

Lecture 11: Dissidence in the Desert.

Reading: Exodus 15:22-17:7 (no water, no food; manna; Moses strikes the rock);

Exodus 31:18; 32-34 (the golden calf; Moses importunes God);

Numbers 11-12 (no food; manna; Miriam and Aaron);

Numbers 13-14 (spies);

Numbers 16-17 (Korah; Dathan and Aviram);

Numbers 20:1-13 (no water; Moses strikes the rock);

Numbers 21:4-9 (bronze serpent);

Numbers 22-25 (Balaam; Baal Peor);

Kugel 236-240, 281-284, 328-334, 336-340.

Topics:

- Why do the Israelites rebel so often against the authority of Moses (and Aaron)?
- What is the meaning of all these rebellions?
- Why do the Israelites build images of calves – are these images idolatrous or are they meant to be images of YHWH?

Narrative structure of the last part of Exodus:

- When exactly, and how many times, Moses ascended Mt Sinai to the Lord, is not clear: Exodus 19:3 (descends in 19:14), 20:18, 24:1-2, 24:12-18.
- Chapters 25-31: Instructions for building the Tabernacle (*mishkan*), its appurtenances, the priestly vestments, and inducting Aaron and sons into the priesthood, etc. – apparently Moses is still on Mt Sinai the entire time.
- 31:18 God gave to Moses the two tablets of testimony. Seems to follow upon 24:18.
- 32-34 Golden calf (Moses descends, smashes the tablets, and then re-ascends and makes new ones).
- 35-40 building the tabernacle.
- Narrative thread is then lost; resumes somewhere in the book of Numbers.

Experience of Israelites in the wilderness: honeymoon with God (Jeremiah 2:2; 31:2) or rocky start to a relationship (Hosea 9:10, 13:5)? The latter tradition is enshrined in Exodus and Numbers.

Three basic patterns: Israelites grumble against Moses and/or God:

1. We have no food/water; life was wonderful in Egypt;
2. Who is Moses (who are Moses and Aaron) that he/they are in charge (Korah; Dathan and Aviram);
3. Israelites worship “idolatry” (Baal Peor; golden calf) and/or lose trust in God (spies);

- Common outcomes: God blows up at the Israelites, kills some / many; and / or God solves the problem (brings water / food);
- Tells Moses that he (God) will get rid of the Israelites and will make Moses into a mighty nation;
- Moses intercedes (JSB note on Exodus 32:10): what will the Egyptians say? God calms down;
- Many of these stories contain the miraculous: manna, water from a rock, mysterious plagues, healing through a bronze (or copper) serpent, earth swallowing up Dathan and Aviram, sprouting of the staffs;
- Many of these stories are complex assemblages of material. MBS: Exodus 17:1-7 and Numbers 20:2-13 (the motif of striking the rock) are doublets (see Kugel). A story about Korah the Levite is combined with a story about the Reubenites Dathan and Aviram (see Kugel). Caleb is hero of spy story vs. Caleb and Joshua.

Why does the Torah have such stories?

- Emphasizes divine power and divine mercy; see esp. Moses pleading before God at the Golden Calf story and the spy story; God is just but merciful.
 - ♦ “Thirteen attributes of God”: Exodus 34:6-7; cf. Numbers 14:18;
- The link between God and the people of Israel is not natural but constructed – God can reject his people if they sin sufficiently; he can but he doesn’t.
 - ♦ In the presence of disaster the Prophets and Psalms will ask (as will later Jewish apocalypses) – has God rejected his people?
 - ♦ Chosen people motif does NOT mean that Israel is immune to punishment. Just the opposite.
- Specific motifs in specific stories explain: why Moses did not enter the land of Canaan, why the Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years, and how they survived in the desert for forty years.

The golden calf is the most important of these stories:

- The story as we have it is polemic against the shrines built by Jeroboam 1 (Kings 12:25-33) (JSB note on 31:18-32:35).
 - ♦ Many MBS have conjectured that lurking behind our Golden Calf story is an original story authenticating it (see Kugel). Original story distinguished between “idolatry” and image worship of YHWH. “These are your God(s) who took you out of the land of Egypt.”
- The story as we have it is polemic against Aaron (and Aaronides) in favor of Levites. (Aaron behaves badly; Levites support Moses.)
 - ♦ Contrast Korah story: in favor of Aaronides against Levites.

- The story as we have it raises the interesting question whether the divine presence is, or should be, in the camp or outside it. P puts Tabernacle in the camp, E puts “tent of meeting” outside the camp. See JSB note on 33:7-11.
 - ♦ Similarly, is it a good thing that God sends his angel to protect the Israelites: 23:20-23 (listen to my angel and he will bring you victory) vs. 32:34 (as explained by 33:1-3), a sign of diminished divine favor.
- Golden calf story later figures prominently in Jewish-Christian debate: for Christian interpreters Moses’ destruction of the divine tablets represents the breaking of the old covenant.
 - ♦ 32:34 (“But when I make an accounting I will bring them to account for their sins”) becomes in the Talmud something like Christian original sin. (“No divine punishment comes upon Israel that does not contain at least a little bit of the punishment for the sin of the Golden Calf.” Rashi.)

“Horned” Moses = radiant Moses; see note in JSB 34:29.

Perhaps the most intriguing story is Balaam (Numbers 22-24), famous for its talking donkey (22:28).

Story turns on the power of blessing and cursing; cf. stories in Genesis.

The seer Balaam son of Beor has a history outside the Torah (see Kugel; JSB note on 22:2-24:25). The story seems to be an independent unit, but is mentioned elsewhere in the Bible (Numbers 31:16; Deuteronomy 23:4-7; Joshua 24:9-10; Micah 6:5).

Perhaps originally a favorable story -- Balaam is the only non-Israelite prophet in the Bible – but in its current form clearly mocking and unfavorable.

Responsibility for Baal Peor episode (Numbers 25) is allotted to Balaam in 31:16.