

Exodus: From Egypt to Sinai (Exodus 5-24, 32; Numbers)

Lecture 8 Transcript

<https://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/rkst-145/lecture-8>

Overview

This lecture traces the account of the Exodus (and the origin of the Passover festival as a historicization of older nature festivals) and Israel's liberation from bondage under Pharaoh. The story reaches its climax with the covenant concluded between God and Israel through Moses at Sinai. Drawing heavily on the work of Jon Levenson, the lecture examines Ancient Near Eastern parallels to the Sinaitic covenant and describes the divine-human relationship (an intersection of law and love) that the covenant seeks to express.

1. Passover as a Historicization of Earlier Ritual Practices

[1] *Professor Christine Hayes:* So following the theophany at the burning bush, Moses returns to Egypt, and he initiates what will become ultimately a battle of wills between Pharaoh and God. The story in Exodus has high drama, and lots of folkloric elements, including this contest between Moses and Aaron on the one hand, and the magicians of Egypt on the other hand. This kind of contest is a very common literary device. It's a kind of "our boys are better than your boys" device. The Egyptian magicians who are initially able to mimic some of the plagues that are brought on by God — they are quickly bested, and Yahweh's defeat of the magicians is tantamount to the defeat of the gods of Egypt.

[2] There are ten plagues. These include a pollution of the Nile, swarms of frogs, lice, insects, affliction of livestock, boils that afflict humans and animals, lightning and hail, locusts, total darkness, and all of this climaxes in the death of the firstborn males of Egypt in one night. And source critics looking at this material discern numerous, diverse sources that are interwoven throughout. These sources preserve different traditions on the number and the nature of the plagues, as well as the principal actors in the drama: God, Moses, Aaron. So according to the source critical analysis, no source contains ten plagues. J has eight and E has three, and P has five, and some of them are the same as one another, and some of them are different, and so on. Some of them are unique

to one source, some are not, but ultimately, the claim is that these have all been merged, and have left us then with an overall total of ten. This may in fact be true.

[3] Nevertheless, as much as we like to engage sometimes in this kind of analysis about the sources that have gone into the composition of the text, it's also always important to keep your eye on the final form of the text as we've received it. Literary analysis that is sensitive to the larger contours of the account will reveal the artistic hand of the final editor. I have charted this at the top of the board here.

[4] Some scholars have noticed that the plagues are organized in three sets of three. There are literary links that connect them and make it clear that these are three sets of three, followed by the climactic tenth plague — and again, three and ten are ideal numbers in our biblical texts. Each set of three shares certain structural and literary features. So in each set, the first and second plague are forewarned — that's what the FW is on the side — whereas the third plague is not. So a warning, a warning, and then a third plague; a warning, a warning, and then a third plague; a warning, a warning, and then a third plague. In each set, the first plague is accompanied by a notation of the time in the morning. It's also introduced by God's speech, when God says, "Present yourself before Pharaoh," and to do this in the morning. So each of the first plagues in the sets of three is introduced this way. Now the second plague in each set of three is introduced with the divine instruction, "Go to Pharaoh." The third plague

in each set has no forewarning and no introduction.

[5] So this sort of structural repetition creates a crescendo that leads then to the final and most devastating plague, which is the slaughter of the Egyptian firstborn sons. The slaughter may be understood as measure for measure punishment for the Egyptians' earlier killing of Hebrew infants, but it's represented in the biblical text as retaliation for Egypt's treatment of Israel, and Israel is referred to as the firstborn son of Yahweh. So in Exodus 4:22, Yahweh tells Moses to say to Pharaoh, "Thus says the Lord, 'Israel is my firstborn son. I have said to you, 'Let my son go, that he may worship Me,' yet you refuse to let him go. Now I will slay your firstborn son.'" So it's seen as retaliation. In this last plague, God or his angel of death passes over Egypt at midnight, slaying every Egyptian firstborn male. Moses orders each Israelite to perform a ritual action, and this action will protect them from the slaughter. The ritual consists of two parts. Each family is told to sacrifice a lamb. The lamb will then be eaten as a family meal, and its blood will be smeared on the doorposts to mark the house so the angel of death knows to pass over that house, — and the pun works in Hebrew, as well as English, which is kind of handy. In addition, each family is to eat unleavened bread. So according to Exodus, this Passover ritual was established on Israel's last night of slavery while the angel of death passed over the dwellings that were marked with blood.

[6] The story attests to a phenomenon that's long been observed by biblical commentators and scholars, and that is the Israelite historicization of preexisting ritual practices. In other words, what we probably have here are two older, separate, springtime rituals. One would be characteristic of semi-nomadic pastoralists: the sacrifice of the first lamb born in the spring to the deity in order to procure favor and continued blessing on the flocks for the spring. The other would be characteristic of agriculturalists: it would be an offering of the very first barley that would be harvested in the spring. It would be quickly ground into flour and used before it even has time to ferment, [so as] to quickly offer something to the deity, again, to procure favor for the rest of the crop. It's supposed by many that Israel was formed from the merger, or the merging of diverse groups, including farmers and shepherds in

Canaan. The rituals of these older groups were retained and then linked to the story of the enslavement and liberation of the Hebrews. So you have older nature festivals and observances that have been historicized. They're associated now with events in the life of the new nation, rather than being grounded in the cycles of nature. This may in fact be then part of the process of differentiation from the practices of Israel's neighbors, who would have celebrated these springtime rituals. So now the blood of the sacrificial lamb is said to have protected the Hebrews from the angel of death, and the bread now is said to have been eaten, consumed in unleavened form, because the Hebrews left Egypt in such a hurry. They had no time to allow the dough to rise. Historicization; and we'll see this historicization of rituals recurring again and again.

2. The Exodus as a Paradigm for Collective Salvation

[7] And following the last plague, Pharaoh finally allows the Israelites to go into the desert to worship their God, but he quickly changes his mind, and he sends his infantry and his chariots in hot pursuit of the Israelites, and they soon find themselves trapped between the Egyptians and something referred to as Yam Suph, meaning Reed Sea. It isn't the Red Sea. That's a mistranslation that occurred very, very early on, so it's led to the notion that they were at the Gulf of Aqaba, or somewhere near the actual big ocean water. Some of the Israelites despair, and they want to surrender. "Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, saying let us be, we will serve the Egyptians, for it's better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." But Moses rallies them, and then in the moment of crisis, God intervenes on Israel's behalf.

[8] Once again, source critics see in the account of the parting of the Reed Sea, in Exodus 14 and 15, three different versions of the event that have been interwoven. I have to stress, though, that scholars differ very much on where the seams in the text are, what parts of the story belong to J, or E, or P, so you'll read very, very different accounts. There's some consensus,

but a lot of disagreement. One thing that most people do in fact agree on is that the oldest account of the event is a poetic fragment that's found in Exodus 15, verses one to 12, in particular. This is often referred to as the Song of the Sea, and here the image is one of sinking and drowning in the Sea of Reeds. You have a wind that blasts from God's nostrils, the waters stand straight like a wall, and at a second blast, the sea then covers the Egyptians, and they sink like a stone in the majestic waters.

[9] The hymn doesn't anywhere refer to people crossing over on dry land. It seems to depict a storm at sea, almost as if the Egyptians are in boats, and a big wind makes a giant wave, and another wind then makes it crash down on them. So they're swamped by these roiling waters. But the name Yam Suph, Reed Sea, implies a more marsh-like setting, rather than the open sea. John Collins, who is a professor here at the [Yale] Divinity School, points out that this image — particularly in poetic passages — this image of sinking in deep waters, occurs often in Hebrew poetry [Collins 2004, 115-1190]. It occurs particularly in the book of Psalms, where it's a metaphor for distress. In Psalm 69, the Psalmist asks God to save him, for "waters have come up to my neck. / I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold. I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me" [RSV; see note 1]. But a few verses later it's clear that the poet isn't really drowning: this is a metaphor for his difficult situation. "More in number than the hairs of my head are those who hate me without cause. Many are those who would destroy me, my enemies who accuse me falsely." So Collins suggests that the poem in Exodus 15 is celebrating and preserving a historical memory of an escape from or a defeat of Pharaoh, and that the drowning image is used metaphorically, as it is elsewhere in Hebrew poetry to describe the Egyptians' humiliation and defeat.

[10] Later writers take this poetic image and fill out the allusion to drowning in this ancient song, and compose the prose accounts in Exodus 14, in which the metaphor is literalized. According to these prose accounts now, Pharaoh's army was literally drowned in water. But even in the prose accounts in Exodus 14, we can see a composite of two intertwined versions. In the material that's usually associated with P, Moses is depicted as stretching out his staff, first to

divide the waters, which stand like a wall so that the Israelites can cross over on dry land; and then, he holds out his staff to bring the waters crashing down on the Egyptians. But according to one little section — this is just verses 24 and 25 in Exodus 14; some attribute this to J — it seems that the Egyptians were stymied by their own chariots. The image we get there is that the Israelites are working their way through the marsh on foot, and the Egyptians' chariot wheels can't make it through the marsh. They get stuck in the mud, and this forces them to give up the chase. So, the final narrative that emerges from this long process of transmission: perhaps a core image of escape on foot, where chariots are bogged, a poem that describes the defeat in metaphorical terms using a drowning and sinking image, and then prose elaboration on these previous traditions that have a very dramatic element of the sea being parted and crashing down on the Egyptians. A long process of transmission, interweaving, literary embellishment has gone into the creation of this account in Exodus 14 and 15. But the story as it stands reiterates a motif that we've seen before: that of the threatened destruction of God's creation, or God's people, by chaotic waters, and of divine salvation from that threat.

[11] What's interesting about the Song of the Sea, this poetic fragment in Exodus 15, is that here the Hebrews adopt the language of Canaanite myth and apply it to Yahweh. If you still have that sheet that was handed out before, listing different epithets for Baal, and listing epithets for Yahweh, it would be handy to have that, or to take a look at it later again, because the description of Yahweh is that of a storm god in Exodus 15. He heaps up the waters with a blast of wind, like a storm at sea, and this is reminiscent of the Canaanite storm god Baal, as you see on your handout. Baal is said to ride on the clouds, he's a storm god, and he's accompanied by wind and rain. At the beginning of the rainy season, Baal opens a slit, or makes a slit in the clouds, and thunders and shakes the Earth. In one important legend that we have from the Canaanite texts, the Ugaritic texts, he defeats an adversary who's known as Prince Sea, or Judge River. After he vanquishes this watery foe, he is acclaimed the king of the gods, and the king of men, and he is housed in a home, not a tent as El was. El was housed in a tent, but now this Baal is housed in a

permanent structure, a home that is on top of a mountain, and is built of cedar.

[12] Now, ancient Hebrew descriptions of Yahweh employ very similar language in the poetic passage here in Exodus 15, but also in other poetic passages. So, for example, Psalm 68:5, “Extol him who rides the clouds, the Lord is his name,” Yahweh is his name. So “Extol him who rides the clouds, Yahweh is his name,” as if to say [Yahweh] not Baal. So Yahweh is described like Baal, as riding on the clouds. Psalm 29 also employs the language of a storm god. “The voice of the Lord is over the waters. The God of glory thunders, the Lord, over the mighty waters.” Some scholars think this actually was originally a psalm about Baal that was simply adopted and referred to Yahweh. Images of God engaged in a battle with some kind of watery foe also appear in the Psalms. Psalm 74: “O, God, my king from of old, who brings deliverance throughout the land; it was You who drove back the sea with Your might, who smashed the heads of the monsters in the waters;” and so on. Judges 5 is also another ancient song fragment in verses four to five. It uses the same kind of imagery.

[13] Now, Michael Coogan, who’s a very important biblical scholar and an expert in the Canaanite texts, the Ugaritic materials, has made some intriguing observations in connection with the biblical representation of Yahweh in terms that are so reminiscent of the storm god, Baal [Coogan 2006, 101-3]. He notes that Baal was the key figure in a change, a change in the religion of Canaan, that happened somewhere between 1500 and 1200 BCE, and that is also the traditional time for what we think of as the Exodus and the introduction of Yahwism, or the differentiation of Yahwism. At this time, somewhere in this period, there was a transfer of power in the Canaanite pantheon from the older gods to younger gods. The older god El, the sky god, was replaced by the younger storm god, Baal, and he was replaced by virtue of his defeat of Prince Sea, or whoever this watery foe is. So El is replaced by Baal after a defeat of some watery foe.

[14] Coogan notes that about the same time, there seems to have been a similar change in many of the world’s traditions, or many of the traditions of the region. We have a younger storm god who usurps power from an older god by virtue of a victory over a water god. Remember

Enuma Elish, which we read at the very beginning of the semester. You have the young storm god, Marduk, who defeats Tiamat, the watery ferocious deep monster, and does so by blasting a wind into her, and so establishes his claim to rule, instead of the old sky god, Anu. In India, the storm god Indra about this time assumes the place of a previous god, Dyaus. In Greece, Zeus, who is associated with a storm, thunder — lightning bolts you think of in the hands of Zeus — he replaces Kronos, who had been the head of the pantheon. And so here in Exodus, we find that just as the nation of Israel is coming into existence, just as the Israelites are making the transition from a nomadic existence to a more settled way of life ultimately in their own land, there seems to be a collective memory of a similar change in her religion. Like the storm gods in the myths of Israel’s neighbors, Yahweh heaps up the waters with a blast of wind. He wins a stunning victory, he establishes himself as the god of the Israelites in place of El, who was worshipped by Israel’s patriarchs, remember. And like the Canaanite god, Baal, Yahweh, as we will see as we continue to read the text, will eventually want a house for himself atop a mountain, Mount Zion, and it will be lined with cedar.

[15] There are of course, important ways in which Israel’s use of the storm god motif diverges from that of other Ancient Near Eastern stories. The most important is that Yahweh’s battle is a historic battle, rather than a mythic battle. The sea is not Yahweh’s opponent, nor is Yahweh’s enemy another god. Yahweh is doing battle here with a human foe, the Egyptian pharaoh and his army. The sea is a weapon deployed. It’s a weapon in the divine arsenal, and it’s deployed on behalf of Israel, but, again, Yahweh is depicted by the biblical writer as transcending nature, using forces of nature for a historical purpose, acting in history to deliver his people, and create a new nation, Israel. So just as in Genesis 1, the universe is created when the wind of God parts the primeval waters, so in Exodus 14 and 15, a new nation is created when the wind of God parts the waters of the Reed Sea. But to describe what was understood to be a historic event, a one-time event, not a recurring mythical event, but a historic event, the ancient Israelites employed language and images drawn naturally from the traditions and myths of their broader cultural context, or I should say, [traditions and myths]

that were the cultural context in which they themselves existed, while at the same time differentiating themselves to some degree.

- [16] Now, as has long been noted, the Exodus event became the paradigm of God's salvation of his people, and when I say salvation, I don't mean that in the later Christian sense of personal salvation from sin. That's a notion that's anachronistically read back into the Hebrew Bible. It's not there. Salvation in the Hebrew Bible does not refer to an individual's deliverance from a sinful nature. This is not a concept we find in the Hebrew Bible. It refers instead, to the concrete, collective, communal salvation from national suffering and oppression, particularly in the form of foreign rule or enslavement. When biblical writers speak of Yahweh as Israel's redeemer and savior, they are referring to Yahweh's physical deliverance of the nation from the hands of her foes. We're going to see this increasingly as we move to the prophetic material.

3. *The Mosaic Covenant between God and Israel at Sinai*

- [17] So the exodus is a paradigm for salvation, but it would be a mistake, I think, to view the Exodus as the climax of the preceding narrative. We've gotten to this point now: we had this big dramatic scene at the Red Sea, but the physical redemption of the Israelites is not in fact the end of our story. It's a dramatic way-station in a story that's going to reach its climax in the covenant that will be concluded at Sinai, and as many sensitive readers of the Bible have noted, the road from Egypt leads not to the other side of the Red Sea, but on to Sinai. God's redemption of the Israelites is a redemption for a purpose, a purpose that doesn't become clear until we get to Sinai, for at Sinai the Israelites will become God's people, bound by a covenant. And so the story continues. In the third month, after the Exodus, the Israelites arrive at the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamp at the mountain where Moses was first called by God, the text says. The covenant concluded at Sinai is referred to as the Mosaic covenant. So this is now our third covenant that we have encountered; we will have one more coming. And the Mosaic covenant differs radically from the Noahide and the Abrahamic or patriarchal covenants that we've already

seen, because here God makes no promises beyond being the patron or protector of Israel; and also, in this covenant, he sets terms that require obedience to a variety of laws and commandments. So the Mosaic covenant is neither unilateral — this is now a bilateral covenant, [involving] mutual, reciprocal obligations — nor is it unconditional like the other two. It is conditional. So this is our first bilateral, conditional covenant. If Israel doesn't fulfill her obligations by obeying God's Torah, his instructions, and living in accordance with his will, as expressed in the laws and instructions, then God will not fulfill his obligation of protection and blessing towards Israel.

- [18] Now, the biblical scholar Jon Levenson, here, maintains that historical critical scholarship has been unkind to biblical Israel, because of a pervasive bias between the two main foci of the religion of ancient Israel [Levenson 1995, Introduction]. Those are (1) the Torah, or the law — understood as the law — not a great translation, I prefer instruction, but Torah, taken to mean the law on the one hand; and, (2) the temple on the other. He says that, on the one hand, negative stereotypes rooted in Paul's condemnation of Mosaic law as a deadening curse from which belief in Jesus offers liberation — that account colors scholarly accounts of the giving of the Torah. On the other hand, a Protestant distaste for priest-centered cultic ritual colors scholarly accounts of the temple, and its meaning for ancient Israelites. These biases are so much embedded in our culture, he says, they permeate the work of even secular scholars of the Bible, so that a negative view of the law affects interpretation of the book of Exodus. Scholars tend to place great emphasis on the deliverance from Egypt as the high point in the Exodus narrative, rather than the more natural literary climax, which is the conclusion of the covenant at Mount Sinai, and the delivery of the Torah. So Levenson, in his book *Sinai and Zion*, tries to correct this prejudicial treatment. He says he seeks to give the two central institutions of Torah on the one hand, and Temple on the other, a fair hearing.

- [19] So in his book, *Sinai and Zion*, Levenson explores what he calls the two great mountain traditions that express these central concepts: the tradition of Mount Sinai — that's where Israel received the Torah, and entered into this defining covenantal relationship with God —

and then on the other hand, the tradition of Mount Zion. Zion will be the future site of the nation's holy temple in Jerusalem. Mount Zion is in Jerusalem, it's the Temple Mount today where the [El-Aqsa] mosque now is. Today, we'll consider Levenson's analysis of the Sinai tradition as an entrée into the Israelite concept of the Torah, and the covenant bond, its meaning and its implications.

[20] Levenson stresses the importance of the covenant formulary. There are Ancient Near Eastern parallels to the Sinai covenant of the Bible — especially Hittite treaties that date 1500 to 1200, or so; also Assyrian treaties in about the eighth century, but they are in many ways continuous with what you find in the Hittite treaties — treaties between a suzerain and vassal. Remember we talked about two types of treaties: suzerainty treaties and parity treaties. Parity treaties [are] between equals, but suzerainty treaties are between a suzerain, who has a position obviously of power and authority, and a vassal. He details the following six elements, which I hope you can all see [on the board], especially in the Hittite treaties. They're not all found in every treaty, but they're often enough found that we can speak of these six elements.

[21] First there is a preamble. That's found in everyone. The suzerain identifies himself. Second of all, there's generally an account of the historical circumstances that are leading to the treaty: so some kind of historical prologue. Then we usually have some sort of set of stipulations and requirements, upon the vassal generally. Fourth, there's generally some arrangement, either for the publication of the treaty, or its deposition, its safe-keeping in some sort of shrine. There is generally a concluding invocation of witnesses, usually the gods are invoked as witnesses to a binding oath, some kind of covenantal oath that brings the treaty into effect, and it's witnessed by gods. Lastly, there will be very often a list of blessings for the party who obeys, and curses for the party that violates the pact. The curses are particularly emphasized in the Assyrian treaties.

[22] Levenson then identifies many of these elements in Yahweh's very first speech to Moses. Moses and the Israelites arrive at Sinai, in Exodus 19, and God says the following in verses 3b to 8:

[23] The Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel: 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me. Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel." Moses came and summoned the elders of the people and put before them all that the Lord had commanded him. All the people answered as one, saying, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do!" And Moses brought back the people's words to the Lord.

[24] So Levenson, who draws actually on long-standing work by other scholars, and earlier in the twentieth century even [see note 2], Levenson finds several of the main elements of the Hittite suzerainty treaties in this speech. So verse 4, "You've seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings," is the historical prologue. That's the reason that we're in the situation we're in now, and making this covenant. Verse 5 contains God's stipulations. It's a very general condition — "If you obey my laws." Basically, keep my covenant, obey me faithfully, that's the conditional. That's going to be filled out and articulated at great length in the subsequent chapters when all the laws they have to obey are spelled out. The second half of verse 5 and 6 gives the reward: God is conferring on the Israelites this elevated status of royalty, of priesthood; "You'll be to me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation." In verse 8, the people solemnly undertake to fulfill the terms of the covenant, so we have at least three of the steps that we find in the Hittite treaties, as well.

[25] If we take a broader view of the full biblical account of Israel's covenant with God, all six elements can be identified in the biblical narrative. They're scattered throughout the text, however. We have the preamble, and the historical background to the covenant in God's summary introduction to the people in Exodus 20: "I am Yahweh who brought you out of the land of Egypt." It sums it all up: introduction, who I am, and why we are historically connected. So this fact of God's bringing Israel

out of Egypt, presumably establishes God's claim to sovereignty. The terms of the treaty are then stipulated at great length in the instructions that are found in Exodus chapter 20 through chapter 23. Moses reads the book of the covenant — it's called the Scroll of the Covenant — publicly: this is said in Exodus 24:7. In Deuteronomy we read that it will be deposited for safekeeping in a special ark. The Israelites vow that they'll obey [in] Exodus 24:3, also 7b. The covenant is then sealed by a formal ritual. In this case it's a sacrifice in Exodus 24:8. In a monotheistic system you can't really call upon other gods to be witnesses to the sealing of the oath, so we have heaven and earth being invoked as witnesses — Deuteronomy 4:26; Deuteronomy 30:19; 31:28 — heaven and earth, the idea being perhaps the inhabitants thereof should witness. As for blessings and curses, we have a long list of each found in Leviticus 26, and Deuteronomy 28, also interesting reading. Some of these curses, particularly the ones in Deuteronomy bear a very striking resemblance to curses in an Assyrian treaty that we have that dates to about 677 BCE [from] the Assyrian king Esarhaddon — and many of the curses are really almost word for word. So while no one passage contains all of the elements of the Hittite treaty form, there are enough of them scattered around to suggest it as a model, as well as its later instantiation in Assyrian culture.

[26] So what's the meaning of this? Why does it matter that Israel understands its relationship with God, and uses the covenant as a vehicle for expressing its relationship with God, the vehicle of the suzerainty treaty? According to Levenson, the use of a suzerainty treaty as a model for Israel's relationship to Yahweh, expresses several key ideas. It captures several key ideas. First, the historical prologue that's so central to the suzerainty treaty, grounds the obligations of Israel to Yahweh in the history of his acts on her behalf. So it's grounded in a historical moment, and we'll come back to this and what that might mean about her perception of God. Second, the historical prologue bridges the gap between generations. Israel's past and present and future generations form a collective entity, Israel, that collectively assents to the covenant. And even today, at Passover ceremonies everywhere, Jews are reminded to see themselves, they're reminded of the obligation to see themselves as if they

personally came out of Egypt, and personally covenanted with God.

[27] The historical prologue, thirdly, explains why Israel accepts her place in the suzerain-vassal relationship. Israel's acceptance of a relationship with God doesn't stem from mystical introspection, or philosophical speculation, Levenson says. Instead the Israelites are affirming their identity and their relationship with God by telling a story, a story whose moral can only be that God is reliable. Israel can rely on God, just as a vassal can rely on his suzerain. The goal is not, Levenson says, ultimately the affirmation of God's suzerainty in a purely verbal sense. The point is not mere verbal acclaim of God as suzerain. Levenson points out that the affirmation of God's suzerainty is rendered in the form of obedience to commandments, not mere verbal acclamation. Observance of God's commandments is, as Levenson puts it, the teleological end of history. Why is that important? Unless we recognize that the road from Egypt leads inextricably to Sinai, that the story of national liberation issues in and is subordinate to, is ultimately subordinate to, the obligation to God's covenantal stipulations and observance of his laws, then we run the risk of doing what has been done for some centuries now: of reading Exodus as first and foremost a story of a miraculous delivery, rather than the story of a relationship, which is expressed through obligations to the observance of specific laws, commandments, and instructions.

[28] The suzerain-vassal model has further implications. Levenson and other scholars, point many of these out. Just as the Ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaties specified that vassals of a suzerain are to treat other vassals of the suzerain well, Israelites are bound to one another then as vassals of the same suzerain, and are to treat one another well. So covenant in Israel becomes the basis of social ethics. It's the reason that God gives instructions regarding the treatment of one's fellow Israelites. So the suzerain-vassal relationship grounds the social ethic within Israel.

[29] Also, just as a vassal cannot serve two suzerains — that's pretty explicit in all the treaties, you owe exclusive service to your suzerain — so the covenant with God entails the notion of Israel's exclusive service of Yahweh. The assertion is

not that there is no other god, but that Israel will have no other god before Yahweh. The jealousy of the suzerain is the motivation for prohibitions against certain intimate contacts with non-Yahweh peoples, because these alliances will end up entailing recognition of the gods of these peoples. The covenant with Yahweh will also, we shall see soon, preclude alliances with other human competitors. If Israel serves a divine king, she can't, for example, serve a human king, and that's an idea that will express itself in biblical texts, as we'll see, that are clearly opposed to the creation of a monarchy in Israel. Not everyone was onboard with the idea that Israel should be ruled by a king. So there are texts that will object to the creation of the monarchy of King Saul, and King David, and so on. There are also texts that are going to object to alliances with any foreign king, or subservience to any foreign king, whether it's Egypt or Assyria or Babylonia. So subservience to a human king, native or foreign, is in these texts considered a rejection of the divine kingship, which is the ideal — the exclusive kingship of Yahweh — and it's seen as a breach of the covenant.

[30] Now, Ancient Near Eastern suzerainty models also speak repeatedly of the vassal's love for the suzerain. Vassal so-and-so will love the Assyrian lord so-and-so, and that's an element that is not absent at all in the biblical texts that deal with the covenant bond. The Israelites promise to serve and to love Yahweh. That's an additional theme that's associated regularly with the covenant. It's one that we'll take up in greater detail, though, when we get to the book of Deuteronomy, where it is stressed to a greater degree than it is in Exodus, but for now, we can accept Levenson's claim that Sinai represents an intersection of law and love, because of the use of the suzerainty model.

[31] So the covenant concept is critical to the Bible's portrayal and understanding of the relationship between God and Israel. The entire history of Israel, as portrayed by biblical writers, is going to be governed by this one outstanding reality of covenant. Israel's fortunes will be seen to ride on the degree of its faithfulness to this covenant.

[32] The book of Exodus closes, with the construction of the sanctuary, and when the sanctuary is completed, the text says the presence of the Lord filled the tabernacle. This

is a sign of divine approval. The long section where we have the receipt of the instructions for the building of the temple, and then we have an actual account of those instructions being fulfilled, not the temple, tabernacle, excuse me: it's just a tent structure at this stage — so receiving the instructions and then the actual construction of the tabernacle, that extends from Exodus 25 to the end of the book, Exodus 40; but it's interrupted in Exodus 32 by the account of the Israelites' apostasy with the golden calf, which is a great and very ambiguous story. The moment of Israel's greatest glory is to be the moment of her greatest shame.

[33] As Moses receives God's covenant on Mount Sinai — he's there at the top of Sinai communing with God — the Israelites who are encamped at the foot of the mountain grow restless, and rebellious, and they demand of Aaron a god, because they don't know what's become of "this fellow Moses." They say: what about this guy, Moses? They use a very colloquial kind of term to dismiss him. So Aaron, feeling the heat, makes a golden calf, and the people bow down to it, and someone declares, "This is your God, oh Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt." Well, an enraged God tells Moses: You know what's going on down there? And he tells him to descend from the mountain. The people are sinning, they've already gone astray, and he says: I'm through. I want to destroy the nation, and I'm going to start a new nation again from you, Moses. Moses manages to placate God momentarily, and then he turns around to face the people. He comes down from the mountain, he approaches the camp, he's stunned by what he sees. He's carrying the tablets, the instructions, and then he smashes them at the foot of the mountain in fury. He manages to halt the activities. He punishes the perpetrators; he has a few choice words for Aaron. This temporary alienation from God is ultimately repaired through Moses' intense prayer and intercession. It actually takes several chapters to reach a resolution, and God pouts for quite a while, but a renewal of the covenant does occur, and another set of stone tablets is given, and according to one rabbinic text the broken tablets, as well as the new tablets, are both placed in the ark [see note 3].

4. *Patience with the Israelites: Towards the Promised Land*

[34] And this embarrassing episode is just the beginning of a sequence of embarrassing events that will occur as the Israelites move from Egypt towards the land that's been promised to them. Most of these episodes will occur in the book of Numbers, and they involve the rebellion of the people in some way, generally God's fury in reaction to that rebellion, Moses' intervention usually on behalf of the people, and God's appeasement. The book of Numbers recounts the itinerary of the Israelites throughout the 40 years of their wanderings and encampments around the sacred tabernacle. The tabernacle always moves in the center of the tribes, and they're positioned in certain specific positions around the tabernacle as they move. They stay at Sinai for a year, I believe, in the text, before they begin their movement, and Numbers contains some law, and much narrative material. The material tells of God's provision for the people in the desert, but it also tells of the Israelites' constant complaining, and rebellion. The Israelites rebel against Moses and God, and they long for Egypt. There are several times when God threatens to exterminate them, but Moses manages to dissuade him.

[35] In Numbers 14, for example, when the Israelites complain again, God is determined to destroy them, and Moses intervenes, and the intervention leads to a compromise. God swears that none of the adults who witnessed the Exodus — with the exception of Joshua and Caleb, who did not join in the rebellion — none of the adults who witnessed the Exodus would see the fulfillment of God's salvation, and enter the Promised Land. This means the Israelites will have to wander for 40 years in the desert until all of those who left Egypt as adults pass away, leaving a new generation that hasn't really tasted slavery, to enter the land and form a new nation.

[36] The book of Numbers, I think, is most remarkable for the relationship that it describes between Moses and God. I love reading these particular stories, and just hearing the dialogue between them, and imagining it, because the two of them alternate in losing patience with the Israelites, and wishing to throw them over. But each time the one convinces the other to be

forbearing. The relationship between Moses and God is a very intimate one, very much like a husband and wife, who are working together as partners and parenting a difficult child. They're partners in the preparation of Israel for their new life, readying Israel for life in God's land as a nation, as a people. I'm going to just give you two examples of the way Moses and God act as a check upon each other. The first excerpt is from Numbers 14, and it shows Moses' ability to placate the wrath of God. Now, in this story, the Israelites express great fear. They've just heard a report from a reconnaissance team that scouted out the land, and they come back and say: Oh, boy, you know, it looks really bad — and that they think that the chances of conquering the Promised Land are very, very slim.

[37] The whole community broke into loud cries, and the people wept that night. All the Israelites railed against Moses and Aaron. "If only we had died in the land of Egypt," the whole community shouted at them, "or if only we might die in this wilderness! Why is the Lord taking us to that land to fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be carried off! It would be better for us to go back to Egypt!" And they said to one another, "Let us head back for Egypt." ... the Presence of the Lord appeared in the Tent of Meeting to all the Israelites. And the Lord said to Moses, "How long will this people spurn Me, and how long will they have no faith in Me despite all the signs that I have performed in their midst? I will strike them with pestilence and disown them, and I will make of you a nation far more numerous than they!" But Moses said to the Lord, "When the Egyptians, from whose midst You brought up this people in Your might, hear the news, they will tell it to the inhabitants of that land.... If then You slay this people to a man, the nations who have heard Your fame will say, 'It must be because the Lord was powerless to bring that people into the land He had promised them on oath that He slaughtered them in the wilderness.' Therefore, I pray, let my Lord's forbearance be... abounding in kindness; forgiving iniquity and transgression.... Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to Your great kindness, as You have forgiven this people ever since Egypt." And the Lord said, "I pardon, as you have asked...."

[38] So note God's offer to start all over again with Moses. This is a pattern with this god, you

know — create, gets upset, a flood wipes them out, let's start again, oh, still not too good, let's choose one person, Abraham, see how that goes; oh, disappointed, let's go with Moses — so this is a bit of a pattern. But Moses refuses to accept the offer, and instead he defends the Israelites, and he averts their destruction. He appeals primarily to God's vanity: What will the neighbors think if you destroy them? They'll think you couldn't fulfill your promise. They'll think you're not the universal God of history. But the roles are reversed in the following passage, and this is where the text blows hot and cold. In fact, there's a rabbinic image, there's a rabbinic tradition that talks about this period of time, and has God and Moses talking, and God says: Listen, between the two of us, whenever I blow hot, you blow cold, or when I pour hot water, you pour cold, and when you pour hot, I'll pour cold, and together we'll muddle through, and get through here. The Israelites won't be wiped out. But in this next passage, which is Numbers 11, Moses is the one who is impatient with the Israelites' constant complaints and lack of faith, and he's ready to throw in the towel. I'll just read this last passage.

[39] The riffraff in their midst felt a gluttonous craving; and then the Israelites wept and said, 'If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt Okay, we were slaves, but the food was free, you know? I just love that line. We used to eat this fish free in Egypt. ...the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. Now our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look at!' ... Moses heard the people weeping, every clan apart, each person at the entrance of his tent. The Lord was very angry, and Moses was distressed. And Moses said to the Lord, "Why have You dealt ill with Your servant [me], and why have I not enjoyed Your favor, that You have laid the burden of all this people upon me? Did I conceive all this people, did I bear them, that You should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries an infant,' to the land that You have promised on oath to their fathers? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people, when they whine before me and say, 'Give us meat to eat!' I cannot carry all this people by myself, for it is too much for me.

If You would deal thus with me, kill me rather, I beg You, and let me see no more of my wretchedness!" Then the Lord said to Moses, "Gather for Me seventy of Israel's elders of whom you have experience as elders and officers of the people, and bring them to the Tent of Meeting and let them take their place there with you. I will come down and speak with you there, and I will draw upon the spirit that is on you and put it upon them; they shall share the burden of the people with you, and you shall not bear it alone.

[40] So again, hot and cold. And in many ways, Moses sets the paradigm for the classical prophet. He performs this double duty. He chastises and upbraids the Israelites for their rebellion and failures. When he's turning and facing the people, he's on their case. But at the same time, he consoles the people when they fear they've driven God away irreparably, and when he turns to face God, he defends the people before God. He pleads for mercy when they do in fact deserve punishment — and he knows they deserve punishment. He even says as much, but please [he says] have mercy. At times he expresses his frustration with the difficulty of his task, and resentment that it's been assigned to him. But we'll consider the character and the role of Moses in much greater detail when we reach the book of Deuteronomy next Monday.

[41] For the coming week, I would like you to please pay particular attention: we're dealing with two topics that will be, I think perhaps for some of you, a little different, new, alien. We're going to be dealing with biblical law on Monday, and biblical ritual, purity text, holiness, temple, on Wednesday. These are worlds apart from many of the things we know, so please, there's a lot of textual reading to do for Monday and Wednesday. Please do it carefully, and I might even hand out a little bit of a study guide to help you with that.

[42] [end of transcript]

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[43] Notes

[44] 1. Quotations marked RSV are taken from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

[45] 2. Correction: Professor Hayes is referring to the work of Mendenhall in the 1950s. She meant to say even earlier in the 1900s or the twentieth century.

[46] 3. Correction: Professor Hayes is referring to a talmudic tradition that is not in the Bible.

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[47] References

[48] Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations have been quoted from “Tanakh: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text.” Copyright (c) 1985 by The Jewish Publication Society. Single copies of the JPS biblical citations cited within the transcripts can be reproduced for personal and non-commercial uses only.

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