

CHAPTER TEN

The Priestly School

In Chapter Eight we outlined an earlier, now abandoned, hypothesis concerning the origins of the Torah. In Chapter Nine we focused on the key role played by the Deuteronomists, who were responsible for the Book of Deuteronomy, but also had input into the other books of the Torah. It seems that the key role in composing the Torah as we have it was taken by priests. Beginning, perhaps, in the reign of Josiah towards the close of the seventh century, and continuing during the exile and for a number of generations after the return to Judah, it was probably this Priestly School (**P**) who played a leading role in linking the narrative of creation and the flood, the patriarchal narrative and the Exodus narrative in one work, and so producing Genesis, Exodus and Leviticus, followed later by the Book of Numbers. Their primary interest, as one would expect, was to ensure that the relationship of Israel with YHWH was in accordance with the traditions handed down. Besides reflecting on their own experience, they studied the manuscripts, including the priestly material they inherited, intent on systematising so that every aspect of God's revealed will would be obeyed.

Their work during the Babylonian Exile was done under the shadow of the tragic destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Their work in the period after the exile was done in light of the 'miraculous' return to the Holy City and the reconstruction of the temple. With special reference to the work of the Priestly School, Professor Jean-Louis Ska SJ in his *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch* (Eisenbrauns 2006) writes:

The legislative texts and the narratives have been re-read, corrected, reinterpreted and updated several times in accordance with new situations and the need to answer new questions.

– page 94

He goes on to say:

The reconstruction of the temple and the restoration of a faith-community within the Persian Empire created a new situation that undoubtedly called for the revision and reinterpretation of the "data" presented by the sources and the most ancient traditions.

– page 141

Speaking of 'the Priestly Writer' Ska says:

He knows the ancient sources and presupposes that the reader knows them. He dialogues with these traditions, corrects and reinterprets them, and proposes a new vision of Israel's history. Throughout all of this he develops his own theology, which is both independent of and related to the ancient tradition.

– page 147

Exodus

In the Book of Exodus we read the story of the escape of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt under the leadership of Moses. We read of their journey to Mount Sinai and the revelation that they receive there. In the Book of Exodus we find the core of Israel's faith. It is possible that parts of the story of the exodus go back to an experience of slaves who escaped from Egypt and journeyed in the Sinai wilderness, where they formed into a religious community, bound together by their commitment to each other and to God under the name of YHWH: the Liberator God whom they believed was responsible for their escape. The sequence of 'events' we now have in Exodus, however, is a late construction that weaves together several traditions of various groups to create a unique collective memory of this special people.

One can imagine the story of the exodus holding a special power for the tribes of the hill country of Canaan that espoused the religion of YHWH. Perhaps the exodus story encouraged the northern kingdom in the struggle against Assyrian power. The prophets certainly used it in their critique of the abuses of government and life that they opposed in the name of YHWH (in Israel see Amos 2:10; 3:1-2; and later in Judah, Micah 6:4). Hosea also speaks of it (Hosea 11:1-5; 12:14). Some of the story may have been written prior to the destruction of Samaria (721BC), and we find some of it recorded in Deuteronomy, where it supported Josiah's movement to re-conquer and liberate the Promised Land. Clearly the exodus story supported the exiles, who found themselves outside their land longing for the call to return. Finally we have the experience of the post-exilic community, attempting to form a renewed Israel, and recalling the experiences of their beginnings, determined to be faithful to the covenant with God made in their name by their ancestors, a covenant which defines them as a people.

The authors-editors of the Book of Exodus inherited the story that had passed through 700 years of Israel's history, and they wrote the story for their contemporaries. They drew on folklore and legends, and on the pieces of narrative composed in Israel and in Judah, and on Deuteronomy, as these had been re-imagined and re-edited during and after the exile.

The best way to read the Book of Exodus is to put ourselves among the returned exiles and hear it as they would have heard it, keeping in mind that the texts witness to different ways of understanding that history. There is wide agreement among scholars that large slabs of Exodus 19-40 (especially 25-31 and 35-40) comes from the Priestly School (**P**). However, some of the legal material is among the oldest writing in the Bible (especially 21:18 - 23:19 and 34:17-26). The influence of the Deuteronomic School is sometimes apparent (especially 34:10-16); some of the material may well have been composed in the northern kingdom prior to the collapse of Samaria (721BC), some comes from writers in Judah during the reign of Josiah, and some comes from after the exile in Babylon. We should add the influence of the Isaiah School and any number of other competing schools. All these ways of thinking are kept in tension as they searched for the right way to be faithful to YHWH's choice and mission.

Besides narrative, the Book of Exodus contains law codes, including norms for regulating the cult. It is important that we read these laws as expressions of practices that have come down through the tradition, a tradition that the Priestly School understood to be guided by their God, YHWH. These laws express ways in which their ancestors, and they themselves, have solved various problems that have emerged in the community, as well as ways of organising personal and communal life in ways that are consistent with their religious insights.

Leviticus

The key role played by the Priestly School (**P**) in the production of the Torah is most apparent in Leviticus where, from the content, the language and the style, it is apparent that the entire book is the product of that school. The word ‘School’ is important. We are not speaking of a document that was written at one time and by a single group of priests. There are clear signs, as we shall see, that Leviticus chapters seventeen to twenty-seven is a later work that qualifies and supplements the legislation found in the earlier chapters. Nor should we imagine the priests who composed Leviticus chapters one to sixteen as creating their text out of nothing. First of all there is the obvious fact that they were drawing on centuries of practice, especially from the cult in the Jerusalem temple, but also from the sanctuaries in the northern kingdom, such as Shiloh (Joshua 18:1).

Since the priesthood was hereditary, sons would have learned from their fathers the regulations covering the cult. However, there was a significant difference between the priesthood as practised in Israel and the priesthood of other peoples in the ancient Near East, where the priesthood tended to guard its secrets jealously. In Israel the whole people was to be ‘priestly’. The people needed to know what was expected of them when they came to the sanctuary to worship. Of course, in a community that was largely illiterate, the people would have been shown what to do by the priests and those who assisted in the sanctuary, but we should expect that, even more than in the surrounding cultures, regulations covering the public cult would have been stored in temple archives, and that these records would have been available to the authors of Leviticus.

Cult tends to be stable, but the way cult is carried out in a small tribal sanctuary would have to be different from what took place in the temple in Jerusalem. It is not difficult to imagine the adjustments that had to be made when David brought the ark to Jerusalem from Shiloh (2Samuel 6:2), when Solomon built the temple (1Kings 6:1), when refugees from the north poured into Jerusalem after the collapse of Samaria (see, for example, 2Kings 17:28), and when, a century later as part of his reform, King Josiah insisted on centralising the cult in the Jerusalem Temple (2Kings 23:19). Regulations that governed the behaviour of people in relation to a local and easily accessible sanctuary could not work for those who lived long distances from Jerusalem. There is evidence, too, of debate between the members of the Deuteronomic School and the members of the Priestly School responsible for Leviticus. The upshot of all this is that we should imagine the priest-authors working not only from memory and oral tradition, but also from pieces of written material inherited from the northern sanctuaries and from the Jerusalem Temple.

However, a major impulse for their work was the catastrophe of the destruction of the temple (587BC) and the experience of exile. During the long years when there was no temple and no public cult there was a real danger that much would be lost unless it were set in writing. The loss of the land and the kingship focused attention on Israel as a worshipping community. The priests wanted to ensure that when the temple was restored worship would be carried out according to the will of YHWH.

Then came the important years after the return from exile. In Exodus and Numbers the priest authors drew on traditional stories. There are virtually no stories in Leviticus. It picks up from the end of the Book of Exodus where Moses has just completed the setting up of the tent of meeting 'in the first month in the second year, on the first day of the month'(Exodus 40:17). The Book of Numbers takes up the story a month later 'on the first day of the second month'(Numbers 1:1). The whole of the Book of Leviticus is located in the first month, between the building of the sanctuary, and the departure from Sinai. The priest authors put time on hold, as it were, as YHWH summons Moses and speaks the whole of Leviticus to him from the tent of meeting (see Leviticus 1:1).

This is the perfect setting for the material contained in Leviticus. Believing as they did that YHWH was present among them, guiding them, they saw the history of cult regulations as being an expression of God's will and as being implicit in the foundational revelation received by Moses. By placing these regulations here, before the Israelites leave for the Promised Land, they are able to link them with the revelation given at Sinai. The priests focus on the cult, not only because it was the area of their special ministry, but more importantly because they knew that it is Israel's communion with God that identifies them as a people, and enables them to fulfil the ethical requirements of being God's 'priestly kingdom' and 'holy nation'(Exodus 19:6).

As a people formed by God, the people of Israel judged that everything essential to their life was inspired by God. Their ethical and cultural life, and in a special way their cult, was their way of responding to God's choice. Their fidelity in these matters was their side of the covenant they had with God. It was their way of welcoming the blessings God wanted for them. Infidelity, on the other hand, could only cut them off from God's blessing and lead to their undermining as a people.

The destruction of the temple was proof of that. By living pure lives in accordance with God's will as it had been revealed to their ancestors, they wanted to avoid repeating the sins of their forebears. We are talking of a living tradition which required a constant listening to a living and present God. The priest authors, therefore, were careful to preserve whatever material was available to them. They wanted to show that there was continuity in the legislation, that they were not creating something new, but were being faithful to ancient practices.

Some of these rituals have parallels in the surrounding cultures. Their purpose, however, is very different. The Israelite priests are not trying to manipulate God or to ward off the influence of evil spirits. They are not indulging in magic actions or incantations.

They are, of course, influenced by their culture, but their sacrifices and purification regulations, are their attempt to respect the holiness of God and, through participating in the symbolic world of cult, to remember the kind of life they are called to live and the mission to the world entrusted to them by God. The cult was a constant reminder that, thanks to the Presence of God among them, and to the extent that they obeyed God's will, the forces of evil, of impurity and death would be overcome by the power of life issuing from the divine presence. The priests understood that it was failure to respect the cult that caused YHWH to abandon the temple, which led to its destruction and the exile. They were determined to see that this did not happen again.

Numbers

In regard to the Book of Numbers there is a scholarly consensus that most of the book is from the Priestly School. This is clear from the content, from the style and from the vocabulary. Where there is as yet no consensus is in regard to the date. However, it seems to me that the convergence of probabilities points to well on in the post-exilic period, even as much as one hundred years after the return. Baruch A. Levine writes in the Introduction to the first volume of his commentary on Numbers (Anchor Bible, Doubleday 1993, page 107):

It would be accurate to state in summary that the priestly materials in Numbers 1-20 (as in Numbers as a whole) represent, by and large, the further development of priestly law and historiography well into the post-exilic period. Such development was not merely a matter of redactional activity, but also involved new writings by the post-exilic priesthood in Jerusalem and their associates.

What seems to have happened is that in the fifth century the texts of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy were achieving the fixed form that has come down to us. To re-interpret, update and complement cultic legislation and custom a new book was therefore necessary. The new book is Numbers. The post-exilic priest authors carried on the tradition of asserting that developments in the cult were consistent with the essential revelation given by YHWH to Moses on Mount Sinai. In Numbers this refers to developments that happened in the period of the second temple.

As is often the case in Exodus and Deuteronomy, the legislation is presented through story. The narrative material which tells the story of various happenings on the journey of the Israelites from Mount Sinai to the Plains of Moab east of the Jordan is drawn from older sources. This is seen from an examination of the way the wilderness period was viewed by the pre-exilic prophets. We look first at the prophets in the northern kingdom just before the fall of Samaria (721BC).

In the Amos scroll there are only two references to the wilderness period. In one, the focus is on YHWH, as we would expect, and on YHWH's fidelity to the special love that he has for his people:

I brought you up out of the land of Egypt, and led you forty years in the wilderness.

– Amos 2:10

Clearly the story of the Exodus generation having to spend forty years in the wilderness (see Numbers 14:33) was not an invention of the post-exilic priests. However, we cannot have the same assurance when it comes to the stories about YHWH giving instructions concerning sacrifice in the Tabernacle (see especially Numbers 6-7), especially when we read in Amos:

Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?

– Amos 5:25

The expected answer is ‘No’. Amos associates sacrifices with a later, settled period. The same doubts arise when we read Jeremiah. He has YHWH declare:

In the day that I brought your ancestors out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to them or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices.

– Jeremiah 7:22

Hosea thinks of the wilderness period as one when YHWH showed special love to his new bride. Addressing his no longer faithful contemporaries, Hosea pictures YHWH alluring Israel back into the wilderness in order to:

... speak tenderly to her ... there she shall respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.

– Hosea 2:14-15

Later in the scroll Hosea speaks, once again, of YHWH’s special love and fidelity, but this time his reference to Israel’s response is not as positive. YHWH declares:

Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel.
Like the first fruit on the fig tree, in its first season, I saw your ancestors.
But they came to Baal-peor, and consecrated themselves to a thing of shame,
and became detestable like the thing they loved.

– Hosea 9:10

Numbers has a lot to say about YHWH’s fidelity. When it comes to Israel’s response, the accent is very heavily on their lack of trust, complaining and rebellion. One such story is that referred to in Hosea: the story of Baal-peor (see Numbers 25). This is one example of a story recorded in Numbers that could be very ancient indeed.

In contrast to his own period – that of Judah just before the terrible events of the opening years of the sixth century BC – Jeremiah sees the period of the wilderness journey as an idyllic period. Not only did YHWH express his special love for Israel, but Israel responded with a special love. Jeremiah was instructed to declare to the people:

Thus says YHWH: I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride,
how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown.
Israel was holy to YHWH, the first fruits of his harvest.

– Jeremiah 2:2-3

Thus says YHWH: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness;
when Israel sought for rest, YHWH appeared to him from far away.
I have loved you with an everlasting love;
therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.

– Jeremiah 31:2-3

Deuteronomy, too, speaks of YHWH's love for his people during their wilderness journey and in Canaan:

YHWH sustained Israel in a desert land, in a howling wilderness waste;
he shielded him, cared for him, guarded him as the apple of his eye.
As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young;
as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions,
YHWH alone guided him; no foreign god was with him.
He set him atop the heights of the land, and fed him with produce of the field;
he nursed him with honey from the crags, with oil from flinty rock;
curds from the herd, and milk from the flock, with fat of lambs and rams;
Bashan bulls and goats, together with the choicest wheat –
you drank fine wine from the blood of grapes.

– Deuteronomy 32:10-14

The other theme – that of Israel's infidelity – is highlighted in Psalm 78:1-8.

Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old,
things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us.
We will not hide them from their children; we will tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of YHWH, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.
He established a decree in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel,
which he commanded our ancestors to teach to their children;
that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn,
and rise up and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God,
and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments;
and that they should not be like their ancestors, a stubborn and rebellious generation,
a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God.

The central religious conviction of ancient Israel, a conviction which was inherited by the Jews in post-exilic Judah and which is still at the heart of Judaism, is that their very existence as a people came from a decision of God: 'Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation' (Exodus 19:6).

The authors of the Book of Numbers believed that YHWH revealed himself to their ancestors on Mount Sinai, and that he wanted to be with them as they journeyed from Sinai to the Promised Land. They used this journey as a vehicle to reflect on the nature of their God, on God's will for Israel, and on what it means to put one's trust in YHWH and to obey YHWH's will. They also picked up that element of the tradition that focused on Israel's infidelity, and used it as an object lesson for their contemporaries. They wanted to ensure that the mistakes of the past, mistakes which had led to the tragedy of the destruction of Jerusalem and the ensuing exile, were not repeated, for their very identity as a people depended on their faithfulness to their covenant with God.

Numbers focuses on the failure of the Exodus generation to believe, a failure that resulted in their not enjoying the Promised Land. It is of value to read again the texts in Exodus where this theme is already present: At Marah, where they complained because there was no water to drink (Exodus 15:22-27); when they complained of hunger and YHWH sent them manna (Exodus 16); and then again at Rephidim when God gave them water from the rock (Exodus 17:1-7).

The journey in the wilderness is portrayed as a time when again and again YHWH demonstrated his fidelity to Israel. At the same time, it was a time when, again and again, Israel failed to trust. In this are the seeds of the kinds of rebellion that would bring about the collapse of the northern kingdom in 721BC, and of Judah in 598BC and 587BC. If Judah is to survive it is imperative that they remember YHWH's special love for them and be faithful to the covenant. This means remembering and not repeating the mistakes of their past.

Both these themes are developed by Ezra when he reflects on the wilderness journey in his prayer proclaimed before the inhabitants of Jerusalem:

For their hunger you gave them bread from heaven, and for their thirst you brought water for them out of the rock, and you told them to go in to possess the land that you swore to give them. But they and our ancestors acted presumptuously and stiffened their necks and did not obey your commandments; they refused to obey, and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them; but they stiffened their necks and determined to return to their slavery in Egypt. But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and you did not forsake them. Even when they had cast an image of a calf for themselves and said, 'This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt,' and had committed great blasphemies, you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness; the pillar of cloud that led them in the way did not leave them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night that gave them light on the way by which they should go. You gave your good spirit to instruct them, and did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and gave them water for their thirst. Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness so that they lacked nothing; their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell.

– Nehemiah 9:15-21

The priest authors of Numbers spend the first ten chapters highlighting the exact obedience of Moses and the people to YHWH's instructions. They introduce the theme of complaint from the first verses of the journey from Sinai (see Numbers 11:1ff). It is evident from what we have seen that both these themes are traditional.

I have already referred to Levine who argues that Numbers is post-exilic. I will note here two other scholars who hold the same basic position. Mary Douglas in her *In the wilderness: the doctrine of defilement in the Book of Numbers* (JSOT Supplement, Sheffield 1993, page 98) writes:

Numbers complements the other Books by presenting a coherent mythic background for Judah's political situation after the exile.

Thomas Römer, in his excellent summary of the state of scholarship in regard to Numbers, says: ‘She is certainly right’ (‘Israel’s sojourn in the wilderness and the construction of the Book of Numbers’ in *Reflection and Refraction: studies in biblical historiography in honour of A. Graeme Auld* [Vetus Testamentum, Supplement 113, 2005, page 443]).

The Book of Numbers continues on from the Books of Exodus and Leviticus. In the opening chapters Moses and the people are still at Mount Sinai preparing to set out for the Promised Land. In a profound and real sense every generation has to make this journey. It is important that we make the journey with God, listening to his inspiration and guided by his Spirit. If my reading of the text is correct, the authors of Numbers were writing for a people who were constantly being reminded of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and the loss of much of the Promised Land. When they searched for reasons, they found a consistent explanation in their sacred literature, which continued to present YHWH as faithful. The problem was not YHWH; it was people’s stubborn refusal to listen. The Book of Numbers, therefore, after highlighting the necessity of exact obedience to YHWH, is full of warnings as it tells the story of the journey from Sinai to the Promised Land, focusing on their stubborn disobedience as the reason why the first generation failed to complete the journey. Their sin must not be repeated.