

THE BIOGRAPHY OF
Ancient Israel

NATIONAL NARRATIVES IN THE BIBLE

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CHAPTER FOUR

At the Foot of
Mount Sinai
National Rites of Initiation

Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob,
and tell the children of Israel;
Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians,
and how I bare you on eagles' wings,
and brought you unto myself.
Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed,
and keep my covenant,
then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me
above all people:
for all the earth is mine:
And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests,
and an holy nation.

Exod. 19: 3-6

So proclaims God in the initial ceremonial address to the people at Mount Sinai. It is a climactic point in the biography of ancient Israel, the opening note of the momentous initiation rites of Sinai.

The diction ascends above the level of prose and assumes poetic form, as befits a passage dealing with such an exalted topic.¹ Before the law, before the smoke, the fire, the thunder, and the cloud, comes poetry. The beautiful image of the “eagles’ wings” likens the journey up the mountain to an exhilarating swift, smooth flight beyond the dangers and the dreariness of the human world below. The agony of slavery as well as the miseries of thirst and hunger along the road vanish for a while. On bringing the people to His mountain, God lures the people to fly “unto Himself,” to come closer to the divine sphere, up high, in heaven.

From the height of the eagle’s route, the state of the nation may be seen afresh. The image of the eagles’ wings is set within a poetic frame of national names. The opening parallelism begins with a call to the “house of Jacob,” the most primary designation of the nation (Exod. 1:1), and its parallel, the “children of Israel.” The move from the former to the latter captures the historical process through which Jacob’s household became a people. But the most dramatic transition is evident in the leap from these designations to the three titles that appear at the end, titles that were never heard before: “peculiar treasure” (*‘am segula*), “kingdom of priests” (*mamlekkhet cohanim*), and “holy nation” (*goy kadosh*). These tokens of chosenness are offered to the children of Israel provided that they obey God’s covenant. The people seem eager to step into this new position: they answer at once—and together (*yachdav*)—accepting the divine offer, committing themselves to the Law as they commit themselves to each other.

The initiatory dimension of the eagle metaphor is elaborated in the Song of Moses:

He found him in a desert region,
In an empty howling waste.
He engirded him, watched over him,
Guarded him as the pupil of His eye.
Like an eagle who rouses his nestlings,
Gliding down to his young,
So did He spread His wings and take him,
Bear him along on His pinions.

(Deut. 32:10–11)²

Much as eagles catch their young on their backs while initiating them in flying, so God bears the Israelites on His wings, “rousing” His offspring, spurring them to dare the flight, to mount toward the heights of sacred knowledge, to transcend their lowly beginnings in the land of Egypt and become a consecrated nation.³

One could regard the entire period of wandering as an initiatory voyage in “an empty howling waste” through which the Father introduces his chosen firstborn son into the realm of sacred knowledge.⁴ Indeed, as I claimed at the outset, metaphors of national birth, suckling, and initiation intermingle throughout the Pentateuchal account of national formation. But at Sinai, the most sacred station along the road, the most secluded site in the desert—accessible, it seems, only to those who are brought there by God—the Israelites undergo rites that bear a more pronounced resemblance to initiation rites. Above all, they bear resemblance to initiation rites at the onset of puberty whose role is to mark the boy’s turning away from childhood and entrance into the world of social responsibilities.⁵ Such rites often involve a period of seclusion, a “liminal” phase, to use Arnold van Gennep’s terms, in which the initiates are taken to an isolated zone, where

the sacred codes and customs of the community are revealed to them.⁶

In exploring the initiatory aspects of Sinai, I will take into account not only the memorable scenes of revelation but also the subsequent rites that were performed on this mountain: the feast around the Golden Calf and the ceremonious construction of the Tabernacle.⁷ In doing so, I rely on Victor Turner's consideration of ritual as a *process*, "open to the play of thought, feeling, and will."⁸ Rituals, Turner suggests, provide areas of time and space for social reflexivity. "In them are generated new models, often fantastic, some of which may have sufficient power and plausibility to replace eventually the force-backed political and jural models that control the centers of a society's ongoing life."⁹ Novices, accordingly, are not merely blank slates on which the elders inscribe consecrated cultural laws but active participants who—especially during the liminal phase—may fashion new social models while questioning the validity of the sacred corpus that is passed down to them.¹⁰

My reading, however, goes beyond anthropological issues. I provide an extensive *textual* analysis, considering the literary dimension of the rites: the ways in which the writers of Exodus chose to shape this historical moment.¹¹ Here as before, biblical historiography provides a sharp interpretation of national events, recording both the highlights and the crises at stake. Sinai represents a time of love, of great intimacy, between the Father and the son, ignited by the son's advance toward the Father's world. And yet, as we shall see, the threshold of adolescence is at the same time a very violent site, where the nation's growing powers and growing desires lead to fierce and gory clashes with the Father.

Revelation

The consent of the people to become a titled nation is followed by the most dramatic scene of all: God's descent. This is the only time in the history of Israel when such a grand revelation takes place. If so far the nation ascended toward God, or the mountain of God, now in a moment of unparalleled intimacy God descends upon the mountain: first through a cloud and flashes of lightning and then through a fire that sets the entire site ablaze. Sounds of thunder and the blare of the horn, growing louder and louder, intermingle with the wondrous sights. The people tremble with excitement and horror in response to God's overwhelming appearance—and so does the smoking mountain (the same verb *vayecherad*, "quaked" or "trembled," is used in both cases—Exod. 19:16–18).

It is an ecstatic experience in which the divine and the human worlds come close, but precisely because of this unusual proximity, certain rules must be strictly observed. Flying at the appropriate height, as Daedalus warns his son, Icarus, is an art. Those who venture to exceed human limits, or misjudge their power, can only lose their feathers in the terrible heat of heaven and fall into the deep. The people are required to follow Moses' instructions meticulously in preparation for the event: they must purify themselves, wash their clothes, refrain from sexual relations, and, above all, resist the temptation to climb the mountain. "Take heed to yourselves, that ye go not up into the mount, or touch the border of it: whosoever toucheth the mount shall be surely put to death" (19:12). The peculiar prohibition against "touching" here and in the next verse (19:13) discloses the illicit—somewhat in-

illicit touching + desire

cestuous—desire that such initiatory moments generate: to draw even nearer to the divine, to become one with God, to touch His body.¹² But just as sexual relations in the human sphere are regulated, so too the contact between the human and the divine is confined. Moses “set bounds about the mount” (19:23). A careless glance at the divine realm, let alone touch, means death. Sacred intimacy is at the same time the heart of horror and the greatest desire of all.

The erotic quality of the bond between God and Israel is the specialty of the Husband-wife metaphor, as developed by the Prophets, but it is nonetheless an essential ingredient—if less apparent—of the Pentateuchal renditions of the Father-son relationship. That the Father is something of a Mother in this case only adds, I suspect, to the erotic tension at Mount Sinai. Somewhere along the slopes of this mountain, after all, lies the rock of Horev, the maternal rock that yielded sweet refreshing water for the thirsty congregation in Exodus 17. Do the people crave, among other things, to touch the rocky breasts of the deity?¹³

Various individual rites of initiation hover in the background. Jacob engages in a daringly physical initiatory struggle with a mysterious divine man from whom he wrests a new name, the name of the nation: Israel. But the most relevant individual rite is that of Moses at the burning bush.¹⁴ “When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain,” says God to Moses through the flames, foretelling the nation’s initiation as He designates the terror-stricken Moses as His special messenger (Exod. 3:12). And indeed the nation’s initiation takes place on the same “holy ground” where Moses took off his shoes and marveled at the wondrous bush (*seneh*), burning

with fire yet unconsumed. The pun that links “Sinai” and “seneh” highlights the connection between the two scenes.¹⁵ The unique fire that “devours” the top of Mount Sinai (24:17) evokes the fire in the midst of the seneh. It is, however, an intensified version of the earlier sight: this time the mountain itself burns, not merely a bush. This time God reveals himself to the community as a whole and demands that the entire nation, not only Moses, become His special servant.

Communitas: The Question of Social Hierarchies

The unusual proximity between the divine and human realms at Sinai is accompanied by the blurring of social hierarchies. Each member of the community assumes the status of a priest and is deemed worthy of approaching the divine. Much as the priest is allowed to go up by the steps of the altar (provided that he covers his nakedness) to a site no one else is allowed to enter (see Exod. 20:26, 28:42–43), so the people as a whole, being a “kingdom of priests,” may enter the sacred zone of the mountain of God and witness His descent. Theophany is communal: it is not only the privilege of the elite but rather a spectacle accessible to all. Turner regards such suspension of social hierarchies in initiation rites as an instance of “communitas.”¹⁶ Communitas, he suggests, designates “a moment in and out of time, in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalized social bond.”¹⁷

The egalitarian bent of the Sinai revelation is underscored in Deuteronomy:

Ye stand this day all of you before the Lord your God; your captains of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, with all the men of Israel. Your little ones, your wives, and thy stranger that is in thy camp, from the hewer of the wood unto the drawer of thy water. (29:10-13)

No one should be prevented from entering the covenant with God. Even women, children, strangers, and lowly servants who fetch wood and water are expected to take part in the ceremony.

Judith Plaskow sees Sinai as the ultimate moment of exclusion vis-à-vis women.¹⁸ She interprets the prohibition to approach women on this occasion as an indication of the patriarchal character of the covenant. One cannot ignore the underlying patriarchal presuppositions of the biblical text, but Sinai, of all places, is a station where hierarchies are momentarily challenged in gender terms as well. The ban on sexual relations is meant primarily to restrict the contact between the human and divine realms—not to exclude women from the scene. The mountain too, after all, was not to be touched.

Social hierarchies, however, are suspended rather than abolished. Alongside the representations of *communitas* one finds scenes that reaffirm social differentiation as they distinguish between various levels of revelation. Different members of the community seem to have different abilities and (in)sights. While the people remain at the foot of Mount Sinai, the elders (with Moses, Aaron, Nadav, and Abihu) are allowed to go up the mountain to a point from which they can get a closer glimpse of God.¹⁹ In the account of the elders' voyage up the slope, Buber writes, "the narrator breaks into rhythmic words, as though he were quoting verses from a time-old song."²⁰

And they saw the God of Israel: and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone, and as it were the body of heaven in his clearness. And upon the nobles of the children of Israel he laid not his hand: also they saw God, and did eat and drink. (Exod. 24:10-11)

The poem offers an audacious depiction of human-divine familiarity. The nobles are granted the sight of the treasures that lie under God's feet—the sapphire stone and its poetic parallel: heavenly splendor. They "see" and "eat" and "drink" at once in a striking encounter between the spiritual and the physical.²¹

Moses is the most privileged of all. He climbs up the mountain time and again and engages in a direct dialogue with God: "And the Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend" (33:11). The boundary between the divine and the human spheres in this case almost dissolves: Moses and God converse on the same plane, as two friends. The nobles had a vision of the realm below God's feet, Moses gets as far as God's face.²²

In one of the greatest moments of intimacy between the two, God reveals His inscriptions to Moses. The first set of Tablets, "written with the finger of God" (31:18), is given to Moses in a most tangible way, as if transferred from hand to hand. The second set of Tablets, fashioned by Moses after the model of the primary one, is no less inspiring. The contact with the splendor of the divine word was so powerful this time that the skin of Moses' face "shone" as he came down the mountain with the new Tablets in his hands (34:29).