PARALLEL GUIDE 16 Concluding Exodus

Summary: In this chapter we review the elaborate building, furnishing, and staff ing of the tabernacle. We also look at JE's covenant account and P's story of the golden calf. Then we discuss Israel's understanding of God at work in history and her perception of God present in creation. Finally we couch a discussion of Israel's unique covenant in a general survey of covenant in the ancient Near East.

Learning Objectives

• Read Exodus 25:1-31:11

• Identify the tabernacle and the Urim and Thummin

• State the probable relationship between the story of the golden calf and King Jeroboam

• Define the "glory" of Yahweh, the Shekinah

• State at least two of God's characteristics which are demonstrated by God's involvement with the historical existence of Israel

• State how God as creator and God as Lord of history are related

• State three possible outcomes that may occur if the covenant is violated

• State what the "mercy seat" refers to

• State what the biblical and contemporary naturalistic views of the Exodus/Sinai event have in common

Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

1. How do you relate the concept of God as creator who caused all things to be, and God as Lord of history? Where is the place for individual freedom in this framework?

2. The golden calf is a powerful symbol. What parallels to the golden calf do you find in our contemporary history or in our own lives?

3. What are some contemporary ways in which people conceive of God that are antithetical to God as Lord of History?

Preparing for Your Seminar

When we contemplate God as creator and God as Lord of history, we may wonder how God and nature relate. What about science which pushes back into naturalistic terms the notion of creation? How can we respond to these questions in the twenty-first century without falling into the trap of godless science or thoughtless credulity?

Additional Sources

W. F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Doubleday Anchor Book, 1957) is a work of fundamental importance to the study of the history and religion of Israel. The work of this volume is supplemented by Albright's Archaeology and the Religion of Israel, 5th ed. (Doubleday Anchor Book,

1969).

W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981).

Chapter 16
CONCLUDING EXODUS

In this chapter we read the instructions for the building and furnishing of the taber nacle and the accounts of the sealing of the covenant between YHWH and Israel, including the incident of the golden calf. Then, we discuss the significant theological issues that come out of the story of Israel's flight from Egypt and the making of the covenant at Mt. Sinai. We have said that these events together form a unit in which a fundamental theological statement is made, so we have referred to them by a singular, composite name, "the Exodus/Sinai event."

We also examine in this chapter what the story of the Exodus means by its insistence that God has acted in history, in the actual events experienced by a group of people. Then we turn to consider how his action in the world relates to his creation of it. Finally, we see what role the covenant plays in God's drama of redemption.

Instructions for Building and Furnishing the Tabernacle

The long passage from Exod. 25:1-31:11 is a P account giving detailed instructions for building and furnishing the tabernacle, for clothing and installing the priests, and for appointing the artists and workers to do the jobs. From Exod. 35 through the end of Exodus a similarly detailed account is given of the carrying out of these instructions; the second account follows the wording of the first almost exactly. Since it is clear that no such elaborate cultic apparatus could have been set up during the wilderness wanderings, scholars have assumed that the Priestly writer read back into the wilderness wanderings an idealized picture of the temple. Much of the account is based on the elaborate practices needed after the Exile; its intent seems to be to reestablish Israel's identity. You need not read all the details of these passages. We simply point out certain details of the account which come up again in the historical narrative.

Exodus 25:1-9 presents a list of materials which the people are to donate for the tabernacle and its appurtenances. The materials are all very expensive; the only way in which any degree of plausibility may be given to placing such a demand on a wilderness people is by setting it in the context of the despoiling of the Egyptians (3:21-22; 11:2-3; 12:35-36—not P, but all JE, interestingly enough). Notice that 25:8 has God say that he wants the sanctuary built "that I may dwell among them." This is the characteristic view of the P writer concerning the relationship of YHWH to the people: within the tabernacle (especially the ark, whose construction is described in 25:10-22) YHWH dwells with YHWH's people. Cultic acts are addressed to a God who resides in the holy place: "But the LORD is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him" (Habbakuk 2:20).

The ark (25:10-22) was a portable box in which sacred objects were carried. The P writer habitually speaks of it as the "ark of the covenant" (e.g., 25:22), for "the covenant" was to be placed in it (v. 21). This must be a reference either to the tablets of stone that Moses has brought down from the mountain, or to a book of laws which express the terms of the covenant ("the covenant"). Exodus 16:32-34 relates that a jar of manna was also placed in the ark "before the covenant." Exactly what the ark

looked like or what it contained is not known. The P account in this section cannot be an accurate historical

description. It is highly unlikely that such an elaborate device would have been built in the wilderness.

Exodus 25:17-22 speaks also of the "mercy seat" with two cherubim on top of it. The name "mercy seat" is surely a mistranslation. The Hebrew word kapporet is from a word which is sometimes used to refer to the "covering up" of sin. Yom Kippur (day of atonement) is the day on which sins are "covered" so that they no longer stand between humans and God, and kippur is from the same root—kpr—as kapporet.

Because of this purely verbal connection, Latin and Greek translations have described the kapporet in the image of a "seat." The English "mercy seat" is the result. Actually it seems likely that kapporet simply means the cover or the lid of the box. The cherubim on the cover, facing toward each other across an empty space, mark the "seat" of the invisible God. This imagery is expressed in the canticle Benedictus es, Domine (The Book of Common Prayer, p. 49), from the "Song of the Three Young Men" in the Apocrypha: "Blessed art thou that beholdest the depths, and dwellest between the Cherubim . . . ." The New English Bible actually translates kapporet as "cover," as does the Torah of the Jewish Publication Society.[top]

The description of the tabernacle—a combination tent and wooden structure—in 26:1-37 is so confused it is practically impossible to understand. It is apparently an attempt to put together a tradition about a tent-tabernacle of the wilderness days with a later plan for the Jerusalem Temple.

The priestly vestments (28:1-43) are also described in a way incapable of being understood. Some of the terms used are in fact unknown to present-day translators. The ephod (EE-fahd), for example, could have been a loincloth, an apron, or perhaps even a box. The "breastpiece" (vv. 15-16) may have been a bag worn around the neck to hold the sacred lots—the Urim and Thummim of v. 30, cast to find out the will of God—or it may have been like a royal breastplate such as are seen in pictures of ancient Near Eastern kings—or even a composite of the two. The "plate of pure gold" (vv. 36-38) which was placed on the turban of the high priest was probably a sign of royalty equivalent to a crown. After the Exile, there no longer being a king, the high priest took over many of the trappings of royalty, and the P writer, familiar with this post-exilic role of the high priest, read it back into the earlier period.

The Making of the Covenant

To extract the story of the making of the covenant out of P's liturgical directions, read Exod. 24:1-18 and 31:18-34:35. Then mark the following passages and read them together as one story: Exod. 24:12-15a, 34:1-5, 10-11a, and 14-28. This is the reconstruction of the JE narrative which Martin Noth, an Old Testament scholar, has made. You will notice that it eliminates the story of the golden calf and the breaking of the first set of tablets (except for the passing reference in 34:1). When you have finished reading the marked passages, come back to this text.

Several traditions are woven together in this narrative. The JE account has Moses go up the mountain and cut some pieces of stone on which the Ten Commandments—the "Ritual Decalogue" in Exod. 20—are to be written. Yahweh then makes

the covenant with Moses simply by delivering these commandments. There is no response required except that of receiving the commandments.

Exodus 24:1-11 contains two different accounts of the making of the covenant. Verses 9-11 (and probably vv. 1-2 as an introduction) show Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu—who have not previously been named—and seventy of the elders of Israel—probably those appointed on Jethro's suggestion in 18:13-27. All go up to the mountain, meet with God, and eat and drink. In this version the common meal seals the covenant.

In vv. 3-8, in contrast, the event takes place at the foot of the mountain. Moses tells the people what God has commanded and they agree to abide by his words. Moses writes down Yahweh's words; presumably they form the "book of the covenant" of v. 7. Then Moses builds an altar and sets up twelve pillars representing the twelve tribes. "Young Men" (v. 5) offer sacrifices and Moses throws half the blood on the altar; the other half he throws upon the people, after they have once again assented to the terms of the book of the covenant.

All three of these traditions—24:12ff; 24:9-11; 24:3-8—hold in common that the covenant is initiated by YHWH. God makes the covenant with Israel—the motif of God's election of Israel dominates. This is true also of the account (Exod. 19) that precedes the "Ethical Decalogue"; God calls Moses to him before returning him to the people for their response.

The Golden Calf

The story of the making of the golden calf does not seem to be an original part of the Sinai narrative, although there is some argument about this. In I Kings 12:25-30, it is reported that King Jeroboam, the first king of the northern kingdom after the division of the nation (922-901 BCE), set up two sanctuaries in the north so that his people would not go to the temple in Jerusalem. He has two golden calves made. "He said to the people, 'You have gone to Jerusalem long enough. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt"' (v. 28). He put one of these golden calves in the temple at Bethel and one at Dan. The fact that Exod. 32:4 uses these same words about the golden calf—one calf, even though "your gods" (plural) are referred to—indicates that the actions of King Jeroboam may lie in the background of the exodus account. The writer wishes to discredit Jeroboam's actions by equating them with an act of betrayal against Moses and YHWH.

The I Kings account of Jeroboam's reign is written from a southern standpoint and is hardly unbiased. Rather than intending the calves to represent idols, it is more likely that the king meant them to represent the bulls on which the gods were often shown mounted in non-Israelite religions. In defense of Jeroboam, the fact that the calves—not even bulls!—had no figure of a deity on their backs would imply that he was using the same type of imagery as the empty space between the cherubim on the cover of the ark—YHWH, unlike the idols, is invisible and cannot be portrayed. The problem that this issue raises, particularly when we remember that the cherubim are also manufactured of gold donated by the people, bothered Jewish thinkers as early as the Middle Ages. In fact the medieval poet-philosopher Judah Halevi anticipated a

solution much later proposed by the Old Testament scholar W.F. Albright. Albright judges that conceptually there can be "no essential difference between representing the invisible deity as enthroned on the cherubim or as standing on a bull" (From the Stone Age to Christianity, p. 300). Halevi had suggested that the only difference between the cherubim and the calf was that "one form had been permitted and the other had not" (cited in Plaut's The Torah, p. 651). The heresy of the people, in this view, becomes not idolatry, but breach of trust. There is a midrash (also cited in Plaut) which indeed understands the sin in much that way, not in the making of the calf, but in the intentions of the people when Moses is delayed. "Israel said: God redeemed only himself but not us; He is concerned with himself but not with us" (p. 652).

In Exod. 32:2-4, Aaron is the craftsman who makes the golden calf. Later, in v. 24, Aaron explains to Moses that he simply threw the gold into the fire, "and out comes this calf"! In fact, in vv. 21-24, Aaron passes the blame for the whole incident onto the people, just as Adam blamed Eve—and God for giving her to him—in Genesis. When read as an evasion of guilt, the remark that the calf simply "came out" of the fire sounds childishly dishonest. What may be referred to is a magical practice which can be seen in other Near Eastern societies: molten gold or silver is poured into water, and the form that results is interpreted as a message from the gods. One may discern here two different traditions—one which tells of human skill or artistry and another in which the calf came about by magic. Aaron's role in all of this is very difficult to understand. In

all that has gone before—the events in Egypt, the flight from Egypt, the crossing of the Reed Sea—Aaron has been closely involved with Moses and completely aware of YHWH's purpose. How could he suddenly become a party to such an act of idolatry? No lasting guilt is assigned to Aaron; indeed he occupies a very favorable position in all the later parts of the story. This has led some scholars to think that Aaron's name has been inserted in the story by some writer who wanted to besmirch his reputation. If so, it must have been before P, for whom Aaron is the source of the legitimate priesthood. (There are hints that Aaron may not be entirely culpable. For example, he tells the people to "tear off" their earrings, not just "take off" or "give to me." It is a very violent word, and he may well have been surprised when they did so. And is his calling for a "festival to the LORD" perhaps his attempt to call the people back to the true God?)

In vv. 19-20, Moses smashes the tablets of stone, thereby symbolizing that the covenant has been broken by the idolatry of Israel. Then he grinds the calf into powder, mixes it with water, and gives it to the people to drink. This is apparently a "water of cursing," an ancient form of trial in which an accused person suffers no ill effects if innocent, but great harm if guilty. Here guilt is assumed, and all that is awaited is the punishment. In vv. 25-29, punishment is not left to God. At the command of Moses, three thousand Israelites are slain by the "sons of Levi," the tribe to which Moses and Aaron belong. This account, which is full of improbable features, may be an attempt to establish the priestly superiority of the Levites. What were the sons of Levi doing while everyone else was engaging in the illicit worship? Why did they slay only three thousand, if all the people were involved? These questions lose their strength if we are supposed to see this story simply as saying that Moses' family,

the house of Levi, rallied to his support and thereby "ordained [themselves] for the service of the LORD" (v. 29).

At two points in Exod. 32 Moses acts as an intercessor for the people. (An intercessor presents someone else's cause before God.) This is important to our understanding not only of this story, but also of the role of Moses throughout the Pentateuch. In vv. 11-14, Moses uses two arguments on behalf of the people. First he pleads that if God destroys them, the Egyptians will think that he was unable to bring about the purposes he had when he delivered them from Egypt. This is a very primitive idea—that the god has to support his people for his own name's sake. The prophets will fight against this idea, maintaining that YHWH is not dependent on his people the way the gods of other nations are. The other appeal is to the promises made to the patriarchs: "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants" (v. 13). Moses is not suggesting that YHWH has forgotten these men; in the Old Testament, for God to remember someone means for God to hold that person before God's presence with favor. Moses is reminding YHWH of the covenant, initiated by YHWH long before the present event.

Again in vv. 30-35 Moses pleads with God for the people. In v. 32, he offers to accept punishment in their place. God refuses the plea, insisting that only those who have sinned will be punished. The exact nature of the punishment God sends (a plague according to v. 35) is unclear, as is the time in which it will be sent: "When the day comes for the punishment, I will punish them for their sin" (v. 34). This is not the last time that Moses appears as intercessor for Israel, and his offer to substitute himself for the people was not lost on early Christian readers of this text.

YHWH Appears to Moses

Exodus 33 is made up of several traditions. Its main theme, and the reason these disconnected fragments are put together, has to do with the presence of YHWH to the people. Verses 1-6 show YHWH ordering them to go into the land promised to the patriarchs, but saying that YHWH will not go with them "lest I consume you in the way, for you are a stiff-necked people" (v. 3). Instead, YHWH will send an angel to lead them. The people cast off their ornaments in mourning at the thought that YHWH will not be with them.

Verses 7-11 and 12-23 then speak of three different ways in which YHWH's presence comes to be preserved without destroying the people. If these stories were a unit, we would ask how God's presence could be preserved at all, in view of what was said in the opening verses of the chapter, but the issue running throughout is the tension between the awesome consuming presence of YHWH and the need of Israel to be assured that God is still with them.

In vv. 7-11, YHWH comes down from time to time in a cloud to meet with Moses at a tent pitched outside the camp. The "tent of meeting" is located at a safe distance from the camp so that the divine presence will not harm the people. It is not the same as the tabernacle which P describes and in which God is said to dwell continuously; it is the tent to which YHWH comes to meet with Moses. Moses is shown to be superior to all the rest of the Old Testament figures because YHWH "used to speak

to Moses face to face, as one speaks to his friend" (v. 11). In fact, there is in this passage a sense in which Moses stands—not so much to Aaron as to the people—as God stands to him. Jewish tradition understood the tent to be Moses' own; he was said to withdraw from the camp because God had done so.

As the story of the march through the wilderness into the promised land unfolds in Numbers and Joshua, these two ways of speaking of the presence of YHWH continue to be interwoven. The older JE source speaks of the tent of meeting and of the cloud which comes down to the tent, then lifts from it and moves on ahead of the band of Israelites. The tent of meeting is kept outside the camp to protect the people from the divine presence. The P source continues to speak of the abiding presence of God in the ark within the tabernacle: the tabernacle is pitched in the midst of the camp. These two outlooks concerning the manner in which God is related to God's people have continued to be reflected in the Christian community. In Protestant Christianity the emphasis in corporate worship generally tends to be on the meeting between the worshipers and God in the preached word. The encounter takes place in a building which is often very plain, not suggestive of holiness or mystery; sometimes, especially in America, the building is called a "meeting house"—the place where the congregation meets to encounter God in worship. In Catholic Christianity the emphasis tends to be placed on the continuing presence of God. The reserved sacrament—some of the bread from the eucharistic celebration which is kept for administering to the sick and for adoration—is kept in "the tabernacle" and a special lamp burns before it to remind the worshiper of the presence of God. The architecture and furnishings contribute to a feeling of awe and an awareness of the presence of holiness. Neither of these tendencies is exclusive to one tradition, but the difference is marked and reflects tensions that are apparently permanent in Judeo-Christian religions. The next section, vv. 12-23, shows a somewhat different response to the issue of the presence of YHWH with the people. In vv. 12-16, Moses presents the need for YHWH's presence: how will the people know that Moses is really led by God unless God goes with them? "In this way we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth" (v. 16). It is the presence of YHWH with Israel that makes her different from the other nations.

When in vv. 17-23 God responds to Moses' plea, it becomes clear that the scene has shifted from the foot of the mountain to the mountain itself. The story bears comparison to the account of the call of Moses in Exodus 3. There, when Moses asks the name of God, he receives the rather confusing and *idem per idem* (or tautological) response, "I AM WHO I AM." Here the answer received is essentially the same, circular and self-defining: "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy" (33:19). YHWH promises to pass by Moses so that Moses may see God's "glory" only. The "glory" of YHWH is a visible indication of the divine presence. Exactly what it looked like is not stated; perhaps it was a bright light of undefined shape. The glory revealed the presence of God, but it also served to hide God's face from human eyes so that the beholder would not be consumed by God's holiness, nor come to know God completely. Moses is given to understand once again that there is a limit to human knowledge of God.

The Hebrew word translated “glory” is kabod. It was widely used as a euphemism for God. Later rabbinic writings used the word shekinah, not found in the Old Testament, for the same purpose. The shekinah of God is seen by the rabbis in the pillars of cloud and of fire during the Exodus as well as in other manifestations of God’s special presence. In Christian art, the halo has been used to express the presence of divine influence on a holy person. The glow of Moses’ face, discussed below, is akin both to the shekinah and to the halo.

God hides Moses in a crack in the rock, putting a hand over Moses’ eyes so that he cannot see God’s face “for no one shall see me and live” (33:20). This was a widely held view, but it is contradicted in v. 11, in which Moses and YHWH are said to speak face to face. As time went on, the idea of the absolute holiness of God would grow. Earlier traditions might speak almost casually of meetings between God and human beings, but the later ones tended to put a gulf between the two. We may therefore suppose that the episode described in this passage comes from a later source than that in v. 11. Here God passes by Moses, releasing the hand from Moses’ eyes so that he may see God’s back.

The Covenant Renewed

If Martin Noth is correct, Exod. 34 is the J account of the making of the covenant; J had no story of the golden calf and the breaking of the stone tablets. In its present context, however, 34 describes the remaking of the covenant after the incident of the golden calf. Moses cuts two tablets of stone on which the words of God will be recorded. YHWH describes the divine nature in vv. 6-7 in terms of “steadfast love,” forgiveness of sin, and judgment. “Steadfast love,” as you may remember, is a translation of the Hebrew word chesed and connotes the kind of faithfulness and concern which is not affected by momentary changes in the relationship between God and people; it does not mean sentimental or emotional love. God, then, forgives the people—God is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger” (v. 6). This does not mean, however, that God simply passes over guilt: God will not clear the guilty, “visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation” (v. 7). How can these two statements be reconciled?

One way this apparent contradiction may be resolved is to interpret “transgression and sin” in v. 7 as referring only to ritual offenses, and “iniquity” as referring to serious moral offenses. Another way is to see “the guilty” as those who are unrepentant and continue in their “iniquity”; such are not “cleared” of their guilt. Still a third possibility is that this statement as a whole reflects the clearly observable fact that even when an offense has been forgiven, the harmful results of it may remain and extend far into the future—even to those generations as yet unborn. However it be interpreted, the passage clearly means that forgiveness through “steadfast love” does not imply an absence of judgment.

We have looked at the Ritual Decalogue in vv. 14-28. Note that the warning against making covenants with the inhabitants of the land (v. 12) probably comes from a time in which intermingling of YHWH worship with the Canaanite fertility religion had already taken place.

In vv. 29ff., the glow of Moses’ skin from the encounter with YHWH indicates a transfer of some of the “glory” of YHWH to him, and, in order to protect the people from its destructive power, Moses has to put a veil over his face when he is in their presence. Notice that in these verses (34-35) Moses goes in “before YHWH” to speak with God and comes out to speak with the people. Once again we have the Priestly image of the tabernacle as the dwelling place of YHWH, in the midst of the camp. To go “before YHWH” in the tabernacle is an expression which later comes to be used for the cultic activities in the temple.

A curious mistranslation in these verses has been kept alive by many works of art, including Michelangelo's statue of Moses. The Hebrew word which means "shine" or "glow" is very similar to another word which means "horns." Michelangelo's statue, perhaps the most famous representation of Moses, shows him coming down the mountain from his visit with YHWH with horns coming out of his head. Nearly as famous—and more accurate to the Hebrew—is Rembrandt's painting (now in the Berlin Museum) which shows Moses carrying black tablets of stone engraved with gold letters, his face shining with the reflected radiance of God.

Our treatment of the story in the Book of Exodus is now complete. God through Moses has led the people from a condition of slavery in Egypt into freedom, and God has brought them to Sinai where God has sealed a covenant with them. They are to be God's own special people, a priestly nation, and they are to live in accordance with God's commandments. We have discovered that the Law—all the commandments, statutes, and ordinances—was so central to Israel's understanding of her life under God that most of the major legal codes of the nation come to find places in the narrative of the wilderness wanderings under Moses: most of the latter part of Exodus, all of Leviticus, and the first part of Numbers are set at Mt. Sinai. Not until Numbers 10 do we see the Israelites break camp at Sinai and continue their journey.

Let us now consider some of the meanings of the vital events which have taken place there.

God and History

One of the most striking features of the biblical understandings of God is the activity of God in the course of history. This story of the Exodus/Sinai event underscores the fact that YHWH is an intensely personal God who plays a direct role in the activities of humankind. In the Book of Genesis God is pictured as walking in the Garden of Eden and speaking with Adam and Eve; God speaks directly with Cain and with Noah, punishing sin and rewarding righteousness; God calls Abram and directs the lives of Isaac and Jacob for God's own purposes; and God uses Joseph to save the sons of Jacob from famine. These stories were either theological "myths" or dimly remembered legendary sagas used to express theological points of view. In contrast, the story of the Exodus/Sinai event, however much its details may have been altered to fit a theological framework, is historical. Something happened to a group of people who had been slaves in Egypt: they escaped and fled into the Sinai peninsula, and eventually they invaded and settled the land of Canaan. There is ample evidence that this actually occurred, and the dates for it can be set, even if only approximately. The biblical writers, reflecting the conviction of the people of Israel, interpret this event as due to the direct action of YHWH.

Of course, other interpretations are possible. A group of slaves may have reached the end of their endurance and broken free from the Egyptians, some natural phenomenon such as a tidal wave or a severe windstorm coming to their aid by a fortunate coincidence. The experience of finding themselves free may have been so exhilarating that they imagined themselves to be blessed by a god and came to see themselves as his special people. In recent times, especially the last one hundred years, a trend has been growing by which only such naturalistic interpretations, devoid of any religious dimension, have been regarded as "true." If this standard is used, the biblical interpretation could not, of course, be accepted; the Exodus/Sinai event would be simply one of many slave uprisings and the so-called covenant with YHWH would be only an example of "primitive" imagination. But a point that is often missed by people who hold such a view is that both the naturalistic and the biblical pictures are the result of interpretations; neither point of view is simply there, imbedded in "facts." History, like any other attempt to make sense out of our experience, is not simply facts, but the interpretation of facts. Moreover, facts do not prove the interpretations which are given to them; interpretations are attempts to articulate the meaning of facts. The facts which make up the Exodus/Sinai event, whatever they may have been, prove neither that YHWH led the people out of Egypt nor that there were merely "natural" forces at work. To speak of "natural forces" is to invoke a principle of interpretation just as much as it is to speak of YHWH's action.

Israel interpreted these events as due to YHWH's acts, and this can lead us to make two observations:

a) Israel looked to events in her corporate life as occasions for encountering God, and

b) she saw God as one who became involved in the life of Israel.

It is often said that God can be encountered in those moments of awe felt in viewing a sunset, in contemplating the beauty of a flower, or in meditating during a walk through a peaceful forest. Meditation exercises adapted from Far Eastern religions are helping many people in our society to make journeys "inward," to discover the deep pools of serenity and strength which lie within each of us, and to sense a dimension of life which is at least akin to the divine. These and other ways of experiencing something beyond the usual surfaces of existence can properly be seen as encounters with God, but they omit the arena in which the Bible most characteristically looks for him: God delivered Israel as a people, and the quality of the nation's life together forms a large part of the terms of the covenant God made with them. The Law commands worship to be addressed to God and justice to be done toward neighbor—and both of these are seen, equally, as religious activities. As the story moves on and tells of life in Canaan, kings will be denounced and social systems condemned—not in the name of humanitarian principles or social improvement, but in the name of the God of the covenant. God will continue to speak to the people at key moments in their history and bring about changes in their national life.

If God is encountered in the events of Israel's corporate life, this implies something about God: this is a God who is involved within history—the scene of a people's life together. God is not simply a power, or an abstract principle. God is not aloof.

God is one who enters into relationships with people, who responds to their actions and commits himself to a covenant with them. Indeed, it is possible to understand God as acting in history within people; God enters their hearts and enables them to assign meaning to events in their lives that would otherwise be meaningless. God is not always thought of in this way. Some points of view about God insist that God be far removed from the interplay of human activities, "uncontaminated" by them. To be religious, from such points of view, involves withdrawing from normal human life as much as possible and seeking higher "spiritual" levels. In the Bible, God "comes down" and engages in the activities of humankind.

God and Creation

Although it is in historical events that God is primarily encountered in biblical religion, God is also related to what we often call "nature." To think that God can be encountered in the beauty—or even the terrors—of nature is not, from the biblical standpoint, mistaken in itself. God is not simply a part of nature. God is not the beauty, the power, or even "the Absolute" of nature, but rather its creator. When a faithful Israelite stood in awe before some aspect of nature, it aroused in him a response of praise to the God who made it: "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Psalm 19:1).

Because God has created the world, it belongs to God and God is its ruler. God as creator is not simply the cause of the world, but the possessor and Lord of it. Among the many places where this connection between God's creativity and rule is stated, Psalm 95 presents a striking example. The first seven verses of this psalm speak of his creative work: "In his hand are the depths of the earth. . . . The sea is his, for he made it; and the dry land, which his hands have formed. . . . Let us kneel before the LORD our Maker. . . . We are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand." All of nature belongs to God, its creator. Verses 8-11 change the tone of the message of the psalm: references are made to the faithlessness of Israel during the wilderness wanderings, and the psalmist says, "Do not harden your hearts . . . [as] when your ancestors tested me" (vv.

8-9). God the Lord of nature is the same as the Lord of history. This is a God who covenants with a particular people of a particular time and place; God makes them God's people and works in their lives to bring about God's purposes because God is creator of all and therefore owner of all.[top]

The Covenant

The idea of a covenant is not unique with Israel. It was, and remains today, a common means by which two parties arrange their relationships with one another. Today the word "covenant" is often used to mean an agreement, pact, or contract. A covenant may be entered into by two parties who are equals or between a stronger and a weaker party. Most contracts today provide each party with equal legal protection. Thus in a properly drawn contract, a relatively powerless individual is protected against the immense power of a large corporation; however powerful the corporation, it is bound by law to the terms to which it has agreed.

In ancient times, however, a covenant was nearly always offered by a superior political power to weaker nations or tribes. Certain rights, such as promises of protection against attack from neighboring tribes, were given to the weaker party in return for acceptance of the terms offered. Payment of tribute money or service as a vassal (a

subordinate or servant) were common terms. The format for such covenants, as seen in texts which have been recovered by archaeologists, consisted of the name of the king with a description of the powerful status which he held—especially in relation to the weaker tribe—followed by a statement of the terms.

In Exod. 20:1-17, the Decalogue, such a format is in part followed in v. 2: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." This gives the name of the party offering the covenant and the particular relationship from which stems the power to initiate it. Verses 3-17 set forth the demands which are made on the people as their part of the terms of the covenant. There is no statement in this passage of the rights or benefits which the covenant confers on the people, but these are stated earlier in (19:5-6)—"if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation."

Abiding by a covenant is always optional. Obviously, this is true when it is between equals. Between stronger and weaker parties, however, there exists a rather grim choice: the weaker party may accept the terms of the covenant, or suffer the consequences! In a war between two tribes or nations, the victor, by virtue of greater power, can impose a condition of total defeat, even to destruction. If a covenant is offered, the victor is giving the defeated opponent a choice, even if a negative one. The covenant is at least a second option, even though it is so far preferable to the unconditional terms of defeat that the defeated cannot but choose it.

The covenant with YHWH is in this same sense optional. YHWH does not make Israel become a "priestly kingdom and a holy nation." YHWH offers to them a covenant by which she can become so. The awesome holiness of YHWH no doubt makes it difficult to conceive of rejecting it; the wrath of YHWH at the people's rejection of the covenant when they build and worship the golden calf—accompanied as this wrath is with threats to "burn hot against them" and "consume" them (32:10)—makes it clear that the choice was between blessing and fiery death. Yet the covenant remains an optional offering. The Lord does not say "Accept it or I will abandon you here, or send you back to slavery in Egypt." The covenant is of no effect unless accepted. Israel would prove, as so many nations and individuals have proven again and again, that it is possible to choose a path that leads to death, even when the way to life is offered.

If the weaker party to a covenant accepts the terms, the covenant is then sealed by ceremony—usually either a meal or a sacrifice. In 24:3-8, after Moses has told the people the terms of the covenant, they voice their

acceptance of it: “All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do.” Then a sacrifice is offered, and the blood from the animals is thrown against the altar (representing YHWH) and against the people. The covenant is thereby sealed. In v. 11, apparently preserving another tradition, the covenant seems to have been sealed by a meal.

In the tradition represented in the Pentateuch there is a development in the covenant relationship. God makes a covenant with Abraham in which the promise is made that from his seed will come a great nation by which all the nations of the earth will be blessed. So from the outset, the nation is called to a mission of redemption —she is elected not simply for a status of privilege, but for a purpose.

The covenant is renewed with Isaac in a special revelation; it does not extend automatically to him. Similarly, Jacob receives a special revelation, and the covenant is renewed with him. With the patriarchs, then, the covenant has to be renewed in each generation. Furthermore, Ishmael (Abraham’s other son) and Esau (Jacob’s brother) do not inherit the covenant. We have seen already that one purpose of this feature of the patriarchal stories was to assert that the covenant narrowed down to Israel alone among the various Semitic peoples to whom she was akin. In the patriarchal period the covenant was made with individuals; with Moses the covenant is finally given to Israel as a whole people.

In a sense the covenant had already been made with Israel—by anticipation, in Jacob. Under Moses the people themselves are called upon to accept it. After the Exodus/Sinai event, it is no longer necessary for the covenant to be renewed in each generation by a special act of revelation. The renewal is continually done in the yearly ritual of Passover and by the rite of circumcision. By circumcision the newborn are brought into the covenant, and by Passover the whole nation experiences the renewal of it. (The similarities between these and the Christian rites of baptism, in which individuals are brought into the new covenant, and the Eucharist, in which the new covenant is renewed by the cultic reenactment of its sealing in the meal and the poured “blood of the new covenant,” are readily apparent.)

There remains a very great problem in all of this—one which was to persist throughout Israel’s life and which recurs in the Christian part of the story: what will happen if Israel does not faithfully keep the terms of the covenant? Three major ways of answering this question have occurred:

a) A strict legalism, under which persons who break the Law lose their rights under the covenant. Since the covenant is seen as bringing salvation, this means, of course, that such people are consigned to damnation.

b) An assumption that the promises of the covenant, once sealed, are guaranteed by the grace of God, in spite of human transgressions.

c) A search for some means by which God transforms humankind’s sins so that a right relationship is restored.

The threat of the loss of the covenant relationship—the first alternative—runs throughout the Bible. It is first seen in the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden—once the immediacy of that primeval state is lost, there is constantly the risk of the total loss of relationship with God. It is voiced by Cain, who interprets

his banishment to the land of Nod as being driven from the presence of God. In regard to the second alternative, the prophets found it necessary to insist that the nation was mistaken in assuming that her covenanted position under God would keep God from bringing destruction upon her for her sins. Jesus also

says, when his fellow Jews claimed virtue in being “children of Abraham,” that God could raise up children of Abraham “from these stones” (Matt. 3:9). But the story of Jacob seems to lend support to this alternative: in spite of Jacob’s deceit and lack of faith, YHWH remains true to YHWH’s purposes and brings Jacob to repentance.

It is in the story of Joseph that the third alternative is first clearly stated: the brothers mean their act of treachery for evil, but God means it for good. God overcomes human evil and transforms it. This is the dominant view found in the Bible; it oc- curs as early as the Joseph story, and, as we see, it is a major message in the “good news” in the New Testament.[top]

End of chapter

Lord of History[back]

Yes, but what does "lord of History" mean?

Falling into the trap[back]

This paragraph contains a cool set of assumptions in its unsupported adjectives. Widely used in contemporary politics, actually. But I think the point is the central point of this course, and indeed of all our thinking about religion.

Mercy seat[back]

As a child I used to think of it as a kind of supernatural commode. But then at school we used to sing (or at least I did) about "God the Holy Parakeet." Nobutseriouslyfolks, here's the answer.

Ark[back]

"Ark" comes from the Latin word *arca*, "chest". And guess what - the word "arcane" comes from the same root. For lots more on the Ark of the Covenant, including its current locations, see Wikipedia.

What was the heresy?back

An interesting idea. It actually fits well with the idea that what God wants from his or her people is absolute trust, perhaps even more than absolute obedience.

"primitive"back

Watch out for words in double quotes.

social systems condemned[back]

I've never been quite sure where the writers of the EFM material come out on the question of democracy versus theocracy. We could discuss.

God far removed[back]

Again, watch out for the words in double quotes. A sneer is so often implied. But anyway the paragraph makes a false distinction. It's quite possible to believe that God doesn't want to get involved (or doesn't even exist) and still be active for good in the world. Personally I feel I'm doing a little better when I'm running God's high-test fuel.

And there are better and worse ways of withdrawing from the world in the name of religion.

third alternative[back]

Let's get this straight, once and for our lfetimes. An alternative is a choice between two, and only two, options. If there are more than two choices, use some other word.