is unusual for outgroups in the Exodus story. Arriving at Israel's camp in Sinai, Moses' father-in-law goes through several stages to be accepted by the Israelite community. He is welcomed and greeted (Exod 18:7); he is instructed in Israel's history (Exod 18:8); he acknowledges the God of Israel and offers sacrifices (Exod 18:10–12) and he shares a meal with the community (Exod 18:12). Even more, not only does Jethro share these core identity markers of Israel's ingroup, he also shows concern for the wellbeing of the community—Moses' father-in-law shares his wisdom on how the Israelites could make their governance more efficient (Exod 18:13ff).

It is interesting to note that apart from the introduction of the story of Jethro's visit (Exod 18:1), Jethro is not described as the priest of Midian in the subsequent narrative. He is regularly identified as Moses' father-in-law thus emphasising his primary group affiliation.

Despite all these indications that Moses' father-in-law was considered a member of Israel's ingroup, there is no clear statement anywhere that he stayed with Israel. Quite the contrary, Exod 18 concludes with Jethro returning to his own land. The biblical narrative shows that Jethro never fully merged with the ingroup.

The ambiguity of Jethro's group status vis-à-vis Israel is well illustrated by a story in the book of Numbers, the last story in which Moses' father-in-law interacts with the Israelites. In this encounter, Moses asks Jethro not to leave but rather stay with the Israelites (Num 10:29–32). At the end of the story, it is not stated whether Jethro chose to remain with Moses' group or went away to his own country; his status remains open for discussion. Later biblical tradition seems to imply that Jethro's group stayed particularly close to the Israelites as distinct but in many ways similar, as can be understood from Judges 1:16, which is open to interpretation.

Thus, we can conclude that the biblical narrative portrays and maintains tension between Jethro's social and family group identities and Jethro's status as both an insider and an outsider to the Israelite group. It could also be described as a development in the social identity of Jethro's group, which started off being very distinct and foreign to the Israelites, but at some point, became close physically and culturally, almost a marginal subgroup that retained distinct characteristics but was not considered a threat to the Israelites in any way. Characteristically of the Hebrew Bible, its narrative does not resolve the tension between different identities of Moses' father-on-law but it presents an opportunity for the interpreters of the Bible to read their own stories into the Scriptures. In the remainder of this article, two earliest Christian and Rabbinic commentaries on Moses' father-in-law's social will be considered in order to illustrate what their analysis can tell us about the groups that created these commentaries and their relationships with other groups of their time.

D   CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION OF JETHRO: ORIGEN

Origen of Alexandria was the earliest systematic biblical commentator in the Christian Church who lived at the end of the second and beginning of the third century in Alexandria and Caesarea Maritima. There are two fragments of the preserved Origen's works in which Jethro is interpreted—one is in the homilies on Joshua,[19] the other in the homilies on Exodus.[20] The latter is found in the eleventh homily on the book of Exodus and is by far the most extensive of Origen's interpretation of Jethro or Moses' father-in-law. In two subsections of the homily (Homilies on Exodus 11.5–6), Origen comments on Jethro's visit to the Israelite camp in the desert after the people have come through the Red Sea and fought off Amalek.[21]

In this fragment, Origen touches upon the themes of the inferiority of Jethro in comparison to Moses and Israel's patriarchs; the importance of Jethro's eating with the elders of Israel; Jethro's good counsel; Jethro the Gentile's inferiority to Moses and ends with Origen discussing future Gentiles who will give Moses good counsel in interpreting the law spiritually.

This list of subjects illustrates that Origen's interpretation of Jethro is not particularly favourable; the author returns to the theme of Jethro's inferiority more than once. As it happens often in his preaching, Origen juxtaposes a less

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[19] See Homily on Joshua 1.2.

[20] Jethro is very briefly mentioned in Homily on Genesis 11:2, but this fragment does not contribute to the current discussion.

[21] The Latin text can be found in Wilhelm A. Baehrens, *Homilien zum Hexateuch: In Rufins Übersetzung*, Origenes Werke (Sechster Band, Erster Teil; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1920), 256–260; the English translation is found in *Origen: Homilies on Genesis and Exodus* (trans. Ronald E. Heine; Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981), 360–364.

favourable character (in this case Jethro) with a more favourable one (in this case it is mostly Moses) in order to show the superiority of the latter.[22] Origen's interpretation does not outline anything particularly bad about Jethro but his inferiority to Moses and the other leaders of Israel is clearly emphasised.

In Origen's interpretation, Jethro is regarded more as an individual than a group in cases where he is compared to individual Israelites (Moses, Abraham, Jacob) and biblical history (Adam, Abel). However, in other cases Origen clearly considers Jethro as part of a group—he arrives in a group with Moses' wife and sons, he is identified as one of priests and he is described as a Gentile or pagan.[23] In the first case, Jethro's group is a primary or family group type. His status as a priest shows that he belongs to a social group and a Gentile is clearly a category group type. Thus, it can be concluded that Origen considered Jethro not only an individual leader of a group but also a representative of a certain community, whether a family, social or category group type.

Jethro's primary group status in Origen's description is not developed and emphasised. For example, even though Origen introduces Jethro as Moses' father-in-law, his main emphasis is on the description of how Jethro cannot go to the mountain because he is "a priest of Midian" (implying idolatry).[24] For Origen, Jethro's identity as a member of a primary group is not important. His emphasis is clearly on Jethro's other group identities, particularly the category group.

In Jethro's group descriptions, he is mainly considered an outgroup. Thus, even though Jethro has an exclusive access to his son-in-law, the leader of the Israelites (which not everyone easily has[25]), Jethro's status as an outsider is more emphasised. Origen writes that Moses does not lead him to the mountain of God as he would have done with the Israelites.

Similarly, the outsider status of Jethro is clearly discernible in the descriptions that portray him as a member of a social group. Even though he was eating with the elders in God's presence[26] and eating in this case is an important ingroup activity that provides the ingroup with its identity,[27] the description

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[22]   See, for example, Origen's story that Moses was strong and able to go down to Egypt and win the battle against the Egyptians, but Jethro was not able to do so. W. A. Baehrens, *Homilien zum Hexateuch*, 257.

[23]   *Gentilis* in Latin; see Baeherens, *Homilien zum Hexateuch*, 260.

[24]   Baehrens, *Homilien zum Hexateuch*, 257.

[25]   That the Israelites had difficulty in gaining access to Moses is illustrated by the story of Moses judging the people in Exod 18:13–14.

[26]   Baehrens, *Homilien zum Hexateuch*, 258.

[27]   See Homily on Exodus 11.3 where Origen explains eating and drinking as a crucial ingroup activity; it means approaching "deeper meaning of spiritual teaching" (Heine's translation, see *Origen: Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, 357–358; the Latin text is found in Baehrens, *Homilien zum Hexateuch*, 254).

makes clear that this participation was an exception. Jethro did not fully belong to the community sharing this meal. Origen's commentary emphasises that Jethro can only give his good counsel after eating. He has to acquire something from the ingroup in order to be able to do something good or useful.

Jethro's status as an outgroup is best illustrated in the description of his status as a category group member. He is identified as a Gentile who is "an alien from the people of God."[28] In this description, Origen is unusually emotional, noting how impossible it was for Moses the prophet of God to accept counsel from Jethro: "My mind goes numb with admiration!"[29] This fragment clearly states that Jethro was considered a member of a group that was very distinct from and inferior to Moses and his group. Jethro is clearly an outgroup member.

In the analysis of Origen's understanding of Jethro, it is important to note not only the elements of the biblical text that the author uses but also those that are left out of his description of Moses' father-in-law. There is no reference to Moses' greeting of Jethro on the latter's arrival (Exod 18:7) and nowhere does Origen describe Jethro's acknowledgement of Israel's God (Exod 18:10) or Jethro sacrificing (Exod 18:12). These elements would show Jethro in a more favourable light as they would indicate the ingroup's acceptance of Jethro and his sharing of an important ingroup identity marker—religiosity. As will be shown below, these texts are important for the Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael but they play no role in Origen's interpretation.

Jethro's farewell (Exod 18:27) is not mentioned by Origen either. Instead, Origen finishes his section on Jethro's visit with a description of two ways of interpreting the law—the literal way practised by the Jews and the better, spiritual way of interpreting the law practised by the Gentiles.[30] Origen returns to this subject regularly throughout his homilies on Exodus.[31] For our purpose, it is important to note that Gentiles in this context represent the ingroup; the people who interpret the law spiritually, the correct way. One might think that here Origen treats Jethro as the ingroup because he is clearly identified as a Gentile only a paragraph earlier. However, Origen does not mention Jethro in his last comment; he only refers to the category "Gentiles." The text leaves us with an impression that Jethro is replaced by Origen's ingroup at some future time. The Gentiles who understand the law spiritually are not directly connected with Jethro but are an entity that only shares some features with a Jethro-like group of the past.

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[28] Heine's translation; see *Origen: Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, 364. "... *ab homine gentili, alieno a populo Dei*," Baehrens, *Homilien zum Hexateuch*, 260.

[29] Heine's translation; see *Origen: Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, 363. "... *admiratione nimia stuporem mentis incurro*," Baehrens, *Homilien zum Hexateuch*, 260.

[30] Baehrens, *Homilien zum Hexateuch*, 260.

[31] Cf. Homilies on Exodus 11.4; 5.1, etc.

In editorial terms Origen's interpretation of Jethro's group most probably represents his sources. He was influenced by Philo's interpretation of Jethro as an inferior character.[32] Origen was also strongly influenced by Paul's writings with its emphasis on the gentile character of Jesus' followers.[33] In sociological terms it can be observed that even though in other interpretations, Origen mostly uses very static identities for his characters,[34] there is a certain development of the group's identity in Jethro's case. Moses' father-in-law starts off as an inferior outsider, a Gentile of a lower social status than God's people but the group that he represents becomes the superior group later, in Origen's time. However, Jethro is not part of that group anymore, Origen is.

Origen's interpretation of Jethro shows the author's particular interest in the category group identity of Moses' father-in-law. Jethro does not represent anything in Origen's time, the only important gentile group that Origen is concerned about is his own Christian group that is superior to the Jews in its interpretation of the law. In this sense, Origen's main interest is his group's relationship with the Jews rather than his group's relationship with a Jethro-like gentile group. Interestingly, Origen does not seem to be interested in a mission to Jethro's gentile group. Following these observations and the fact that no other interpretation mentions Jethro's group as the ancestors of Origen's ingroup, this research concludes that Origen does not consider Jethro an ingroup in either the author's present or the past. Jethro remains a distinct gentile or pagan group that has a lower status, can be useful under very specific circumstances, but in general is not particularly interesting to the author.

E   RABBINIC INTERPRETATION OF JETHRO: MEKHILTA DE RABBI ISHMAEL

The Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael is one of the earliest collections of rabbinic commentaries on a biblical book and is devoted to the book of Exodus. Jethro's visit to the Israelite camp is discussed in chapters three and four of the Mekhilta's tractate "Amalek." As all early rabbinic documents, the Mekhilta is a compilation of a number of quite varied traditions and opinions and does not represent a unified view on any particular subject. However, there are certain themes that the Mekhilta regularly returns to or discusses in greater detail than others. In this research, it is assumed that the more lengthy and varied commentaries on a subject indicate that it is particularly important to the authors

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[32] See F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, "Introduction," *Philo: Volume I*, The Loeb Classic Library (ed. G. P. Goold; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), xxv.

[33] On Paul's influence on Origen, see Christoph Markschies, "Paul the Apostle," *The Westminster Handbook to Origen* (ed. John Anthony McGuckin; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 167–169.

[34] For example, Egypt is always wicked. See Homilies on Exodus 3.3, 4.6, etc.

of the compilation and therefore these commentaries are given special attention.[35]

The more elaborate Mekhilta's commentaries with regards to Jethro are on the following topics: the reason for Jethro's arrival, Jethro's relationship with Moses, Jethro's different names and their meanings (this subject is missing in Origen's commentary), Jethro's relationship with God (missing in Origen), Jethro's mission after his return home and Jethro's descendants (also missing in Origen). This list shows that the Mekhilta differs from Origen with regards to the types of questions it is interested in Jethro's case. Furthermore, the very questions it asks show that its attitude toward Moses' father-in-law is much more positive than Origen's.

As in Origen's work, the main emphasis of the Mekhilta's comments is on the ingroup and Moses. However, compared to other parts of the Mekhilta, the editorial work of chapters three and four in tractate "Amalek" shows a particular interest in foreign nations that are favourable to Israel (Rahab and Naaman are mentioned several times) and Israel's mission to the outsiders (there are more references to Abraham in these chapters than in any other part of the Mekhilta).[36]

In terms of social commentary, the authors of the Mekhilta particularly emphasise Jethro's role as a representative of a group rather than an individual. For example, there is a lengthy discussion on different members of Jethro's arrival party (his daughter Zipporah, her sons and people Jethro sends to announce his arrival).[37] The Mekhilta's extensive discussion of Jethro's family shows that Jethro's primary group type was of great importance to its authors. It is reinforced in chapter four of tractate "Amalek" where several commentaries describe Jethro's descendants,[38] a topic that is not developed in the Hebrew Bible itself and not mentioned in Origen's commentary.

There are also references to Jethro's social group type. He is called a priest and a chief[39] but the Mekhilta does not dwell at length on this part of Jethro's identity. Lastly, we see descriptions of Jethro's category group type as well—his past as an idol worshipper is referred to several times.[40] Like the social type, the

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[35]   Detailed analysis of the composition of the Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael can be found in Elaine A. Phillips, "Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael: A Study in Composition and Context" (DPhil thesis, Annenberg Research Institute, 1992).

[36] For   more on the composition of tractate "Amalek," see Phillips, "Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael," 376–423.

[37]   Jacob Z. Lauterbach, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael: A Critical Edition, Based on the Manuscripts and Early Editions, with an English Translation, Introduction, and Notes* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 277.

[38]   Lauterbach, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, 285–288.

[39]   Ibid., 272.

[40]   Ibid., 272–273, 275, 280.

commentaries using the category group type are short and not developed. Moreover, Jethro as an idol worshipper, seems to belong to the past. References to this part of Jethro's identity mostly emphasise his change, not his current status.

It has to be mentioned that there are also some commentaries in tractate "Amalek" that treat Jethro more as a unique individual than a group member. For example, there are commentaries that describe Jethro in a one-on-one relationship with Moses. Moreover, Jethro's name(s), which is an important identity marker, could be considered an individual trait. However, even in these cases we can identify Jethro as a representative of a certain group of individuals. Jethro has a relationship not only with Moses, but also with a group of elders and the meaning ascribed to most of his names is very general and could apply to other people as well.[41]

In general, one can observe that the Mekhilta emphasises Jethro's family affiliation by dwelling on his relationship with his son-in-law Moses and describing Jethro's descendants. The Mekhilta clearly considers Jethro's group as a primary family group and, like the biblical text and Origen's interpretation, it carries elements of both an ingroup and an outgroup. Jethro is considered an ingroup member when he arrives at the Israelite camp. He is received with great honour; Moses comes out to meet him, bowing down before his father-in-law.[42] On the other hand, the same description shows Jethro as an outgroup member. Jethro obviously does not belong to the ingroup to start with. He arrives from his country and in the end returns to his country. Furthermore, even though Jethro is Moses' family member, Moses instructs him just like anybody else who would not be familiar with the ingroup.[43]

When describing Jethro's relationship with God, the Mekhilta's commentaries consider him as an ingroup member—he sacrifices to God; he is accepted by God.[44] On the other hand, he is also portrayed as an outgroup member, as some commentaries question Jethro's confession and recall his past as an idol worshipper.[45] Even Naaman is considered better than Jethro by one commentary because Naaman acknowledges that Israel's God is the only one whereas Jethro only states that Israel's God is the strongest of all gods.[46]

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[41] For example, the meaning of his name Reuel is given as "because he was like a friend to God." Ibid., 272.

[42] Ibid., 278.

[43] Ibid.

[44] A midrash specifically quotes God's words about his acceptance of Jethro; see ibid., 277–278.

[45] Ibid., 280.

[46] Ibid., 280.

Jethro's different names also portray him as an ingroup member. They illustrate his special relationship with God, the Torah and Israel's patriarchs.[47] On the other hand, these explanations of his name show that Jethro's name is not interpreted in the biblical text itself and in this sense, Jethro does not share Israel's history and scriptural tradition.

Finally, commenting on Jethro's descendants, the Mekhilta portrays them in very similar terms as the ingroup. They are Torah scholars and worshippers of Israel's God. At the same time, they are also outsiders with their own distinct traditions. A commentary mentions that their tradition prohibits drinking wine, something that was not required of the Israelites.[48] The Mekhilta's authors portray Jethro and his group as being distinct from the ingroup but it is a very special outgroup—Israel is encouraged to be particularly favourable to it through several reminders that God has accepted Jethro and therefore Israel needs to honour him and his descendants too.

As in Origen's interpretation, the Mekhilta's description of Jethro shows some development in his status over time. Jethro is an outsider at the beginning of his description but gradually takes on several key ingroup markers such as acknowledgement of Israel's God, sacrifice and table fellowship. The Mekhilta's comments do not clearly define how much Jethro and his group identified with the Israelite ingroup at the end of the story. Many scholars think that Jethro was a typical example of a convert in rabbinic literature.[49] Even though it might be true for other early rabbinic commentaries,[50] this research concludes that the Mekhilta does not give clear understanding of Jethro as a convert.

There is some evidence that Jethro might be considered a convert. In his farewell speech, he states that he would return to his home to bring people under the wings of the Shekhina.[51] To bring someone "under the wings of the Shekhina" is an expression of conversion in rabbinic literature.[52] However, there is no discernible change in Jethro's relationship with Israel after his visit. He does not stay with Israel but rather returns home and never even comes back to visit. More importantly, despite its lengthy commentary on circumcision,[53] the

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[47] Ibid., 272.
[48] Ibid., 286.
[49] See, for example, J. R. Baskin, "Reflections of Attitudes towards the Gentiles in Jewish and Christian Exegesis of Jethro, Balaam and Job," (PhD thesis, Yale University, 1976), 23–24.
[50] See *Sifre Bamidbar* 80–81 [cited 14 July 2022]. Online: https://www.sefaria.org/Sifrei_Bamidbar.80.1?lang=bi.
[51] Lauterbach, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, 285.
[52] Baskin, "Reflections of Attitudes," 26–27.
[53] Lauterbach, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, 275.

Mekhilta does not mention that Jethro ever underwent circumcision,[54] which would have enabled him to become a full member of the Israelite community.

Even though the Mekhilta does not portray Jethro as a full convert, his group is shown as undergoing some development from pagan god worshippers who are distant relatives of Israel to a group that enjoys a close relationship with Israel. They are also a people set apart for their goodness in a moral sense—Jethro's good works are emphasised several times in Mekhilta's commentaries.[55] But the main identity marker for this group is their religion that shares its core elements with the Israelite cult. According to the Mekhilta, the outcome of Jethro's mission after he returned home was a people well versed in the Torah and who had a very close relationship with Israel's God. However, they never lost their distinct status and identity. The Mekhilta does not dwell on these differences, but Jethro's descendants are clearly different from Israel genealogically and seem to differ in halakhic matters.

F   CONCLUSION

Moses' father-in-law is an interesting test case for the study of social psychology group identity in the Hebrew Bible. His description has elements of an individual and a group, elements of different types of groups (primary, social, and category), and elements of an ingroup and outgroup. Jethro's case illustrates how complex and nuanced our Scripture can be in its description of the social identity of its characters.

Jethro's case is also particularly useful if we are to analyse group identities in later traditions that interpreted Jethro's stories and used them for their own teaching and group definitions. The above analysis has shown that the early Christian and Jewish commentaries, Origen and the Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, have different emphasis on Jethro's group type. While both works mention three types of Jethro's group, in Origen's case, the most important is the category group (Gentile), whereas in the case of the Mekhilta the most important is the primary group.

Both commentaries show certain similarities in their interpretation of Jethro's group identity—they emphasise its low social status and the humility that the ingroup must exercise toward it. Both commentaries also describe a certain development in Jethro's group. However, the nature of this development in the two commentaries also illustrates their differences. In Origen's case, the development is strictly linked with Jethro's eating with the elders. It results in Jethro becoming useful for the ingroup. In the case of the Mekhilta, Jethro's

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[54] See Beatrice J. W. Lawrence, *Jethro and the Jews: Jewish Biblical Interpretation and the Question of Identity* (The Brill Reference Library of Judaism 56; ed. A. J. Avery-Peck, W. S. Green; Leiden: Brill, 2017), 72.
[55] See Lauterbach, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, 272–273.

development follows his initial encounter with and instruction by Moses, which leads to Jethro's acknowledgement of Israel's God and becoming a believer in his own right. In the Mekhilta, Jethro's eating results from his transformation, not its cause.

Considering what this analysis can teach us about the groups that created the Mekhilta and Origen's homilies, we can conclude that the Mekhilta shows an understanding that outgroups can share crucial features with the ingroup (most particularly religious knowledge and practice) but remain distinct groups in other ways. In Origen's case, there is no space for a border or marginal group—there is either a fully distinct outgroup or a complete ingroup. These conclusions have interesting implications for early Jewish–Christian relationship research. Origen's approach leads to less tolerance toward outgroups that do not share all core elements with the author's ingroup whereas the Mekhilta and its tradition tolerate outgroups that are closely related but not fully merged with the ingroup. These findings are important in evaluating the traditions about group identity and their relationship with other groups that modern Jewish and Christian groups have inherited.

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