CHAPTER 7

The Priestly Theology

EXODUS 25–40, LEVITICUS, AND NUMBERS

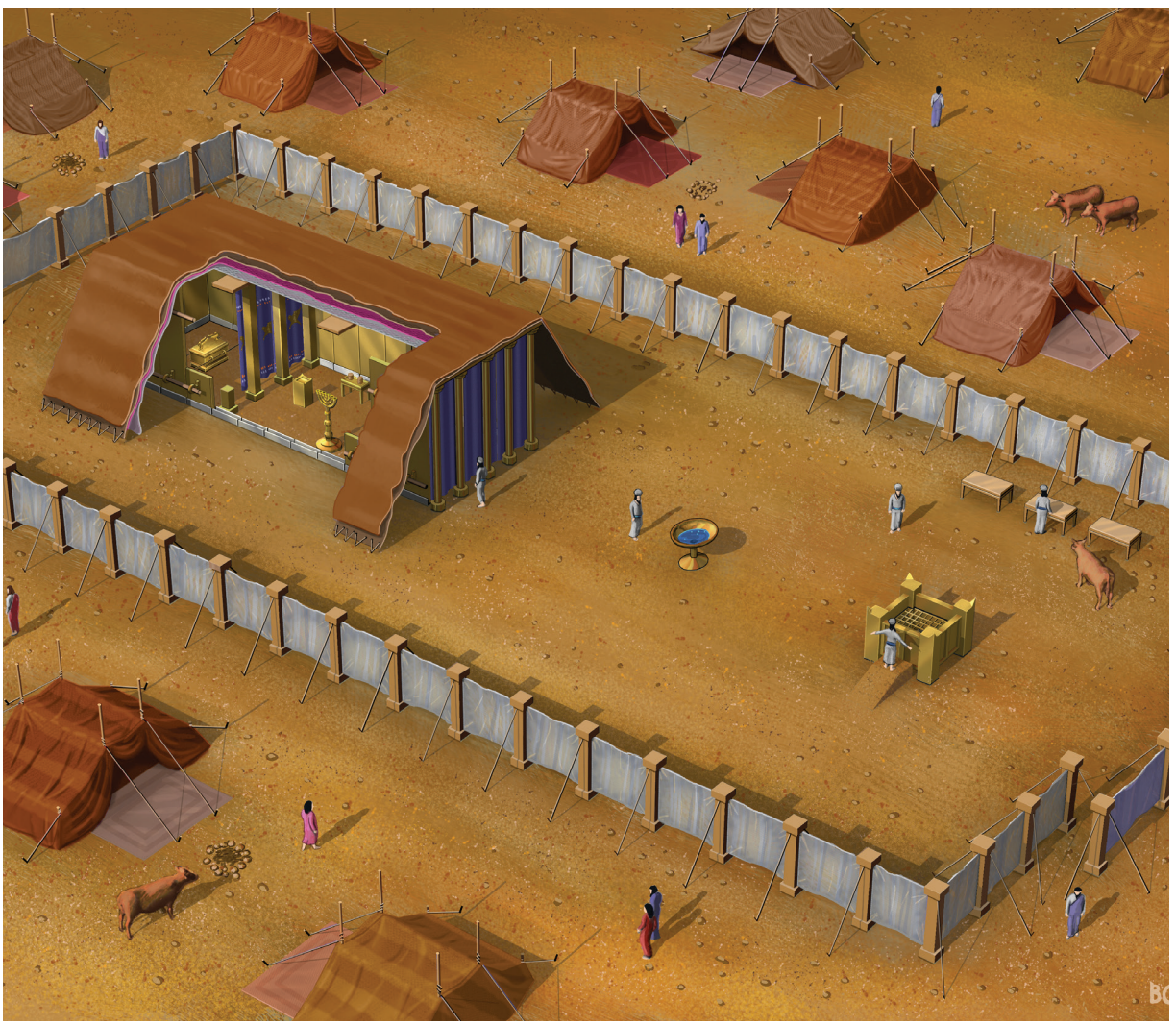
We have encountered the Priestly source in earlier chapters. In this chapter we examine the core of the Priestly document, including the commandments concerning the tabernacle in Exodus (25–31 and 35–40), the book of Leviticus (and especially the Holiness Code in chapters 17–26) and the book of Numbers, asking about the distinctive theological perspective of this source.

The core of the Priestly source is found in Exodus 25 through Leviticus up to Numbers 10. Moses is given instructions about the sanctuary, the sacrificial system, the consecration of priests, the distinction between pure and impure, and the Day of Atonement. Leviticus 17–26 stands out as a distinct section known as the Holiness Code. The early chapters of Numbers provide instructions for the arrangement of the camp in the wilderness. Taken together, these laws constitute a symbolic system that embodies a distinct theology.

THE TABERNACLE (EXODUS 25–31; 35–40)

Tent-shrines for deities are attested in the Semitic world. In the Ugaritic myths the god El had a tent. The ancient Phoenicians had tent-shrines that they carried into battle. Such tent-shrines have survived down to modern times. Most scholars, however, have felt that the tabernacle described in Exodus 26–40 is too elaborate to have been transported in the wilderness. It may reflect a later, settled shrine, possibly at Shiloh, where the tabernacle is set up in Josh 18:1 (Shiloh is the site of "the house of the LORD" in the time of Samuel, before the building of Solomon's temple). Alternatively, it may be an ideal construction, imagined by later Priestly writers. It does not correspond to what we know of the Jerusalem temple, although it incorporates some of its features, notably the statues of winged cherubim guarding the mercy seat (Exod 25:21).

The significance of the tabernacle in P is that it provides a way of imagining a central sanctuary even while Israel was wandering in the wilderness. The presence of God is associated with the ark of the covenant, which is housed within the tabernacle. God is manifested over the mercy seat, between the cherubim that are on the ark (Exod 25:22). The centralization of worship was a major innovation in the reform of King Josiah in 621 B.C.E. The Priestly source, as reflected in Exodus 26–40, seems to presuppose this centralization. While there may well have been a tent-shrine in ancient Israel, it is unlikely that it ever served as the focus for the cult of all Israel in the way that the tabernacle does in P.



Depiction of the tabernacle as described in Exodus. However, such a structure would have been too elaborate to have been transported in the desert, and the account of its construction in Moses' time is anachronistic.

LEVITICUS

The Sacrificial System (Leviticus 1–7)

A sacrifice is something that is made sacred by being offered to a god. In the case of animals, and sometimes of human beings, the offering requires that they be killed, and so made to pass over into the world of spirit. There is also provision for offerings of inanimate objects, such as cereal.

Various kinds of sacrifices are distinguished in Leviticus 1–7. The burnt offering (*olah*) literally means "that which ascends." The equivalent Greek term is "holocaust," which means "wholly burned." In such a sacrifice, the victim is given completely to God. In contrast, the sacrifice of well-being (*sh'lamim*) was a communion sacrifice, where the victim was eaten by the worshipers. Since the slaughter of animals was permitted only in the context of sacrifice in early Israel, these sacrifices were the occasions on which people could eat meat. The cereal or grain offerings (Leviticus 2) were less expensive than the meat sacrifices and could be offered more frequently.

In ancient times people thought of sacrifices as a way of feeding the gods. This idea is reflected in the Atrahasis myth, where the gods are distressed when they are deprived of their offerings. It is also parodied in the story of Bel and the Dragon, which is one of the additions to the book of Daniel in the Greek Bible. In Leviticus, however, there is no suggestion that God needs the offerings in any way. Rather, the sacrificial system provides a symbolic means for people to express their gratitude and indebtedness to God, or to make amends for their sins.

Leviticus prescribes special sacrifices for sin, even inadvertent, and purification (chaps. 4–7). Sin is regarded as an objective fact—it must be atoned for even if it was not committed intentionally.

The Day of Atonement

The most vivid example of ritual atonement in Leviticus is found in chapter 16. This ritual requires the sacrifice of a young bull and the offering of two goats. The high priest (Aaron) designates one goat for the LORD. The other goat is designated "for Azazel" and is driven away into the wilderness. Azazel is not attested elsewhere, but is evidently a demon. In the ancient Near East, all sorts of problems were explained as being due to angry demons that had to be appeased by offerings or other means. There are scarcely any references to demons in the biblical writings. (They do appear, however, in Jewish writings of the Hellenistic period, such as Tobit and *1 Enoch.*)

Leviticus 16 provides a good illustration of the way ritual works. The priest "shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat. . . . The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities" (16:21-22). Iniquities (sins) are not material objects that can be packaged and put on an animal's head. They are deeds that people have done (murder, for example), and in many cases they cannot be undone. The action of the priest, then, is symbolic, and the effectiveness of his action depends on the belief of everyone involved. When the ritual is performed correctly, the sins of the people

are deemed to be carried away into the wilderness. Just as a judge in a court has the power to declare someone guilty or innocent, the priest has the power to declare sin forgiven.

We can imagine that people who approached the Day of Atonement burdened by a sense of sin would feel a great sense of relief as they watched the goat bearing their sins disappear into the wilderness. Such people might well resolve to avoid sinful conduct in the future, although this is not necessarily the case. We can also understand that an individual who made an offering for sin would be pardoned not only by God but also by the society that acknowledged the validity of the ritual. The efficacy of the ritual, however, depends on its acceptance. A person who did not believe that the goat carried the sin of the people into the wilderness could hardly feel any relief when it went out of sight.

The Priestly laws in Leviticus may give the impression that the sacrifices work automatically, but elsewhere in the Bible we often find an awareness that rituals are only effective when they give expression to genuine human intentions. The prophets are often very critical of the sacrificial cult when it was not accompanied by the practice of justice (see especially Amos 5). The psalmists also were aware of the limits of ritual. "For you have no delight in sacrifice," says Ps 51:16-17, "if I were to give a burnt offering you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." Leviticus, however, assumes that God is pleased by burnt offerings and that the ritual is effective when it is performed properly.

The Consecration of Priests

The instructions for the building of the tabernacle included directions for the consecration of the sons of Aaron as priests in Exodus 29. The actual consecration is described in Leviticus 8–10. Leviticus takes pains to emphasize that the consecration of the priests is stamped with divine approval. Any improper use of the priesthood is presented as highly dangerous. When Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu "offered unholy fire" before the Lord (10:1-2), they were consumed by fire. We are not told what made their fire unholy. The point is that any neglect of proper ritual may prove fatal.

The Levites were another class of priests, depicted as subordinate to the descendants of Aaron in Numbers 8. They serve in the tent of meeting in attendance on Aaron and his sons. (The relationship is spelled out further in Numbers 18.) The account in Numbers 8 suggests that this was a harmonious arrangement, but there are indications that it was not always so. In Numbers 16 we are told that a descendant of Levi named Korah, supported by Dathan and Abiram, rebelled against Moses and Aaron, saying, "You have gone too far! All the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them. So why then do you exalt yourselves against the assembly of the Lord?" The dispute is resolved when the earth opens and swallows Korah and his followers. The Priestly writers claim absolute, divine authority for the cultic order, and specifically they claim that the Aaronide priesthood is divinely ordained to a higher rank than the Levites.

The stories of Nadab and Abihu, and of Korah and his followers, bring to mind one other story of instantaneous divine judgment in the book of Numbers. This is found in chapter 12 and concerns a challenge to the authority of Moses by Aaron and Miriam, "because of the Cushite woman whom he had married." In the postexilic period, marriage

to foreign women was a controversial issue in Judah. Some people found the marriage of Moses to a foreign woman to be an embarrassment. The story in Numbers makes the point that no one should question the authority of Moses, regardless of what he may have done. The point is made all the more forcefully by the fact that the people who are rebuked are Aaron and Miriam, sister of Moses (only Miriam is actually punished for her grumbling). There is no suggestion, however, that Moses' marriage to a foreign woman sets a precedent for anyone else.

Each of these stories serves to assert not only the authority of God but also that of God's human surrogates, Moses and Aaron. Religious leaders throughout history have often claimed such divine endorsement, as indeed have political leaders. We shall find in the prophetic literature that there were also good reasons to question such claims, as they served all too neatly the interests of the people who made them.

The Impurity Laws

Leviticus 11–15 deals with various matters that can cause impurity. Impurity, or uncleanness, is not in itself a sinful state, but it renders a person unfit to approach the altar. Some defilement is unavoidable, but it can be removed by ritual action. There was a tendency in Second Temple Judaism for some groups (Pharisees, Dead Sea Scrolls) to insist on stricter standards of purity in everyday life.

Dietary laws have always been important in Judaism. We have already encountered the prohibition against cooking a kid in its mother's milk in the Book of the Covenant (Exod 23:19). In the same context, the Israelites are forbidden to eat any meat that is mangled in the field, because "you shall be a people consecrated to me" (23:31). Such concerns are found in the oldest stratum of Israelite laws. More elaborate laws are found in Leviticus 11. Animals that do not have divided hooves and chew the cud, and sea creatures that lack fins and scales are prohibited, as are a list of twenty wild birds. All winged insects are "detestable."

The traditional, orthodox view is that these laws reflect the inscrutable will of God, so that no explanation should be sought. Already in the Middle Ages Jewish interpreters such as Maimonides argued that the forbidden animals were carriers of disease—the pig, for example, carries trichinosis. But this cannot be shown to apply to all the forbidden creatures. Others have tried to find symbolic explanations for the prohibitions (e.g., birds of prey were symbols of injustice). Others have sought an ethical explanation, arguing that the restriction of what humans may eat arises from reverence for life. Only cattle, sheep, and goats, which are bred for the purpose, may be eaten. The pig is excluded because it is disgusting. This kind of explanation makes some sense in the case of the kid in its mother's milk, or in the prohibition of eating meat with the blood. It is difficult to see, however, how reverence for life could lead to classifying animals as abominations, or warrant a distinction between fish that have fins and scales and those that do not. In fact, ethical considerations (concern for the effect of actions on other human beings or on animals) are singularly absent from the Priestly code. The purpose of the Holiness Code in Leviticus 17–26 was largely to remedy this lack in the older laws.

The only rationale given in Leviticus is that the Israelites should not defile themselves but be holy, because the Lord is holy (Lev 11:44-45). Holiness is primarily the attribute

of God. Human beings are holy insofar as they come close to God. The opposite state is "profane." While the positive character of holiness is difficult to grasp, negatively it implies a contrast with the normal human condition. Holy people and places are set apart and consecrated. Observance of a distinct set of laws makes the Israelites holy insofar as it sets them apart from the rest of humanity. But the concept of holiness in itself does not explain why sheep may be eaten, but not pigs.

One popular interpretation is offered by anthropologist Mary Douglas. Animals that may be eaten are judged to be normal, the others as abnormal. The decision as to what is normal is based on observation, but draws a line that is arbitrary to a degree. It is characteristic of the Priestly authors that they like clear and distinct dividing lines. By categorizing things in this manner, they impose a sense of order on experience, and this in turn gives people a sense of security, which is especially attractive in times of crisis and uncertainty. Such a system can have unfortunate consequences for people who are themselves deemed to deviate from what is considered normal in their society. One of the ways in which a person was seen to be abnormal was by bodily defects. A priest who was blind or lame, or had a mutilated face or other deformity, was disqualified from service at the altar (Lev 21:16). Animals that were blemished were not acceptable for sacrifice (chap. 22). Anyone who was leprous or had a discharge, or was impure from contact with a corpse, was to be excluded from the camp (Num 5:1-5).

Some scholars have also sought to give an ethical character to impurity laws by arguing that the sources of impurity symbolize the forces of death. Three sources of impurity are discussed in Leviticus 11–15: dead bodies, bodily emissions, and scale diseases. In the case of dead bodies, the association with death is obvious. But the attempt to relate impurity to death breaks down in Leviticus 12, which discusses impurity caused by childbirth. A woman who bears a male child is ceremonially unclean for seven days, and her time of blood purification is thirty-three days. She is impure for double that length of time if she gives birth to a female. The uncleanness here is caused by bodily emissions, which are messy and do not fit in neatly distinct categories. Compare the discussion of bodily discharges, male and female, in Leviticus 15. Neither the birth of a child nor a discharge of semen can be said to symbolize death. Impurity laws preserve vestiges of old taboos, based on the fear of the unknown. They have more to do with primal fears about life and death, and loss of human control over the body, than with ethical principles in the modern sense.

THE HOLINESS CODE

Leviticus 17–26, the Holiness Code (H), has a distinctive style and vocabulary. Although the various units are still introduced by the formula, "The Lord spoke to Moses saying," they have the character of a direct address by God to Israel. These chapters attempt to integrate ethical commandments of the type found in the Decalogue and emphasized in Deuteronomy and the prophets, with the more specific cultic and ritual laws of the Priestly tradition.

Slaughter and Sacrifice

Leviticus 17 opens with a remarkable command: "If any Israelite slaughters an animal and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting as an offering to the LORD, he is guilty of bloodshed" (v. 4). One of the great turning points in the history of the religion of Israel was the Deuteronomic reform of King Josiah in 621 B.C.E., which forbade sacrifice outside the one place that the LORD had chosen (Jerusalem). Since many Israelites lived at some distance from Jerusalem, Deuteronomy allowed that animals could be slaughtered for meat without being sacrificed, that is, it permitted profane slaughter. Since there is only one tent of meeting, H is insisting on the centralization of sacrificial worship, but unlike Deuteronomy, it refuses to allow profane slaughter. Such a law would have been difficult to implement. I shall return to the centralization of the cult in discussing the relationship between the Priestly tradition and Deuteronomy.

Improper Relations

The next issue raised in the Holiness Code is the distinction of Israel from the nations: "You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan to which I am bringing you" (Lev 18:3). Most of the issues involve improper sexual relations. In modern times, only one of these laws is controversial, namely, 18:22: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman." Leviticus 20:13 specifies that both men would have committed an abomination and must be put to death.

The biblical prohibition of male homosexual intercourse is unique in the ancient world. Leviticus does not give an argument for the prohibition. It simply declares such intercourse to be an abomination. These are the only passages in the Hebrew Bible where homosexual intercourse is explicitly prohibited. The narratives in Genesis 19 (Sodom) and Judges 19, where hosts offer women to protect their male guests, involve other issues besides homosexuality (rape, and the violation of hospitality). In the New Testament, Paul draws a contrast between the "shameless acts" of men with each other and natural intercourse with women (Rom 1:27). Homosexuality is also denounced in several lists of vices in the New Testament (1 Cor 6:9; Gal 5:19; 1 Tim 1:10).

All the issues in Leviticus 18 are sexual, except one (child sacrifice). Procreation is the common theme. Waste of reproductive seed is an issue here. This concern was not peculiar to P or H—compare the story of Onan in Genesis 38 (and see Prov 5:15-16). There is no prohibition of sex between women (lesbianism) in Leviticus. This omission cannot be explained by the male-centered focus of these laws. The following verse carefully indicates that the prohibition of sex with animals applies to women as well as to men (Lev 18:23; cf. 20:16). Presumably, sex between women did not concern the Priestly legislators because there was no loss of semen involved. In contrast, Rom 1:26-27 condemns "unnatural intercourse" on the part of both males and females.

Procreation, however, is not the only issue here. There is also an intolerable degree of defilement. Not only is the passive male partner condemned to death in Lev 20:13, but also animals with which humans have sexual relations must be killed, although there can be no question of responsibility on the part of the animals. The juxtaposition of

the prohibition of male homosexuality with that of bestiality and the fact that the death penalty is prescribed for all parties in both cases shows that the issue is not exploitation of the weak by the strong.

One other passage in the Holiness Code may throw some light on the prohibition of male homosexuality: "You shall not let our animals breed with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials" (Lev 19:19; cf. Deut 22:9-11). Certain combinations are deemed improper. In Lev 19:19 the concern is with combinations of pairs of different materials; in the prohibition of homosexuality, the issue is combining two of the same kind. In all these cases, however, there is a preoccupation with order, with clear definitions of what combinations are permitted and or not. The prohibition of male homosexuality must be understood in this context.

Finally, some comment must be made on the relevance of these laws for the modern world. They seem to be quite unequivocal in their condemnation of male homosexuality. Whether one considers any of these laws still binding is another matter. Few people in the modern world worry as to whether their garments are made of different materials. Many other factors besides the teaching of Leviticus would have to be considered in a discussion of the morality of homosexuality in the modern world.

Ethics and Holiness

The strategy of the Holiness Code in revising the Priestly tradition is most clearly evident in Leviticus 19. The chapter begins with the programmatic assertion: "You must be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy." In the Priestly source, holiness was defined primarily by ritual requirements, although reverence for life was certainly implied. In Leviticus 19, however, we find ritual regulations interspersed with ethical commandments (note the echoes of the Decalogue in 19:2-3, 11-13). Leviticus 19:10 echoes Deuteronomy when it says that the edges and gleanings of the harvest must be left for the poor. Also characteristically Deuteronomic is the reason why one should not oppress the alien: "for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (19:36). The code does not lessen the importance of ritual and purity regulations but it puts them in perspective by alternating them with ethical commandments. Holiness is not only a matter of being separated from the nations. It also requires ethical behavior toward one's fellow human beings.

The cultic calendar in Exodus	The cultic calendar in Leviticus 23
Unleavened Bread	Passover
Weeks	Unleavened Bread
Tabernacles (Sukkoth)	Weeks
	Tabernacles (Sukkoth)
	Rosh Hashanah
	Yom Kippur

The Cultic Calendar (Leviticus 23)

The cultic calendar in Exodus had only three celebrations—Unleavened Bread, Weeks, and Tabernacles. Leviticus lists these three but it also includes the Passover as a "holy convocation." Two new festivals are mentioned in the seventh month: Rosh

Hashanah (the fall New Year's festival) on the first day of the month, and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) on the tenth day. The Priestly calendar gives precise dates for each of the festivals, using the Babylonian calendar, which began in the spring. The fixed dates for the festivals indicate that they are less closely connected to the rhythm of the agricultural year than was the case in the older calendars.

This is a more developed calendar than we find even in Deuteronomy. It cannot have reached its present form until a relatively late date, long after the exile. The book of Nehemiah, which cannot have been written before the late fifth century B.C.E., has an account of the festivals in the seventh month in chapter 8. There is one on the first of the month, but this is followed by the Festival of Tabernacles or Sukkoth. There is no mention of a Day of Atonement on the tenth day. In Nehemiah 9, however, we find that on the twenty-fourth day of the seventh month the people were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth. It may be that the Day of Atonement was celebrated after Sukkoth but, in any case, this account of the festivals does not conform to what we find in Leviticus.

Another distinctive observance is added in Leviticus 25: the jubilee year, in the fiftieth year (after seven weeks of years). There would be general emancipation, and the land would lie fallow. This would require that the land lie fallow for two consecutive years, as the forty-ninth year was a sabbatical year. There is no evidence that the Jubilee Year was ever actually observed. The original practice of the sabbatical year was probably a way to avoid overuse of the land and allow it to recover. The laws in Leviticus, however, have a strictly religious rationale: they are a reminder that the land belongs not to the people but to YHWH.

Blessings and Curses

The blessings in Leviticus 26 are given briefly. They promise a utopian condition of prosperity and peace. Distinctively Priestly is the promise that God will place his dwelling in the midst of the people. The curses are given in more detail, and entail war, famine, and pestilence. People will be reduced to eating the flesh of sons and daughters. Again, there is a distinctively Priestly nuance in the prediction that "the land shall enjoy its sabbath years as long as it lies desolate" (26:34). The passage concludes, however, with the assurance that if the people confess their sin and make amends "when they are in the land of their enemies," then God will remember his covenant. The reference here to "the land of their enemies" clearly presupposes the Babylonian exile.

THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

The book of Numbers begins with "a census of the whole congregation of Israelites, in their clans, by ancestral houses" (1:2). List making and genealogies are among the favorite activities of P. These lists impose order on reality, and the genealogies establish relationships and places in society. The genealogies became especially important after the Babylonian exile, when Israelite society had been disrupted.

Numbers 11–12 picks up the theme of rebellion in the wilderness, which was found already in Exodus 16–17 (J). The stories of miraculous food in the wilderness (quails

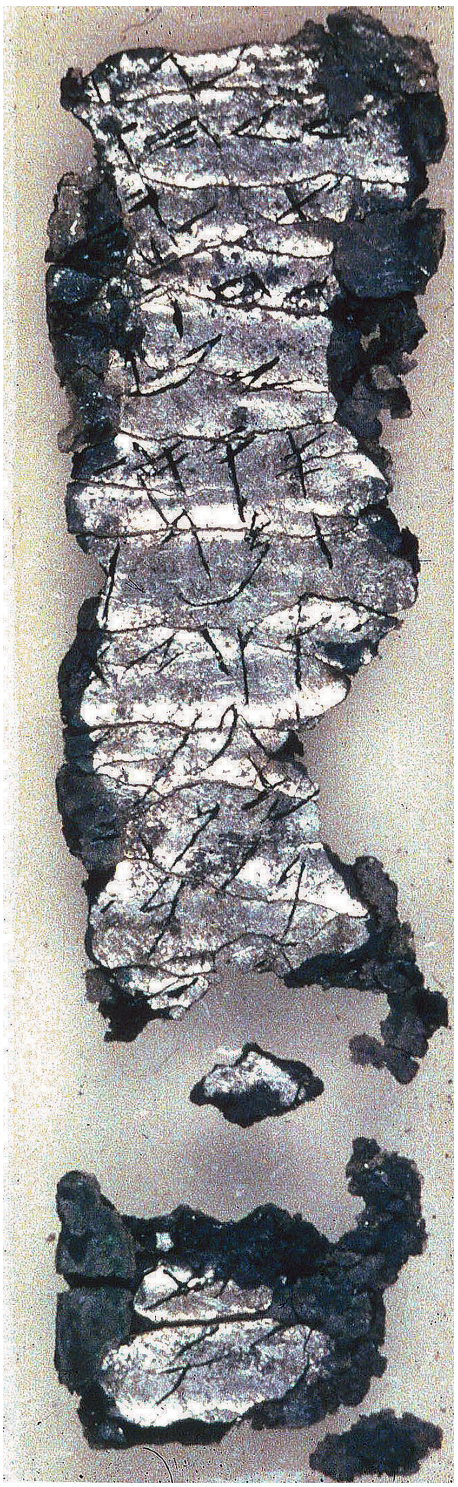
and manna) and the water from the rock (Exodus 17) illustrate Israel's ingratitude for deliverance from Egypt and its complete dependence on divine providence. The stories in Numbers reinforce the authority of Moses.

Balaam

The story of Balaam is mainly derived from the Yahwist. Balaam is now also known from an inscription discovered in 1967 at Tell Deir 'Alla in the East Jordan valley that dates from the eighth century B.C.E., which describes him as "a seer of the gods." The content of this prophecy has no relation to the Balaam texts in Numbers, but bears a general similarity to the prophecies of "the Day of the LORD" (e.g., Amos 5:18).

The stories in Numbers 22–24 tell how Balaam is summoned by the king of Moab to curse Israel, but is prevented from performing the task. First, God speaks to him in the night and forbids him to do so (this part of the story is usually attributed to E). Then the angel of the LORD blocks his path. Balaam's donkey sees the angel before Balaam does. This episode is vintage J storytelling (cf. the talking snake in the Garden of Eden). The blessing of Israel seems all the more sure because it is put on the lips of a pagan prophet. Balaam is acknowledged as a man of God—indeed, he acknowledges YHWH as his God, although he is not an Israelite. The Hebrew Bible seldom appeals to the testimony of Gentiles in this way. (Another example is found in 2 Kings 5, in the story of Naaman the Syrian.)

One of the oracles attributed to Balaam was especially important in later times: "A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel . . ." (Num 24:17). In the Hellenistic and Roman periods, this oracle was taken as a messianic prediction. The leader of the last Jewish revolt against Rome, in 132–135 C.E., Simon Bar Kosiba, was hailed by Rabbi Akiba as the messiah foretold in this oracle. Because of this, he is known in Jewish tradition as Bar Kokhba (literally, "son of the star").



Silver amulet found in the Hinnom Valley, Jerusalem. Dated to the seventh century B.C.E., it bears an abbreviated version of Numbers 6:24–26, and is thus the earliest known biblical text.

Phinehas and the Ideal of Zealotry

The incident at Shittim in Numbers 25 bears the distinct stamp of the Priestly writers. The Israelites engage in sexual relations with foreign (Moabite) women. When Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron, sees an Israelite man take a Midianite woman into his tent, he follows them and pierces the two of them with his spear. He did this "because he was zealous for the LORD," and his action is reported as making atonement, and stopping a plague among the Israelites. For this God gives him a covenant of peace and an eternal priesthood.

The woman is Midianite, although in the context we should expect a Moabite. The significance of a Midianite woman is clear: Moses had married one. The Priestly author wants to make clear that the precedent of Moses does not apply to anyone else. The zeal of Phinehas represents a particular kind of religious ideal that had a long and fateful history in Israel. Much later, in the second century B.C.E., the Maccabees would invoke the model of Phinehas as inspiration for their militant resistance to persecution by the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes. The rebels against Rome in the first century C.E. take their name, Zealots, from the same source.

Finally, P adds an interesting notice in Num 31:8, 16. The Moabite women, we are told, acted on the advice of none other than Balaam, and the Israelites accordingly killed Balaam with the sword. The Priestly writers were evidently uncomfortable with the idea of a "good" pagan prophet, and undermine the older account of Balaam by this notice. It is also axiomatic for the Priestly writer that the women who tempted the Israelites must not be allowed to live.

The Phinehas story underlines some of the fundamental tensions in the Priestly tradition. On the one hand, that tradition was characterized by respect for life, human and animal, as is shown by the prohibition against eating meat with the blood, and the account of creation in Genesis 1. On the other hand, the violence of Phinehas, like the summary executions of dissidents like Korah, shows an attitude of intolerance, where the demands of purity and holiness take precedence over human life. The intolerance shown in this story has its root in the certitude of Phinehas and those he represents that their way is God's way.

FOR FURTHER READING

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