

## Yitro's Arrival – Artwork



*Jethro's Visit*  
Gerard Jollain



*Jethro and Zipporah Return*  
William Artaud

# Yitro's Arrival in Art

Yitro's Arrival in Art has been dedicated by Dr. Adina and Rashi Kuhr,  
in loving memory of their Saba, Yosef ben Avraham Shemuel Greenberg ז"ר.

## Introduction

Artistic renderings of Biblical scenes often provide another layer of analysis of the text. The artist's choices convey possible interpretations of Biblical ambiguities, sometimes acting like Midrash in filling in gaps in the text. The two artworks displayed here, Gerard Jollain's *Jethro's Visit* (1670)<sup>[1]</sup> and William Artaud's *Jethro and Zipporah Return* (1790s)<sup>[2]</sup> are a case in point. Both works portray the same Biblical scene, Yitro's arrival and reunion with Moshe (Shemot 18:1-12). Each artist made specific decisions as to whom to include in his depiction, the setting in which to place his characters, how to portray the various figures and whom to highlight.

## Contrasting Images

### Jollain

In Jollain's engraving, eight central characters are set against the campsite of Israel. Yitro and Moshe embrace in the foreground, while behind them, two women on one side and two men on the other engage in conversation. The identities of the background figures are not totally clear. One of the ladies is presumably Zipporah; the other is likely the children's wet-nurse. The two men are perhaps elders of Israel, coming to greet the newcomer in a show of honor and respect.<sup>[3]</sup> Moshe's two young children stand in the lower left corner, connected to the central figures by their father's outstretched arm.

### Artaud

In Artaud's rendering, in contrast, only six figures appear: Moshe, Zipporah, Yitro, the two sons, and an unidentified woman in the background, perhaps Yitro's wife.<sup>[4]</sup> The most prominent characters are Zipporah and Yitro; they take center stage in the painting, and their figures are illuminated. An elderly Yitro, adjacent to Zipporah, seems to be prompting her forward to reunite with her husband, Moshe. She grasps Moshe's arm, and his attention is turned toward her. The teen-age children stand somewhat off to the side, bystanders to the event. In the background, Artaud has painted the Israelite tents at the foot of a mountain, most likely Mount Sinai.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Relationship to the Biblical Text

The artists' choices reflect certain ambiguities in the Biblical text and different possible interpretive stances:

## Age of Yitro

Artaud depicts Yitro as an elderly man, completely white-haired, while Jollain renders him around the same age as Moshe.<sup>[6]</sup> This relates to several unknowns in the Biblical text. How old was Moshe when he arrived in Midyan and married Zipporah, and what were their relative ages? See [Chronology of Shemot 2-4](#). Yitro's exact relationship to Moshe is also unclear: Was Yitro Moshe's father-in-law, brother-in-law or maybe even grandfather-in-law? See [Who is Yitro](#) for more.

## The Reunion

While Artaud highlights the relationship between Moshe and Zipporah, Jollain focuses instead on the embracing of Yitro and Moshe, with Zipporah being basically ignored by her husband. This raises the question of Yitro's motives in coming to the Israelite camp. Was Yitro's primary goal the reuniting of husband and wife, or was Yitro coming on a personal religious quest or as part of a diplomatic mission? See [Purpose of Yitro's Visit](#) for more. Jollain's positioning of Zipporah on the sidelines together with a second woman, also makes one wonder about the nature of her relationship with Moshe. Had Moshe taken a second wife? Did he and Zipporah separate or divorce? See [אחר שילוחיה](#) and the [Cushite Woman](#).

## The Children

Jollain portrays Moshe's children as toddlers,<sup>[7]</sup> whereas Artaud depicts them as adolescents. From the Torah itself it is impossible to know the boys' ages, allowing for both renderings. The question depends on when Gershom was born, the age and identity of the child that is circumcised in Shemot 4:25, how much time elapsed between Moshe leaving Midyan and the Exodus, and when Yitro came to visit. See [Chronology of Shemot 2-4](#) and [Chronology of Shemot 18](#) for more on these issues.<sup>[8]</sup>

## The Setting

The choice to emphasize just the Israelite camp or their encampment at the foot of Mount Sinai, relates to another point of contention amongst Biblical commentators: When and where did Yitro arrive? Did he come before the giving of the Decalogue and the arrival at Sinai, or did he arrive at some later point, once they were already camped there?<sup>[9]</sup> For a full discussion, see [Chronology](#).

<sup>[1]</sup> The engraving appears in the La Sainte Bible.

<sup>[2]</sup> The painting was printed in the Macklin and Bowyer Bibles.

<sup>[3]</sup> Cf. [Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael](#) which says that Moshe came out to greet Yitro together with Aharon, Nadav, Avihu, the seventy elders, and all of Israel.

<sup>[4]</sup> See [Who Accompanied Yitro](#) for the possibility that "and his wife" in 18:5 refers to Yitro's own wife.

<sup>[5]</sup> See Shemot 19:2 "and Israel camped there before the mountain."

[6] So much so that, at first glance, one might not be sure who is Yitro and who is Moshe. Upon further analysis, it appears likely that Moshe is on the left coming with the elders from the camp to greet Yitro, and Yitro is on the right arriving with Zipporah and her sons. If one looks closely, one can also see that Jollain depicted Moshe with horns crowning his forehead (see Shemot 34:30).

[7] See above that the second woman in Artaud's engraving may be the children's wet-nurse.

[8] Another possible reading of Artaud's painting is that the two sons portrayed are not Moshe's, but rather Yitro's – see [Who Accompanied Yitro](#) regarding this possible interpretations of Shemot 18:5. Also see the note above that Yitro's wife may appear in the background of Artaud's picture.

[9] See the note above that Jollain depicts Moshe already with horns rising from his forehead (although they are first mentioned only after the revelation at Sinai).