

TRANSLATION

THE PRESENCE AT MOUNT SINAI

by

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A. *The Place of the Sinai Story in the Pentateuch*

The Book of Exodus indicates that the purpose of the sojourn of the Israelites at "Horeb, the mountain of God" would be the worship of the God who brought them out of Egypt and the concluding of a covenant with the God who had revealed to the people his redeeming powers (cf. Ex. 3: 1-12). The descriptions of the People of Israel's sojourn at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:1; Num. 10:11; cf. Deut. 4:11) are indeed completely devoted to shaping the bond between JHWH and the Israelites, without mentioning profane matters like shortage of water and food, or clashes with enemies; they deal exclusively with the receiving of the Torah. The story of the Golden Calf, too, is only a description of a crisis in the relationship between JHWH and his people, which for a moment endangered the receiving of the Torah.

Some scholars maintain that this pericope has been inserted into the description of the journeys of the Israelites at a late date. Wellhausen maintained that according to the most ancient tradition the Israelites travelled directly from Egypt to Kadesh-Barnea and did not make the detour to Mount Sinai. His argument is that the event at Massah and Meribah (Ex. 17:1-7) did not precede the Israelites' arrival at Mount Sinai, and the event at the waters of Meribah at Kadesh (Num. 20:1-13) occur after they left Sinai, but that it was one event reflected in different sources. Eduard Meyer conjectured in addition that the Israelites received the JHWH-cult at Kadesh-Barnea, where it had been practised since ancient times, and that later tradition transferred the JHWH-cult to Mount Sinai because this mountain was considered as JHWH's dwelling-place. Another argument for a late dating of the Sinai story within the journey description is raised by Von Rad. He emphasises that it is barely mentioned – and then only late – in the biblical speeches inculcating into the people the commandment of loyalty to JHWH, while most of these speeches refer only to God's miracles during

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the exodus from Egypt and the journeys in the desert. Von Rad resolves this difficulty by conjecturing that the Sinai tradition found its source in the ritual of the celebrations of the renewal of the Covenant at Sichern, which were annually performed there, and that only the J source transferred this tradition to Mount Sinai and inserted it into the pericope of the desert journeys. This innovation, however, won general recognition only in the Second Temple period. Noth, however, suggests an earlier date for the insertion of the Sinai pericope into the desert stories and attributes it to the common basis of the J and E sources. Kraus holds the view that the origin of the Sinai tradition lay in the Sichern cult whereas the origin of the Exodus tradition lay in the Gilgal cult, and that the transfer of the amphictyonic centre from Sichern to Gilgal brought about the unification of both traditions.

All these conjectures are strongly disputed. Even if we accept Wellhausen's view that the story of Massah and Meribah and that of the waters of Meribah at Kadesh reflect one event, it is a fact that the two occasions were separate in the eyes of the redactor of the Torah, who preserved both traditions and connected them with two different stages in the desert journeys. Furthermore, Von Rad's difficulty is not a real one, for it is understandable that in urging the people to observe God's commandments reference is made to his great deeds of salvation and punishment rather than to the less appealing argument that God had given his people law and justice. And as regards the logical link of the Sinai story to that of the exodus: the latter describes how God actually entered into an alliance with his people, while the former describes the juridical confirmation of this alliance by means of a covenant. Contracts between the Hittites and their vassals are examples of alliances in two stages: the actual contract was preceded by a history of the development of ties between the great Hittite king and the vassal, with an emphasis on the favour bestowed on the vassal by the great king prior to the concluding of the covenant. The antiquity of the nucleus of the tradition of the Sinai Covenant can also be seen from the wealth of stories about this event which have been preserved in the Torah and which are divided between the J, E, D and P sources.

B. *The Presence at Sinai*

The expression "presence at Sinai" (*ma'amad har-Sinay*) finds its basis in medieval philosophical language. Maimonides (*Yesodeh ha-Torah* 8.1; cf. 19.9) emphasises the presence at Sinai as a unique event because the announcement of God's commandments took place in the presence of all the people and was accompanied by the revelation of the *Shekhina*, in contradistinction to other commandments which were transmitted to Moses alone. This does not mean that the role of Moses as a mediator between God and his people is not recognised in this story; it is especially recognised in the preparation of the event, cf. Ex. 19:3-10 and Deut. 4:10.

This revelation, then, took place before the eyes of all the people, but one can discern different traditions regarding two apparently related questions: namely, where did the people stand during the revelation? and: did God speak to the people directly, or to Moses? The main tradition has it that the people stood at the foot of the mountain (Ex. 19:17; Deut. 4:11) and also strongly stresses the prohibition against the people going up into the mountain (Ex. 19:12-13, 21-22). But another tradition has been preserved: "When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain" (Ex. 19:13). Another trace of this tradition appears in the verse: "The Lord spoke with you face to face at the mountain" (Deut. 5:4; cf. vv. 25-27), but according to Ex. 19:9 the people heard the words that God spoke to Moses, which gives the impression that Moses stood on the mountain while the people were at its foot. Going still further in this direction is the verse in Deut. 5:5, according to which Moses said: "I was standing between the Lord and you at that time to declare to you the word of the Lord; for you were afraid because of the fire, and you did not go up into the mountain"; it is remarkable that this verse which explicitly denies the ascent of the people into the mountain also denies the tradition that the people heard any of the words from the mouth of God. To this tradition possibly also belongs the verse in Ex. 19:20, according to which God called Moses to go up to the top of the mountain; this verse may originally have served as the opening phrase of the Ten Commandments. Ex. 19:24 preserves a trace of a further tradition, according to which not only Moses but also Aaron was allowed to go up into the mountain. According to Deut. 5:1-22 (cf. 4:13), God announced the Ten Commandments to the people during their presence at Mount Sinai, but the connection is less clear in Exodus, because the many differences in the description of the presence at Sinai recorded in Ex. 19 blur the connection of the Ten Commandments with this event. But here too the Ten Commandments closely follow it; according to one version, it is likely that they were the continuation of Ex. 19:19, and according to another of Ex. 19:20.

C. The Conclusion of the Presence at Mount Sinai

To the Ten Commandments, which were spoken to all the people, in both Exodus and Deuteronomy, have been attached other ordinances which were spoken to Moses alone. In both passages the people expressed dread before God and asked Moses to approach God alone and receive these ordinances. Thus the Book of Covenant (Ex. 20:23-23:33) and the Deuteronomic laws were linked with the presence at Mount Sinai and thereby benefited from the high authority of this event. The section Ex. 20:18-21 provides the link between the announcement of the Ten Commandments and the Book of Covenant. But doubt has arisen among scholars as to whether this was indeed the original function of these verses. Nachmanides maintained

that Ex. 20:18-21 reverts to what happened before the giving of the Ten Commandments, for here it is said that the people were frightened by the revelation of the *Shekhina*, but not that they were frightened by the divine speech. It has been maintained (most recently by Greenberg) that this passage is essentially a direct continuation of Ex. 19:19, and that it was detached only later for the purpose of providing a transition to the Book of Covenant. But this conjecture is not likely, because it can well be understood that also after having heard the Ten Commandments the people mentioned only the accompanying awe-inspiring phenomena as the reason for their dread.

In Ex. 24:2-8 reference is made to "the Book of Covenant" which Moses read in the hearing of the people, the reading being accompanied by a covenant conclusion ceremony with sacrifices and blood sprinkling. It is true that the content of the book is not explicitly stated, but the current view rightly maintains that it designated the collection of laws in Ex. 20:23-23:19, which opens with the words of God to Moses: "And the Lord said to Moses, 'Then you shall say to the children of Israel: You have seen for yourselves that I have talked with you from heaven'" (Ex. 20:22), which means that the communication of this collection is a continuation of the presence at Mount Sinai. With this story is linked another (Ex. 24:1, 9-11) which also concludes the establishment of the Covenant between the people and God on Mount Sinai. (This story is apparently based on the view that all the people heard the Ten Commandments, since it begins with the words: "And to Moses he said . . .", which must mean that God had previously spoken to the people, for it would be very hard to interpret this as meaning that God had earlier spoken to Moses words to be communicated to the people and now uttered words which were meant for him alone.) Here God commands Moses to go up on the mountain accompanied by Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and the seventy elders, and prostrate themselves from afar. This formula reminds one of the formulae in Ugaritic and Akkadian letters found in Ugarit, in which the writer lets the king know that he prostrates himself from afar before him. The redactor of these verses apparently thought that all those mentioned in v. 1 were ordered to prostrate themselves from afar except Moses, who subsequently came alone near to God (v. 2), and on the basis of this understanding he combined the story of Ex. 24:1, 9-11 with that of vv. 3-8. The story in Ex. 24:1, 9-11 relates in daring and ancient mythological language that Moses and his companions saw the God of Israel, "and there was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness", and it concludes: "they beheld God, and ate and drank". The implication is clearly that they held a solemn meal to conclude the covenant ceremony, which obviously began with the communication of the Ten Commandments to all the people.

Deuteronomy attaches to the announcement of the Ten Commandments during the presence at Mount Sinai the statement that God wrote these upon two tables of stone, and gave them to Moses (Deut. 5:19). In this tradition no room is left for the story of the breaking of the tables, which reflects another tradition which became the main one, telling that Moses received the tables only after he, at God's behest, had gone up into the mountain a second time and remained there forty days and forty nights. (Ex. 24:12; 31:18; cf. Deut. 9:11). This main tradition is to be understood in the light of the story that the people, during Moses's absence, committed the sin of the Golden Calf, which brought about the breaking of the tables and the making of new ones. The description of this ascent of Moses to Sinai (Ex. 24:16-17) shows considerable similarity with that of the presence at Mount Sinai. Although there is no reference to the presence of the people, the *Shekhina* manifests itself "in the sight of the people of Israel". Also the function of the seventh day in this description reminds one of the function of the third day in the description of the presence at Mount Sinai. Within this tradition of the giving of the tables that were subsequently destroyed, the priestly tradition is interwoven with God's commandment to Moses to build the tabernacle (Ex. 25:1-31:17) and to "put into the ark the testimony" (Ex. 25:16; 40:20). It is probable that the priestly tradition, like Deut. 5:22, knew nothing of the breaking of the first tables.

There are thus in the Sinai story a great number of different traditions. But all traditions hold to the same view that during Israel's sojourn at Mount Sinai the Covenant between God and his people was concluded, and all traditions maintain the central importance of the manifestation of God's glory on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.

D. *The Ritual Explanation of the Presence at Mount Sinai*

Special problems are connected with the description of the divine manifestation itself on Mount Sinai. This description includes, both in Exodus and Deuteronomy, phenomena which are natural ones. In Exodus we read: "There were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mountain ... and Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and the smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln" (Ex. 19:16, 18). Similarly in Deuteronomy: "The mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud and gloom" (Deut. 4:11). To this, in Exodus, is added "a very loud trumpet blast" (Ex. 19:16, 19; 20:18). Some have seen in these natural phenomena the description of a volcano, but it seems that this description is typological. God's manifestation in clouds, lightnings and thunder finds its basis in the traditional description of the god Haddad. The description of the tribulation of nature before God frequently recurs in the Bible and is similar to the description of manifestations of warrior gods in the Akkadian literature.

Special is the image of the smoke of the kiln, but a certain parallel may also be found for this in the description of the "smoking fire-pot" in Gen. 15:17, which symbolises the manifestation of God. The blast of the trumpet, on the other hand, forms an exception to the usual description of the manifestation of God as well as to the framework of natural phenomena in the Sinai story. There is no proof for Cassuto's explanation that the "voice of the trumpet" symbolises here the "voice of the spirit", but it may be assumed that the blast of the trumpet has to do with the cultic usage of trumpet-blowing.

Since Mowinckel's book on the Ten Commandments (1927), many discussions have been held about the relationship between the Sinai tradition and the ancient Israelite cult. Within the school of those who acknowledge such a relationship, two contradictory views are held. According to one view, the words of the Torah are a projection in the past of a Covenant conclusion ceremony annually performed at a certain festival, and it is assumed that the words of the Torah are a kind of aetiological tale explaining the reason for the annual ceremony. At the centre of this ceremony would have stood the recitation of the festival legend describing a covenant concluded in a distant past. The other view holds that the legend is ancient and determined the details of the ceremony in the cult. There are those who go still further and maintain that the connection with the Covenant renewal festival does not only apply to the legend in general but also to the details of the acts described in it, such as the sanctification of the people, their leaving the camp for Sinai, the manifestation of the cloud and the blast of the trumpet. These conjectures are all shaky. The Bible itself does not mention any link between the presence at Sinai and a specific festival, not even the New Year festival which Mowinckel links with the presence at Sinai. It may, however, be assumed that there is a cultic source for these verses, e. g. the solemn warning speech in Ex. 19:3-6; but there is no compelling evidence for this, and it is not by accident that Mowinckel struggles with the question whether to attribute such a speech, which was customary, in his opinion, during the ritual, to the prophet or to the priest. Ceremonies of sanctification of the people which call to mind Ex. 19:10-11 are referred to in Gen. 35:2; Num. 11:18; Josh. 3:5 and 7:13, but one should be aware that they serve in each case as preparations for one-time events and not for a recurring festival. It is true that the cloud hiding the manifestation of God shows a parallel with the cloud of incense in which God appears above the mercy seat on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:2, 12-13), and that this cloud has a ritual meaning, but the presence at Sinai has nothing to do with the Day of Atonement. Moreover, the manifestation of God in a cloud as described in the Sinai story is based upon an old tradition of the appearance of the rain-god. This does not necessarily mean that no cultic parallel could be drawn from the description of the awe

at Sinai. It is however, completely arbitrary to conjecture that it is possible to find a trace of solemn cultic processions in the simple words: "And Moses brought the people out to meet God" (Ex. 19:17). The only thing in the Sinai story in which one can discern a cultic element is the blast of the trumpet. The cultic use of the trumpet is mentioned several times (2 Sam. 6:15; Ps. 81:4; 98:6; 150:3). There is also a trace of the view that blowing the trumpet is connected with the manifestation of God in Ps. 47:6: "God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet". It may thus be imagined that the blast of the trumpet symbolises in the cult the presence of God and that this cultic view influenced the description of God's manifestation at Mount Sinai. But this does not mean that from this detail one can draw the conclusion that there is a connection between the description of the presence at Sinai and the ritual of a certain festival.

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