PARALLEL GUIDE 14
From Egypt to Sinai

Summary: This chapter continues surveying the Exodus/Sinai event. It starts with the final plague in Egypt as the context for the institution of the Passover, pauses to compare the Passover to the Eucharist, and then goes through the phenomenal events that surround Israel's escape. Finally it ends at the foot of Mt. Sinai with the odd involvement of the Kenite priest, Jethro.

Learning Objectives

• Read Exodus 15:22-20:21

• Comment on the directions given by P for carrying out the Passover

• Describe the main difference between P and D's treatment of the Passover and that of J

• State the main difference between the accounts of the crossing of the "sea of reeds" as given by P and J

• Recite the "hymn of Miriam"

• Describe how manna was formed

• Tell what the ark was and what it symbolized

• Reflect on how St. Paul's treatment of the relationship of law and grace expresses the sequence described by the Exodus/Sinai event

Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

1. Compare Passover with the Eucharist.

2. By now you are familiar with the four-source model of Tradition, Culture, Action, and Position. Analyze the Passover using this model.

3. What modern parallels of the Exodus and Sinai events come to mind? Draw up some parallels in three columns. One column is from the Bible, another is from a cultural or contemporary event, and the third column is from your life. What similarities do you see in the sequence and character of these parallel events?

Preparing for Your Seminar

If the Eucharist is a meal like the Passover, then what features of the present ways of celebrating the Eucharist help maintain the meal symbolism? What features hinder the symbolism?

Consider holding a Seder meal, the traditional Passover celebration, as part of the life of your group, or perhaps organize a Seder for a portion of your congregation.

Additional Sources

Martin Buber, Moses (East and West Library, 1946 [cover 1947]).

Chapter 14
FROM EGYPT TO SINAI

In the last chapter we carried the story of the Exodus from the birth of Moses through the stories of the plagues sent to demonstrate the power of YHWH. The final plague, that of the death of the firstborn of Egypt, we carried over to this chapter because it causes the pharaoh to release the people of Israel and becomes the setting for the institution of the Passover. In this chapter we shall examine the Passover and make a few comparisons between it and the Christian Eucharist. Then we complete our review of the unit composed of the first fifteen chapters of Exodus.

Following this, we move on to the next major section of the Book of Exodus, Exod. 15:22-20:21, the account of the journey through the wilderness to Mt. Sinai.

If it has been some time since you finished your first reading of Exod. 1-15, it would be a good idea for you to skim through 11-15:21 once more before beginning Chapter Fourteen. Plan your study time so you can go back to the Bible for a summary reading of 15:22-20:21 to prepare for the second section of this Chapter.

Exodus 11:1-13:16 The Passover

The account of the institution of the Passover is quite different in style from the rest of the exodus story. Though it is set within that story, the account of the Passover is concerned largely with tone and with instructions for the keeping of the festival. These instructions give liturgical direction for an established cult, and no such cult could have been operating until quite some time after the events which the story commemorates. Still, the Passover became and remains the most important cultic act of Israel, kept every year up to the present time. Its meaning remains centered around the events of the Exodus. All the details for the keeping of the Passover were therefore set within the account of the events from which it sprang. The fact that many of the details described in this account presuppose a settled situation in the promised land rather than a time of hasty flight does not mean that all of the section is late and unreliable; indeed some aspects of the cult seem to hark back to times even before the night of the original Passover. What this does mean is that we should be aware that here—even more than in the rest of these first fifteen chapters—we are dealing with matters that are central to the worship life of Israel. We need not be overly concerned about inconsistencies in the historical sequence of events.

In Exod. 11:1-3, Moses is assured by YHWH that with the coming of this final plague the pharaoh will drive the Israelites out, not simply allow them to depart. Before YHWH announces what the plague will be, however, God instructs the people through Moses to ask for jewelry of silver and gold from their Egyptian neighbors. The people, and especially Moses, are held in favor by the Egyptians, and presumably, for this reason, the Egyptians will give them the jewelry. This makes no practical sense. After all the plagues that have come upon Egypt because of the Israelites, how likely is it that the Egyptians will give or even lend their jewelry to them? The passage intrudes into the story of the plagues in a clumsy way. But the tradition had it that the Israelites in fact “despoiled” the Egyptians. In addition, there had to be

some way to account for their being in possession of enough gold to make the golden calf at the foot of Mt. Sinai later in the story. Hence this insertion.

Exod. 11:4-10 is made up of various strands. In vv. 4-6, Moses is apparently speaking to Israel, announcing what YHWH is about to do to the Egyptians. All the firstborn of Egypt, from Pharaoh down, including even the animals, will die; the entire land will suffer from the stubbornness of its ruler, and a great cry will go up

over all of Egypt. But in vv. 7-8, Moses is apparently speaking with the pharaoh, though he was told in 10:28-29 not to come back on pain of death and indeed agreed that he would never see Pharaoh again. Verses 9-10 are from the Priestly writer and introduce the first (P) set of instructions for keeping the Passover.

Most scholars agree that Exod. 11:9-12:20 is from P and Exod. 12:21-23 from J. The instructions are shorter in J than in the P section. J is concerned with matters of history rather than matters of cult, telling us quite simply what happened. P tells us in addition how what has happened is to be celebrated. Verses 24-27a, which are different in style and refer to a time when Israel will look back on this night instead of to a time of preparation for the night, are probably from D. This is the first time we have encountered the Deuteronomist, so you may want to refer to Chapter Two to review what we have said about the tradition of that source. Chapter 13:1-17 is also from D. From this you can see that two sources which were particularly interested in the sacrificial cult, P and D, have contributed detailed directions for the Passover, while J tells us simply what happened.

Exodus 12:1-11 (P) contains the following main points:

a) the month in which Passover occurs is to mark the beginning of the year;

b) a “lamb”—the Hebrew word means simply a young animal—shall be selected on the tenth day of this month and shall be killed in the evening of the fourteenth day;

c) the basis for the rite is the household, or a combination of small households if a family is too small to eat a whole animal;

d) the animal is to be a year-old male without blemish;

e) there are specific directions for putting blood on the doorposts and for cooking and eating the animal, with unleavened bread and bitter herbs;

f) the animal remains are to be burnt;

g) the meal is to be eaten in haste, the people dressed for immediate departure.

Some commentary on these points is necessary.

a) The designation of the Passover month as the first month of the year (12:2) shows the presence of an annual calendar of religious festivals that reflects the concerns of an established cultic organization rather than a crisis rite in Egypt.

Furthermore,

b) the instructions to select the young animal on the tenth day and keep it until the fourteenth before killing it (12:3, 6) would be impossible in the setting in

Egypt in view of the announcement in 11:4 that YHWH will go forth to kill the firstborn “at midnight,” presumably that night. (Of course, 11:4 is from J.) c) Later in this chapter, when we suggest some comparisons between the Passover rite and the Christian celebration of the Eucharist, we note some rather interesting implications of the fact that the Passover was (and is) essentially a family or household activity (12:3-4). Within the Old Testament are many attempts to centralize the sacrificial worship of Israel at a single shrine, the temple in Jerusalem. Despite these attempts, which were successful for most of the

sacrificial cult, Passover remained too closely tied to the family to be completely subsumed in the centralization process. Even though there were strong pressures on Jews to come to Jerusalem for the Passover—which we can see in Luke's account of the boy Jesus in the Temple as well as all of the gospel accounts of "the last supper" in the Synoptic Gospels—the actual keeping of the feast took place in homes. It was this feature of Passover which allowed the Jews to continue it in homes and synagogues after the destruction of the temple by the Romans in CE 70.

d) The provision that the animal be a year-old male (12:5), that is, an animal capable of reproduction, may indicate that at some time this rite had fertility implications. Almost certainly the rite which is now known as Passover and which is connected with the Exodus was not made up on the spot on that night in Egypt. There was some earlier practice which formed its basis. Most Old Testament scholars assume that this practice was a rite that was done in the spring of the year just prior to moving the flocks to new grazing grounds. This is possible, but we should remember that there is no real evidence for this theory. The insistence that the animal for the Passover be a year-old male is evidence for a fertility connection, but the important thing in the present context is that it be without blemish. Only the most valuable and prized animal is fit to be offered to YHWH.

e) Some of the blood is to be put on the doorposts and the lintels of the doorways of the houses (12:7). In 12:13, YHWH says that when the angel of death sees the blood, he will know that the house belongs to an Israelite and will pass over it, not smiting it with the plague that is to kill the firstborn of Egypt. In the historical setting in Egypt, this expresses the primary purpose of the rite: to protect the Israelites from the plague of death. Rites which give such protection, usually from some kind of demon or evil spirit, are called "apotropaic" rites (a-po-tro-PAY-ik). The "hex signs" which can still be seen on some barns in Pennsylvania are examples of apotropaic signs. Frequently in the Middle Ages and even today in some Christian cultures, the sign of the cross made on a person at times of danger, especially in the presence of death, is an apotropaic act. In the Passover, either YHWH, the plague, or "the destroyer" is to be warded off. The reference to "the destroyer" in 12:23 may be a carryover from some older apotropaic use of the rite before its connection with the Exodus.

The smearing of blood as an indication of community membership and thus safety from the Angel of Death has other facets as well which are significant for

the faith community. First, anyone who wanted to could do it. That is, it didn't take special skill, special equipment, or a high economic level. This act of "community making" was open to all who wanted to be included. Next, anyone who wanted to be included had to do something to indicate that desire to be part of the group. Merely wanting to wasn't enough; something physical had to be done. Finally, the action which was required was specified by God; humans didn't just think up something. And the item specified didn't make "sense" logically. One did it as a sign of obeying what God had said, period.

f) The directions for burning what is left over (12:10) show the notion of the sacred or holy thing: that which has been "sanctified" or set apart for YHWH. The destruction of the remains of the holy food is not simply a sign of reverence, but a recognition of the power of the sacred. Touching or handling sacred things out of the context of their proper cultic use was thought to be extremely dangerous. There are reports that in the Middle Ages protective clothing was sometimes worn by persons already baptized to prevent baptismal water from splashing on them! Even today some lay persons feel a reluctance to walk up to the altar or handle the vessels used in the Eucharist—so persistent is the ancient feeling of awe for sacred things.

(g) The directions for clothing and the instructions to eat the Passover in haste (12:11) recall the situation in Egypt. The people must be ready to leave in haste when the plague has had its intended result, the expulsion of the Israelites from Egypt.

Exodus 12:12-13

The P writer ends this section of directions with a summary statement of what YHWH is about to do; this may be compared with the statement in 11:4-8 (mainly J). Note that P makes it explicit that the contest is between YHWH and the gods of Egypt: ". . . on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD." We note that such pronouncements from God in which God's power is asserted, whether against other gods as here or against the sins of Israel, are frequently punctuated with this declaration: "I am the LORD."

The apotropaic function of the blood is spelled out in v. 13. When YHWH sees the blood, YHWH will "pass over" that house so that the plague does not strike its inhabitants. The word translated "pass over" is *pesach* (pronounced peh-SAHK), the same word that is used for the animal sacrificed and for the rite itself. We do not know for certain what the derivation of this word is. It seems to be associated with a verb which means "to leap" or "to limp." In the story of Elijah's contest with the prophets of Baal at Mt. Carmel (I Kings 18:17-40), the verb form of the word is used (v. 26). The prophets of Baal "limped about the altar they had made." The translation could read that they leaped about the altar; in either case, they were almost certainly performing some kind of ritual dance. In the Passover, the word seems to have the sense of God's leaping over the protected house. (The Latin transliteration of the word *pesach* is paschal, which came to be used in Christianity in connection with Jesus' death and resurrection. Indeed, in many languages "Easter" is still named according to its Hebrew derivation, e.g., the Greek, pascha, French Paques; Jesus is the "paschal lamb" and Christians exclaim, "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us.")

Exodus 12:14-20

In these verses the P writer joins the Passover with the rite of the feast of unleavened bread. At some point in Israel's history, after the settlement in Canaan when agriculture had become the way of life—supplanting the earlier semi-nomadic sheepherding—this agricultural feast became joined to the Passover. In later times there was an attempt on the part of the priests to subordinate Passover to the feast of unleavened bread, but it never really succeeded because of the family orientation of Passover. How the joining of the two feasts came about is not entirely certain, but possibly the two occurred at about the same time of year. (This is indicated in the P narrative; the Passover animal is to be killed in the evening of the fourteenth day of the first month, and the feast of unleavened bread is to begin on that same day and run for seven days after.) The reference to unleavened bread and bitter herbs (12:8) suggests a linkage. It must be said, at any rate, that the people's experience of the Exodus affected both observances. Whatever their origin, these festivals became memorials to the people's deliverance from Egypt.

Exodus 12:21-13:16

These verses mainly repeat the directions for Passover and for the feast of unleavened bread. Exodus 12:21-23 and v. 27b are J's directions for sprinkling the blood on the doorways. Verses 24-27a, as well as 13:1-16, show a concern for explaining to the children the meanings of the rites which the people perform to remember the night of deliverance (12:26 and 13:14). This is a characteristic of the D writer. (This is probably one of very few passages from D in Exodus.) The P writer (12:40-51), again speaking of the practices of Israel as a settled nation in Palestine, gives rules for the treatment of strangers and non-Israelite hired persons. Note 12:46 in which it is commanded that "you shall not break any of its bones" (i.e., the passover animal). We find reference to this in the New Testament in John 19:33-36—the soldiers do not break Jesus' legs "that the scripture might be fulfilled, 'None of his bones shall be broken.'"

Reflections on the Passover

As a family celebration, the Passover was experienced in Israelite worship as a feast of renewal. In the Exodus, the "Hebrews," the motley group of fringe people who had no land of their own and no national identity, became "Israel," the people of God, as a result of God's election of them and deliverance of them from bondage in Egypt. This entire section of Exodus, the first fifteen chapters, is the account of that event. In the feast of Passover every Israelite enters again, year after year, into the event of Israel's election. While the Passover itself reenacts the events of the night in which YHWH smote the Egyptians, the memory of that first Passover also contains within it the memory of the covenant which YHWH was to seal with them at Sinai. These two moments, the Exodus from Egypt and the covenant at Sinai, were early joined as one act of deliverance. This is why many scholars insist on speaking of "the Exodus/Sinai event" rather than dividing them into two. So, when the Passover is kept each year, every member of Israel enters again into the covenant with YHWH—the covenant is renewed, and the people are renewed in their relationship with God.

We have noted in passing that the setting of the celebration of the Passover has changed over the years. By the time of Deuteronomy (621 BCE), the festival was celebrated at the central sanctuary, but after the destruction of the temple in CE 70, it returned to its place of origin, the homes of the people, as well as entering a new

setting, the synagogue. Today, while some synagogues have instituted communal observances, particularly for those who cannot celebrate in their own homes, the Passover remains essentially a home celebration with its center at the Seder meal, "a unique occasion for religious sharing with family, friends, and guests; for enhancing the meaning of Judaism and rejoicing in its beauty; and for a personal experience of the mysterious unfolding of God's role in history and the wonder of . . . redemption, past, present, and future" (Plaut, p. 451). Plaut notes, incidentally, that the forms of the celebration have changed greatly from biblical to post-biblical to medieval to modern times, and there is no reason to believe that they will not continue to change. The similarities between the celebration of the Passover and the Christian Eucharist should be obvious. The historical Passover took place in the night in which YHWH smote the Egyptians; in the Synoptic Gospels Jesus was eating the passover meal with his disciples "in the night in which he was betrayed." His body was offered and his blood was poured out to seal the "new covenant" in which his people would be delivered from the bonds of sin. There are complications involved in this, for the Passover is not the only sacrificial type which is used for Jesus' death, but the fact that the passion seems to have taken place at the time when Jerusalem was filled with pilgrims who had come to keep the Passover ensured that it would be interpreted in the light of the Passover model.

In the early days of the church's life, the Christian Eucharist, like the Passover, was a family or household observance rather than a temple rite. The early Jewish Christians in Jerusalem went to the temple to engage in the regular cultic life of Judaism, but they gathered in houses for "the breaking of bread." The celebration was not done by a priesthood patterned after that of the Temple, but by the heads of the household—just as was the case with the Passover. Only later, after the Christian rite had been thoroughly separated from the Jewish cult, did ideas of priesthood with their connotations of temple sacrifice come onto the Christian scene. The Epistle to the Hebrews argues that Jesus as the great high priest has displaced the priesthood of the temple. Just as in Judaism the Passover could be kept even after the destruction of the temple (70 CE), so the Eucharist could be celebrated by Christians apart from the Jewish priesthood.

Exodus 12:29-39

Tucked in among the accounts of the keeping of the Passover, this J passage recounts the expulsion of the Israelites. When all the firstborn of Egypt, including the firstborn of the pharaoh, are killed, Pharaoh calls Moses and orders him, his people, and their flocks and herds out of Egypt, even asking that Moses bless him! Here is complete submission, at least for the moment. YHWH has been acknowledged by the pharaoh, the

incarnation of the gods of Egypt!

We have noticed that the number of people mentioned in 12:37 has been greatly exaggerated. (Another interpretation of the number suggests that what has been translated 600 “thousand men” should read 600 “contingents,” with about nine or ten men to a contingent. This would mean that only about 6,000 men left Egypt.) But however many Israelites there were, v. 38 adds that a “mixed crowd” also went out with them. Here is recognition that no kind of “racial” purity can be claimed by

Israel. To be an Israelite is to enter into covenant with YHWH, not to be a member of a particular racial stock. Paul is to make a similar claim for gentile Christians later: it is not by being a Jew, claiming Abraham as one’s biological forefather, that one is a member of Israel, but by manifesting the faith by which Abraham responded to God. So gentiles, too, can be true members of the “new” Israel because of their faithful response to Jesus and the new covenant in his blood.

The beginning of the journey from Egypt into the wilderness is cited in v. 37 as the people go from Rameses to Succoth.

Exodus 13:17-15:21

The account of the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Egyptians is made up from the three sources, J, E, and P, mixed together very closely. Exod. 13:17-19 is probably from the E source, since the divine name is “God” and, more importantly, since v. 19 refers to E’s account of the promise to Joseph that his bones would be taken up out of Egypt (Gen. 50:25). The account then picks up with the reference to Succoth mentioned in the J passage in Exod. 12:37. The “pillar of cloud” and the “pillar of fire” which go before the Israelites by day and by night may imply a connection with a volcanic phenomenon associated with Sinai, although several other explanations have also been advanced.

You may have noticed that there are two accounts of why Pharaoh decides to pursue the Israelites. In 14:1-4 (the P account), YHWH causes Pharaoh’s heart to be hardened again when he finds out that the Israelites are “wandering aimlessly in the land; the wilderness has closed in on them” (14:3); the reason given for YHWH’s action is once again that his glory may prevail. In 14:5-7 (JE), Pharaoh changes his own mind about letting Israel go from serving him. The peculiar comment in 14:5a that the “king of Egypt was told that the people had fled” does not accord with the earlier statement that the pharaoh had ordered the Israelites out of Egypt. “King of Egypt” is the typical way in which the E writer refers to the monarch whom the other two sources call “the pharaoh.” This suggests that E originally may have told the story in a slightly different form in which the Israelites “fled” from Egypt without the knowledge of the pharaoh. This would not have suited the purposes of the P writer, whose intention is that the story demonstrate the power of YHWH over the gods of Egypt, personified by the pharaoh; nor is it the version which J presents. It would, however, account for a decision to pursue a band of slaves who had slipped away during the night.

Deliverance Through the Sea

When the Egyptians overtake them, the Israelites are “by the sea” (14:9). This cannot be the Red Sea. The Red Sea is all the way on the other side of the Peninsula of Sinai. Properly translated, the Hebrew reads the “reed sea” or the “sea of reeds.” This could have been any one of a number of shallow marshy bodies of water in the area through which the present-day Suez Canal runs. Seeing the Egyptians, the Israelites complain to Moses: “Was it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?” (14:11). We see this grumbling throughout the wilderness wandering; in time of fear, people will prefer a past which is familiar, no matter how unpleasant, to the unknown dangers of the present and future.

There are also two accounts of the "parting of the sea" combined in the present text. Exodus 14:15-18 is the beginning of the P version. P continues in v. 21a; omits ". . . and YHWH drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land"; then goes on in vv. 21c-23, vv. 26-27a, and vv. 28-29. The other sections are JE.

The P account is more miraculous in tone. Moses is told to lift the rod with which he has previously done miracles and to stretch out his hand over the sea to divide it. In v. 21 (omitting the J section) and v. 23, we read, "Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea . . . and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left." This is the picture Cecil B. DeMille presents in his motion picture The Ten Commandments. The J version describes the event in more naturalistic terms in the middle of v. 21—". . . and YHWH drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and made the sea dry land. . . ."

Historians have often sought to find a natural explanation for the event of the crossing. They have looked for a place where a reedy sea could be forded, where tides or winds might push waters back and forth. Such a search overlooks the central fact. The J narrator as much as the P understands the event of the crossing of the sea of reeds as the mighty act of YHWH. The entire Exodus is a miracle in the true sense—the divine is involved throughout: YHWH brings about the downfall of Egypt. Whether or not God uses frogs, bugs, disease, darkness, wind, and water as agents, clearly God wills Israel's salvation, and Israel is saved. As the great Jewish historian and theologian Martin Buber points out, whether or not the event has a supernatural or natural explanation is not the point.

It is irrelevant whether 'much' or 'little,' unusual things or usual, tremendous or trifling events happened; what is vital is only that what happened was experienced . . . as the act of God. The people saw in whatever it was they saw 'the great hand,' and they 'believed in YHWH' . . . . From the biblical viewpoint history always contains the element of wonder. (Moses, p. 77, 79)

This is the third instance in the Pentateuch in which God is depicted as controlling the waters. "Dry ground" (14:16[P]) and "dry land" (14:21[J]) are both words harking back to Noah's deliverance from the waters of the Flood (cf. Gen. 8:6-8; 13-14). The God who creates the people of Israel is the same God who divided water from water to create the earth.

In the JE version, the pillar of cloud moves from in front of the Israelite column so that it stands between the Israelites and the Egyptians. The presence of YHWH—E expresses it as "the angel of God" in the first part of v. 19—is there to protect the people. In v. 24, it is YHWH's looking down on the Egyptians from the cloud that panics them and causes them to flee. Here, too, we have two versions. In the P version (14:23, 26, 27a, 28-29), the Egyptians pursue the Israelites until Moses, at YHWH's command, stretches forth his hand a second time to cause the waters to return and cover them. In the JE version (14:19-20, 21b, 24-25, 27b), the Egyptians camp through the night, then become panicked by YHWH in the morning so that

they flee into the returning waters of the sea. This picture is one of panic by demoralized troops, which ends in their plunging headlong into the waters. Yet 14:30-31 summarizes the meaning of the event for Israel—whatever the account: YHWH saved Israel from the Egyptians, "and so the people believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses."

Exodus 15:1-21 is a great song of thanksgiving. As such, it provides a fitting conclusion to the first fifteen chapters of Exodus. Look first at 15:21, the little song which is attributed to Miriam, one of four women in

the Bible to be called “prophetess.” (The others are Deborah [Judg. 4:4], Huldah [II Kings 22:14], and Noadiah [Neh. 6:14].) This may be the oldest passage in the Bible. It is certainly ancient and very possibly a firsthand account of the event. Even in its brevity, the hymn, probably sung first as part of a liturgical representation of the drama of redemption from Egypt, follows a traditional pattern: it invites the worshipers to praise God and then recites those acts of God’s for which praise is to be given. We can see this same pattern in many of the psalms in the Psalter.

The longer hymn, 15:1-19, begins with a variant of the “hymn of Miriam.” The hymn shows evidence of being composed of several traditions—there are several changes of rhythm in it. It was probably not originally part of the narrative of the deliverance from the Egyptians, but was an independent hymn which has been put in this place by the redactors. Still, whatever its origin, this Shirat ha Yam (“Song at the Sea”) or simply Shirah (Song) has achieved a special place of respect in the worship of the Jews. As W. Gunther Plaut notes,

The Sabbath on which it is read in the order of weekly synagogal pericopes is called Shabbat Shirah, the Sabbath of the Song. At its reading the congregation stands in special respect, a custom which has developed with regard to only one other Torah reading, that of the Ten Commandments. The overwhelming sense of gratitude that the Children of Israel felt at the sea still reverberates in the hearts of their descendants. (p. 487)

The song has also become incorporated into the daily liturgy of the Jews. The people of Israel do not only sing at the edge of the sea of reeds, they—or at least the women among them—also dance (15:20). There are, in fact, “no fewer than eleven Hebrew words denoting dance, suggesting that ritual choreography was extensive and highly sophisticated.” In Israelite as in other ancient cultures, dance was a normal and important part of worship. “There were dances to express communal joy. . . . There were victory dances, petitional dances, dances to celebrate the harvest with gratitude, and of course dances were indigenous to wooing and wedding.” Dance—and indeed music—was banned from the synagogue after the fall of the temple in CE 70. And it was not until the eighteenth century with the rise of Chasidism that dance spread beyond the wedding celebration to other areas of Jewish living and worship. “Other Jewish groups have been slow to take up [the Chasidic] example, but the eventual full readmission of ritual dancing to the synagogue can be safely predicted,” Plaut says (p. 492). Certainly it is fair to say that the joy of deliverance does not find full expression in song alone—it must be celebrated by movement as well.

The Journey to Mt. Sinai

We have finished looking at the narrative unit which extends throughout the first fifteen chapters of Exodus. Take time now to read 15:22-18:27. This will bring us up to the point at which YHWH makes a covenant with the people of Israel and Moses receives the Law. We keep a discussion of the giving of the Law for the next chapter, when we look at the whole body of law in the Old Testament. When you have finished reading 15:22-18:27, return to this text.

Exodus 15:22-27

Several place-names occur in the story of the journey through the wilderness. Unfortunately, there is no way of telling where these places (Elim, Marah, the wilderness of Shur) were. We have already noted, however, that the sea was not the Red Sea, but “the sea of reeds,” wherever that may have been. The story about Moses turning the bitter water of the oasis sweet by throwing in a “tree” (probably a small desert bush) may well be an etiological story to account for some spring whose water was drinkable even though it had a name which meant “bitter.”

Verses 25b-26, which refer to YHWH’s making a statute and an ordinance for the Israelites, seem to be out

of place since they occur long before any such laws were given.

Exodus 16:11-36

Once again the people grumble against Moses, this time because they have no food to eat. Slavery in Egypt at least provided food, even though it is not likely that they would very frequently have had flesh from the "fleshpots" (caldrons in which meat was boiled). The sending of "bread from heaven" (v. 4) and flesh to eat in the evening (v. 8) are regarded as miraculous gifts from YHWH. For a people who have spent all of their lives in Egypt and are unfamiliar with the desert area of Sinai, the "manna" and the quails that come up in such abundance must seem miraculous. The fact that they are natural phenomena which still occur in that region makes them no less miracles. The tamarisk bush in Sinai secretes a sap-like substance when the bush is infested with a kind of insect. The substance falls to the ground and partially solidifies during the cool of the night, forming a flake which is edible. It has a sweet taste as described in v. 31. When the day grows warm, it tends to melt, as stated in v. 21. Also, in the spring and fall of the year, the area through which the Israelites traveled is on the flyway of the quails; it would not be unusual for the birds to appear in such vast numbers that they could be hunted easily. Still, for a people who were strangers to that land, this would seem as miraculous as did the appearance of the white flakes of manna. (Here, the quails are referred to almost in passing, the greater part of the story being taken up with the account of the manna. In Numbers 11:4ff., a similar story is told, and there the quails are the center of attention. Possibly the reference to them here is simply a transference from the Numbers story.) At the center of this story, however, is the miraculous presence of God. For the narrator manna is truly "bread from heaven" (cf. Ps. 105:40), the quails, a gift from God. The story expresses the faith that God provides for Israel whatever is necessary for her life. This theme is to come up again and again, and not only in the account of the wilderness wanderings; it is found also in the words of the prophet Isaiah when he counsels the king to put his trust in YHWH instead of in foreign alliances. In addition, it establishes the observance of the Sabbath. This is the first time (v.

23) that the word "Sabbath" occurs in the Old Testament. We noted previously that the P writer's account of the creation myth is arranged in such a way as to point to the observation of the Sabbath, but the word is not used. Gen. 2:2-3 states that God finished the work of creation by resting on the seventh day, and that God hallowed this day; this was one basis for the later observation of the Sabbath. Exodus 16:22-30 sets forth explicitly the commandment that the people are to rest on the seventh day, "a sabbath to the LORD" (v. 25).

The instructions in vv. 33-34, for some of the manna is to be placed in a jar and put "before the testimony," intend that it be placed in the "ark." The ark was a box with carrying-poles containing, probably, the tablets of the Law on which the "testimony" or covenant was inscribed, and in which it was believed that YHWH's "presence" accompanied the Israelites through their journey in the wilderness. This passage is an anachronism (a misplacing of an event in time), since the building of the ark is not commanded until later in Exodus. There is no explanation of why the manna would not spoil in the jar. The issue was not important to the writer, who is concerned with commemoration of an event in Israel's "history of salvation."

Exodus 17:8-16

The story of the battle with the Amalekites, a group of fierce nomadic tribes, serves several purposes. First, it thrusts back into the wilderness period the theme of conflict with this group of tribes; the conflict is more properly seen as occurring between the southern Israelite tribes and the Amalekites from the desert region to the south of Palestine after the settlement of the land. Second, it is possibly an etiological story having to do with a local shrine, identifying that place with the figure of Moses. Finally, it portrays a (magical?) power coming from Moses' outstretched arms, or, perhaps more properly, from his rod. It shares this with the story that precedes it, as well as with the P version of the crossing of the sea of reeds. There is no mention at this point of this power coming from YHWH, but that might be presupposed. The name of the place is virtually

impossible to translate with certainty. It might mean “YHWH is my banner,” or it might mean “the throne of YHWH.” In any event, the place is now unknown to us.

Exodus 18:1-27

The question of the relationship between the Israelites and Jethro, the priest of Midian, is one of the most tantalizing and ultimately unanswerable ones in the entire story of the Exodus. It is clear that Jethro acts as a person with some kind of authority, and, since the matters with which he deals are not family affairs, we must suppose that his authority was more than that of Moses’ father-in-law.

Note first that in vv. 10-12 Jethro, having been told of the events which have taken place, blesses YHWH, saying that YHWH is now known to be greater than all the gods. If Yahweh was the name of the Midianite (Kenite) deity, this would mean that the god whom Jethro has known all along is now shown to be not simply his own tribal deity, but one whose power extends beyond the normally expected circle of influence and reaches to another people (the Israelites), a god who is able indeed to subdue the forces of the gods of the great empire of Egypt. This is said on the assumption that what is known as the Kenite hypothesis is correct. The text itself simply shows Jethro acclaiming YHWH’s power.

Next, notice that it is Jethro, not Moses, who offers the sacrifices to God. The point seems to be that Jethro is the one recognized as being the appropriate priest at this occasion. Is this because he is the “YHWH priest,” the priest who would normally preside at cultic worship of YHWH? Or is the place itself, the “mountain of God” (v. 5), a specifically Midianite holy place?

Before answering that second question, let us consider what has come to be called the Kenite hypothesis. This hypothesis attempts to tie together:

a) the several strange references to Jethro (or Reuel), Moses’ father-in-law;

b) the placing of Moses in Midian for the giving of the divine name; and c) the relationship of the exodus group’s experience to the confederation of all the tribes under a covenant with YHWH.

In Exod. 2:16 and 3:1, Jethro is called “the priest of Midian.” In 18:1, as we have seen, when the tribes reach the “mountain of God” after their flight from Egypt, Jethro hears “how the LORD had brought Israel out of Egypt.” And he says, “Blessed be the LORD, who has delivered you from the Egyptians and from Pharaoh. Now I know that the LORD is greater than all gods . . .” (vv. 10-11). Further, in v. 12, it is Jethro who offers the sacrifice to YHWH. Then in v. 13ff., it is Jethro who instructs Moses. According to the hypothesis, Jethro must be familiar with YHWH worship, although (according to E and P) the name of YHWH is new for the Israelites.

As we have seen, the Kenites, who were a part of the Midianite group of tribes, went up with the exodus group into the promised land. The Kenite hypothesis goes on to say that the exodus group learned the name YHWH from the Kenites (Midianites), and that Jethro the priest is indeed the one through whom the name was learned. When the exodus group came into the central part of Palestine, they were able to unite the southern (“Abraham”) tribes, who by this hypothesis had already taken the name “YHWH” from the Kenites, with the northern (“Jacob”) tribes who had not yet heard of the name. The exodus group, according to this thinking, originally had come from the northern tribes, gone into Egypt, and had encountered the name YHWH in their wanderings and associations with the Kenites in Midian.

The tradition as it is related in Exod. 3 is that the name was revealed to Moses at the burning bush. By the Kenite hypothesis, what Moses accomplished was to see that the “god” he met at what was presumably a

Kenite “holy place” was actually the same God who had appeared under so many different names to the patriarchs. Without this insight—that is, without a realization that the many gods of the patriarchs and the god called “YHWH” by the southern tribes were one and the same God, and that it was this God who had made the covenant at Sinai—it would not have been possible for the twelve tribes to confederate together as “Israel.” The confederation was an amphictyony (am-FICK-tee-oh-nee), a grouping of tribes who shared a common God and who united to worship at a common shrine.

This hypothesis accounts for the peculiar role of Jethro, as well as for the curious fact that J, the southern writer, assumes that the name YHWH has “always” been known, while the northern E writer does not know this name until Moses delivers it.

This brings us back to the issue of the location of the “mountain of God.” In Exod. 3:1, this phrase is attached to the name Horeb, which is the Deuteronomist’s characteristic name for the mountain that is known as Sinai in the other traditions. It would seem from the content of Exod. 3 that this was a Midianite holy place. If this is also the mountain on which Moses encountered YHWH for the giving of the Law (19:1-20:31), namely Sinai/Horeb, then it would presumably be located near enough to the oasis at Kadesh-barnea for Moses to have visited it while tending Jethro’s sheep during his stay in Midian. This would point to a location as the more northern of the two sites for Sinai. The traditional site for Sinai is the southern one.

At that point, in the south of the Sinai peninsula, there are two mountains which are presently called Jebel Musa (Mount of Moses) and Jebel Qaterin (Mount of St. Catherine). Tradition has it that the body of St. Catherine of Alexandria, who was martyred in CE 307 by being tortured on a wheel and then beheaded, was carried by angels to the mountain which now bears her name. There is at present a monastery at the site where her body was supposed to have been put to rest. The Mount of Moses is next to the Mount of St. Catherine and is acknowledged by Muslims, Jews, and Christians to be the place where Moses met God in the burning bush and where the Ten Commandments were given to Moses.

Arguments against this site hinge mainly on the fact that there is no sign of volcanic activity in this area—the descriptions of the appearance of YHWH in fire and smoke suggest volcanic action—and on questions about the role of Jethro and the Kenites. The more northern mountain near Kadesh-barnea lies in a region in which there has been volcanic action. The likelihood of its being a Midianite/Kenite holy place is perhaps stronger, owing to its nearness to the traditional land of the Midianites. The Midianites were a nomadic people, however, and it is not at all impossible that they could have had such a holy place even as far away as the southern site.

If the northern mountain is accepted as the true Sinai/Horeb, the “three days’ journey” to sacrifice to YHWH for which Moses pleaded with the pharaoh would be just about sufficient to reach the “mountain of God.”

There is really no way at present to determine which is the correct site. There is weight to the arguments for the northern one near Kadesh-barnea, but the long-standing tradition associated with the southern one, along with the imposing grandeur of it and certain features of the contours of the mountain and the plain beneath it which fit the Exodus description, suggest that it may indeed be the correct location. At any rate, Jethro acts as one who possesses some kind of authority. He not only acts as priest, but also advises Moses (Exod. 18:13-27) how to organize the people for the administration of justice. There seems little room for doubt that the Exodus/Sinai event owes a great debt to the influence of the Kenites—even if the exact details of that debt cannot be known now.

Summary

In the last two chapters we have looked at the first part of the drama which we have been calling the

Exodus/Sinai event: the people are delivered by YHWH from the

power of the gods of Egypt, saved from destruction at the hands of the Egyptian army at the sea of reeds, and preserved on their trek through the desert to Sinai by the miraculous gift of “bread from heaven.”

We next turn to the second part of the drama, the making of the covenant and the giving of the Law. It is important for an understanding of both the continuing tension within the story of Israel in the Old Testament and the identical tension within the life of the Christian church, that we note carefully the order in which the two parts of the Exodus/Sinai drama occur. First God delivers the people, and then God gives them the Law. God’s grace, freely given in love to Israel, is shown in the deliverance; only after this does God give to Israel the Law, which provides the structure within which the people of God are to live their lives.

Prophets such as Amos will later find it necessary to remind the Israelites that it is their calling, or their election by God, that makes them God’s people; it is not their greatness, in either power or moral uprightness, that brings about their election, but solely the gracious will of God. To maintain the external structures of religion is not enough if the very heart of the relationship between Israel and YHWH has been forgotten. The Law is not a set of rules to be followed in order to become worthy of election as God’s people, but the framework for a life that is worthy of the people of God. The repeated descriptions of the Israelites as a people who “grumble” against Moses and against YHWH, who never seem to be able to remember or even to understand the significance of their own deliverance, serve to point up this fact. For they remain God’s people even when they reject God’s leadership communicated through Moses.

This same tension between law and grace is felt within Christianity. In his letters, especially the Epistle to the Galatians and the Epistle to the Romans, Paul strives to combat an interpretation of Christianity which reverses the order we have just described. In Galatians, he fights against a group of Christian teachers who are maintaining that unless one first keeps all the Law, there is no possibility of salvation through Jesus. Paul argues angrily that it is the grace of God, given through Jesus, which makes it possible for a person to “stand in the right” with God. (The actual term used is “be justified.”) Once a person has by faith—that is, by a trusting acceptance of God’s grace—been “made right” by God, then he or she can live by the Spirit of God in such a way as to fulfill the Law. But one does not achieve that right relationship with God by “works of the Law,” that is, by fulfilling the legal or moral requirements of the Law.

The foundation for this Pauline interpretation of the relationship between God’s graciousness and our obligation to live according to God’s will is laid in the sequence of events narrated in the Exodus/Sinai story. First came the election by God and God’s act of deliverance; only then followed the giving of the Law at Sinai.

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Borrowing[back]

An unpleasant piece of the story that has been used to evil effect ever since.

And they had neighbors?

>

Fertility implicationsback

Why?

>

Angel of Death[back]

The assumption would be that the angel of death isn't too bright. But that has sometimes been said of angels.

>

Members of the new Israel[back]

This may be an appealing idea to some Christians; to our Jewish neighbors, I suspect not so much. We could have a discussion about how Mormonism is related to Christianity. The same way that Christianity is related to Judaism?

>

Red Sea/Reed Seaback

No it doesn't. I can't say anything about the Hebrew, but the Greek of the Septuagint just says "sea." We don't really know where the Hebrews were living - and the story about their borrowing jewelry implies that they were well mixed in with the Egyptians - so we can't make much of a judgement about where they might have crossed. Somewhere near the top of the Gulf of Suez might have fit nearly as well as the marshy regions further North.

And it brings back the big question of how much we care about the story's historical accuracy.

>

Downfall of Egyptback

"Downfall" is a bit strong in referring to a country that was still very much a going concern when Julius Caesar met Cleopatra.

Let's think back to David's comment about the wretched Egyptians upriver who had never heard of Moses, and still had their water turned to blood. I wonder if we should attribute the callousness not to God but to the people who told the story. They never thought about the plight of the ordinary Egyptian in the street, or if they did, they didn't care. Triumphalism is never pretty, at least not for long.

>

Fleshpots[back]

Well pooh! I'd always thought of fleshpots as something more interesting, whatever they were. Though I'm not hungry...

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No less miracles[back]

OK fair enough - we can explain this one. But I still wonder if it's fair to call it a miracle if it's so readily explained. To the Israelites it certainly looked like a miracle, and to the eye of Faith it still does. A sceptic might call it a great piece of luck. And I come back to the weather at the Dunkirk evacuation. Many people of my parents' generation called that a miracle, or a divine intervention. Perhaps they were right.

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St. Catherine of Alexandria[back]

But let's not forget the pagan philosopher Hypatia, sometimes considered the real-life model for the legend of St. Catherine (though she lived and died almost a century later).

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Justified[back]

Perhaps I feel just a little bit like that on my good days.

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