

LS — Week 6 Response

This week felt more like getting into the weeds than any yet, but it was very interesting to do so. I've always found the long sequences of law difficult to wade through, even though there are interesting nuggets to debate scattered throughout: tattoos, clipping your beard, your bull gores someone, homosexuality, etc. To be honest, even the Ten Commandments for me takes some mental gymnastics not to perceive redundancy and triviality — not that they aren't important, but that I wonder why, for example, Jesus' two greatest commandments don't figure in it directly, instead being circumscribed by specifics: don't envy their donkeys, wives, servants... If the Law and the Prophets are indeed summed up by just the two Jesus cites (Matt 22:40) or even the latter (Gal 5:14), shouldn't they head the Ten? Yet compared to most of the Pentateuch's laws, the Ten at least have a clear purpose and structure — and an end! It's in the middle of Numbers that my Hebrew reading is currently stalled. All this to say that Sailhamer's analysis was very welcome, whether or not it's correct, because it draws a map through what was (for me) uncharted waters.

Ansell's reading also broadened to a startlingly wide perspective; what felt like a somewhat ad hoc, unlikely suggestion that Aaron's simile is the key to the whole event gradually gained in force with the linguistic evidence of the words' limited applications in the OT and then some well-chosen verses. I'm not convinced that the purpose of the episode is to paint the picture of a divine womb and spiritual rebirth (an idea that feels ahead of its time in Biblical development), though I can at least adduce *El Shaddai*, one of whose proposed etymologies is from *shad* "breast". The straightforward reading of the passage is more compelling to me than comparing the curse on Miriam to the danger of the Israelites' approach past the fringe of Sinai: challenging Moses' authority or insulting her father-in-law probably doesn't constitute a "premature spiritual rebirth", and if the cause of the whiteness is that God simply *revealed* himself (prematurely) to her as he revealed himself in other instances of whiteness, it seems unwise to thereby associate punishment and revelation. On the other hand, the more fundamental truth of God as a maternal figure is a valuable one and I appreciated the brushstrokes the article added to that picture, even if I doubt it accounts for this episode. I did also appreciate his citing a difference in Miriam's actions to explain her being singled out for punishment — it's a more plausible, and preferable, reading than that it was because of her gender and that this went without mention.

If there is a broader surprise in the text from Exodus to the middle of Numbers, it's the same thing YHWH complains of in Numbers 14:11: "How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs I have performed among them?" Much as we read the gospels with a certain disbelief that the disciples could miss the spiritual meaning of Jesus' words, I find it hard to read the Exodus account without saying to myself: Quail? Figs? Back to slavery? Really? Even the fear of the Canaanites in the chapter just cited seems incredible in the face of the miracles they've witnessed. Plagues have struck, firstborns have been killed, angels have led them, God has thundered from the mountain, seas have parted. God is clearly on their side.

Perhaps the key lies in the distance that Sailhamer identifies in the Israelites' fear of approaching Sinai even when invited. From the start, Moses has mediated between God and the Israelites, asking God who he should say sent him. Moses speaks to God, but the Israelites only see an intimacy from the outside; God even alludes to this as fact in the episode with Miriam and Aaron chapter 12. In fact, if there were a second surprise in this text, it would be God's quickness to anger and Moses' having to intercede for the people, which he does repeatedly. God appears to

be vindictive on occasion: Quail? Here, have enough to choke on. Eat it till you're sick of it... Even Moses is not spared God's wrath, being barred from the Promised Land for a single failure to obey which is moreover chalked up as "not holding God holy". If the Israelites are mistrustful of YHWH's wrath it's easier to understand their suspicion that he might turn on them when they need his help. If so, we might ask why God appears so short-tempered with them, and bring this back to a failure of faith on their part: maybe the calf, or the desire to return to Egypt when pursued by Pharaoh. Even this grates with our picture of the merciful God; but then, he does usually give in to Moses' intercession. The smiting of Korah, Moses' exclusion from the Promised Land, and the wiping out of a generation with forty years' wandering gives us pause, but the nation survives, and the covenant is renewed.

One connection with my teaching practice is that multiple chances and the constant renewal of the covenant are a good model for us. Jesus' advice to forgive "not seven times, but seventy times seven times" (Matt. 18:22) is consistent with his father's treatment of the Israelites, not only here, but throughout the whole Biblical story. The idea of an unbreakable covenant — despite its stated boundaries — has always appealed to me. Between two people who trust each other there should be a willingness to look for a deeper truth and identity than surface actions (until and unless the actions reveal a different deeper truth). I've had arguments where the other person and I realized that our fundamental commitment to each other was more important than what we were arguing about, and I've had arguments where I was stunned to find that this "covenant" was broken by the individual actions.

I find that students in particular find it hard to believe in or perceive this covenant. It's obvious to me, but not to them, that I want them to succeed and have good memories and be uplifted and empowered and happy. Nothing they do or fail to do can change the fact that this is what I hope for them, and that if I didn't, I wouldn't be a teacher. But I've come to realize that this is hard for students to accept. They are willing to live in the hypothesis that a teacher wants them to fail or is making their life harder on purpose. To be fair, we can be pretty bad at recognizing which signals we're telegraphing; David I. Smith in *On Christian Teaching* gives an example of how a teacher might unwittingly project an appearance of not caring despite their intentions.

But apart from the signals, students can develop theories about the nature of their relationship to their school, their peers, and the adults in their lives that are perhaps more tied to the setup of our education system than to individual interactions. Just yesterday I was tutoring a student who, suddenly overwhelmed by anxiety about her grade, began spelling out the failure she believed she would be if she didn't pass all her courses. It turned into a rapid succession of the things she saw herself in danger of failing at. "My mom will finally give up on me," she said. In the minutes that followed as I helped her calm down and put things into perspective, I reminded her of her mom's love for her and all the evidence of the same: the support, the way they talk, and so forth. I reassured her that she could not lose any respect from me, since I've tutored her enough years to know who she is as a person, totally independently of the grades she receives. She was calmed and grateful by the end of this conversation. This was a good reminder to me that I have to ensure students know where they stand: in an unbreakable, even if perturbed, covenant.¹

¹ And, since I'm not God, I should also keep an eye out for the straw that will break this camel's back. What might be an underestimated threat to the covenant, that causes me to lash out or give up on someone? I don't know yet.