

ABSTRACT

The Characterization of Aaron: Threshold Encounters in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers

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This study presents a reader-constructed portrait of Aaron, the high priest of the ancient Israelite people. The portrait was developed according to the literary theory which proposes that a narrative character is an interindividual defined by the other characters with whom he interacts at the moment of their direct meeting. That point of interaction is designated as a threshold encounter. Therefore, texts for the study were selected based upon Aaron's engagement in various threshold encounters. These include Exodus 32 (the golden calf incident), Leviticus 10 (the destruction of Nadab and Abihu during the inaugural sacrificial service), Numbers 12 (Miriam's and Aaron's challenge to Moses' authority), and Numbers 20:1-13 (Moses' disobedience of Yahweh). These four texts were examined from both literary and reader response perspectives. The study concludes that Aaron was a complex interindividual, as revealed through his action and speech in response to Yahweh, his sister Miriam, his brother Moses, and the Israelite people, as well as through contrast with Moses and with his own previous responses. In the narrative of the Pentateuch, Aaron presents as a character who possesses both positive qualities and unfortunate foibles. The study identifies a number of his traits which are consistently displayed across multiple threshold encounters. Additionally, the study

concludes that several aspects of Aaron's character change over the course of the pentateuchal narrative.

The Characterization of Aaron: Threshold Encounters in
Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers

by

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DEDICATION

To Faith

exemplified by my mother
who in her heart
always knew that this goal could be achieved
but didn't live to see it

To the Faithful

especially Splash

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Throughout a major section of the pentateuchal narrative, Aaron is a visible character, as either the object of Yahweh's instructions or as an active participant in events that constitute the narrative. In the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, in particular, there are close to three hundred references to him.¹ Aaron is an instrumental factor in Moses' acceptance of the Lord's call to lead the Israelites. He plays a leading role as accomplice in the liberation of the Israelites enslaved by pharaoh in Egypt. During the exodus, he joins a frantic crowd involved in syncretism but then, subsequently, makes atonement for their sin. Yahweh has Aaron anointed to the position of high priest and designates his descendants as perpetual members of the priesthood. Yahweh, then, describes his priestly duties and garments in minute detail. Aaron helps facilitate the defeat of Amalek early in the Israelites' sojourn through the wilderness. As the narrative progresses, he deals with their grumbling and responds to their need for sustenance as they grow weary and dubious. In one scene during the Israelites' wandering, he intercedes on their behalf and squelches a plague which had already killed thousands of their fellow rebels. Thus, during the nascent shaping of Yahweh's chosen people, Aaron fulfills the significant roles of Moses' right hand man and the Lord's high priest/liturgical leader. But in spite of this fact, no modern scholar, to date, has attempted to conduct an analysis of Aaron's qualities, traits, motivations, and relationships in order

¹ John R. Spencer, "Aaron," *ABD* 1:1.

that a portrait of his character might be sketched. To that end I direct this study. Specifically, this study shows how Aaron's responses to the characters with whom he interacts help define who he is.

Current State of Scholarship

Dissertation

James D. Findlay presents a lengthy character analysis of Aaron in his recent dissertation, written in 2005.² Findlay examined six biblical texts: Exodus 7-11, Leviticus 8-10, Numbers 16-17, Deuteronomy 9-10, Ezra 7:1-10 and 1 Chronicles 23-24. Though he claims both a synchronic and diachronic reading of these texts, his conclusions predominantly reflect the latter. He adheres to the theory promulgated by redaction critics that the Hebrew Bible proceeded through stages of historical development. As authors and audiences shifted, Findlay suggests that different views of Aaron were constructed and reconstructed to meet their varying needs.³

He argues that each biblical writer emphasizes a distinctive role for Aaron, and consequently, each biblical book casts him differently. In the narrative unit Exodus 7-11, Findlay assesses that Aaron is presented in joint leadership with Moses. He functions as a co-worker, or partner, acting in tandem and alongside his brother, but not as a subordinate to him.⁴ In addition, he is portrayed as an obedient servant of God, following the deity's dictates to confront pharaoh with words and wondrous acts. In Leviticus 8-10,

² James D. Findlay, "A Study of the Biblical Characterization of Aaron," (Ph.D. diss., The Claremont Graduate School, 2005).

³ Findlay, "A Study," 580.

⁴ Findlay, "A Study," 560.

Findlay determines that Aaron is cast as the lead liturgical figure of Israelite society. He is perfectly obedient during his installation to the priesthood. He performs the sacrificial rituals without error. He blesses the community. When his surviving sons incur Moses' wrath, he takes the initiative to defend them. Findlay states that this latter action demonstrates Aaron to be more than a priest: he is also a "responsive and responsible person."⁵ By this remark, Findlay implicitly ascribes personal traits to Aaron. Although he does not explicitly identify obedience as one of Aaron's personal qualities, he uses it as a descriptor for him in both passages.

In Numbers 16-17, Findlay points out that Aaron initially shares leadership with Moses. When confronted by opposing tribal leaders, the holiness of both of them is challenged; they both stand at the door of the Tent for the contest with the censers; they both utter an intercessory prayer for the people; they both receive divine warnings to separate themselves from the rebels. At the end of the incident, however, Aaron's position as priest assumes an unrivaled status. Only his rod, when placed among those of the twelve leaders, sprouts. It is the divine sign of his selection as religious authority. In stark contrast, the Deuteronomy 9-10 passage depicts Aaron in a negative light. He performs no notable function. Instead, he causes divine wrath, and Moses has to intercede on his behalf. Findlay describes Aaron's portrayal in this text as "weak, dependent, powerless, and disobedient."⁶ In Ezra 7 and 1 Chronicles 23-24, Findlay notes that Aaron's position is once again cast favorably. His titular designation as "the

⁵ Findlay, "A Study," 564.

⁶ Findlay, "A Study," 570.

chief priest” gives authority to all other priests, including Ezra. He is depicted as the father and founder of the Israelite priesthood.

Therefore, Findlay concludes that Aaron undergoes a “process of characterization,” as seen in the movement of his role from Moses’ assistant, to triumphant priest, and ultimately to father and founder of the Israelite priesthood. He notes that his findings are in agreement with Thomas Docherty’s secular work involving post-modern fiction. According to Findlay, Docherty posits that the essence of a character cannot be determined. Rather, a character continually undergoes creation and recreation: character exists in a state of constant “becoming.”⁷ Even though Findlay, at times, describes Aaron in terms of his characteristic traits, as mentioned above, he makes no attempt to identify behavioral patterns or make personality generalizations across texts. Clearly, his work focuses upon the progression of roles which Aaron performs. He even states that Aaron “is not a ‘character’ but rather a multi-faceted and often differentiated product of an ongoing ‘process of characterization’ in which numerous biblical writers participated.”⁸ Thus, the traits, qualities, motivations, and relationships that define who the character of Aaron is remain yet to be identified and fully explored within the scholarly literature.

With respect to previous scholarship, Findlay determines that Aaron contradicts Meir Sternberg’s theory regarding the “proleptic” function of biblical characterization.⁹ That is to say, early statements about Aaron do not seem to foreshadow any subsequent

⁷ Findlay, “A Study,” 580.

⁸ Findlay, “A Study,” 580.

⁹ Findlay, “A Study,” 576. See also Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1985), 321-41.

character development. To support his argument, Findlay cites the example of God's initial designation of Aaron as Moses' prophet (Exod 7:1) and God's pronouncement that Aaron would ask pharaoh for the release of the Israelite people (Exod 7:2). As this narrative unfolds, Findlay points out, Aaron only speaks to pharaoh once, and that one time is in concert with Moses. Thus, reader expectation is thwarted and prolepsis, unrealized.

Findlay does concur, however, with Sternberg's comments about the opacity of biblical characterization. Findlay calls Aaron a "prime example" of obliqueness and ambiguity.¹⁰ Rather than being defined by a fixed set of descriptors, he suggests that "Aaron must be viewed from a number of angles." These include his explicit depiction in a narrative unit; his relationship to other characters in that unit; and his connection to themes, intentions, and possible settings of the text.¹¹ Findlay does mention other characters in relation to Aaron, namely, Moses, Yahweh, pharaoh, and Korah. He does not, however, discuss what they reflect about Aaron's persona or any effect that Aaron has upon them.

At the outset of his dissertation, Findlay presents a comprehensive survey and annotation of other scholarly literature with Aaron as subject. He deftly organizes the research into categories: brief literary studies, historical-critical studies, commentary interpretations, and monographs. His effort demonstrates that an imbalance in the research tilts toward Aaron the historical figure, and he rightfully concludes that there is a dearth of full-length studies portraying Aaron the character.

¹⁰ Findlay, "A Study," 575.

¹¹ Findlay, "A Study," 576.

Monograph

The single monograph to date devoted to Aaron was written by Heinrich Valentin in 1978.¹² He sought to find clues for the historical figure in various texts which he deemed to be pre-priestly. He discovered, however, that his subject was not presented as a priest in any of the examined texts. In addition, these texts failed to provide any conclusive evidence as to Aaron's origin. Instead, Valentin detected various functions that Aaron fulfilled. He also posited probable reasons behind the writing of each passage. In Exodus 4:10-17, for example, where Aaron is named as Moses' spokesperson, Valentin surmised that the text was written to legitimize the Levites as teachers. He determined that the event described in Exodus 17:8-16 was not historical, and therefore, Aaron could only be presumed to have been a tribal leader. In Numbers 12, according to Valentin, Aaron serves as a prophet, secondary to his sister Miriam. The authorial intent behind their confrontation with Moses was to establish the authority of the priesthood, which Moses represented, over and against prophecy.

Article-length Literary Studies

Several authors within the last two decades have provided insight into Aaron's character through their article-length literary studies. Rather than taking a comprehensive look at him through multiple texts, they each confined their focus to isolated narrative events. As a result, they identify traits that paint only a partial picture of Aaron.

¹² Heinrich Valentin, *Aaron: Eine Studie zur Vor-Priesterschriftlichen Aaron-Uberlieferung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978).

Elie Wiesel

Elie Wiesel, in his cleverly titled article, “Aaron, the Teflon Kid,” ponders why no punishment was applied to Aaron.¹³ His study focuses only on Exodus 32 and Numbers 12. In the first text, he cites Aaron’s culpability in creating the golden calf, the graven image which incurred God’s wrath. He observes that God expressed ire indirectly against Moses but never mentioned Aaron in the order, “Go down at once, for your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves” (Exod 32:7). God subsequently condemned all the Israelites; three thousand died immediately and others were stricken later. Once again, Aaron escaped without castigation. In an ensuing event, Wiesel notes that Miriam and Aaron were equally guilty of chiding Moses for his superior status and for his marriage to a foreign (Cushite) woman (Num. 12:1-2). But, God smote only Miriam with a skin disease. Wiesel suggests that Aaron attracted forgiveness because of certain attributes which he has identified, though he does not substantiate his assessment by citing supporting texts. These traits include, namely, that Aaron was a “man of peace.” In addition, from Wiesel’s perspective, Aaron was a success in all endeavors; people of all stations loved and respected him; and they sought him out for his understanding nature and for his mediation skills.

Erica S. Brown

Erica S. Brown suggests that personal traits may be inferred by attending to the circumstances surrounding a character’s death. In her article, “In Death As in Life,” she scrutinizes the demise of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, all leaders in the Israelites’

¹³ Elie Wiesel, “Aaron, the Teflon Kid,” *Bible Review* 14 (1998): 26-27.

deliverance from Egypt.¹⁴ The passage in Numbers 20 is central to her study. Observing that Aaron is the sole sibling who draws a crowd at the time of his death (Num 20:22-29), she concludes that he is “a man of the people.” The passing of the priestly vestments to his son Eleazar without hesitation, she says, reflects his obedient nature and sense of communal responsibility. She contrasts Aaron’s acceptance of his death and his willingness to bequeath his leadership over against Moses’ resistance and argumentative spirit. To support her claim, Brown points out that Moses’ call to death was pronounced at least four times (See Num 27:12-13 and Deut 31:14, 31:16, 32:49-50).¹⁵

Diane M. Sharon

Diane M. Sharon probes Aaron’s silence and abstinence following the death of his sons Nadab and Abihu. She bases her work on the text in Leviticus 10. She argues that the trope of refusing food and drink is a subtle technique used to illuminate character traits.¹⁶ Sharon notes that the food which Aaron rejected takes on additional significance because it was a cultic meal to be shared with God. Through her intertextual readings of the biblical text and ancient Near Eastern literature, she deduces that Aaron’s action is indicative of a distressed state of mind.¹⁷ She likens his behavior to that of Hannah, grieved by her inability to bear children (1 Sam 1:1-8). She suggests that Aaron’s

¹⁴ Erica S. Brown, “Death as in Life: What the Biblical Portraits of Moses, Aaron and Miriam Share,” *Bible Review* 15 (1999): 40-47, 51.

¹⁵ Brown, “Death as in Life,” 47.

¹⁶ Diane M. Sharon, “When Fathers Refuse to Eat: The Trope of Rejecting Food and Drink in Biblical Narrative,” *Semeia* 86 (2006): 135-148.

¹⁷ Sharon, “When Fathers Refuse to Eat,” 138.

behavior is comparable to David's when he sensed impending persecution by King Saul (1 Sam 20:1-3). Additionally, she claims that Aaron's response is not unlike that of Jonathan who was angered by his own father's attempt to kill him (1 Sam 20:33-34). Sharon suggests that rage, suspicion, and sadness are all wrapped into Aaron's symbolic gesture of not eating.¹⁸ Chapter Three of my study continues to explore the behavior exhibited by Aaron which Sharon considers unusual.

John C. Holbert

John C. Holbert conducts a literary analysis of Exodus 32, which he deems to be a complete narrative in itself.¹⁹ He determines that the predominant issue in the text is leadership. In his work, "A New Literary Reading of Exodus 32, The Story of the Golden Calf," he offers a contrast in style between Moses and Aaron, the two early leaders of the Israelite people. He explicitly states that Aaron was used as a foil for Moses.²⁰ He bases his conclusion that Moses was the true leader on two qualities: Moses' zeal for Yahweh and his compassion for the people. Holbert claims that Aaron's lack of both traits is clearly evident in Aaron's account of the events surrounding the creation of the golden calf. He points out that Aaron tweaked the details. He suggests that through these linguistic changes, Aaron tried to enhance his image.²¹ Holbert makes additional observations about Aaron. He refused to accept responsibility for his part in

¹⁸ Sharon, "When Fathers Refuse to Eat," 139.

¹⁹ John C. Holbert, "A New Literary Reading of Exodus 32, The Story of the Golden Calf," *Quarterly Review* 10 (1990): 46-68.

²⁰ Holbert, "A New Literary Reading," 62.

²¹ Holbert, "A New Literary Reading," 60-62.

the syncretistic actions. He assailed the Israelites as evil, and rather than identify with them, he set himself apart. Unlike Moses, Aaron made no overture toward Yahweh to atone for the people's sin. As a result, Holbert casts Aaron as a provisional leader, a rebel against Yahweh's will, and an anti-hero.²²

In sum, my research has determined that there are few character studies available on Aaron within the scholarly literature. The author of the one dissertation written to date on the subject examined a variety of biblical texts, but his conclusions focused primarily upon the sequence of functionary roles which Aaron held. The single monograph written in 1978 was concerned with the historical figure of Aaron. Recent article-length studies have taken a more atomistic view of the character of Aaron, concentrating on a singular character trait, singular texts, or novel, but limiting approaches to characterization. In order to obtain a fuller picture of Aaron's character and observe the development of his personage, one must look at a variety of interactive texts in their narrative progression within the Pentateuch.

Selected Texts

My study focuses on four texts contained within the pentateuchal narrative: Exodus 32; Leviticus 10; Numbers 12; and Numbers 20:1-13. These particular passages were selected primarily on the basis of two criteria. Each text contains an identifiable narrative event as well as Aaron's interaction with other characters.

²² Holbert, "A New Literary Reading," 67.

Criteria

Narrative event. A narrative event, as Rimmon-Kenan points out, may be defined merely as a happening.²³ Robert Alter offers a more elaborate explanation. From his perspective, a “proper” narrative event occurs when the narrative tempo slows down enough for the reader to examine a particular scene, to imagine the characters interacting, to perceive traits and motivations as revealed by their speech, gestures and actions.²⁴ Alter makes a clear distinction between narrative event and summary. In the latter, complex happenings covering a lengthy time period are reported in few verses. Narrated time is collapsed into narrating time. As a consequence, no narrative events, replete with character action and dialogue, are present.²⁵ A summary, thus, has the tenor of a report.

Jacob Licht, in his discussion on storytelling in the Bible, classifies narrative into four types: straight narrative, scenic narrative, description and comment.²⁶ His category of scenic narrative corresponds most closely to the phenomenon of narrative event and occurs frequently in the Old Testament.²⁷ Licht explains that scenic narrative consists of a sequence of scenes which present the happenings of a particular place and time. Within these scenes, the audience is able to attend to the characters’ words and actions.²⁸

²³ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (New York: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1983), 2.

²⁴ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 63.

²⁵ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 63, 75.

²⁶ Jacob Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1978), 29.

²⁷ Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible*, 30.

²⁸ Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible*, 29.

Interpersonal conflict and dialogue, therefore, are crucial components of a scene. In contrast, Licht observes that these same elements are usually lacking in straight narrative, which he, like Alter, likens to a report of events. In straight narrative, the narrator's goal is to ensure that events transpire uninterrupted by character interaction.

Licht points out that just the opposite takes place in description. The storyteller actually halts the plot in order to elaborate upon the features of people, places, or objects. A comment, according to Licht, is used either by narrator or character to progress the story. It can explain a situation, praise or condemn a character, moralize or philosophize. In Old Testament narratives, however, detailed description and comment are rare, leaving the reader to resort to his own imagination to develop character portraiture.²⁹ Licht quickly notes that both description and comment exist abundantly in the Old Testament, but these occur outside of storytelling.³⁰ He offers as one example the description of the tabernacle (Exod 25-28). The minutely detailed depiction of Aaron's priestly garments is another (Exod 28). In sum, the presence of narrative events, replete with dialogue and action, is one of my criteria for text selection.

Character interaction. The other criterion pivots on character interaction since a number of scholars propose that relationships reveal character. Adele Berlin, for example, contends that the reader makes judgments regarding one character based upon contrast with another character or with that character's own earlier self.³¹ Drawing upon

²⁹ Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible*, 31.

³⁰ Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible*, 33.

³¹ Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield, England: The Almond Press, 1983), 136.

the analogy of painting, she proposes that one persona is made more colorful when juxtaposed against another more neutral or “grayish” sort of individual. Bar-Efrat points out minor characters serve as a backdrop for the main character.³² John Darr, in his essay on reader-response theory, supports the notion that relationships are key factors when one conducts character analysis.³³ He argues that biblical characters are defined in terms of each other just as people are today in real life.

Other scholars suggest that character is defined at the precise moment when a narrative requires a response of one character from another. For example, David McCracken, building upon the theoretical work of Mikhail Bakhtin, presents the biblical character as an “interdividual.”³⁴ He argues against the notion that character is the fixed, flat description offered by an authoritative voice. Instead, he posits that character is created: created each time decision confronts a person.³⁵ Character emerges within what McCracken calls a “threshold encounter.”³⁶ He defines the threshold encounter as that point where one character demands a response, either action or speech, from another. Hence, character is not individual, but “interdividual.”³⁷ Alter’s perception of the writing

³² Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield, England: The Almond Press, 1989), 86.

³³ John Darr, “Narrator as Character: Mapping a Reader-Oriented Approach to Narration in Luke-Acts,” *Semeia* 63 (1993): 51.

³⁴ David McCracken, “Character in the Boundary: Bakhtin’s Interdividuality in Biblical Narratives,” *Semeia* 63 (1993): 30.

³⁵ McCracken, “Character in the Boundary,” 31. See also Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 81. Bar-Efrat seems to concur with McCracken through his statement that a character’s choices convey information about his or her values and priorities.

³⁶ McCracken, “Character in the Boundary,” 32.

³⁷ McCracken, “Character in the Boundary,” 33.

process supports McCracken's theory. He proposes that biblical authors were more interested in presenting how characters responded to actions or how they produced them rather than in the actions per se.³⁸

Preview of Texts

These scholars' works have influenced my choice of texts. The presence of character interaction within a narrative event is critical to my character study of Aaron. In all of the selected texts cited above, Aaron actively engages with or responds to more than one of these recurring characters, Yahweh, Moses, and the Israelite people, as well as with Miriam.

Exodus 32. In Exodus 32, Aaron participates in two "threshold encounters," one involving the people, and the other, Moses. In the initial encounter (vv. 1-6), the Israelites confront Aaron at the foot of Mt. Sinai. They have become restless due to Moses' absence and, as a consequence, turn to Aaron for leadership. Aaron reacts with both word and deed. The second encounter (vv. 21-24) occurs when Moses returns from his mountaintop conference with Yahweh. He questions Aaron about his complicity in the crafting of the image which the Israelites have requested. Aaron responds verbally with an excuse.

Leviticus 10. Leviticus 10 is set within the environs of the tabernacle and during the ceremonies associated with Aaron's ordination into priestly service. Aaron is involved in three threshold encounters and receives a set of directives in each one. In the first (vv. 1-7), he witnesses Yahweh's punishment of the people, specifically his two sons

³⁸ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 66.

Nadab and Abihu. Moses follows up with an explanation for the divine intervention. Aaron responds with an act of mourning. Moses then admonishes Aaron against formal, public mourning, and Aaron immediately complies. In the second threshold encounter (vv. 8-11), Yahweh addresses Aaron individually. The divine words deal with the separation of intoxicating drink from the performance of ritual duties. Yahweh also emphasizes Aaron's role as teacher. Karen C. Eliassen points out that this is the only place in the book of Leviticus where Yahweh speaks to Aaron alone.³⁹ In the third threshold encounter (vv. 12-20), Moses follows the divine directive with a prescription for the eating of the sacrificial offering. Aaron offers a retort, though his words are contrary to Moses' expectation.

Numbers 12. In Numbers 12, Aaron's sister, Miriam not only becomes an active player but through her assertive criticism of Moses becomes a central character. Aaron interacts with her. He joins her in the charges against their brother, thereby setting up two threshold encounters. Aaron initiates the drama in both cases. In the first encounter (vv. 1-9), Yahweh is a major figure and offers an unsolicited response in the form of a rebuke. In the second encounter (vv. 10-16), Aaron seeks action from Moses in the form of intercession. Within this text, relational and attitudinal contrasts are observable through Aaron's and Moses' responses.

Numbers 20. The narrative in Numbers 20 takes place within the context of murmuring and grumbling as the Israelites wander wearily through the wilderness.

³⁹ Karen C. Eliassen, "Aaron's War Within: Story and Ritual in Leviticus 10," *Proceedings: Eastern Great Lakes Biblical Society* 20 (2000): 84.

Aaron experiences two threshold encounters, both of which are confrontational in nature. In the first one (vv. 1-6), he, along with Moses, is accosted by a people carping about the lack of water and the infertility and desolation of the surrounding land. Aaron responds to them in a markedly different way than he does at Mt. Sinai (Exod 32). In the second encounter (vv. 7-13), Yahweh appears to both brothers and outlines for them a specific way to appease the people. Moses' reaction to divine directive, which is described with clarity and detail by the narrator, satisfies the people, but it elicits judgment from Yahweh. Though Aaron is in the company of Moses and also is condemned by Yahweh, the text treats Aaron's response less openly. Therefore, the reader must infer the implications specific to this threshold encounter.

All of the aforementioned threshold encounters require decisive action, either in word or deed, on the part of the character Aaron. I attempt to show how his decisions in response to the recurring characters, Yahweh, Moses, and the Israelite people, as well as to Miriam, illumine his persona. I also attempt to show the ways by which he impacts them.

Methodology

I approached the Pentateuch synchronically, assuming its final form to be a holistic narrative. The study relied upon a combined methodology of literary and reader response criticisms. Through the lens of literary criticism, I examined both elements of narrative structure: the story, or in other words, the actual narrated events, and also the discourse, which is the process of production, or the way the story is told.⁴⁰ Emphasis was on the former. The results such analyses and the implications have upon character

⁴⁰ Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 3.

portrayal require inferential reading. Various scholars, both biblical and secular, give significance to the role of the reader. Robert Alter, in his discussion about the surprising nature of biblical personae, states that the reader must deduce character from fragmentary data supplied by the narrator.⁴¹ Secular critic Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, seemingly in agreement with the biblical scholars consulted by this study, considers character to be precisely a construct assembled by the reader.⁴² According to Adele Berlin, “The reader reconstructs a character from the information provided to him/her in the discourse. He is told by the statements and evaluations of the narrator and other characters, and he infers from the speech and actions of the character himself.”⁴³ From Bar-Efrat’s perspective, the burden of characterization falls upon the reader. He claims that without help from the narrator, the reader interprets a character’s action and speech and then infers respective mental and emotional states.⁴⁴ John Darr sums up the reader response approach very succinctly, “Readers build characters.”⁴⁵

Fred Burnett explains that during the reading process, a reader infers traits from certain indicators and then constructs the character.⁴⁶ A theoretical discussion of character indicators follows.

⁴¹ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 126.

⁴² Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 36. See also Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), 125.

⁴³ Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 34.

⁴⁴ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 64.

⁴⁵ John A. Darr, “Narrator as Character,” 46.

⁴⁶ Fred Burnett, “Characterization and Reader Construction of Characters in the Gospels,” *Semeia* 63 (1993): 5.

Character Indicators

Direct Definitions

Biblical and non-biblical literary critics alike have described a number of character indicators within the narrative itself which make varying demands upon the reader.⁴⁷ In some instances, a trait is explicitly named by either the narrator or another character. Several scholars point out that because the narrator's voice is generally considered omniscient and reliable; the reader is able to accept with confidence the quality he identifies.⁴⁸ In other words, a narrator named trait would make little demand upon the reader. On the other hand, Alter cautions, when a trait is spoken from the mouth of another character, the reader must evaluate the authoritativeness of that speaker.⁴⁹ Yahweh would be the exception, since critics generally assume the divine characterization of a narrative figure to be valid.⁵⁰ The traits expressed by the narrator, other characters, and Yahweh are categorized as direct definitions.⁵¹ Epithets, naming, and statements about inner life fall under this rubric. More frequently in biblical narrative, however, a trait is not named. Instead, it is merely displayed or exemplified in

⁴⁷ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 47-92. See also Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 33-41; Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 59-70.

⁴⁸ Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 60, 86-9, 94-103. See also Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 126; Christopher R. Heard, "Narrative Criticism and the Hebrew Scriptures: A Review and Assessment," *Restoration Quarterly* 38 (1996): 31-37. Heard presents both sides on the issue of narratorial reliability.

⁴⁹ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 116-117.

⁵⁰ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 54. See also Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 96, 100, 101. Amit states that God and the narrator are always credible.

⁵¹ Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 59-60.

some indirect way, such as action or speech, and, thus, requires that the reader make some kind of inference. Rimmon-Kenan informs that these traits are classified as indirect presentations.⁵² This study first turns to a discussion of various types of direct definitions.

Epithets. In order to create an initial image or to provide an identity, an epithet is usually, but not always, embedded in the character's first introduction to the reader.⁵³ Such is the case with Aaron. Before Aaron even figures into the plot, Yahweh wrangles with Moses about his prophetic call to the brink of impatience. Yahweh attempts persuasion, as a last resort, by offering Aaron as Moses' mouthpiece. "Then the anger of the Lord burned against Moses, and he said, 'Is there not *your brother Aaron the Levite?* I know that *he speaks fluently . . .*'" (Exod 4:14).

These divine words, as presented in the text, contain an epithet incorporating three of the five features identified by Sternberg as being commonplace within epithets. These are indicated by italics. Sternberg notes a physical component, a social component represented by *your brother*, a singular and concretizing component represented by both *he speaks fluently* and the name *Aaron*, a moral/ideological component, and a psychological component.⁵⁴ These elements correspond to the descriptive terms cited by

⁵² Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 59-61.

⁵³ G. C. Chirichigno, "The Use of the Epithet in the Characterization of Joshua," *Trinity Journal* 8 (1987): 75. See also Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 90.

⁵⁴ Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 326.

Berlin: status (*your brother*), profession, gentile designation (*the Levite*), and distinctive physical features (*he speaks fluently*).⁵⁵

Though an epithet spoken by the narrator is considered to be authoritative data, it has limitations as a character indicator. As Sternberg points out, it provides only one piece of the overall picture of a figure.⁵⁶ Therefore, both he and Berlin, in accordance with Licht cited earlier, acknowledge that it is the task of the reader to complete the portrait by analyzing the character's subsequent speech and actions.⁵⁷ Additionally, Alter points out that because of the unpredictable and changing nature of biblical characters, a person cannot be summed up by a fixed adjective (or an epithet). For example, he states that Jacob is not solely "wily Jacob," and Moses is not exclusively "sagacious Moses."⁵⁸

Naming. According to Sternberg, the main functions of naming are to confer being or status upon an individual and to assure the person a future role in the story.⁵⁹ Otherwise, the character remains faceless, without identity. In most cases, he says, the etymology of a name cannot be determined fully, and the text itself is not helpful in providing explanations. Sternberg claims that a name neither defines the personality nor reveals the "secret self." To the contrary, it says more about the giver of the name than the recipient. He offers the example of Leah who named her sons to reflect her

⁵⁵ Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 35-6.

⁵⁶ Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 327 and 329.

⁵⁷ Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 327 and 329; Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible*, 32; Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 34, 38-39.

⁵⁸ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 126.

⁵⁹ Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 330-331.

unfulfilled love of Jacob (Gen 29:31-30:19).⁶⁰ She called her first born Reuben, which means, “look, a son,” in the hope that his birth would secure Jacob’s affection (Gen 29:32).

Direct statements about inner life. Direct statements about a character’s inner life also can provide insight into personality. Berlin points out that texts apprise readers of feelings. A case in point is Moses’ anger: “and Moses’ anger burned, and he threw the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain” (Exod 32:19). Another is Aaron’s joy: “And moreover, behold he is coming out to meet you; when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart” (Exod 4:14). In addition, direct statements inform the reader about what characters think: “So Eli thought she was drunk” (1 Sam 1:13); about what they see: “So he looked this way and that, and saw that there was no one” (Exod 2:12); about what they understand: “Then Eli discerned that the Lord was calling the boy” (1 Sam 3:8); and about what they do not know: “For Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them” (Gen 31:32).⁶¹

Readers must proceed with caution when assessing these statements, making sure to consider their source. As mentioned earlier, the omniscient narrator’s revelation is usually perceived to be totally reliable, as is Yahweh’s, who is above every authority.⁶² On the other hand, information given by another character about a subject must be treated with circumspection, on several accounts. First, without the benefit of omniscience, one character cannot judge another’s feelings, thoughts, or intentions with complete accuracy.

⁶⁰ Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 330-331.

⁶¹ Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 38.

⁶² Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 88.

He merely can make interpretations about what he sees and hears. Second, his words might reflect his own inner state rather than accurately representing that of his subject. Bar-Efrat cites the example of Joab's feelings of guilt over the slaying of Absalom as well as his resentment toward David, which can be detected in the following utterance. "By loving those who hate you and hating those who love you. For you have shown today that princes and servants are nothing to you; for I know this day that if Absalom were alive and all of us were dead today, then you would be pleased" (2 Sam 19:6).⁶³

A character's own introspection, in some instances, gives the reader valuable clues about his or her own thought processes or self-concept. Often, the character gives an honest assessment of the feelings being experienced. Bar-Efrat reminds us of Hannah's plea to Eli: "Do not consider your maidservant as a worthless woman; for I have spoken until now out of my great concern and provocation" (1 Sam 1:16). At other times, self-expression about one's own emotions and knowledge (or lack of) may be less reliable. Consider Cain's evasive reply when Yahweh asks him the whereabouts of his brother Abel. He says, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen 4:9).⁶⁴

The readers must observe another caveat when evaluating a direct statement about a character's inner life, whether it emanates from the mouth of the narrator, another character, or the subject's own self. A direct statement does not necessarily reveal a pattern of thought or emotion. It merely illuminates a selected or isolated facet of that character's mind or heart.⁶⁵ A direct statement also tells about the individual in definite

⁶³ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 59-61.

⁶⁴ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 62.

⁶⁵ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 64.

terms. Thus, it presents a static or constant view of the character.⁶⁶ From McCracken's viewpoint of determining character, all of these descriptive statements about a character are less important for obtaining the objective truth than are the responses elicited from that character.⁶⁷ These responses which exemplify rather than name a trait are discussed in the following section.

Indirect Presentations

These responses, which Rimmon-Kenan refers to as indirect presentations, are manifested mainly through action, reaction to judgment, and speech. These responses depict the dynamic or changing nature of a character. Bar-Efrat points out that because of the frequency of their occurrence in biblical narratives, individuals are characterized primarily through this method.⁶⁸ As a narrative event unfolds, a character experiences threshold encounters which present him with choices. When a decision is made, it generates action, words, gestures, or in some cases, a combination thereof. A character's decision could, on the other hand, effect inaction. The observant reader collects data from these character indicators and begins to mold the individual's personality. Even though the personality may shift and change over time, Bar-Efrat notes, stable elements usually are present.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 89.

⁶⁷ McCracken, "Character in the Boundary," 32.

⁶⁸ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 89.

⁶⁹ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 90.

Action. Within secular literature, Rimmon-Kenan has identified three different kinds of action which aid the reader in shaping character: acts of commission; acts of omission (those that the individual should, but does not do); and acts of contemplation or intention.⁷⁰ She notes that these deeds occur either on a one-time or routine basis. In her opinion, a single reaction creates dramatic effect and tends to be more qualitatively revelatory about a person's traits than his habitual acts would be.⁷¹ With respect to biblical narratives, Bar-Efrat points out that a character typically faces a single, unique circumstance or crisis that tests his mettle.⁷²

He also raises the question of whether a unique occurrence illuminates the essence of a person or merely reflects a fleeting impulsive behavior.⁷³ He asks, for example, "Does Lot's reception and protection of the two angels who came to Sodom prove that he is a hospitable person?" Or in the case of Aaron, "Can he be regarded as weak-willed because he gave in to the people and made them a golden calf?" His answer hinges upon the length of a narrative. He contends that, in a short story, a one-time action does portray a person's nature, explaining that the author had a purposeful interest in its selection. Otherwise, the writer would have featured either different or additional actions to cast him in another way. Conversely, Bar-Efrat maintains that in a longer narrative or one consisting of a sequence of events, the author is able to use a number of actions to convey a characteristic pattern.

⁷⁰ Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 61.

⁷¹ Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 61.

⁷² Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 78.

⁷³ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 80.

Routine, daily tasks rarely are recounted in biblical narratives according to Bar-Efrat.⁷⁴ Therefore, when a habit, such as eating or drinking, is mentioned, he considers the report significant for characterization. He cites the example of Jehu who feasted immediately following the bloody death of queen Jezebel. Not only did Jehu orchestrate her murder, but he also participated in it (2 Kgs 9:33-34). The resumption of his routine, his acting as if nothing happened, reflects his insensitivity. On the other hand, Bar-Efrat contends that the rejection of food and drink also has implications.⁷⁵ Take note of Hannah's reaction to Peninnah's taunting. Instead of retaliating, she internalizes her deep sorrow by weeping and fasting (1 Sam 1:7). And in the case of Aaron, the newly anointed priest refuses to partake of the ritual meal in total disregard of Moses' instructions (Lev 10:12-20). Chapter Three of my study considers what this response implies about his character.

At times, a narrative focuses on a person's failure to act, a move which Bar-Efrat considers strategic and indicative of character traits.⁷⁶ He uses David's relationships with his children to illustrate his point. For example, the narrator relates that after learning of Tamar's rape by her brother Amnon, David becomes very angry. The narrator sets the reader up to anticipate action on his part. Yet, David, her father, does nothing (2 Sam 13:21). Bar-Efrat interprets the inaction as indicative of the king's weakness and passivity.⁷⁷ In the scenic narrative where Yahweh destroys Aaron's two sons before his

⁷⁴ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 79.

⁷⁵ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 79.

⁷⁶ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 82-4.

⁷⁷ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 82-3.

very eyes (Lev 10:1-3), Aaron does not act, according to conventional interpretations.

Nor does he immediately respond after Yahweh addresses him individually and prescribes the separation of intoxicating drink from ritual practices (Lev 10:8-11).

Chapter Three of my study offers alternative explanations to what commentators usually have rendered as a failure on Aaron's part to act.

Although action and speech normally work together in narratives, Berlin calls the reader's attention to scenarios where words do not accompany deeds. She gives the example of Abraham's silent activity in response to Yahweh's call for the sacrifice of Isaac. "So Abraham *rose* early in the morning, and *saddled* his donkey, and *took* two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son; and he *split* wood for the burnt offering, *arose*, and *went*" (Gen 22:3). From the quantity and rapid pacing of the verbs (italicized), Berlin ascribes to Abraham a deliberate and obedient nature.⁷⁸ One sees a similar stringing of verbs in the account of God's call to Aaron. "Now the Lord said to Aaron, 'Go to meet Moses in the wilderness.' So he *went*, and *met* him at the mountain of God, and he *kissed* him" (Exod 4:27).

Reaction to the judgment. Bar-Efrat points out that one individual's reaction to the judgment of another individual also serves as a character indicator for the reader. Nathan's condemnation of David for Uriah's murder highlights David's negative attributes of lust, covetousness, and human weakness (2 Sam 12:7-9). On the other hand, David's confessional reply, "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Sam 12:13) illuminates his positive qualities: contrition and repentance.⁷⁹ Within the texts under consideration in

⁷⁸ Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 39.

⁷⁹ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 85.

this study, Aaron faces condemnation from both Moses and Yahweh. In Exodus 32, Moses accuses Aaron of being the cause of the Israelites' idolatry. Chapter Two of the dissertation deals with Aaron's reaction to his brother's angry indictment and analyzes the traits which surface as a result. In Numbers 12, Yahweh upbraids both Miriam and Aaron for criticizing Moses' marriage to a foreign woman and for challenging Moses' authority. Chapter Four concentrates on Aaron's responses to Yahweh's punishment of Miriam, meted out in the form of physical disfigurement, and the personal qualities which these responses reflect.

Speech. The speech of an individual - both what is said and how it is said - is another valuable character indicator. In literature, speech is presented in at least three forms. For example, one character may comment upon another. Or, a character may utter his or her own thoughts to himself or herself. Alter notes that this inward speech may be reported, but more frequently in biblical narrative, it is quoted as monologue.⁸⁰ The third form, dialogue or direct discourse between characters, dominates biblical narrative. In fact, according to Alter, "the rule of thumb is that when speech is involved in a narrative event it is presented as direct speech."⁸¹

Berlin indicates that direct discourse illumines a character's internal psychological and ideological points of view.⁸² Speech in the form of command or request given to a respondent may reveal a speaker's intentions or aspirations, which in

⁸⁰ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 67-68. See also Seymour Chatman, *Reading Narrative Fiction* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993), 131.

⁸¹ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 67.

⁸² Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 64.

turn shed light upon his characteristics.⁸³ Bar-Efrat offers the example of Abraham, who attempts to make his three guests feel unobtrusive with these words, “Please, let a little water be brought . . . and I will bring a piece of bread” (Gen 18:4-5). While he ostensibly wants them to think their presence requires little effort, he quietly directs his household to prepare a feast of bread cakes, roasted calf, milk, and curds. Bar-Efrat suggests that Abraham’s request and the manner in which he phrases it portray him as a hospitable person.

In some instances, according to Bar-Efrat, direct speech is intended to elicit an emotion or attitude and therefore may be instructive about both speaker and recipient/hearer.⁸⁴ He offers the example of Hushai who shows his keen awareness of Absalom’s vulnerability to flattery when he replies to the self-imposed king’s inquiry about his change of allegiance. Rather than denigrate King David and offer reasons for abandoning him, Hushai elects to emphasize his choice of Absalom in an appeal to his ego. He responds by saying, “for whom the Lord, this people, and all the men of Israel have chosen, his will I be, and with him I will remain” (2 Sam 16:18). Hushai’s use of subtle fawning keeps the focus on the ambitious Absalom. As a result, he wins Absalom’s confidence and dispels any lingering suspicion regarding his loyalty.

Berlin encourages the reader to pay attention to the way a character phrases his or her speech. To illustrate, she offers Esau’s expression, “Bless me, even me also, O my father!” (Gen 27:34). The simplicity of his words suggests to her a childlike, bewildered

⁸³ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 72-3.

⁸⁴ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 70.

personality.⁸⁵ In the same vein, Bar Efrat cautions the reader to observe the completeness and precision with which characters convey information. Any discrepancy in detail, he suggests, may be revelatory of character. He points out, for example, that King Ahab ingratiates himself before Naboth when asking for his vineyard. But when Ahab recounts the episode to his wife, who is the daughter of a king, he omits the polite language which he actually used. Thus, to her, he presents himself as a more authoritative figure than he appears in his speech to Naboth (1 Kgs 21:2-6).⁸⁶ In Chapter Two of my work, Aaron's alteration of the golden calf account is discussed and what that phenomenon reveals about his character.

Another character indicator prevalent in literature is style of speech. Bar-Efrat points out that style often reflects the social status of a character, whether it be the speaker, the person spoken to, or the person spoken about.⁸⁷ Terms of deference, such as, "my lord" and "your servant" proliferate the dialogue between royalty, masters, and commoners. Deviations from this accepted protocol is also revelatory of a person's nature. The use of polite speech in certain encounters may betray a character's feeling. Consider Aaron's response when Moses rebukes him for making the golden calf: "Do not let the anger of my lord burn" (Exod 32:22). Bar-Efrat suggests that Aaron's language in this remark discloses guilt.⁸⁸ In Chapter Two of this study, I examine Aaron's language and behavior and present an alternative interpretation.

⁸⁵ Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 38.

⁸⁶ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 66-7.

⁸⁷ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 76-7.

⁸⁸ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 67.

An individual's verbal reaction to words directed at him helps the reader discern character traits. For example, Bar-Efrat claims that Moses' modesty is evident in his resistance to Yahweh's call to leadership. "Who am I, that I should go to pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?" (Exod 3:11).⁸⁹ As the pentateuchal narrative progresses, one notices that the tone of Aaron's retorts, to Moses in particular, differs and thus reflects attitudinal changes within him.

Contrast

In addition to direct definitions and indirect representations in the form of action and speech, contrast serves as another character indicator. Berlin identifies three types of contrast: (1) contrast with another character, (2) contrast with an earlier action of the same character, and (3) contrast with the expected norm.⁹⁰ In the first kind, she claims that a trait is accentuated if it is juxtaposed against its opposite. Using the illustration of Esau and Jacob she points out the explicitness of the discourse. The narrator states, "Esau was an expert hunter, an outdoorsman, but Jacob was a mild man, an indoor type" (Gen 25-27).

Contrast is not as evident, Berlin cautions, when embedded within the story line.⁹¹ She offers the following example from 2 Samuel 11:7-14. After David commits adultery with Uriah's wife, he tries to convince Uriah to leave his troops and go home to Bathsheba. A conjugal encounter is implied. David's intention to cover up his sin underlies his persuasive efforts. But, Uriah refuses to go. When the two men's actions

⁸⁹ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 74.

⁹⁰ Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 40.

⁹¹ Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 40.

are analyzed side by side, Uriah's loyalty to his men, in contrast to David's immorality, becomes more obvious. Within a couple of the threshold encounters under study, Aaron and Moses stand as foils for each other. The variation in their behaviors serves to emphasize Aaron's traits.

In the second type of contrast, a character's own words and/or deeds may change from those things said or performed during a previous narrative event. To support this observation, Berlin mentions the changing relationship between Jacob and Esau over time. She also points out the erratic behavior of Saul toward David.⁹² In the grand narrative presented in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, Aaron's character undergoes transformation. The phenomenon is clearly evident in the passages from Numbers that are under consideration. In the Numbers 12 account, for example, an immediate and blatant difference in Aaron's tenor toward Moses is observed before and after Yahweh's smiting of Miriam with the decaying skin condition (cf. vv. 1-2 and vv. 11-12). An intratextual analysis in Chapter Four of this study shows the positive development of Aaron's character.

Furthermore, his speech to Moses appealing for Miriam's restoration (Num 12:11-12) is revelatory when contrasted against his earlier explanation to Moses with regard to the making of the golden calf (Exod 32). In these two contexts which span a period of narrative time, Aaron expresses a completely different attitude toward the commission of sin. An intertextual analysis in Chapter Five also shows the positive development of Aaron's character.

⁹² Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 40.

Another illustration of contrast with a character's own self is evident in Aaron's interaction with the Israelite people. In more than one setting, he is met by a passionate mob demanding results. His response to them in the context of Exodus 32 is not consistent with his response in Numbers 20.

The third type of contrast identified by Berlin highlights behavior contrary to personal expectation or contrary to the usual norm. She notes that heroic acts fit into this category. One example would be the boy David's slaying of Goliath (1 Sam 17). Tamar's disguising as a temple prostitute in order to deceive Judah (Gen. 38) would be another example of unexpected behavior.⁹³ Aaron also demonstrates unconventional behavior. As mentioned previously, he refuses to eat the prescribed ritual meal. The newly anointed high priest fails to perform the sin offering which entails sharing a meal with Yahweh. Instead, he presents a burnt offering. Such action is not only contrary to the expected norm for priests but also counter to the expectations of Moses. Chapter Three of my study looks closely at this type of contrast and discusses the traits which it reveals about Aaron's personality.

From the four texts selected for this study, Exodus 32, Leviticus 10, Numbers 12, and Numbers 20:1-13, I compiled data borne out by the character indicators. Rimmon-Kenan suggests that common denominators in behavior do occur.⁹⁴ Following her rubric, I looked for response patterns by linking multiple findings to a unifying category. For example, Aaron's defense of his two sons after Moses chastises them (Lev 10:16-20) conceivably can be paired with his intercession on behalf of Miriam following Yahweh's

⁹³ Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 41.

⁹⁴ Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 38.

corruption of her skin (Num 12:10-13). The nature of these responses can be generalized as a trait: familial loyalty or protectiveness. Rimmon-Kenan's paradigm additionally allows for character change, especially upon recognition that a certain behavior does not fit under the constructed heading.⁹⁵ McCracken's theory of threshold encounters and interdividuality embraces the notion of fluidity and proposes that character will never be fixed.⁹⁶ My analyses of character indicators and interrelationships contained within the four selected pentateuchal texts yielded a portrait of Aaron that incorporates both change and constant unified reader-constructed traits. An examination of Exodus 32 is contained in the ensuing chapter.

⁹⁵ Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 38-9.

⁹⁶ McCracken, "Character in the Boundary," 31.

CHAPTER TWO

Exodus 32

Introduction

The character Aaron is initially introduced to the reader by Yahweh in the context of Moses' call to serve. In the early part of the book of Exodus, Yahweh summons Aaron for the specific purpose of enabling Moses, who is insecure about his ability to deliver the Israelites from the oppressive hand of pharaoh (Exod 4:1-17). In this setting, Moses expresses a lack of confidence, specifically in his communication skills. He implores Yahweh, "Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since Thou hast spoken to Thy servant, for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue" (Exod 4:10). In response, Yahweh is quick to point out to Moses that Aaron does possess a facility with words. Yahweh states, "Is there not your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he speaks fluently"

(ויאמר הלא אהרן אחיך הלוי ידעתי כי דבר ידבר הוא) (Exod 4:14). Aaron's verbal prowess is conveyed grammatically in Hebrew by the positioning of the infinitive absolute "to speak" (דבר) before the finite verb of the same root "he speaks" (ידבר). The effect of the linguistic construction is to emphasize the verb "to speak."¹ In this

¹ C. L. Seow, *A Grammar for Biblical Hebrew* (rev. ed. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 250.

particular instance, the interpretation is, “he indeed speaks.” In other words, Yahweh makes the case before Moses that Aaron is articulate.²

Yahweh’s portrayal of Aaron is determined to be an example of a direct definition when adhering to the guide of character indicators previously delineated in Chapter One of this study. Within that discussion of character indicators it is noted that Yahweh is deemed a reliable character by biblical literary critics. Therefore, the reader must consider the characterization of Aaron as verbally fluent to be accurate. Yahweh offers two additional and dependable characterizations of Aaron within that context of prophetic call. Grammatically speaking, those divine words are presented in the form of epithets. Yahweh states that Aaron is Moses’ brother and that he is a Levite (Exod 4:14). The same verse contains another depiction of Aaron. Yahweh tells Moses that Aaron will be glad in his heart at the moment of their reunion. As the narrative progresses beyond Exodus and begins to unfold in other books of the Pentateuch, namely Leviticus and Numbers, a considered view of the grand scheme indicates that this initial joyous feeling of Aaron toward his brother devolves into competitive rivalry.

While the characterizations provided by Yahweh are informative, this study maintains that these do not offer a complete portrayal of Aaron.³ Aaron’s subsequent interactions with other narrative players in numerous threshold encounters provide a

² By implication, therefore, communication should be a non-issue for Moses.

³ In Chapter One of the dissertation, the limitation of epithets was discussed. See Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1985), 327 and 329; Jacob Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1978), 32.

fuller picture of his character.⁴ Within the narrative of Exodus 32, I have identified six threshold encounters. Two of these, (vv. 7-14 and vv. 30-34), present Moses interacting exclusively with Yahweh. Therefore, these encounters were not analyzed because Aaron is not actively involved. In other words, he makes no responses.

Aaron is directly involved in two encounters. In the first of these (Exod 32:1-6), he interacts with the Israelite people. Looking ahead briefly, the people confront Aaron, their interim leader, and verbally demand a god-like image. He responds with both word and action. In relation to the Israelites, Aaron presents as an easily influenced individual, as a peacemaker, and also as an inadequate provisional leader of the community.

In the fourth threshold encounter (Exod 32:21-24), Aaron interacts with Moses. These two characters engage in dialogue, but commit no deeds. Moses interrogates Aaron concerning his role in the crafting of the people's idol. Aaron verbally responds to the accusatory nature of Moses' question. A considered view of this exchange indicates that Aaron once again comes across as a character intent upon pacifying. In addition, he demonstrates a reluctance to accept culpability for his actions.

The other two threshold encounters (Exod 32:15-20 and Exod 32:25-29) involve only Moses and the people. Although Aaron does not interact, the encounters are essential to the study because the leadership style of Moses is portrayed therein. It is the contrast of his style with that of Aaron which serves to provide the reader with additional character traits.⁵ Before proceeding, however, with a discussion of these threshold

⁴ David McCracken, "Character in the Boundary: Bakhtin's Interdividuality in Biblical Narratives," *Semeia* 63 (1993): 32.

⁵ Contrast, a technique of characterization forwarded by Adele Berlin, was discussed in Chapter One of the dissertation.

encounters, it is helpful to understand the background and plight of the people with whom Aaron deals.

Narrative Background

The narrative in Exodus 32 presents an Israelite people fresh from their verbal ratification of a covenantal promise to Yahweh. The text places the people beneath the shadow of Mt. Sinai, where they have unhesitatingly agreed to execute all the words which the Lord had spoken through Moses. The repetition of the community's pledge three times adds emphasis to their intention (Exod 19:8; 24:3, 7). The narrative of this central part of the book of Exodus portrays the community as one that has previously encountered Yahweh in theophany, albeit from a distance. The fiery smoke descending upon the mountain peak, they had seen. The trembling earth, they had felt. The thunderous reply of the divine being, they had heard (Exod 19:18-19; 20:18). In that context, the pledge of covenant loyalty fits the narrative well. Yet, when the reader considers the movement of narrative time, this people is still a nascent religious community. Their commitment to a new deity must be in an emerging phase. Their trust in Yahweh is not fully developed.⁶

⁶ Jacob Milgrom, "Magic, Monotheism and the Sin of Moses," in *The Quest for the Kingdom of God* (ed. H. B. Huffmon et al. Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 258. Milgrom assesses the Israelite community in a similar way using these words: "Israel had hardly been weaned from the bondage of Egypt . . . Moses' generation is not yet bound to its God."

Israelites' Relationship with Yahweh

As Douglas Stuart points out, these people have, in narrative time, only been away from their homes in Egypt for three or four months.⁷ The long view of the narrative suggests that the people and their ancestors had lived in Egypt surrounded by a culture populated with multiple gods and iconic worship. Those in that culture were accustomed to following things visible as the various Egyptian deities were represented in images.⁸ In the contrast of narrative time suggested by the book of Exodus, the Israelites have been Yahweh's covenant people for a relatively short period of time. The covenant they have ratified requires a forsaking of idolatry, a practice which had been part of their religious experience for generations.⁹ Thus, despite the community's pledge of covenant fidelity, a considered view of the narrative would suggest that their trust in the Lord of the covenant is in its infancy.

The texts leading up to the Exodus 32 narrative repeatedly demonstrate the Israelites' ambivalent and fragile relationship with Yahweh. For example, the account in Exodus 14:21-31 attests to the people's initial faith in Yahweh. During their flight from Egypt, the Israelites had witnessed Yahweh's spectacular parting of the Red Sea and the subsequent drowning of the Egyptian army, which had been in rabid pursuit. The narrator compares the sea's divided water to "a wall on the peoples' right hand and on

⁷ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus* (NAC 2; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 661.

⁸ For example, the Egyptians worshiped Apis, a black bull with white markings. It was a fertility deity associated with procreation and agriculture, as well as with heavenly bodies. Donald B. Redford, "Apis," *ABD* 1:278.

⁹ Joshua 24 attests to the Israelites' exposure to other gods. Take for example verse 14: "Now therefore, fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord." See also verses 2 and 15.

their left” (Exod 14:29). Furthermore, the narrator reports that “Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore” (Exod 14:30b). As a result of the Israelites’ witness with their own eyes to Yahweh’s mighty disposition of pharaoh’s army, the narrator presents the Israelites’ trust in their new deity as unequivocal. The certainty of the narrator’s analysis is achieved by the redundancy of his phrasing: “the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord.” In the same breath, he states that they also believed in Yahweh’s servant Moses (Exod 14:31).

But in the short narration of time that elapses following the escape from pharaoh, other texts indicate that the Israelites have endured repeated hardship while afoot in the wilderness. These people typically respond to Moses and Aaron with complaints, which show the lack of depth in their belief as reported above. The people have expressed a desire to return to Egypt (Exod 16:3; Num 14:3) even though the narrator in the first part of the book of Exodus has clearly depicted the conditions there as oppressive. For example, he recounts that the pharaoh ceased to provide them, in their enslavement, with the straw necessary for brick-making (Exod 5:6-9). Yet, at the same time, the despotic ruler had required them to gather their own stubble while maintaining their original production quota and deadline. The narrator also reports that the Israelite foremen suffered beatings at the hands of the Egyptian taskmasters (Exod 5:14). In contrast, the narrator reminds the reader, twice in subsequent texts, that the people had enjoyed ample sustenance there. In Exod 16:3, the people mention that they had access to pots of meat as well as an abundance of bread while under pharaoh’s rule. In Num 11:4-5, the people recall freely eating fish in Egypt, as well as cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic.

The narrator relates that three days from the outset of the Israelites' trek in the wilderness of Shur, they encounter their first hardship (Exod 15:22-25). There is no potable water to drink. As a result, the people grumble. Moses, under the guidance of an invisible Yahweh, responds and transforms the once bitter springs of Marah into sweet tasting water. As the narrative progresses and the setting changes to the Wilderness of Sin, the people meet another obstacle. There is nothing to eat. Again, they grumble. In response to the people, the Lord showers the barren desert with quail and bread-like manna (Exod 16:11-15). The masses then proceed to Rephidim and arrive there parched from thirst. Their grumbling turns into an accusation against Moses. "Why now have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" (Exod 17:3). Again following an invisible Yahweh's instructions, Moses leads the elders of the congregation to Horeb. He brings forth water from the rock there by merely striking it with his rod (Exod 17:5-7). At that same campsite, Yahweh, working through Joshua and Moses, delivers the Israelites from the hands of the invading Amalekites (Exod 17:8-13).

The aforementioned texts clearly show that the new deity meets all of the people's basic physical needs along the way to their new land. And, yet, their trust in the consistency of divine provision and miraculous works remains tenuous. All the incredible displays of power do not displace memories of their upbringing in Egypt. Nor do the wondrous signs squelch the Israelites' tendency to question Yahweh's intentions when faced with their seemingly insurmountable problems. Thus, the narrator after first commenting upon the Israelites' faith in Yahweh, proceeds to portray them as a

grumbling and skeptical brood several months into their formation as Yahweh's chosen people.

The Israelites' Leadership Crisis

Not only is the existence of this movement toward Yahwism tenuous because of its infancy, but also Stuart observes that as the narrative of Exodus 32 opens, the movement finds itself in a leadership crisis.¹⁰ In a previous text, the narrator informs the reader that Moses is on the mountain with Yahweh for forty days and forty nights (Exod 24:18). The implication is, therefore, that the people have been without his tutelage for a very long time. This situation is significant. When considering the long view of the narrative, Cornelius Houtman notes that the people were conditioned while in Egypt to seeing with their own eyes in order to believe.¹¹ On their current journey through the wilderness, Moses has enabled the continuation of that practice. John C. Holbert points out that to the people, Moses represents the tangible and visible symbol of a generally invisible deity.¹² Now, due to his lengthy absence they have nothing to behold.

The last sight that the people behold of Moses as he ascends the mountain to meet Yahweh is his envelopment in a smoke-filled cloud. The people see their leader walk into what appears to be raging fire atop Mt. Sinai (Exod 24:17-18). The narrator recounts that before his unusual disappearance, Moses publicly addresses the seventy newly

¹⁰ Stuart, *Exodus*, 661.

¹¹ Cornelius Houtman, *Exodus* (HCOT 3; Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 610.

¹²John C. Holbert, "A New Literary Reading of Exodus 32, the Story of the Golden Calf," *Quarterly Review* 10 (1990): 48.

selected elders of the Israelites. In that context, he explicitly instructs them to remain at the base of the mountain. “Wait here for us [Moses and Joshua] until we return to you” (Exod 24:14). Additionally, Moses designates Aaron to be one of the people’s legal arbiters during his absence. He had said, “And behold, Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a legal matter, let him approach them” (Exod 24:14). But Moses commits a telling oversight. As Umberto Cassuto points out, he fails to tell the masses exactly how long he will be gone.¹³ Thus, the newly covenanted people of Yahweh, plagued by a succession of natural crises as well as the uncertainty of Moses’ return, now stand vulnerable to doubts about their new affiliation.¹⁴ Aaron, the substitute effectively left in charge of the wandering Israelites, however, is not an unknown entity to the people and their elders. The following section contains a discussion of his background.

Aaron’s Background

The narrative in the early part of the book of Exodus places Aaron at Moses’ side at the very inception of the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt. In Exodus 4:27, Yahweh instructs him, “Go to meet Moses in the wilderness.” The text indicates that Aaron immediately and obediently joins Moses. This reaction contrasts starkly with the resistant Moses, who four times beleaguers Yahweh with excuses to the divine call (See Exod 3:11; 4:1, 10, 13). Upon their union, Moses tells Aaron all the words which the Lord had spoken to him earlier and also the signs which Yahweh had commanded him to do (Exod 4:28).

¹³ Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (trans. Israel Abraham; Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1967), 411. See also Stuart, *Exodus*, 661.

¹⁴ See also Stuart, *Exodus*, 661.

Thus, when Aaron first deals with the Israelites, they are pharaoh's slaves. The narrator reports that he conveys to them, without hesitation, the divinely transmitted words and also performs the wondrous signs (Exod 4:30). Aaron's performance convinces the people that Yahweh had heard their earlier cries of oppression and that Yahweh planned to lead them out of bondage. As a result, he is favorably received by them as attested by their positive response to his delivery. The narrator states that the Israelites believed, bowed, and worshiped (Exod 4:31). His report in the text clearly shows that Aaron moved the people toward credulity. In contrast, Moses' words when Yahweh first approaches him to lead the Israelites demonstrate his lack of confidence with the people. His lack of confidence precludes him from taking action. Initially he had expressed to Yahweh, "Who am I that I should go to pharaoh and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?" (Exod 3:11). For a second time, Moses' failure to heed the Lord's call is marked by an insecure voice, "What if they will not believe me or listen to what I say? For they may say, 'The Lord has not appeared to you'" (Exod 4:1).

Aaron's Political Experience

The narrative in the early part of the book of Exodus also indicates that Aaron, the man who temporarily acts in Moses' stead at the base of Mt. Sinai, serves in a role similar to that of apprentice. Under Moses' guidance, he receives valuable political experience negotiating with a foreign head of state: the pharaoh of Egypt. More than one text places Aaron before that despotic ruler pleading for the Israelites' release from their enslaved plight. Together, he and Moses make known Yahweh's demands by delivering the deity's messages. They cry out, "Let my people go that they may celebrate a feast to

me in the wilderness” (Exod 5:1). And again, they ask of pharaoh, “Let my people go that they may serve me” (Exod 10:3).

On several occasions leading up to the exodus event, Aaron, following Yahweh’s direction relayed through Moses, demonstrates Yahweh’s might. He stands in the Egyptian king’s court front and center. For example, he throws down his staff, and it becomes a serpent. When pharaoh’s magicians replicate the act, Aaron’s staff swallows up theirs (Exod 7:10-12). Aaron also strikes the Nile River with his staff, and all the water within its banks turns into blood (Exod 7:20). Then, he stretches his hand over other rivers, streams, and pools within Egypt. As a result, frogs emerge en masse to cover the land (Exod 8:6). He strikes the dust of the earth with his staff and brings forth gnats, which cover both man and beast (Exod 8:17). In response to these wondrous acts which cursed the Egyptians, pharaoh summons Aaron along with Moses to his bargaining table. Each time, pharaoh promises to release the Israelites in exchange for the lifting of the existing plague ravaging the land. First come the frogs, then the swarms of insects, the hail, and locusts. Each time, according to the grand narrative, pharaoh recants (See Exod 8:8-15, 25-32; 9:27-35 and 10:16-20).

Aaron’s Military Experience

Not only does Aaron gain political experience through his relationship with Moses, but a text subsequent to the exodus event indicates that he also sees duty on the military front. In the context of the Israelites’ battle with the Amalekites (Exod 17:8-13), Aaron serves Moses in a capacity analogous to that of a modern day aide-de-camp. In that role, he props up Moses’ arms when exhaustion besets him. The uplifted hands serve

as a signal of encouragement to the Israelite army, and subsequently, ensure victory for these soldiers.

Aaron's Exposure to Worship

While working closely with Moses, Aaron is privileged to commune with Yahweh. In the context of celebrating the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt, he joins Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, and the elders of Israel for a sacrificial meal before the deity (Exod 18:12). On another occasion, Yahweh invites him, via Moses, to worship on the mountain (Exod 24:1). In that setting, Aaron is witness to the religious activities over which Moses officiates. The narrator reports that Moses erected an altar, then performed a covenantal ritual complete with the burnt and peace offerings. Ultimately, Aaron, his sons, Nadab and Abihu, as well as Israel's seventy elders ascend the mountain where they eat and drink with Moses in the Lord's presence (Exod 24:9-11).

Aaron is a Subsidiary, but Faithful Cohort of Moses

In spite of Aaron's presence in the aforementioned narrative scenes, Roy L. Honeycutt points out that Aaron's role in relation to Moses remains subsidiary.¹⁵ Early in their association, except in the context of his call, Yahweh's words to Aaron are invariably mediated through Moses. The phenomenon is clearly portrayed in several of the plague narratives which precede the events of Exodus 32. For example, before the Nile turned to blood, the Lord said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt'" (Exod 7:19; see also 8:6, 16). Furthermore, Yahweh explicitly explains to Moses, but not to Aaron himself, the latter's future role as

¹⁵ Roy L. Honeycutt, "Aaron, the Priesthood, and the Golden Calf," *Review and Expositor* 74 (1977): 526.

spokesperson to the Israelites. In the address to Moses, Yahweh essentially establishes a hierarchy, “And you are to speak to him [Aaron] and put the words in his mouth. He shall speak for you to the people; and it shall come about that he shall be as a mouth for you, and you shall be as God to him” (Exod 4:15-16). But to Aaron, Yahweh only says, “Go to meet Moses in the wilderness” (Exod 4:27).

Though Aaron is cast as Moses’ lieutenant or assistant in these contexts, the narrator presents him as a faithful cohort. During the drama of the plagues, Yahweh issues commands through Moses, and Aaron executes the commands. The narrator consistently reports Aaron’s compliance. He states, “And he [Aaron] lifted up the staff and struck the water that was in the Nile” (Exod 7:20). “So Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt” (Exod 8:50). “And Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff, and struck the dust of the earth” (Exod 8:17).

As pointed out previously, Aaron proves himself to be influential and effective with the people. He gains important political and military experience, as well as exposure to worship rituals. But Aaron’s mettle as a leader has not yet been tested. A close look at the Exodus 32 narrative illuminates his leadership skills and other character traits. This study maintains that his leadership style is affected by his perception of the people. He perceives them to be in a troubled state of mind due to their wandering in the wilderness and Moses’ long absence. The following section presents a portrait of the Israelite people.

The Israelites’ Emotional State

The narrative in Exodus 32 is set in the context of waiting, as indicated by the narrator’s opening statement in the first threshold encounter (vv. 1-6), “When the people

saw that Moses delayed (בָּשַׁשׁ) to come down from the mountain, the people assembled about Aaron” (וַיֵּרָא הָעָם כִּי בָשַׁשׁ מֹשֶׁה לָרֶדֶת מִן הַהָר וַיִּקְהַל הָעָם עַל אֶהֱרֹן). The narrator’s choice of the verb בָּשַׁשׁ bears significance beyond the implication of time.

According to *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, this polel stem of בָּשַׁשׁ, which is frequently translated “delayed,” carries the connotation of shame.¹⁶ In this context of the people’s waiting, such an interpretation fits well. And it is Moses who causes the people’s shame, as John D. Currid points out, chiefly because of his lengthy absence and failure to return from the mountaintop.¹⁷

Gerald Janzen rightfully concludes that the people’s concern over Moses’ continued absence precipitates the story’s development.¹⁸ He, however, takes the meaning of the verb בָּשַׁשׁ in a different direction. By way of intertextual comparison, he argues that the larger narrative within the book of Exodus contains war imagery.¹⁹ For examples, he cites the labeling of Yahweh as a warrior in Moses’ song of victory (Exod 15:3) and the language of “going before” (Exod 13:21; 14:19; 23:23). He refers to Judges 5:28, another text bearing military connotations. This verse contains the only other textual usage of the polel stem of בָּשַׁשׁ within the Hexateuch. In this context, Sisera’s mother laments her son’s failure to return from a battle scene. She raises

¹⁶ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs-Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1997), 101. See also J. Gerald Janzen, “The Character of the Calf and Its Cult in Exodus 32,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (1990): 599; Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 441.

¹⁷ John D. Currid, *Exodus* (Auburn, Mass.: Evangelical Press, 2001), 269.

¹⁸ Janzen, “The Character of the Calf,” 599.

¹⁹ Janzen, “The Character of the Calf,” 599.

concern over the length of time that has elapsed as evidenced by her questions, “Why does his chariot delay (בַּשָּׁשׁ) in coming? Why do the hoofbeats of his chariots tarry?” Janzen suggests that the term delay in this setting connotes a “shameful reversal” or an unfortunate outcome in battle feared by the speaker. By extension therefore to Exodus 32, he claims that the Israelite people are concerned not because of a feeling of shame but for reason of their own safety.²⁰ When the reader considers a preceding text which recounts the Israelites’ skirmish with the Amalekites (Exod 17:8-13), it is reasonable to conclude that this attack remains fresh in the people’s memory and that Janzen’s claim is plausible.

The term “saw” or “perceive” (וִירָא) used by the narrator in the initial statement also warrants mention, especially in view of the fact that it occurs multiple times throughout the Exodus 32 narrative, appearing across three different threshold encounters. Thomas B. Dozeman pinpoints the uses of this verb.²¹ He observes that each usage is headed by a different subject: the people (v. 1), Aaron (v. 5), Yahweh (v. 9), and Moses (v. 19). Thus, a considered view of the narrative would suggest that, whereas, Moses’ absence precipitates story development, perception drives the action. In the first threshold encounter of Exodus 32, it is the people who “see” (וִירָא).

The people’s perception of Moses, taken in combination with their Egyptian background, enables the reader to formulate a portrait of the Israelites, who in narrative time, now near the fourth month of their journey toward the new land promised by

²⁰ Janzen, “The Character of the Calf,” 599.

²¹ Thomas B. Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 681.

Yahweh. Scholars present numerous characterizations of them. As discussed, Janzen casts the people as anxious, even fearful.²² His analysis is plausible considering that they are stalled in hostile territory and have no idea how to proceed on their own to their destination. Plus, they are without their military commander Joshua. He, who had led their defense against invading forces, is now in the company of Moses on Mt. Sinai.

Carol Meyers uses milder terminology. She describes the people as being impatient and unhappy.²³ This state is conceivable considering that they have waited on Moses for an inordinate amount of time. Peter Enns pushes further, suggesting that they must feel a twinge of panic.²⁴ He observes that their only means of contact with Yahweh up to this point has been through Moses. In earlier texts (Exod 19:16; 20:18), the deity was introduced to the people in the context of lightning flashes, thunder, a thick cloud of smoke, and a very loud trumpet sound. The pyrotechnic display of power had caused them trepidation. As a result, they specifically requested of Moses that he act as an intermediary between them and Yahweh. They had said, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen, but let not God speak to us, lest we die” (Exod 20:19). Now, in Moses’ absence, they fear that access to the deity has been cut off.²⁵ Cornelius Houtman portrays

²² Janzen, “The Character of the Calf,” 604.

²³ Carol Meyers, *Exodus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 258. See also Ralph E. Hendrix, “A Literary Structural Analysis of the Golden-Calf Episode in Exodus 32:1-33:6,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 28 (1990): 213. Hendrix claims that the people are not only impatient with Moses but also with Yahweh.

²⁴ Peter Enns, *Exodus* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2000), 568-569.

²⁵ See also John I. Durham, *Exodus* (WBC 3; Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1987), 419.

the people as feeling abandoned as well as being completely disoriented.²⁶ The negative feelings that the Israelites experience build to a crescendo and they turn to Aaron, Moses' appointee, for help.

Aaron, the Temporary Leader

The Israelites and Aaron interact in the first threshold encounter of Exodus 32 (vv. 1-6). The reader detects the intensity of the scene by attending to three textual details: (1) the people's action toward Aaron, (2) the manner and content of the people's speech, as well as (3) the hurriedness of Aaron's response. With regard to the first element, various scholars agree that the people approach Aaron in an aggressive manner. Their conclusion is predicated upon the Hebrew expression *וַיִּקְהַל הָעָם עַל*.²⁷ They interpret the phrase as, "the people gathered against," although the preposition *עַל* lends itself to another common translation: "around." These scholars support their position by noting the occurrence of the same construction in three additional contexts of aggression and hostility. In one setting, the Levites, Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, "gathered against" Moses and Aaron in order to challenge their religious leadership (Num 16:3). Then, the congregation of these same priests "rose up against" Moses and Aaron, blaming them for their leaders' deaths (Num 16:42). In another totally different setting, the sons of Israel "assembled themselves against" Moses and Aaron to complain about the dearth of water

²⁶ Houtman, *Exodus*, 610.

²⁷ Stuart, *Exodus*, 662. See also Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, 682; Holbert, "A New Literary Reading," 47; Nahum Sarna, *Exodus* (JPSTC; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 203; William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 19-40* (AB 2A; New York, Doubleday, 2006), 547; Durham, *Exodus*, 419; Contra Houtman, *Exodus*, 631. Though Houtman infers a tense situation, he pictures the people merely standing around Aaron, the authoritative alternate, who is seated.

along the wilderness route (Num 20:2). Therefore, given the mental duress that the people are experiencing at this point in the Exodus 32 narrative, the translation “against” fits the context appropriately. Based upon the interpretation of על as “against,” the reader can reasonably conclude that the people’s approach to Aaron in this first threshold encounter is confrontational and that the moment is fraught with tension.²⁸

In addition to their actions, the nature of the people’s language also betrays their emotional state. Those who “gather against” Aaron clamor for a god who will “go before them.” Both a sense of urgency and an air of command are conveyed by the imperative form of the verbs used. The Israelites order Aaron “to come” (קום) and “to make” (עשה). According to *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, the term “to come” (קום) bears the connotation of “arise, get up” (i.e., from a state of inaction).²⁹ James K. Bruckner observes, too, that Aaron’s words in response, tear off (פרקו) and bring (הביאו) (Exod 32:2) match the tone of the people and contain a demand of his own.³⁰ Hence, the reader must conclude that the verbal exchange between the two parties does not reflect a relaxed, congenial atmosphere.

The way in which the people speak of their missing leader also reflects their deep seeded feeling toward Moses. They refer to him, in front of Aaron, as “this Moses” (זה משה). They decry, “As for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of

²⁸ Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (OTL; Louisville: The Westminster Press, 1974), 560. Childs, however, offers a stronger interpretation. He posits that the Hebrew expression על ויקהל העם embodies an element of threat and that it is actually a technical term for rebellion.

²⁹ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *The BDB Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 878.

³⁰ James K. Bruckner, *Exodus* (NIBC; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 282.

Egypt, we do not know what has become of him” (Exod 32:1). The placement of the demonstrative pronoun “this” (הַזֶּה) in front of Moses’ name has generated a variety of negative interpretations from scholars. For example, John C. Holbert suggests that the construction conveys sarcasm.³¹ George A. F. Knight nuances it as an expression of scorn.³² Brevard S. Childs considers the term not only abusive toward Moses but also indicative of flippant unconcern.³³ Thomas B. Dozeman points out that the insertion of the demonstrative pronoun functions throughout the Exodus 32 narrative to emphasize distance and alienation between characters.³⁴ In this first threshold encounter, its usage shows that a wedge exists between the people and Moses.

The frantic mood of the scene is also accentuated by Aaron’s impulsive, unreflective retort. Without hesitation, he directs the people to, “Tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me” (Exod 32:2). The utterance of these words suggests that Aaron craters in the wake of tension and pressure. The nature of his response also suggests that he capitulates to the wishes of the people. The reader cannot determine with certainty the cause of his reaction nor the thought processes behind it, mainly because the text is silent on the matter. The reader can reasonably surmise, however, that Aaron is readily influenced by others. In this scene, the outside influence originates with the Israelites, who approach

³¹ Holbert, “A New Literary Reading,” 48.

³² George A. F. Knight, *Theology as Narration: A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1976), 184.

³³ Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 564.

³⁴ Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, 706.

him with furor while simultaneously demeaning Moses. The following discussion demonstrates that the influence of the Israelite people has a direct and negative impact on Aaron's decision-making skills.

Of the Israelite Community

At this first expression of disgruntlement under Aaron's leadership, when Moses delays in coming down from the mountain, Aaron acquiesces to the complaint of the people.³⁵ The reader can reasonably conclude that Moses' appointed arbiter seems to seek peace at all costs when faced with the intensity of the moment. The silences of the text do not negate this conclusion. For example, the text makes no mention of any time spent in reflection on Aaron's part. As Peter Enns notes, Aaron takes no time to deliberate the matter.³⁶ Other scholars observe that Aaron offers no resistance to the popular desire for "a god to go before" the people.³⁷ James K. Bruckner claims that Aaron offers no argument.³⁸ The text does not mention any debate emanating from Aaron's lips. When thrust at the helm, Aaron fails to rely upon his verbal gifts, which were attested to by Yahweh in an early part of the book of Exodus (4:14). He, who in a preceding narrative scene had successfully convinced the people that Yahweh would

³⁵ Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, 703.

³⁶ Enns, *Exodus*, 568.

³⁷ Moses Aberbach and Leivy Smolar, "Aaron, Jeroboam, and the Golden Calves," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86 (1967): 137; H. L. Ellison, *Exodus* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 169. See also Walter Beyerlin, "Exodus 32," *Herkunft und Geschichte der ältesten Sinaitraditionen* (1961): 146. Beyerlin views the peoples' wish as an ordinary request because of their long exposure to the iconic culture of Egypt.

³⁸ Bruckner, *Exodus*, 282.

deliver them from pharaoh (Exod 4:30-31), does not attempt to dissuade nor reason with them in the present context.³⁹

Thomas B. Dozeman points out that the man, whom Yahweh had called to be Moses' mouthpiece, does not uphold Mosaic authority.⁴⁰ He also notes that Aaron neglects to insist that the people wait for Moses' return. As provisional leader of the Israelite community, Aaron does not remind them of the covenantal stipulation prohibiting the crafting of golden images (Exod 20:23).⁴¹ Nor does he try to bolster their immature faith by recalling their recently made promises to obey Yahweh's commands (Exod 19:8; 24:3, 7). Aaron, whom Yahweh had described in an earlier text as being fluent in speech (דָּבָר יָדָבֵר הוּא) (Exod 4:14), does not, in the setting at hand, try to calm his fellow Israelites who are worried and disturbed.

Instead, the narrator informs us that Aaron acts upon the gold submitted by the people. He does so in three ways: (1) he takes it, (2) he tools/fashions it, and (3) he produces a molten calf (עֲגֹל מִזָּכָבָה) (Exod 32:4). Leo Perdue observes that, throughout the narrative, the text equivocates between the people and Aaron in assigning responsibility for the making of the image.⁴² Initially, for example, the people, in direct speech to Aaron, request that he *make* a god for them (Exod 32:1). The narrator states

³⁹ H. Brichto, "The Worship of the Golden Calf: A Literary Analysis of a Fable on Idolatry," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 54 (1983): 5. Brichto also makes this observation.

⁴⁰ Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, 703.

⁴¹ Brichto, "The Worship of the Golden Calf," 5. Brichto also makes this observation.

⁴² Leo G. Perdue, "The Making and Destruction of the Golden Calf - A Reply," *Biblica* 54 (1973): 238.

that Aaron complies: “he *made* it into a molten calf” (Exod 32:4). Then, in a direct address to Moses, Yahweh informs his servant that the people have *made* for themselves a molten calf (Exod 32:8). Before Moses destroys the calf, the narrator attributes the *making* to the people. “And he took the calf which they had *made*” (Exod 32:20a). Subsequently, Aaron relates in a direct quote to Moses the people’s demand of him: “For they said to me, ‘*Make* a god for us’” (Exod 32:23). Continuing the report, Aaron describes his response: “I threw it into the fire and out came this calf” (Exod 32:24). Later, when seeking mercy for the people, Moses tells Yahweh directly that they *made* the god of gold for themselves (Exod 32:31). Finally, the narrator blames both parties for the incident, when he states that the people and Aaron *made* the calf (Exod 32:35).

In effect, the vacillation serves to create uncertainty for the reader as to the exact identity of the guilty party. Holbert, however, argues that Aaron undeniably and fully participates in the project.⁴³ He states that the narrator makes it clear to the reader by using three successive verbs: he [Aaron] took, he tooled/fashioned, and he made (Exod 32:4). Brevard Childs proposes that the narrator gives emphasis to Aaron’s involvement in an additional way: he rearranges the logical sequence of the manufacturing process.⁴⁴ In actuality, the first step in the formation of an idol would be the melting of the gold. The narrator, however, reports that Aaron first shaped the gold with an engraving-type instrument. It was only afterward that he melted it and cast it into a mold. The literary phenomenon apparent in this text is called a hysteron-proteron.⁴⁵

⁴³ Holbert, “A New Literary Reading,” 49.

⁴⁴ Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 565.

⁴⁵ Currid, *Exodus*, 270. See also Houtman, *Exodus*, 638.

Childs purports that the technique of engraving or tooling the gold is the traditionally accepted interpretation although various commentators offer other possible methods of craftsmanship.⁴⁶ Their differing renditions pivot primarily on the expression *ויער אתו בחרט*. The term *חרט* is customarily translated as “stylus” and “engraving tool.” Loewenstamm, however, has identified other interpretations within Aramaic sources, namely, “cloak” or “bag.” These sources, therefore, alternatively propose that Aaron wrapped/tied the people’s gold earrings in a bag or cloak and then melted them.⁴⁷ Several other scholars translate the term *חרט* as “mold” and the phrase *עגל מסכה* as “to pour out,” thereby posturing that the manufacturing process involved the pouring of melted gold into a pre-formed cast.⁴⁸ In an attempt to explain why Moses was able to burn the image as subsequently reported by the narrator (Exod 32:20), both Umberto Cassuto and Nahum Sarna suggest that the iconic object consisted of a wooden core and gold overlay.⁴⁹ This theory, however, is not supported by the text. In his explanation to Moses, as recounted in the fourth threshold encounter (Exod 32:21-24), Aaron does not

⁴⁶ Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 565. For a detailed overview of differing opinions, see Houtman, *Exodus*, 636-639; Propp, *Exodus* 19-40, 549; Samuel E. Loewenstamm, “The Making and Destruction of the Golden Calf,” *Biblica* 48 (1967): 481-90.

⁴⁷ Loewenstamm, “The Making and Destruction,” 487. Loewenstamm considers this idea plausible as does Martin Noth. See Martin Noth, “Zur Anfertigung Des Goldenen Kalbes,” *Vetus Testamentum* 9 (1959): 419-22.

⁴⁸ Currid, *Exodus*, 270. See also Noel D. Osborn and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on Exodus* (UBS Handbook Series; New York: United Bible Societies, 1999), 751; Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, 703; Perdue, “The Making and Destruction – A Reply,” 244.

⁴⁹ Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, 412; Sarna, *Exodus*, 203.

confirm the use of any of the aforementioned techniques. Instead, he claims that the calf was self-produced. He says, “I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf.”⁵⁰

Though the language of the text is multivocal regarding the technique used by Aaron, it attests with clarity and certainty to the fact that a concrete and visible object was manufactured and that the Israelites’ earrings were reconstituted. For example, an end product is specified and the people proclaim it to be their god (Exod 32:4). The narrator identifies it as a calf (Exod 32:4). Aaron sees it (Exod 32:5). Yahweh sees it and becomes enraged (Exod 32:8). Moses destroys it (Exod 32:20). Thus, under Aaron’s unseasoned leadership, a man-made theriomorphic entity becomes central to the nascent Israelite community, still immature in its trust of Yahweh. Although Aaron does not initiate the object’s construction, he participates in its formation.

In Moses’ absence, Aaron not only allows but also facilitates the people’s violation of Yahweh’s second commandment on two counts. First, their new image bears resemblance to one of the creatures of the earth: a calf עֵגֶל (cf. the prohibition in Exod 20:4). This calf is generally assumed to be a young bull, an animal associated with the religions of foreign lands. It recalls the pagan god of Israel’s past, Apis of Egypt. It also alludes to the pagan deity Baal, the bull-like god of the Canaanites. Concerning the second infraction, the Israelites’ new god is specifically crafted out of gold (cf. the prohibition in Exod 20:23).

⁵⁰ See Victor Hurowitz, “The Golden Calf . . . Made by Man or God?” *Bible Review* 20 (2004): 31-32. Hurowitz provides an interesting discussion of autogenesis, a concept prevalent in the ancient Near East, in an attempt to illuminate Aaron’s claim that the calf made itself.

When faced with crisis within the community of Israelites, Aaron proves to be an inadequate leader. He caves in to a request by a frantic people for a prohibited image. He fails to stand resolute on principle and makes no attempt to dissuade their pursuit of it. His reaction to the request for a tangible symbol (calf) also exposes his inexperience as a worship leader. Though the study mentioned in an earlier section that Aaron had witnessed a ritual proceeding, this is the first occasion for him to be in charge. We now turn to that discussion.

An Inexperienced Worship Leader

According to the narrator, when the calf is finished, the people announce, “This is your god, (אלהיך), O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt” (Exod 32:4). Scholars offer a range of speculation regarding the Israelites’ perception of this calf they called “god.” Some suggest that it served as a pedestal on which the invisible Yahweh stood. L. R. Bailey provides a listing of proponents of this interpretation.⁵¹ Others advance the idea that the calf is a visible image of the Israelites’ invisible god, though not actually a replacement for Yahweh.⁵² Still another interpretation, promulgated by Umberto Cassuto, presents the calf as a deified emblem in partnership with Yahweh, hence the usage of the plural form “your gods” (אלהיך) as presented in the text.⁵³ Some commentators propose that the people were desirous of a substitute for Moses.

⁵¹ L. R. Bailey, “The Golden Calf,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 42 (1971): 97-98.

⁵² Ellison, *Exodus*, 169; Martin Noth, *Exodus* (OTL; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), 247; Stuart, *Exodus*, 665.

⁵³ Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, 413.

Therefore, the calf was a representation of him.⁵⁴ Based upon the phrase, “to go before,” several scholars advance the idea that the Israelites considered the calf to be a guide for them through the unknown desert.⁵⁵ For Janzen, whenever Yahweh or the angel of Yahweh is the subject of the expression, “to go before,” the expression carries military connotations (See Exod 13:21; 14:19). Coupling this interpretation with the animal’s symbolism of strength and fighting prowess, he considers the calf to be a warrior-like figure which offers protection to the Israelites.⁵⁶ Common to all of these viewpoints is the element of visibility. The Israelites are a people who have spent generations in an Egyptian culture where the physical properties of a deity were prevalent. In their current and early stage of religious development, it is reasonable for the reader to infer that they desperately need an object to behold.

Within this first threshold encounter where the Israelites and Aaron interact, the focus of perception moves from the people to Aaron (Exod 32:5). It is Aaron who sees (וירא). He sees how the people respond to the calf with their exclamation of, “This is your god (אלהיך), O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.” Samuel R. Driver suggests that the impression which the calf makes on the people propels Aaron into action.⁵⁷ In other words, his subsequent move is reactive. Although the text does

⁵⁴ Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, 703. See also George W. Coats, “The King’s Loyal Opposition: Obedience and Authority in Exodus 32-34,” in *Canon and Authority: Essays in Old Testament Religion and Theology* (ed. George W. Coats and Burke O. Long; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 95.

⁵⁵ Houtman, *Exodus*, 625, 632. See also Holbert, “A New Literary Reading,” 48.

⁵⁶ Janzen, “The Character of the Calf,” 598-600.

⁵⁷ Samuel R. Driver, *The Book of Exodus* (Cambridge: University Press, 1953), 350.

not specify his motive, the reader reasonably surmises, given the people's speech equates the calf with their deliverer from Egypt, that Aaron considers the calf to be a visible representation of Yahweh. The action which Aaron undertakes is the performance of a ritual. It resembles the one which Moses had performed following his recording of the words of the covenant (Exod 24:3-11). In that context, Aaron was present. The two of them were worshipping together on Mt. Sinai at Yahweh's invitation. Therefore, Aaron must have at least witnessed and, perhaps, participated in what Moses had done.

A considered view of the Exodus narrative up to this point indicates that Aaron has had no prior experience in the leadership of worship. He has received no formal training and no instruction regarding the practice of the sacrifices. He has not yet been called or ordained into the priesthood.⁵⁸ In this first threshold encounter of Exodus 32, he now stands in Moses' stead inadequately prepared for the role of priest. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that when conducting a feast to Yahweh he would resort to copying the worship routine which Moses modeled earlier.

The narrator states that, like Moses, Aaron first builds an altar (cf. Exod 24:4). His action is consonant with Yahweh's prescription in the covenant code to construct an altar as a place of sacrifice (Exod 20:24). Next, Aaron publicly calls for a feast to be held the following day. He announces, "Tomorrow a feast to the lord" (חג ליהוה מחר) (Exod 32:5). His words indicate that Yahweh is the object of worship, not the calf. As Janzen points out, the speech clearly demonstrates that Aaron does not intend to worship another

⁵⁸ See Aberbach, "Aaron, Jeroboam, and the Golden Calves," 130, who also points out that Aaron has yet to attain any priestly status.

god.⁵⁹ In other words, as expressed by Jesus Ruiz, the plan for a feast shows that Yahweh is not being rejected.⁶⁰ John Durham and H. L. Ellison concur. From their perspective, the people are not abandoning Yahweh for another god; the calf merely represents the same god that Moses represented.⁶¹

The narrator reports that under Aaron's leadership, the people rise early, following the ceremonial precedent established by Moses (cf. Exod 24:4). They bring both burnt and peace offerings, in the same manner as Moses had directed the young men of Israel to do. The people also act in accordance with the covenantal instructions which Yahweh had issued in a previous context. Yahweh had told them, "You shall make an altar of earth for me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings" (Exod 20:24). In a final act of ritual, the people eat and drink, just as Aaron and Moses had done with Yahweh (cf. Exod 24:11). Up to this point, the ritual closely adheres to Moses' example. The two ceremonies begin exactly the same way, but as Dozeman points out, the feast of Yahweh, proclaimed by Aaron, ultimately devolves into לִצְחָק.⁶² In a threshold encounter that follows (Exod 32:25-29), the narrator describes Moses' perspective of the incident. He reports that Moses saw (וַיִּרְאֵהוּ) the people were out

⁵⁹ J. Gerald Janzen, *Exodus* (WBC; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997): 228. See also Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, 413. Contra Bruckner, *Exodus*, 282. Bruckner claims that the title "feast to Yahweh" was actually a misrepresentation, because according to his interpretation, Aaron was equating the calf with Yahweh.

⁶⁰ Jesus Maria Asurmendi Ruiz, "En torno al becerro de oro," *Estudios Biblicos* 48 (1990): 294.

⁶¹ Durham, *Exodus*, 421-422. See also Ellison, *Exodus*, 169.

⁶² Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, 704.

of control. The narrator then confirms Moses' assessment and places the blame on Aaron's leadership by stating, "for Aaron had let them get out of control" (Exod 32:25).

Scholars continue to debate the precise nature of the behavior suggested by the term לִצְחַק. In the literature, there appear to be two dominant streams of thought. One focuses upon sexual innuendos conveyed by the use of the same verbal root found in several Genesis texts. For one example, the Philistine king Abimelech looks through a window and sees Isaac caressing (מִצְחֵק) his wife Rebekah (Gen 26:8).⁶³ Various commentators, who engage in intertextual comparison, therefore understand the people at the feast of Yahweh called by Aaron to be enjoying a religious orgy.⁶⁴ Stuart notes, and the author of this study concurs, that the narrative context of Exodus 32 does not support this interpretation.⁶⁵

The other line of thought is based upon the term's primary root meaning of "to laugh." In the context of Exodus 32:6, the piel infinitive form is used, thereby indicating an intensification of the verb. Such an interpretation would portray the Israelites as having fun or as playing crazily. When the conversation between Joshua and Moses on their return to camp is taken into account, this interpretation fits the context more appropriately. As they descend the mountain unbeknownst to the Israelites, Joshua thinks

⁶³ See also Genesis 39:14, 17, in which Potiphar's wife suggestively recounts Joseph's visit to her household.

⁶⁴ Noth, *Exodus*, 248; Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 566; Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, 705; Holbert, "A New Literary Reading," 50; Godfrey Ashby, *Go Out and Meet God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 131. See also Janzen, "The Character of the Calf," 600-02. Janzen offers another interpretation, albeit unconventional. Based upon his detection of war/battle imagery in the narrative, he concludes that the Israelites are engaged here in a kind of military victory celebration.

⁶⁵ Stuart, *Exodus*, 666-67.

he hears war-like cries. Moses, however, describes the people's shouting as singing (Exod 32:17-18). Given the nature of both sounds, the noise must be loud and raucous. The narrator reports that when Moses actually identifies the type of commotion, what he sees includes the Israelites dancing (Exod 32:19). The combination of shouting, singing, and dancing gives validity to the interpretation that in this threshold encounter the people resort to celebrating, in the wildest sense.

This behavior of the Israelites deviates not only from the standard exemplified by Moses but also from the covenantal rules governing feasts (Exod 23:14-17). Among these, there is no mention of dancing. The seriousness of the infraction from Moses' perspective raises his ire and contributes, in part, to his smashing of the tablets upon which the laws were written. The narrator describes Moses as "burning with anger" (Exod 32:19). The people's errant behavior also exposes Aaron's vulnerability to external influence. Once again, he submits to the will of the people, this time in the context of ritual. He does not stop them when they decide to rise up and "play" (לְצַחֵק).

Summary

Aaron's interaction with the people as Moses' temporary replacement brings out a major short coming; he is easily influenced. When faced with crisis, this characteristic impinges upon his ability to lead a communal entity. The Israelites, short on trust and dependent upon things visible, are mired in anxiety and fear as they wait for Moses. Their plight causes Aaron to placate their demands rather than stand firm on principle. He does not uphold Mosaic authority and protect the tenets of the covenant. Likewise, the foible compromises his role as interim religious authority. He observes the crowd's enthusiastic response to the calf. Therefore, he incorporates it into the feast of Yahweh

instead of guarding the covenantal prohibitions against idols. Consequently, due to Aaron's lack of resoluteness, syncretism creeps into the Israelite's early worship experience. Durham points out that the invisibility and mystery of Yahweh are compromised by an image that Yahweh had unequivocally forbidden.⁶⁶

Aaron's actions and speech within the first threshold encounter suggest to the reader that he possesses inept leadership qualities. His weakness becomes more obvious when it is juxtaposed against Moses' leadership style. The next section focuses on that contrast.

*Moses, a Foil for Aaron*⁶⁷

As the scenes change and other threshold encounters develop, Moses' strong executive abilities in the midst of crisis serve to accentuate Aaron's leadership inadequacies. In the third threshold encounter of the Exodus 32 narrative (vv. 15-20), Moses' perception of the people comes into focus. From his vantage point atop the mountain, he sees (ויראה) in the camp below a crisis in process. He does not, however, see the crisis exactly as Aaron has perceived it. He does not see an anxious, shamed, fearful congregation now feeling the assurance of Yahweh's presence by way of a visible object. Instead, the narrator reports that Moses sees (ויראה) a golden calf and dancing (Exod 32:19). Moses perceives a man-made image and the violation of Yahweh's commandment.

⁶⁶ Durham, *Exodus*, 422.

⁶⁷ Holbert, "A New Literary Reading," 62. Holbert presents Aaron in terms of a foil for Moses. He contrasts their leadership styles but bases his conclusions on his perception that Moses identifies with the people whereas Aaron tries to distance himself from them.

By his reaction to the Israelites' behavior, Moses demonstrates to the reader that he is an uncompromising religious authority. Instead of including both the tangible image and dancing as part of the feast of Yahweh as Aaron had done, he gets rid of the golden calf. The narrator reports Moses' actions in quick succession. Moses takes the calf, burns it, grinds it into powder, scatters it upon the water, and makes the people drink of it (Exod 32:20). Various exegetes raise issue with the literalness of Moses' actions.⁶⁸ They point out that the properties of gold will not withstand some of the stated treatments. For example, this precious metal does not burn. Instead, it melts. Heavy gold particles will sink rather than be absorbed by the water. Furthermore, if gold were indeed combustible, it would not subsequently lend itself to be transformed into powder.

Other scholars, namely Loewenstamm and Holbert, explain Moses' behavior figuratively by drawing upon comparative literature from the ancient Near East.⁶⁹ They refer to the Ugaritic myth where the goddess Anat kills Mot, the god of death. In that literature, she performs a number of destructive acts that are almost identical to the ones that Moses uses in the Exodus 32 narrative.⁷⁰ For example, she burned Mot with fire, she ground up his body with millstones, and she spread his flesh upon the field and left it for the birds to peck at. In both accounts, Loewenstamm and Holbert note that the series of events is highly implausible and that the order of commission defies logic.⁷¹ They do,

⁶⁸ Loewenstamm, "The Making and Destruction," 481; Houtman, *Exodus*, 658.

⁶⁹ Loewenstamm, "The Making and Destruction," 484-85; Holbert, "A New Literary Reading," 57.

⁷⁰ See also F. C. Fensham, "The Burning of the Golden Calf and Ugarit," *Israel Exploration Journal* 16 (1966): 191-93.

⁷¹ Loewenstamm, "The Making and Destruction," 484.

however, achieve a literary effect. They describe the total eradication of an enemy.⁷² In view of this parallel story, scholars contend that Moses accomplishes the complete annihilation of the golden calf, which represents Yahweh's enemy. Childs, in particular, states that the barrage of verbs used in the text, makes clear that Moses does so beyond any reasonable doubt.⁷³ By his elimination of the visible object, Moses displays zero tolerance for images. In contrast to Aaron, Moses does not waver when dealing with behavior gone astray. Instead, he insists upon preserving the integrity of the covenant. Under his leadership, there will be no making, serving or worship of idols (Exod 20:4-5).

Moses, as a religious leader, also resolutely defends the lordship of Yahweh. For instance, after destroying the golden calf, Moses invites those who support the deity to step forward. He says, "Whoever is for the Lord, come to me!" The sons of Levi respond and gather around him (Exod 32:26). In this context, the text is silent regarding Aaron's response to Moses' summons. There is no mention of his joining the supporters of Yahweh. In contrast, Holbert points out that Aaron as acting religious leader had compromised the people's divine allegiance because of his propensity to yielding to outside influence.⁷⁴

A considered view of Moses' actions suggests that he presents as a strong, decisive community leader. As previously noted, he got rid of the image that the people were dependent upon, rather than accommodate their need as Aaron had done. He put an

⁷² Contra Perdue, "The Making and Destruction – A Reply," 246. Perdue claims that this connection is not compatible because the Ugaritic myth involves symbolism whereas Exodus 32 deals with concrete realism.

⁷³ Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 569. Childs notes that the unbroken chain of verbs effectively portrays Moses' anger.

⁷⁴ Holbert, "A New Literary Reading," 57.

end to the ritual which Aaron had allowed to become syncretistic. Then, in the fourth threshold encounter (Exod 32:21-24), he conducts a thorough investigative process. He interrogates and he observes. He directly approaches Aaron, whom he personally had left in charge. The text presents his style as proactive in contrast to Aaron, whose nature had allowed the people to determine his own response. Of Aaron, whose character has been lax in enforcing covenant regulations, Moses asks, “What did this people do to you, that you have brought great sin (חטאה גדלה) upon them?” (Exod 32:21). The text offers no hint of leniency in his words. From Moses’ standpoint, Aaron and the people had committed a serious offense, as indicated by his use of the expression חטאה גדלה.

In the fifth threshold encounter (Exod 32:25-29), the narrator relates that Moses witnesses (וירא) the state of the people in the camp. From his perspective, according to the narrator, they are out of control (v. 25). The narrator, whose reports are considered reliable by literary critics, additionally expresses that Aaron is responsible for that chaos. As a result of his observation, Moses in his role as leader of the community makes a decisive judgment. He calls for the punishment of all offenders. The text makes clear that Moses wants no one to be spared, regardless of association or kinship. Moses gives these instructions, “kill every man his brother, and every man his friend, and every man his neighbor” (Exod 32:27). Aaron’s abilities to guide the people in the ways of the Yahwistic covenant pale when juxtaposed against the resolute, decisive manner of Moses and his intolerance for aberrant worship practices. Their handling of crisis also betrays their different temperaments. Moses is prone to anger whereas Aaron tries to pacify. The discussion now focuses upon Aaron’s characteristic of peacemaking set against the backdrop of Moses’ wrath.

Aaron, the Peacemaker

Moses' perception (וירא) of the Israelites' behavior ignites his temper. The text explicitly states that "he [Moses] saw the calf and the dancing and Moses' anger burned" (Exod 32:19). The anger which burns within leads him to commit violent destruction. Without uttering a word to Joshua, who is in his company, he dashes the tablets of the covenant to smithereens. With this act, as Everett Fox points out, Moses symbolically cancels the covenant.⁷⁵ He also obliterates the calf to such a degree that not a single trace remains. Then, after his fitful display, he begins to interrogate Aaron, "What did this people do to you, that you have brought great sin (חטאה גדלה) upon them?" (Exod 32:21). From Moses' standpoint, the Israelites had committed a flagrant and serious error as both his actions and his choice of the expression great sin (חטאה גדלה) convey. In biblical literature, the wrongdoing associated with the language used in Moses' speech equates to infidelity in marriage and in worship. Similarly, the expression great sin (חטאה גדלה), when found in ancient Near Eastern documents, implies adultery.⁷⁶

When Moses refers to the Israelites in his question of Aaron, his speech contains the demonstrative pronoun "this." His language contrasts starkly with words used in a previous threshold encounter (Exod 32:7-14). In that meeting on the mountaintop, he had argued with Yahweh. He had purposefully called the Israelites "your" people when rebutting Yahweh's impersonal reference to them as "this people." Furthermore, in that scene, it was on behalf of Yahweh's people that Moses had intervened and appealed for

⁷⁵ Fox, *The Five Books*, 442.

⁷⁶ Currid, *Exodus*, 283. Propp, *Exodus 19-40*, 561. Sarna, *Exodus*, 208. In addition to Exodus 32, other biblical references include Genesis 20:9; 39:9 and 2 Kings 17:21.

mercy. Now, the presence of the impersonal pronoun on Moses' lips suggests that he, too, like Yahweh before him, tries to distance himself from the people.

His question to Aaron contains two important components. In his opening phrase, "What did this people do," Moses conceivably indicates to Aaron that he views the people as having initiated the image-making. Stuart suggests the possibility that they had applied pressure on Aaron.⁷⁷ With Moses' subsequent phrase, "that you have brought great sin upon them," Moses clearly implicates Aaron. Moses' speech, therefore, indicates that from his perspective both parties are guilty. His question, which generates the fourth threshold encounter (Exod 32:21-24), demands a response from Aaron.

Aaron's reply dominates the fourth threshold encounter. In an earlier encounter with the people, as discussed under the heading, "Of the Israelite Community," Aaron responded instantaneously in an attempt to pacify them in their moment of angst. Now, in this scene with Moses, his immediate reaction is similar. His first words, "do not let the anger of my lord burn," (Exod 32:22) are an attempt to calm his mentor. By addressing Moses with the title, "my lord," he portrays deference. His tone even smacks of servility.⁷⁸ Houtman observes that Aaron's wording recalls Moses' use of the identical expression when pleading with Yahweh to rescind his call (Exod 4:10).⁷⁹ Aaron's pattern of response when faced with confrontation, as demonstrated first with the people and now with Moses, suggests another trait. Aaron is a character who seeks to keep peace.

⁷⁷ Stuart, *Exodus*, 678.

⁷⁸ Some commentators consider this address to be an admission of guilt. See Houtman, *Exodus*, 661; Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield, England: The Almond Press, 1989), 67.

⁷⁹ Houtman, *Exodus*, 661.

Many commentators consider Aaron's subsequent comment about the Israelites to be a pejorative characterization of them. He says to Moses, "You, you know (אחה ידעת) the people are ברע." The term ברע traditionally has been translated by scholars as "prone to evil" or "bent on evil."⁸⁰ Janzen, however, offers an alternative interpretation based upon his intertextual reading with Exodus 5:19, where the same term is usually rendered "in trouble."⁸¹ He notes in the scene conveyed by this text, that the Israelites experienced a predicament of hardship. They were enslaved in Egypt and had been required by the dictates of a harsh pharaoh to continue producing their quota of bricks without straw, an essential material. Their supervisors were beaten by the pharaoh's taskmasters. When these overseers informed Moses that their people were "in trouble," the term ברע was used to convey their dire physical condition and the severity of the situation.

Janzen contends that in the context of waiting for Moses, as depicted by the narrative of Exodus 32, the people are also experiencing hardship. His interpretation is reasonable and therefore it is suggested that Aaron, in this threshold encounter with Moses, does not portray the people as evil. Rather, through his usage of the term ברע, he communicates to Moses that the people are "in trouble," or as Janzen expresses, "in a bad way."⁸² Aaron's presentation of the Israelites serves as another attempt to appease Moses. From Aaron's perspective, the people are not evil; they suffer from anxiety, fear, and shame. The fourth threshold encounter (Exod 32:21-24) shows that the character of

⁸⁰ Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 570. See also Stuart, *Exodus*, 679; Currid, *Exodus*, 284; Perdue, "The Making and Destruction – A Reply," 246.

⁸¹ Janzen, *Exodus*, 238.

⁸² Janzen, "The Character of the Calf," 602.

Aaron strives to maintain peace. The encounter also illumines his tendency to dodge blame. To a discussion of that characteristic trait we now turn.

Aaron, the Excuse Maker

After his attempts to mollify Moses, Aaron begins to relate to him the demands that the Israelites have made upon him (Exod 32:23). Holbert points out that a close examination of the text shows the initial part of his account corresponds in meticulous detail to the people's actual speech (Exod 32:1).⁸³ For example, Aaron repeats verbatim their language which insisted upon a god "to go before them." He tells Moses, "For they said to me, 'Make a god for us who will go before us.'" Childs notes that Aaron also includes in his version their disparaging reference to him as "this Moses."⁸⁴ Furthermore, Aaron recounts with precision the rationale which the people gave for their request: Moses' prolonged absence. The people had confessed to Aaron, "The man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." The inclusion of this segment of their speech has the effect of implicating Moses as the root cause of the people's feelings of anxiety, fear, and shame. In other words, Aaron is casting blame on Moses for their being "in trouble" (ברע). Both Propp and Stuart claim that what Aaron is attempting to do through his response to Moses' inquiry is to place the responsibility of the people's action of calf-making back upon Moses himself.⁸⁵

A close reading of the text, Holbert also observes, shows that Aaron's version of his own participation in the incident does not match the original dialogue between

⁸³ Holbert, "A New Literary Reading," 60-61.

⁸⁴ Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 570.

⁸⁵ Propp, *Exodus 19-40*, 561; Stuart, *Exodus*, 679.

himself and the people with the same exactitude (Exod 32:4).⁸⁶ The text clearly shows that some information has been omitted. For example, Aaron does not mention to Moses that he himself had ordered gold earrings to be taken specifically from the wives, sons, and daughters. He reports instead that he said, “Whoever has any gold” (Exod 32:24). The effect is that he merely opened up an opportunity for the collection of the material. The text also bears out that Aaron tweaks the wording of his reply. For instance, in his threshold encounter with the people, he had ordered them to tear off (פָּרְקוּ) the gold rings and to bring (הֵבִיאוּ) the items to him. But to Moses, he now reports that the Israelites gave (יָתְנוּ) the gold to him. Childs suggests that this substitution in the wording gives the impression that the people acted according to their own volition.⁸⁷

Holbert argues that the minor changes made by Aaron not only insinuate that the people bore direct responsibility for what Moses called “the great sin” but also have the effect of minimizing his role in it.⁸⁸ In other words, Aaron draws culpability away from himself. Holbert suggests that by substituting “they gave” (יָתְנוּ) for the imperative “bring them” (הֵבִיאוּ), Aaron portrays himself as being less dictatorial in his speaking.⁸⁹ In addition, the insertion of the pronoun “whoever” produces the same effect, for it neither

⁸⁶ Holbert, “A New Literary Reading,” 60-61. In this article, Holbert discusses three subtle changes in Aaron’s speech to the Israelites.

⁸⁷ Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 570.

⁸⁸ Holbert, “A New Literary Reading,” 60-61.

⁸⁹ Holbert, “A New Literary Reading,” 61.

designates nor mandates a person comply. In essence, Houtman claims that through his reply to Moses, Aaron portrays himself merely as a procurer of gold.⁹⁰

As noted, Aaron's answer to Moses' question begins with minor discrepancies. When he reaches the part about the actual creation of the calf, however, the text reveals that Aaron abandons all subtlety. His rendition of the method of manufacture radically departs from the narrated account. He tells Moses, "They gave (gold) to me and I threw it in the fire and out came this calf" (Exod 32:24). The use of the demonstrative pronoun "this," has the effect of distancing Aaron from the object.⁹¹ One can reasonably infer from his speech, therefore, that he assumes little responsibility for the calf's fabrication. Furthermore, he describes no technique or process, that he himself either undertook or directed others to implement. In other words, Aaron made no concerted effort nor gave any forethought toward a design of or a plan for the calf's production. According to Aaron's account, the object just appeared. To Aaron, it seemed like "no big deal." From his standpoint, no great sin (חטאה גדולה) had occurred. The text gives no hint of any consideration on his part that infidelity or adultery has been committed. His perception of the event conveys an air of nonchalance. Therefore, one can reasonably conclude that Aaron is trying to make light of the situation. He is making another attempt to assuage Moses' anger.

Aaron's claim that the calf came out of the fire without any manipulation has generated a wide range of scholarly interpretations. Both Victor Hurowitz and William H.C. Propp hold extreme positions. Aaron's assertion has been called an "outright lie"

⁹⁰ Houtman, *Exodus*, 662.

⁹¹ Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, 706.

by Hurowitz.⁹² Propp deems Aaron's explanation a "bald-faced denial of responsibility."⁹³ At the other end of the spectrum, his rendition has been deemed credible, especially by those scholars conversant with the literature and culture of the ancient Near East.⁹⁴ A minimalist view posited by Cassuto claims that Aaron's version was accepted by Moses.⁹⁵ Another theory advanced by Brichto proposes that Aaron considered the calf's self-production to be a miracle.⁹⁶ Aaron's excuse that the fire was to blame for the appearance of the calf also has been described as comical by Godfrey Ashby.⁹⁷ George A. F. Knight opines it to be naïve.⁹⁸

Throughout the Exodus 32 narrative, the narrator has insisted that Aaron is a responsible party. In the commentary on the first threshold encounter, he specifically points out that Aaron tools or engraves (ויער אתו בחרט) the calf (Exod 32:4). His use of the hysteron-proteron, a literary device which rearranges the logical sequence of events, effectively highlights that detail. As the narrative closes, the narrator makes the final comment. With it, he again indicts Aaron for the part he played in crafting the image. He states, "Then Yahweh plagued the people for what they made with the calf Aaron

⁹² Hurowitz, "The Golden Calf," 30.

⁹³ Propp, *Exodus 19-40*, 562.

⁹⁴ Loewenstamm, "The Making and Destruction," 488-489. Loewenstamm provides a source for Midrashic viewpoints regarding the origin of the calf.

⁹⁵ Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, 420.

⁹⁶ Brichto, "The Worship of the Golden Calf," 13-15.

⁹⁷ Ashby, *Exodus: Go Out and Meet God*, 132.

⁹⁸ Knight, *Theology as Narration*, 189.

made” (Exod 32:35). From a literary standpoint, the narrator’s reporting is presumed reliable. Loewenstamm makes an interesting observation, however, that gives the reader pause in accepting the certainty of the narrator’s case against Aaron. Loewenstamm points out the narrator never explicitly asserts Aaron’s claim “out came this calf” to be a “crass falsification.”⁹⁹ Furthermore, Moses offers no disputation regarding Aaron’s answer to his question: “What did this people do to you, that you have brought great sin upon them” (Exod 32:21).

In summary, Aaron’s verbal responses to Moses in the fourth threshold encounter reveal a character not yet ready to accept responsibility for his actions. In this encounter, Moses witnesses the Israelites’ behavior and judges it to be a great sin (חטאה גדולה). When he interrogates Aaron about it, Aaron tries to evade any ownership of it. He does not see the severity of the problem as Moses does. As a result, he first rationalizes the people’s conduct by calling Moses’ attention to their distressed state of mind. Furthermore, he places part of the onus on his interrogator’s shoulder. In other words, his response suggests that Moses bears some fault. It was Moses’ absence that had caused the Israelites to act upon their negative feelings. Subsequently, Aaron tries to disassociate his own involvement by manipulating his report of the incident and by trivializing the calf’s fabrication. Within his own actions, Aaron does not see any infidelity that the term great sin (חטאה גדולה) implies.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Loewenstamm, “The Making and Destruction,” 488.

¹⁰⁰ Contra David Fass who claims, in the process of accommodating the people’s will, Aaron overlooks the fact that the man-made object had not been authorized by Yahweh. See David E. Fass, “The Molten Calf: Judgment, Motive, and Meaning,” *Judaism* 39 (1990): 174.

Conclusion

When Moses goes to meet Yahweh on the mountaintop, an unseasoned Aaron is thrust into the position of sole authority over a struggling religious community. Though he had functioned as Moses' close associate since before the Israelites' escape from Egypt, being in charge is a new role for him. The narrative in Exodus 32 reveals his leadership weaknesses. In the first threshold encounter (vv. 1-6), Aaron is faced with a crisis of the people's confidence. Fearing that they have lost their contact with Yahweh, the Israelites demand of Aaron a visible representation of the deity. Aaron acquiesces at the cost of negating one of Yahweh's commandments: you shall not make for yourself an idol (Exod 20:4). When Aaron sees the people's ebullient reaction to the crafted calf, he proclaims a feast for Yahweh, at the cost of syncretism. Both of the actions undertaken by the inexperienced Aaron compromise worship. These dealings with a people under duress expose a weakness in his character that impacts his executive decision-making. Aaron is easily influenced by public sentiment.

In the fourth threshold encounter (vv. 21-24), Aaron is confronted by an incensed Moses. Moses initiates their dialogue by asking a penetrating question: "What did this people do to you?" He follows his interrogation by making a serious allegation: "you have brought great sin upon them." Before offering his explanation, Aaron first attempts to temper Moses' anger. Then he presents an altered version of the actual happening. Two of Aaron's qualities surface in his interaction with Moses. He strives to be a peacemaker. He resorts to excuse making rather than assume responsibility for his questioned actions.

When these two encounters (vv. 1-6) and (vv. 21-24) are read together, the reader observes how differently the two leaders perceive the Israelites. Aaron sees them as a people in a troubled state of mind. Moses sees them as having committed a great sin. When their leadership styles – Moses' is particularly evident in the encounters in vv. 15-20 and vv. 25-29 – are juxtaposed, the deficits of the inexperienced Aaron are magnified. His irresoluteness, his leniency in dealing with the people, and his lax enforcement of the covenant stipulations stand out, as does his reactive *modus operandi*.

CHAPTER THREE

Leviticus 10

Introduction

Bryan Bibb points out that the narrative action in Leviticus 10, pivots on speaking.¹ The narrative contains three threshold encounters involving the character Aaron: vv. 1-7, vv. 8-11, and vv.12-20. In each, he is addressed by either Moses or Yahweh. The words of these other characters demand responses. Aaron does indeed respond, and in various ways which bring into prominence his significant personal characteristics, both overt and subtle. Thus, following McCracken's model, modified from Bakhtin, which promotes character existing in relation to other actors, the person of Aaron is defined in this text by his interaction with Yahweh and Moses.²

As the first threshold encounter within Leviticus 10 unfolds (vv. 1-7), Aaron's initial behavior betrays his humanity. Thrust openly before the reader into a shocking situation, he presents as a father fraught with grief over the deaths of his elder sons, Nadab and Abihu. According to both the narrator (v. 1) and Moses (v. 3), the sons violate ritual procedure, and Yahweh strikes them down. This study contends that Aaron reacts with intense emotion. His feelings, however, do not immobilize him, for in a succeeding scene, the reader notes that he defends his remaining sons, Eleazar and

¹ Brian Bibb, *Ritual Words and Narrative Worlds in the Book of Leviticus* (New York: T & T Clark, 2009), 78. In fact, he claims that speaking is the characteristic narrative action in the entire book of Leviticus.

² David McCracken, "Character in the Boundary: Bakhtin's Interdividuality in Biblical Narratives," *Semeia* 63 (1993): 31.

Ithamar. The narrative shows that they, too, perform a cultic act which is questionable in Moses' eyes.

In this same setting in the courtyard of the tabernacle, though in a different encounter (Lev 10:12-20), Aaron's responses demonstrate that, as the newly ordained religious leader of the Israelite cult, he is committed to carrying out the responsibilities attached to his position. These duties are made clear by a direct speech from Yahweh (Lev 10:8-11). Aaron understands unequivocally that his duties must be executed correctly, and by his actions, he proves himself to be a high priest determined to ensure the holiness of Yahweh. Underlying these admirable qualities of family devotion and obedience, which surface from an examination of Leviticus 10, the reader also, detects a tension brewing between Moses and Aaron. Though the evidence of sibling rivalry is subtle in this text, it continues to mount as the narrative progresses into the book of Numbers. Aaron, the older brother, seems to vie for the authoritative status which now belongs to his father Jethro's second son, Moses.

Narrative Context

Aaron, Called by Yahweh, Again

The narrative of Leviticus 10 is set in the context of ritual. Specifically, John Kleinig points out that the account depicts the inaugural performance of the divine service.³ Aaron is in the process of executing his first duties in the role of high priest of the Israelite community. The narrator has previously delineated in the book of Exodus those precursory preparations that were undertaken leading up to this event. Yahweh had

³ John Kleinig, *Leviticus* (CC; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 233.

once again summoned Aaron to service, this time within the Israelite cult, as portrayed in Exod 28:1. In that context, Yahweh had instructed Moses, “Then bring near to yourself Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the sons of Israel, to minister as priest to me.” Once again Aaron had complied, and again the reader can reasonably assume that he did so without hesitation, since the text makes no mention of any delay.

Aaron, Ordained as Yahweh’s Servant

After Aaron heeds the divine summons, the text portrays an elaborate ritual guided by Yahweh and performed by Moses, by which the priesthood is established (Lev 8:6-36). Additionally, Aaron is ordained as its leader. The narrator describes the ceremony with much detail. He states that it takes place in front of the newly dedicated tabernacle (Lev 8:4). In that setting, Moses washes Aaron and formally adorns him in the priestly regalia (Lev 8:6). First, he applies a tunic girded with a sash, then a robe secured by an artistic ephod, and over both, a breastplate (Lev 8:7-8). On top of Aaron’s head, he places a turban, and in front of it, a golden plate (Lev 8:9). Aaron is crowned the first high priest of the Israelite nation. At this point in the narrative, Aaron is garbed in all the finery of a dignitary and stands before the Israelites as their new religious authority. The reader concludes from the narrator’s depiction that Aaron appears as an imposing figure to the people.

As the ritual continues, Moses anoints Aaron’s head with the holy oil (Lev 8:12). This mixture, Yahweh had made explicitly clear in another context, was to be reserved exclusively for those persons called to divine ministry (Exod 30:32-33). Yahweh pronounced the following instructions which were to be adhered to throughout the generations, “It shall not be poured on anyone’s body, nor shall you make any like it, in

the same proportions; it is holy, and it shall be holy to you. Whoever shall mix any like it, or whoever puts any of it on a layman, shall be cut off from his people.”

Then, in an act of atonement for both Aaron and his sons, Moses presents the bull of the sin offering (Lev 8:14-17). Subsequently, he presents the ram of the burnt offering to the Lord as a soothing aroma (Lev 8:18-21). And finally, he slaughters a second ram, the ram of ordination. He daubs its blood on Aaron in an act of consecration (Lev 8:22-23). After these sacrifices are performed, Moses instructs Aaron and his sons, under the threat of death, to remain inside the doorway of the tabernacle for seven days (Lev 8:33-35). The newly anointed priest is required to spend one week in isolation, the amount of time necessary for the ordination process to be completed. Yahweh had directed the stipulation to Moses, “And thus you shall do to Aaron and to his sons, according to all that I have commanded you; you shall ordain them through seven days” (Exod 29:35). Charles R. Erdman points out that this confinement emphasizes the idea that separation is paramount for priestly consecration.⁴ Priests are to be set apart through a system of washing, investiture, and anointing in order that they may minister to Yahweh.

Aaron, the Obedient Servant

At the conclusion of the ordination ceremony, the narrator favorably portrays Aaron with these words, “Thus Aaron and his sons did all the things which the Lord had commanded through Moses” (Lev 8:36). This comment regarding Aaron’s actions highlights a character trait which is observable again in Leviticus 10. Namely, Aaron demonstrates that he is an obedient servant when interacting with Yahweh’s directions.

⁴ Charles R. Erdman, *The Book of Leviticus* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1951), 43.

The ritual activities progress into day eight, as specified in the text (Lev 9:1). It is on this day that Aaron officially begins his ministry, so notes Philip Budd.⁵ Jacob Milgrom also points out that Aaron exclusively officiates at the inauguration of the divine rites and the cult in the newly dedicated tabernacle.⁶ Up to this point in the narrative, the text mentions no predecessor from whom Aaron has had the opportunity to learn routine and protocol unique to the role of high priest. Therefore, it is incumbent upon Aaron, the reader surmises, that he set the example for future generations. The text indicates that he does rise to this task. Three times the narrator affirms that Aaron performs the various sacrifices with precision, and according to divine expectation. First he states, “He [Aaron] then offered up in smoke on the altar just as the Lord had commanded” (Lev 9:10); “He [Aaron] also presented the burnt offering and offered it according to the ordinance” (Lev 9:16); “But the breasts and the right thigh Aaron presented as a wave offering before the Lord, just as Moses had commanded” (Lev 9:21). After these sacrifices have been offered, Aaron twice blesses the congregation (Lev 9:22-23). The narrator reports that when the second blessing is given, the glory of the Lord appears (Lev 9:23). Subsequently, fire from the deity consumes the offerings upon the altar (Lev 9:24). Walter Houston posits that because of these two signs, the divine appearance and the consumption of the sacrificial animals, Aaron is justified in thinking that Yahweh has

⁵ Philip J. Budd, *Leviticus* (NCBC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 129.

⁶ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation and Commentary* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 592.

approved and authorized his priesthood.⁷ In addition, the narrator states that the Israelite people react with wild euphoria. Commentator Brian Bibb describes the day as the highest moment of the cult.⁸

In summary, the larger view of the book of Leviticus indicates that Aaron unhesitatingly accepts Yahweh's call to become high priest of the Israelite community. The text enumerates in detail the steps he undertakes to become ordained. The narrator repeatedly attests to Aaron's compliance with the process involved in the inaugural service of the cult. In effect, the narrator portrays Aaron to the reader as an obedient minister to Yahweh. As the inaugural service progresses, circumstances abruptly change. Consequently, Aaron must interact with both Moses and Yahweh under a state of duress. The following sections examine and analyze Aaron's responses to these narrative figures in order to ascertain what they reveal about Aaron's character. The section immediately below shows that Aaron is a father who possesses deep feeling.

Aaron, the Compassionate Father

Aaron Witnesses the Deaths of His Sons

Within moments, as depicted in narrative time, another spectacular display of pyrotechnics erupts from the same source, that is, from the presence of the Lord (Lev 10:1-2). The orderly flow of inaugural ceremonies abruptly ceases. The atmosphere of jubilation turns to horror. The flames are no longer a sign of approbation, but of wrath.

⁷ Walter Houston, "Tragedy in the Courts of the Lord: A Socio-Literary Reading of the Death of Nadab and Abihu," *JSOT* 90 (2000): 32.

⁸ Bibb, *Ritual Words*, 117.

In full view of the congregation, the incendiary blast emanating from Yahweh engulfs Aaron's eldest sons, Nadab and Abihu. The narrator reports, "And fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord" (Lev 10:2).

The victims are the very sons who at one time, Lloyd R. Bailey observes, had been in good standing with the deity.⁹ The book of Exodus indicates that they had been divinely chosen, that Yahweh had named them along with Aaron to become priests. Yahweh had given Moses these directions, "Then bring near to yourself Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the sons of Israel, to minister as priest to me – Aaron, Nadab and Abihu" (Exod 28:1). Therefore, these two sons of Aaron had not been elected to their position by the people. Erdman adds an additional observation: they were neither born into the priesthood nor did they inherit it.¹⁰ Furthermore, the long view of the Exodus narrative shows that Yahweh had previously invited them, along with a select group of elders, to ascend Mt. Sinai just prior to the issuance of the Ten Commandments. Yahweh had said to Moses, "Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu . . . and you shall worship at a distance (Exod 24:1). Nadab and Abihu are the same sons whose priestly ordination the public has just witnessed alongside Aaron's. Now, their father, still clad in full priestly raiment and crown, stands among the people and watches them burn to death.

⁹ Lloyd R. Bailey, *Leviticus-Numbers* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 2005), 111.

¹⁰ Erdman, *The Book of Leviticus*, 89.

Moses and Aaron Respond

The traditional interpretation. The text discloses that Moses, the uncle of Nadab and Abihu, steps forward after the incident and speaks (Lev 10:3). The action he takes must be immediate, because no intervening incidents or reactions are reported in the text. Though the text presents Moses' speech, it is silent regarding his feelings. For example, there is no mention of his voice projecting shock or of his vocalizing concern at the loss of his nephews. From Samuel E. Karff's viewpoint, Moses' words come across as starkly insensitive to the ear of his brother.¹¹ Moses offers Aaron no condolences, only the following theodicy for the holocaust: "It is what the Lord spoke, saying, 'By those who come near me I will be treated as holy, and before all the people I will be honored'" (Lev 10:3).

The writer has placed Aaron in the action, provoked him by Moses' words and given him the opportunity to respond, creating the first threshold encounter of Leviticus 10 (vv. 1-7). Aaron does respond. The narrator describes his response with the phrase, וידם אהרן (Lev 10:3). What Aaron does is bound up in the meaning of the verb דגם. The traditional interpretation accepted by most commentators is, "And Aaron was silent." Though scholars have yet to arrive at a consensus for explaining his reticence, they have generated a variety of speculative reasons for it, which are enumerated as follows.

¹¹ Samuel E. Karff, "Silence and Weeping before the Song," in *Preaching Biblical Texts* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 111.

For one, N. H. Snaith suggests that Aaron is struck dumb by the combination of amazement and fear.¹² The dread was so extreme, theorizes J. R. Porter, that it causes him to be “rooted to the spot.”¹³ Erdman, however, maintains that Aaron’s response is one of submission to the presence of Yahweh’s holiness, which is exemplified by the fire.¹⁴ Erhard S. Gerstenberger claims that Aaron’s lack of words is due to his inability to justify his sons’ errors.¹⁵ In a similar vein, Houston proposes that silence is Aaron’s only choice. He can neither defend nor disown Nadab and Abihu.¹⁶ To Martin Noth, Aaron’s silence indicates shame due to the fact that he functions as the supervisor of the ritual proceedings.¹⁷ John E. Hartley argues that Aaron understands the seriousness of Nadab and Abihu’s infraction.¹⁸ Jacob Milgrom claims that Aaron is paralyzed. He bases this conclusion upon an intertextual comparison with the same verb used in Exodus 15:16. In that context the verb form *ידמו* is customarily translated, “they became petrified as stone.”¹⁹

¹² N. H. Snaith, *Leviticus & Numbers* (CB; London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, Ltd., 1967), 76.

¹³ J. R. Porter, *Leviticus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 77.

¹⁴ Erdman, *The Book of Leviticus*, 53.

¹⁵ Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Leviticus: A Commentary* (trans. Douglas W. Stott; OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 118.

¹⁶ Houston, “Tragedy,” 35.

¹⁷ Martin Noth, *Leviticus: A Commentary* (trans. J. E. Anderson; OTL; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1965), 85.

¹⁸ John E. Hartley, *Leviticus* (52 vols.; WBC; Dallas: Word, 1992), 4:134.

¹⁹ Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 604.

W. H. Bellinger suggests that if Aaron had resorted to overt signs of grief, he would have reflected pagan influence.²⁰ On the other hand, Richard N. Boyce claims that had Aaron lamented the loss of his sons, his response would have been perceived as more significant than his devotion to the duties of worship.²¹ Diane M. Sharon and Karen C. Eliassen take the interpretation in different directions. Sharon argues that Aaron's silence is a symptom of his anger toward Yahweh.²² Eliassen suggests that the silence betrays a transformative moment for Aaron. In her article, "Aaron's War Within: Story and Ritual in Leviticus 10," she tries to make the case that Yahweh's theophany and the sacrifice of Aaron's two sons help him realize both the import and risk associated with his priestly vocation.²³ Baruch A. Levine points out that in the Septuagint, Aaron's response is nuanced as shock. A translation of the Greek expression describing his action, *kai katenukhthe Aaron*, is usually rendered as "and Aaron was stunned."²⁴

An alternative viewpoint. Most scholars accept Aaron's response to be silence. Another interpretation is plausible, however, in the context of this first threshold

²⁰ W. H. Bellinger, Jr., *Leviticus, Numbers* (NIBC; Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2001), 65.

²¹ Richard N. Boyce, *Leviticus and Numbers* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 38.

²² Diane M. Sharon, "When Fathers Refuse to Eat: The Trope of Rejecting Food and Drink in Biblical Narrative," *Semeia* 86 (2006): 139.

²³ Karen C. Eliassen, "Aaron's War Within: Story and Ritual in Leviticus 10," *Proceedings: Eastern Great Lakes Biblical Society* 20 (2000): 91.

²⁴ Baruch A. Levine, "Silence, Sound, and the Phenomenology of Mourning in Biblical Israel," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 22 (1993): 89. See also Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 604.

encounter. It bears credibility when the reader considers the high level of emotion bound up in the three momentous events which occurred in a single day. For one, Aaron has just presided over the first sacrificial service of the nascent Israelite cult. Additionally, Samuel Karff points out that he has witnessed Yahweh's power and love dramatically revealed on the altar of burnt offering in the courtyard of the tabernacle.²⁵ Third, his first born children have been struck dead in the line of priestly duty in front of his own eyes. Given the fact that Aaron is a father; that in the long view of the narrative, he has demonstrated sensitivity to the needs of his people; and that in a future narrative scene he shows himself to be a sibling of compassion (Num 12:10-12), it is conceivable that he does not endure the destruction of his children in silence.

Baruch Levine presents an alternative interpretation for the verb in question, (דָּמַם) and makes a compelling argument for reading it as “moaned or mourned.”²⁶ He examines other biblical texts, specifically Isaiah 23:1-2; Lamentations 2:10; Amos 5:13; and Ezekiel 24:17. He also looks at cognates from the surrounding Eblaic, Akkadian, and Ugaritic languages. As a result, he discovers two homonymous roots for the verb (דָּמַם). He finds that each one has a distinct and differentiated usage.²⁷ One application, which he classifies as *d-m-m* I, connotes total silence and stillness.²⁸ He claims that the other root, which he designates as *d-m-m*- II, is associated with movement and sound.

²⁵ Karff, “Silence and Weeping,” 110.

²⁶ Levine, “Silence, Sound,” 89.

²⁷ Levine, “Silence, Sound,” 90-91.

²⁸ Reymond, E. D., “The Hebrew Word דָּמַם and the Root *d-m-m* I (“To Be Silent”)” *Biblica* 90 (2009): 376. Reymond emphasizes that *d-m-m* I represents neither muttering nor speaking in low tones.

As a result of his analysis of Ezek 24:16-23, Levine also identifies two kinds of mourning present in biblical literature.²⁹ One, he notes, is characterized by the involuntary and irrepressible sobbing associated with grief. For this type, he says, prohibitions were usually ineffective. He additionally points out that certain expressions of grief, such as wailing, weeping, sighing, moaning, and liturgical laments, were prevalent among the early Israelites.³⁰ The reader can find sufficient examples within the Pentateuch and in other biblical literature as well. In the narrative scene depicting Sarah's death, for example, Abraham mourns and weeps for her (Gen 23:2). In the Joseph narratives, both Jacob and Joseph are reported to have sobbed. Jacob weeps for his young son after examining the blood stained tunic handed him by Joseph's deceitful older brothers (Gen 37:35). When Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers, the narrator reports that his weeping is so loud the Egyptians are able to hear him behind closed doors (Gen 45:2).

Even King David, at the height of his reign, publicly expresses his grief. In the scene where the Cushite runner brings news that his son Absalom has been killed in the aftermath of battle, David cries out in pain, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" (2 Sam 18:33). It is plausible, therefore, that Aaron, in his bereavement over the simultaneous loss of not one but two sons, displays the same kind of spontaneous emotion in the first threshold encounter of Leviticus 10. The root form of the verb (דָּמַם) associated with movement and sound, identified by Levine and designated as *d-m-m-* II, fits appropriately

²⁹ Levine, "Silence, Sound," 100, 106.

³⁰ Levine, "Silence, Sound," 96.

in this setting. Aaron must have been unable to restrain his paternal instincts. Instead of responding with silence to the holocaust and Moses' explanation of it, he must have mourned the deaths of Nadab and Abihu with sounds audible to the congregation.³¹ He must have moaned and wailed. This study reads Aaron's response according to Levine's interpretation and therefore concludes that Aaron is a father possessing deep feeling.

The other type of mourning that Levine discusses consists of formal, intentional rituals. These include the uncovering of the head, the tearing of clothes, and the tossing of ashes. Levine points out that these overtly physical actions were used as coping mechanisms in the Israelite culture. Therefore, because of the deliberative nature, these actions could be authoritatively forbidden.³² A comparison with the narrative time suggested by the book of Leviticus shows that this phenomenon occurs in the first threshold encounter (Lev 10:1-7) immediately following Aaron's response (v. 3), which this study claims consists of audible sounds. Before Aaron is able to transition from the spontaneous outpouring of grief to more formal expressions, the narrator states that Moses first orders the disposition of Nadab and Abihu's corpses to an area outside the camp (Lev 10:4). He then instructs Aaron (and his surviving sons) to refrain from initiating any of the customary regimens of lamentation (Lev 10:6-7).³³ The text is explicit. Moses says, "Do not uncover your heads nor tear your clothes" (v. 6). He

³¹ Contra Sharon, "When Fathers Refuse to Eat," 135. Sharon maintains that Aaron does not demonstrate grief upon the deaths of his sons.

³² Levine, "Silence, Sound, 100, 106.

³³ Levine, "Silence, Sound, 106. Levine argues that Moses' need to issue a prohibition at this point in the narrative is another indicator that Aaron has begun a grieving process.

additionally commands, “You shall not even go out from the doorway of the tent of meeting” (v.7).

Though the text does not reveal Moses’ inner thoughts, various scholars have speculated regarding the motivations behind his orders. For example, Frank H. Gorman suggests that Moses may have feared such formal machinations would cause defilement of the newly ordained religious authority and ultimately bring God’s wrath upon the entire community.³⁴ Roy Gane and Allen P. Ross postulate that Moses did not want Aaron to mourn formally lest it be construed as sympathy for Nadab and Abihu.³⁵ From Louis Goldberg’s perspective, a ceremonious response may have called into question Yahweh’s action.³⁶ The text does, however, convey the seriousness with which Moses speaks. His command against ritualistic mourning is accentuated with the threat, “Lest you die” (ולא תמותו). Two times he utters these words. The repetition serves to emphasize the admonishment. When Moses finishes his speech, the narrator subsequently reports that Aaron (and his surviving sons) complies with Moses’ orders (Lev 10:7).

Aaron, the Faithful and Compliant Servant

Aaron’s obedient response to Moses recalls similar action which was previously discussed under the heading, “Aaron, Called by Yahweh, Again.” In that section it was

³⁴ Frank H. Gorman, Jr. *Divine Presence and Community* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 65.

³⁵ Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 2004), 191. See also Allen P. Ross, *Holiness to the Lord* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2002), 235.

³⁶ Louis Goldberg, *Leviticus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980), 59.

pointed out that Aaron unhesitatingly heeds Yahweh's call to a position in the cult (Lev 8:6). It was also noted that during the ordination ceremony for the priesthood, Aaron does just as the Lord had commanded through Moses (Lev 8:36). Also mentioned was the fact that in his first presentation of sacrifices during the inauguration of the tabernacle service, Aaron does just as the Lord had commanded through Moses (Lev 9:10, 21). These texts make it clear that Aaron moves with caution, precision, and compliance when in the presence of the divine.

With these responses in view, the reader reasonably assumes that a behavioral pattern, or a consistent character trait, begins to emerge. That is, Aaron proves to be a character who takes his vocational responsibilities seriously. He executes his priestly duties in exact accordance with prescription. And again, in this first threshold encounter of Leviticus 10 (vv.1-7), Aaron complies. He does just as he is directed when Moses tells him to refrain from enacting the formal rituals of mourning (Lev 10:7).

Moses makes it very clear to Aaron that failure to comply with his instructions will result in his own death. The text discloses that Aaron has already been confronted with the reality of death once: his two sons were consumed by divine fire. The reader can reasonably infer, therefore, that Aaron comprehends the gravity of the situation. One also can conceivably conclude that such a realization may have prompted his submission. But, like in the case of Moses, the interior workings of Aaron's mind are not stated in the text and, therefore, remain opaque to the reader. Regardless of one's speculations regarding Aaron's motivation, the narrator unequivocally states that Aaron obeys. "So they [Aaron and his surviving sons] did according to the word of Moses" (Lev 10:7).

Aaron's deferential and faithful reaction in this threshold encounter with Moses becomes more salient when contrasted with his sons' earlier disregard for Yahweh's commands. Although most scholars agree that the ritual impropriety which Nadab and Abihu committed during the inaugural service precipitated Yahweh's wrath, they continue to debate the exact nature of the mistake. Philip J. Budd has compiled an extensive list of suggested infractions, each one of which is tinged with some element of presumptuousness on the part of the young, new priests.³⁷ For examples, Nadab and Abihu may have entered the Holy of Holies, a place to which only the high priest was privileged; or they may have been insensitive to the timing of the offering; or the incense mixture they used may not have been concocted to specification (see Exod 30:34-38).

Mark F. Rooker speculates that the sons may have been inebriated while performing the rites.³⁸ Several scholars argue that the problem revolved around either the fire or the firepans. J. R. Porter, for example, proposes the idea that the sons may have acquired the fiery coals from a foreign source, such as the Zoroastrian cult.³⁹ Others simply suggest that their fire was not taken from the authorized outer altar.⁴⁰ Joan E. Cook makes the broad claim that their error stemmed from a failure to distinguish

³⁷ Budd, *Leviticus*, 149.

³⁸ Mark F. Rooker, *Leviticus* (NAC 3A; Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 160.

³⁹ Porter, *Leviticus*, 77.

⁴⁰ Gorman, *Divine Presence*, 64; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 598; Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 188; Kleinig, *Leviticus*, 230.

between the profane and the sacred.⁴¹ Louis Goldberg and John Hartley move beyond the realm of the ritual and perceive the wrongdoing to be directly related to character flaws. Goldberg attributes the sons' disobedience to a jealousy of their father's rank.⁴² For Hartley, at issue is the sons' self-aggrandizement. They desired that the public think they, too, had special access to Yahweh.⁴³

Even though a plethora of scholarly ideas has been presented, the text does not stipulate Nadab and Abihu's offense. As Levine points out, the text only mentions that the sons brought an offering that had not been specifically ordained.⁴⁴ The narrator reports, "[They] offered strange fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them" (ויקרבו לפני יהוה אש זרה אשר לא צוה אתם). The text does, however, present through the lens of Moses a reason for the divine judgment of Aaron's two older sons. Immediately after their deaths, Moses addresses Aaron, repeating an oracle from Yahweh. "It is what the Lord spoke, saying, 'By those who come near me (בקרבי) I will be treated as holy, and before all the people I will be honored'" (Lev 10:3).

Commentators observe that in the Israelite community, the phrase, "by those who come near me" (בקרבי), was commonly understood to be a designation for priests

⁴¹ Joan E. Cook, "Community, Cult, Sacrament and Priesthood: A Response to Karen Eliassen's, 'Aaron's War Within: Story and Ritual in Leviticus 10,'" *Proceedings Eastern Great Lakes Biblical Society* 20 (2000): 102.

⁴² Goldberg, *Leviticus*, 58.

⁴³ Hartley, *Leviticus*, 131.

⁴⁴ Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus* (JPSTC; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society), 58-9.

(cf. Ezek 43:19).⁴⁵ Given this understanding, Budd suggests that Moses considered the fiery display to be Yahweh's way of showing his holiness to the priests.⁴⁶ Furthermore, Gorman determines that Moses' explanation indicates that the whole community should know the holiness and glory of Yahweh through the priests that drew near to the deity.⁴⁷

In summary, the first threshold encounter of Leviticus 10 (vv. 1-7) makes manifest two of Aaron's character traits. After witnessing Yahweh's judgment upon his elder sons, Aaron immediately listens to Moses' explanation of their deaths (Lev 10:3). This paper concurs with the theory that Aaron responds to the tragedy and Moses' words with an audible expression of grief. Such a response illumines the human dimension of Aaron's character. It portrays a father who possesses deep feelings of compassion. It also shows that in spite of his newly acquired, high profile position, Aaron is a character who displays no shame in expressing public sorrow over his personal loss.

His other character trait is revealed when Moses addresses him for a second time (Lev 10:6-7). In that speech, Moses cautions Aaron against extending his mourning, that is, against performing the overt signs of baring his head and tearing his clothing. To this admonition, Aaron responds with compliance. The response demonstrates that in the wake of personal crisis, Aaron obeys Moses, an authoritative figure.

⁴⁵ Budd, *Leviticus*, 151. See also Hartley, *Leviticus*, 133-4.

⁴⁶ Budd, *Leviticus*, 151.

⁴⁷ Gorman, *Divine Presence*, 65.

Aaron, a Foil for the Stoic Moses

The feeling aspect of Aaron's character, which is illuminated by his sons' deaths, contrasts sharply with the innate stoicism evidenced in Moses' character. For instance, after Nadab and Abihu are consumed by fire, Karff observes that the text makes no mention of Moses offering any words of comfort to his distraught brother.⁴⁸ Instead, the narrator reports that he proceeds to give instructions regarding the rest of the ritual: the grain, the breast, and the thigh offerings (Lev 10:12-18). As a result of Moses' action, the reader reasonably concludes that Moses expects Aaron to continue in his role as high priest as if nothing had happened. Karff opines that from Moses' perspective, vocational duties take precedence over personal tragedy.⁴⁹ Failure to show sympathy to his own flesh and blood in this setting makes the reader skeptical of Moses' ability to understand human nature. The incident recalls a previous scene, where Moses reacted callously to the physical needs of the Israelites during their trek across the desert. They had cried out to him for food and drink, but he lost patience and groused to Yahweh (Exod 17:1-4). By contrast, the character of Aaron, through his display of personal heartache, serves as a character foil against Moses, who comes across as a more legalistic figure in this first threshold encounter (Lev 10:1-7).

⁴⁸ Karff, "Silence and Weeping," 112. Contra Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 192. Gane interprets Moses' intensity as a sign that he deemed the incident as serious. In his opinion, empathy was not appropriate at a time when the sanctuary system and the well-being of the nation were at risk.

⁴⁹ Karff, "Silence and Weeping," 113. In this article, Karff does not paint Moses as a sympathetic character in the Leviticus 10 threshold encounters.

Aaron, the Astute Listener

In the second threshold encounter of Leviticus 10 (vv. 8-11), the text indicates that Aaron is approached directly by Yahweh. The narrator states, “The Lord then spoke to Aaron, saying” (v. 8). In this context, Moses does not function in the role of mediator of Yahweh’s words nor is he a party to the deity’s address. Samuel Balentine points out that this text is the only place in the book of Leviticus where Yahweh speaks to Aaron alone and the first of only two times in the entire Pentateuch (see also Num 18:1, 8).⁵⁰ The exclusivity of Aaron as the addressee conceivably implies that the encounter is significant. It is reasonable to think that the deity has singled out Aaron and the priesthood. Rolf Rendtorff and Robert A. Kugler in their work, *The Book of Leviticus*, note that within the concentric structure of the Leviticus 10 narrative, this speech from Yahweh is centrally positioned.⁵¹ Thus, it stands to reason that the pivotal location of the address to Aaron must additionally indicate the importance of the encounter:

| | |
|-----------------------------|-----------|
| Narrative | 10: 1-5 |
| Moses’ speech | 10: 6-7 |
| God’s speech to Aaron alone | 10: 8-11 |
| Moses’ speech | 10: 12-15 |
| Narrative | 10: 16-20 |

Karen C. Eliassen asserts that at this juncture in the narrative where Yahweh speaks to Aaron individually, Aaron actually realizes the magnitude of his priestly vocation.⁵² She asserts that neither Moses’ previous words nor his relay of the divine commands has been

⁵⁰ Samuel E. Balentine, *Leviticus* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002), 85. See also, Eliassen, “Aaron’s War Within,” 84.

⁵¹ Rolf Rendtorff and Robert A. Kugler, *The Book of Leviticus* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 75.

⁵² Eliassen, “Aaron’s War Within,” 84-85.

able to create a comparable level of understanding. From her perspective, Yahweh's selective attentiveness to Aaron and Aaron's participation in the inaugural ritual, combined with his experiencing such disturbing emotion all coalesce to bring him to his "A ha!" moment.⁵³

Yahweh Addresses Aaron

In the movement of narrative time, Yahweh has cast judgment upon Nadab and Abihu just moments prior to Yahweh's speech. In spite of the sons' solemn mistake, Yahweh subsequently addresses Aaron, their father and Yahweh's own hand-picked servant. The deity's action, Gordon T. Wenham suggests, serves to show that Yahweh approves of Aaron's position as religious authority.⁵⁴ Hartley interprets the move as an affirmation of divine confidence in Aaron.⁵⁵ A close look at the content of Yahweh's speech indicates that it deals with priestly conduct regarding the rituals of sacrifice.⁵⁶ With the first of the divine words quoted by the narrator, Yahweh forbids the consumption of wine and other intoxicants (Lev 10:9).⁵⁷ Yahweh states that none are to

⁵³ Eliassen, "Aaron's War Within," 84-85.

⁵⁴ Gordon T. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 154.

⁵⁵ Hartley, *Leviticus*, 134-5.

⁵⁶ Kleinig, *Leviticus*, 236. Kleinig concludes that Yahweh wants to clarify the priests' clerical responsibilities.

⁵⁷ The ban against alcohol use conceivably guarded against two threats: foreign influence and impurity. Porter, *Leviticus*, 80; Noth, *Leviticus*, 87. These commentators assert that the Israelites were surrounded by a pagan culture which habitually used alcohol in order to affect religious ecstasy. The text of Judges 9:27 implies this activity among the Canaanites. Porter also postures that the prohibition served as a mark of separation, setting the holy priests apart from the congregation.

be used during the performance of the priests' ritual duties inside the tabernacle, the holy place sanctified by Yahweh. The seriousness of the prohibition is emphasized by these divine words, "so that you may not die." These words recall the same warning issued by Moses twice before in the narrative (Lev 10:6-7).

In the long view of the pentateuchal narrative, Aaron's important responsibility as high priest is outlined by Yahweh for Moses in connection with the master plan for the institution of the cult and the construction of the tabernacle. Specifically, in the text of Exodus 28, Yahweh describes in minute detail each garment to be worn by the priests during the execution of rites. In essence, their vestments serve as an obvious sign of separation. Furthermore, within the priestly ranks, the turban distinguishes the high priest from the ordinary ones. Yahweh stipulates that this headdress is to be worn at all times (Exod 28:38). Attached to the front of it is a plate of pure gold bearing the inscription, "Holy to the Lord" (Exod 28:36).

In tandem with the named specificities of this attire, Yahweh voices the duty of the high priest. Yahweh states, "Aaron shall take away the iniquity of the holy things which the sons of Israel consecrate, with regard to all their holy gifts" (Exod 28:38). Basically, Gorman notes, it is Aaron's job to make certain that the offerings from the Israelite people conform to Yahweh's requirements.⁵⁸ By maintaining the people's holiness, he protects them from Yahweh's wrath. By his faithful performance in worship, he enables the people to experience Yahweh's glory.⁵⁹ The reality is, as Kleinig

⁵⁸ Gorman, *Divine Presence*, 66.

⁵⁹ This phenomenon was borne out in the inaugural service. The narrator reports that the glory of the Lord appeared to the people and divine fire consumed the burnt offering (Lev 9:24).

observes, if any sacrilegious act were to transpire during the ritual service, Aaron, in his role as the high priest, would be ultimately responsible.⁶⁰

In the speech delivered privately to his high priest (Lev 10:8-11), Yahweh reiterates and emphasizes Aaron's duty, previously spelled out in the book of Exodus. Yahweh organizes the obligation into the form of a two-pronged commission. First, the deity indicates that Aaron, himself, must be able to distinguish between the sacred and the profane and between the clean and the unclean (Lev 10:10). Second, Yahweh charges Aaron to teach the people to make the same kind of discernment. Yahweh says, "so as to teach the sons of Israel all the statutes which the Lord has spoken to them through Moses" (Lev 10:11). In other words, these divine words, Milgrom observes, imply that Yahweh's chosen people must learn to reduce the incidence of impurity.⁶¹ The speech makes it clear that the people must abide by the statutes in order that respect for the deity's holiness is achieved throughout the community.

As discussed previously, various scholars consider Nadab and Abihu's failure to uphold this mandate to have been their mistake. Erdman claims that by their specific act of confusing the holy and common fires, they had failed to teach the holiness of Yahweh.⁶² By imparting to Aaron this dual commission, to distinguish and to teach,

⁶⁰ Kleinig, *Leviticus*, 235-6.

⁶¹ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 96.

⁶² Erdman, *The Book of Leviticus*, 50.

Yahweh has, in effect, recognized him as the authoritative teacher and interpreter of religious instructions, so states James W. Watts.⁶³

Aaron's Delayed Response

The reader reasonably assumes that following the divine speech, Yahweh departs. No further mention of the deity's presence is noted in the text. Nor does the text make any mention of a direct response by Aaron to Yahweh, either through speech or action. In fact, on the first reading of this second threshold encounter, the reader might reasonably conclude that Aaron does not respond at all. Instead, it appears that he only listens passively. Additionally, the narrator offers no perspective on the encounter, for he is silent after Yahweh's speech ends. He adds no commentary regarding Aaron's behavior, as had been his style at the conclusion of Moses' instructions to the high priest. The narrator simply moves the narrative along by recounting Moses' next action.

Kleinig, however, suggests that Aaron does make a response, albeit delayed.⁶⁴ He notes that the response becomes evident as the third threshold encounter unfolds (Lev 10:12-20). At this juncture in the Leviticus 10 narrative, the narrator reports that Moses approaches Aaron and his surviving sons, Eleazar and Ithamar. In this context, a controversy erupts between Moses and Aaron. The brothers disagree about a detail in the ritual. In the ensuing interaction, Kleinig points out that Aaron acts upon Yahweh's commission to teach. Aaron makes Moses aware of the appropriate applications of the sin and the burnt offerings in the following speech. "Behold, this very day they presented

⁶³ James W. Watts, *Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 97.

⁶⁴ Kleinig, *Leviticus*, 228.

their sin offering and their burnt offering before the Lord. When things like these happened to me, if I had eaten a sin offering today, would it have been good in the sight of the Lord?" (Lev 10:19). As a result, the reader surmises that Aaron listened keenly to Yahweh's address and, therefore, subsequently concludes that the art of listening is one of his positive character attributes.

In summary, the second threshold encounter of Leviticus 10 (vv. 8-11) is devoted entirely to Yahweh's speech. The deity addresses only Aaron about matters of cultic purity. Aaron is instructed to become a master at discerning the profane from the holy and to teach the community how to maintain that holiness. The implied effect of Aaron as the sole recipient of the divine words, therefore, is that Yahweh recognizes Aaron as the religious authority of the Israelite people. This encounter also portrays Aaron as an astute listener. His response to Yahweh does not become evident until the third threshold encounter unfolds.

Aaron, the Discerning Priest and Persuasive Teacher

By Aaron's action in this third threshold encounter of Leviticus 10 (vv. 12-20), the reader is able to ascertain that Aaron has listened astutely to Yahweh's commands and that he makes appropriate application of Yahweh's message in order to instruct others, in this specific case, Moses.

The Inaugural Ceremony Resumes

The third threshold encounter begins with the resumption of the inaugural ceremony. The narrator recounts that Moses takes up his ministrations at the exact place where the conflagration had interrupted them. Milgrom observes that the sacrifices have

been offered but not yet eaten by the priests.⁶⁵ Moses begins reciting instructions to Aaron and his surviving sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, regarding the cultic meals which were designed to succeed the sacrifices (see Lev 6-7). He addresses them regarding the prebends, those sacred portions allotted for the priests' consumption. He says, "Take the grain offering that is left over from the Lord's offerings by fire and eat it . . . in a holy place" (Lev 10:12-13). "The breast of the wave offering, however, and the thigh of the offering you may eat in a clean place . . . for they have been given as your due and your sons' due out of the sacrifices of the peace offerings of the sons of Israel" (Lev 10:14).

Moses Detects a Ritual Discrepancy

The text indicates that the recitation runs smoothly until Moses realizes that an irregularity has been committed during the service. He cannot find the edible portion of the goat of the sin offering (החטאת).⁶⁶ The narrator discloses that, "Moses searched carefully" (דרש דרש משה) for it (Lev 10:16). The placing of the infinitive absolute (דרש) in juxtaposition with the finite form of the verb (דרש) serves to emphasize Moses' action. The narrator then states that Moses becomes angry, not at Aaron, but at Aaron's two remaining sons, Eleazar and Ithamar. Moses fires a scathing question at them, "Why did you not eat the sin offering at the holy place" (מדוע לא-אכלתם את-החטאת במקום הקדש) (Lev 10:17). The same grammatical construction becomes apparent in these words.

While denoting intensity, it implies that Moses proceeds to chastise them for disregarding

⁶⁵ Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 596; Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual*, 93.

⁶⁶ N. Kiuchi, "The Purification Offering in the Priestly Literature," JSOTSup 56 (1987): 46 and 72. Kiuchi assumes that the החטאת refers to the sin offering for the people in Lev 9:15. See also Levine, *Leviticus*, 58; Houston, "Tragedy," 35.

his command. He says, “You should certainly have eaten it” (אָכַלְתָּ אֶת־הַבָּשָׂר) (Lev 10:18). The combination of the infinitive absolute and the finite form of the verb serves to stress the content of Moses’ speech. The use of the emphatic verb form twice within the space of one threshold encounter heightens the situation. The reader may also reasonably assume that the construction dramatizes Moses’ present emotional state: anger.

Because Moses knows that the welfare of the community is at stake given the present circumstances of the ritual, the reader can infer that preying upon Moses’ mind is the concern that the sin offering be executed properly. Moses is aware that the Lord has designated the *הַחֲטָאת* as a method of expiation for the congregation. He also realizes that a communal meal is to be shared between the priests and the deity. Therefore, it is conceivable to assume that Moses’ anger is driven by his desire to avoid another ritual mistake like the one Nadab and Abihu had committed. Regarding the matter, John E. Hartley offers an interesting observation. He points out that the text makes no mention of Yahweh being angry with the priests’ performance of the sin offering.⁶⁷ Rather, Yahweh remains silent. In contrast, Moses becomes incensed. Hartley’s insight appears to lend credence to this study’s previous observation that Moses possesses an uneven temperament.

Prior to this encounter, Aaron has already presented a goat on behalf of the Israelites in order to atone for their sins (Lev 9:15). But Moses discovers in this third threshold encounter (currently under discussion) that the goat’s carcass has been burned. From his perspective, the meat should have been eaten by Aaron and the priests, not incinerated. Moses bases his understanding upon an ordinance outlined earlier to him by

⁶⁷ Hartley, *Leviticus*, 129.

Yahweh in a different context (Lev 6:26-30). It states that a priest's responsibility is to ingest the sin offering in order to make atonement for the people before the Lord. More, specifically, the priest who offers it is supposed to eat it (Lev 6:26). In the case at hand, that means Aaron.

The ordinance also stipulates that if the blood of the offering is brought inside the sanctuary (i.e., the tent of meeting), then the carcass is to be burned with fire (Lev 6:30). In this particular scenario, no blood has been sprinkled on the inner altar. Therefore, from Moses' viewpoint, the priests have not followed the disposition of the sin offering in the prescribed manner. Moses argues that the rite requires consumption of the goat. Instead, the priests have burned the animal in its entirety.

Aaron Explains

Even though Moses' inquiry and rage have been directed at the young priests Eleazar and Ithamar, the text does not mention any response given by them. Instead the narrator reports that Aaron speaks to Moses. Because the text neither divulges Aaron's inner thoughts nor provides a rationale for his stepping forward, the reader is faced with a gap. One might assume that Aaron intervenes because he himself feels implicated on several accounts. For one example, as high priest, he has oversight of the cult. In addition, as high priest, he has performed the sacrifice of the goat, and therefore, he is the one required to consume it. Furthermore, in his role as a father in the Israelite culture, he is responsible for the actions of his sons.

Though his motivations are not stated, the text indicates that Aaron speaks up in haste. In other words, there is no hint of hesitation on Aaron's part in the narrative. He defends both Eleazar and Ithamar as well as himself. Aaron's reaction in this third

threshold encounter (Lev 10:12-20) contrasts starkly with the stance he takes toward Nadab and Abihu in the first encounter (Lev 10:1-7). In that context, Aaron neither tries to justify nor excuse the ritual error made by them. On their behalf, he has remained silent. These opposing responses reflect Aaron's wisdom in being able to determine which filial actions are defensible.

In his response, Aaron parries Moses' verbal assault with a logical answer. He begins by saying, "Behold, this very day they presented (הַקְרִיבוּ) their sin offering (הַטְּאֵתָם) and their burnt offering (עֹלֹתָם) before the Lord" (הֵן הַיּוֹם הַקְרִיבוּ אֶת־הַטְּאֵתָם וְאֶת־עֹלֹתָם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה) (v. 19). The use of plural pronouns three times indicates that Aaron is referring to his sons. Aaron asserts that they performed the prescribed offerings according to expectation. In his second utterance he refers to Nadab and Abihu's deaths in a personal and poignant way. He continues, "When things like these happened to me" (Lev 10:19).⁶⁸ This statement is insightful to the reader in two ways. The words imply emotion and are consonant with his prior act of moaning. More significantly, his reply presents a causative factor. Milgrom points out that Aaron and Moses see the ritual omission from different perspectives.⁶⁹ He claims that from Aaron's standpoint, Nadab and Abihu died in the sacred area and thereby polluted the entire sanctuary. Because Nadab and Abihu died before the people's purification meat had been eaten, their corpses had contaminated the sacrifice. Therefore, the carcass of the

⁶⁸ Karff, "Silence and Weeping," 114. See also Eliassen, "Aaron's War Within," 84-5. These scholars claim that this statement refers to the fire of judgment.

⁶⁹ Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual*, 100.

goat was too laden with impurity to be safely ingested. By Aaron's interpretation, the sacrifice was subject to the law of the burnt offering.⁷⁰

In summary, Aaron's explanation to Moses as presented in the text shows him to be a knowledgeable high priest. His interpretation of the ordinance indicates that he has dutifully absorbed Yahweh's instructions. He is able to determine the appropriate context for sin and burnt offerings. His response proves that he has mastered cultic law. Joan E. Cook maintains that Aaron's departure from Moses' expectation shows that care and thoughtfulness have been given to his office.⁷¹ In other words, Aaron did not change the rite inadvertently or cavalierly.⁷² Along the same vein, Milgrom assesses Aaron's action as being premeditated.⁷³

The reader ultimately understands that it is through his tutelage of Moses that Aaron does respond to Yahweh's speech, which was delivered in the previous threshold encounter (Lev 10:8-11). Aaron's explanation demonstrates that he is an effective, persuasive teacher because Moses acquiesces to his viewpoint. The narrator closes out the encounter by stating, "And when Moses heard, it seemed good in his sight" (Lev 10:20). More significantly, Aaron's response shows that he takes his role as high priest seriously, and thus, merits the confidence that Yahweh placed in him.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual*, 100.

⁷¹ Cook, "Community," 104.

⁷² Cook, "Community," 103.

⁷³ Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual*, 98.

⁷⁴ See Bellinger, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 69. Bellinger asserts that the Leviticus 10 narrative portrays Aaron as being "rehabilitated" for his misdeeds in the golden calf episode.

An Alternative Characterization of Aaron

While numerous scholars agree that controversy in this third encounter pivoted on Aaron and Moses' interaction, Diane Sharon in her article, "When Fathers Refuse to Eat: The Trope of Rejecting Food and Drink in Biblical Narrative," suggests that it is Yahweh who is Aaron's adversary.⁷⁵ Her unconventional read of Lev 10:16-20 presents a different slant on Aaron's failure to eat his portion of the sin offering. From her perspective, Aaron's neglect is neither due to oversight on his part nor to ignorance. She argues instead that he intentionally rejects the meal because of his distressed mental state caused by Yahweh through the execution of his sons.⁷⁶ Aaron's refusal to eat is an obvious reversal of the behavior normally expected of a priest as delineated in the statutes issued by Yahweh (see Lev 6:26). As discussed in Chapter One of this study, Adele Berlin has put forth the theory that the reader is able to infer character traits by observing behavior which deviates from that which is normally expected.⁷⁷ Sharon pursues this line of thinking in her recent article.

Sharon also proposes that the trope of refusing food and drink is a subtle method of characterization found in biblical literature. She supports her thesis by examining three additional biblical figures that also rejected nourishment. In each case, the text indicates that the character's mental condition is under duress. Take for example, Hannah, the barren wife of Elkanah. The narrator clearly states that she is repeatedly taunted by the fertile Peninnah until the gibes became intolerable. He also reports that

⁷⁵ Sharon, "When Fathers Refuse to Eat," 137.

⁷⁶ Sharon, "When Fathers Refuse to Eat," 137.

⁷⁷ Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 41.

she responds by shedding tears and by pushing her food away (1 Sam 1:7). The question Hannah's husband asks of her also attests to her emotional state. He inquires, "Hannah, why do you weep and why do you not eat and why is your heart sad?" (1 Sam 1:8).

In a different narrative (1 Sam 19-20), the character David finds himself to be the object of a bounty hunt ordered by the mercurial personage of King Saul. In one context when the two men are in the presence of each other, the narrator reports that the king hurls a spear at David. David dodges it and then goes on the lam. Though King Saul expects him to attend the new moon festival and sit at his table, David realizes that being there would pose a threat to his safety. The text presents his concern in the form of questions which he asks of his friend Jonathan. "What have I done? What is my iniquity? And what is my sin before your father, that he is seeking my life?" (1 Sam 20:1). Because of his fear, he decides to shun the sovereign's banquet on two successive days. The text makes clear David's response through Saul's question of Jonathan, "Why has the son of Jesse not come to the meal, either yesterday or today?" (1 Sam 20:27). During that same celebration but in a different scene, King Saul throws a spear at his son Jonathan. Enraged by the attack, Jonathan leaves his meal on the table and flees. The text explicitly states that Jonathan does not eat food on that second day of the new moon. Furthermore, it explains the reason, "for he was grieved over David because his father had dishonored him" (1 Sam 20:33-4).

In addition to considering the biblical texts, Sharon explores ancient Near Eastern literature, specifically Hittite and Egyptian stories. She discovers a similar narrative phenomenon. Whenever an extra-biblical character possessed a negative frame of mind, he or she would abstain from eating. In some contexts, eating resumed once the stressing

factor was removed. She recounts as an example the Hittite myth of Ullikumi. In this tale, the sun god, who was under threat, visited Tessub to warn him. The sun god refused to partake of the feast prepared by his host until he was reassured that Tessub would handle the situation. After contemplating both the biblical and ANE stories, Sharon concludes that the cited acts of consumption and abstention reflect the state of a particular character's mood.⁷⁸

In the case of Aaron, she points out that his behavior is even more significant because the food in question is part of a cultic meal. She refers to it as the *minha*, which is supposed to be shared by both priest and Yahweh.⁷⁹ She notes in contrast that the burnt offering is to be devoted entirely to Yahweh. No portion of it is to be consumed by the human officiants. By his not partaking of the *minha*, or grain offering, Sharon argues that Aaron rejects communion with the deity.⁸⁰ In other words, he makes a conscious decision, and by doing so thumbs his nose at Yahweh. Sharon claims, therefore, that Aaron's treatment of Yahweh in this threshold encounter demonstrates both anger at and distrust of the deity.⁸¹

Although Sharon's premise is innovative, I challenge her character analysis. In the threshold encounters which have been examined thus far, no pattern of ire in the

⁷⁸ Sharon, "When Fathers Refuse to Eat," 138.

⁷⁹ Sharon, "When Fathers Refuse to Eat," 136. There is an apparent discrepancy between Sharon's work and the text regarding the specific offering in question. Sharon refers to this meal as the *minha* or grain offering. In the text, however, Moses says it is the sin offering which was not eaten (Lev 10:17).

⁸⁰ Sharon, "When Fathers Refuse to Eat," 138.

⁸¹ Sharon, "When Fathers Refuse to Eat," 137.

character of Aaron has been uncovered. Aaron's responses toward Yahweh and Moses in the Leviticus narrative and toward the Israelite people in the Exodus narrative have yet to reflect an angry temperament. In fact, his demeanor seems to serve as a contrast to more impetuous figures with whom he has interacted. Take for instance, Moses. In Chapter Two of this study, it was suggested that Aaron's disposition is a foil for Moses' hot-tempered nature.⁸²

Various texts attest to Moses' predisposition to anger. It is Moses, who in a rage, demonstrates little regard for the written work of Yahweh, and it is Moses who slams the tablets inscribed with the testimony to the ground at the base of Mt. Sinai (Exod 32:19). It is Moses who, as a young man in Egypt, kills an Egyptian taskmaster for beating a Hebrew laborer and then buries his body in the sand (Exod 2:11-12). It is Moses' irritation with the wandering Israelites that blatantly shows when he appeals to Yahweh for relief (Exod 17:2).⁸³ It is Moses' exasperation with the grumbling Israelites that obscures his regard for Yahweh's command, and consequently, Yahweh's holiness. In that context, Moses is instructed to speak to a rock in order to elicit water for the thirsty people. But instead he hits it more than once (Num 20:7-11).

Aaron's speech in this third threshold encounter of Leviticus 10 allows the reader to infer that his deliberative approach in response to Moses contrasts with his brother's tendency to overact. Therefore, I contend that Aaron's failure to eat the remains of the sin offering is neither an act of willful disobedience nor of silent protest, as suggested by

⁸² Contra Hartley, *Leviticus*, 129. He claims that Moses became enraged only on those occasions when Yahweh's glory was dishonored.

⁸³ See also Num 11:10.

Sharon. Rather, the action is a result of his differing interpretation of ritual ordinance. The text indicates that what initially appears to be errant behavior in Moses' estimation is ultimately accepted by him as appropriate. The narrator in his closing statement says, "And when Moses heard, it seemed good in his sight" (Lev 10:20). As Everett Fox observes, the controversy between Moses and Aaron is solved through reasoned discussion.⁸⁴

Conclusion

The narrative of Leviticus 10 illuminates Aaron as a father and as a divine servant. Both his personal empathy and professional competence are transparent within his responses to both Moses and Yahweh. His encounters with Moses reveal him to be a compassionate character. Within those narrative scenes, he exhibits deep feelings for his sons, all four of them. Whereas his emotions for Nadab and Abihu are inarticulately expressed through moaning, those for Eleazar and Ithamar are articulated through words of reasoned defense. Aaron shows himself to be a character able to grieve intimate loss without sacrificing his ability to discern between responsible and scandalous behavior. The two threshold encounters in which his sons are players (Lev 10:1-7 and 10:12-20) indicate that Aaron knows when to protect his family and when to let go.

Aaron's actions and speech portray a high priest who places highest priority on duty. His careful attention to the necessity for a burnt offering, as evidenced in the third threshold encounter (Lev 10:12-20), indicates that he wants to get his job right. He is a character who is obedient to both human and divine authority. In the first threshold encounter (Lev 10:1-7), the narrator states that he complies with Moses' orders not to

⁸⁴ Fox, *The Five Books*, 546.

exercise formal mourning rituals. In relation to Yahweh, he adheres to the deity's command to teach the statutes (Lev 10:8-11) by informing Moses of the timeliness of the burnt offering. That decision to implement the burnt offering instead of the sin offering following the contamination of the tabernacle by Nadab and Abihu's corpses reflects a leader cognizant of impurity's threat to the community. His action indicates that he takes precautionary measures in order to ensure the inviolability of Yahweh's holiness.

His answer to Moses' heated question (Lev 10:16-20) also suggests that he is a thoughtful, reflective individual. When faced with controversy in the form of harsh interrogation by Moses, Aaron responds with a rational approach to solution. His style effectively neutralizes Moses' anger. The same encounter paints Aaron as a persuasive teacher. His explanatory remarks convince a questioning Moses that his judgment to perform the burnt offering has indeed been correct. Moses' acceptance attests to the effectiveness of Aaron's gift of speech, the quality for which Yahweh initially called him (Exod 4:14-16).

Milgrom suggests that Aaron's legal interpretation of the offering under scrutiny actually upstages Moses.⁸⁵ As a result, Aaron now becomes the authority in cultic matters. The reader concludes that his esteem in Yahweh's eye has increased. The combination of Aaron's demonstrated expertise in ritual law and Yahweh's renewed favor of him anticipates a more pronounced competitive spirit within the character of Aaron. It will be overtly expressed in the form of sibling rivalry as the narrative action moves into Numbers 12.

⁸⁵ Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 627.

CHAPTER FOUR

Numbers 12

Introduction

The encounters within Exodus and Leviticus, which this study has previously discussed, present several indications that Aaron and Moses are at odds with each other. As the golden calf incident transpires, for example, at the base of Mt. Sinai (Exodus 32), the reader begins to sense tension between the two brothers. It also stands to reason that Aaron's confidence regarding their strained relationship is buoyed at the point where he stands up to Moses' scathing questioning about his performance of the sacrificial burnt offering after the annihilation of Nadab and Abihu in the courtyard of the tabernacle (Leviticus 10). In the context of the Numbers 12 narrative, the nature of their rivalry erupts forcefully out of the mouth of Aaron. His vocalizations occur during the Israelite encampment at Hazeroth, another leg on their journey to the Promised Land. Aaron, the holiest man among the Israelites by virtue of his position as high priest, in a bold move, publicly vocalizes the belief that his relationship with Yahweh is on par with that of Moses and the deity (vv. 1-2). This announcement triggers the first of two threshold encounters that comprise the narrative in Numbers 12 (vv. 1-9). His subsequent recognition of wrongdoing and his appeal for mercy initiate the second encounter (vv. 10-16).

Narrative Context

Whereas the drama of Leviticus 10 is set in the context of exuberant worship turned sour, the narrative event of Numbers 12 occurs in an atmosphere of widespread personal dissatisfaction, from the top down. In the narrative scene immediately preceding Numbers 12, the narrator informs the reader that the people complain of hardship: “Now the people became like those who complain of adversity in the hearing of the Lord” (Num 11:1a). Milgrom points out that the Israelites are discontented, in general, with their three day march from Sinai to Taberah.¹ The text clearly states that Yahweh responds angrily (ויחר אפיו) to the grumbling of the Israelites. The details are presented in graphic terms. Flames burst forth from the deity and burn the perimeter of their campsite (Num 11:1-3).

As the narrative progresses, a rabble, that is the mixture of other Semitic groups and Egyptians, leads the Israelites in a complaint about their monotonous repast. That they have become bored with Yahweh’s provision of manna day in and day out is reflected in their words, “but now our appetite is gone. There is nothing at all to look at except this manna” (Num 11:6). That they prefer to eat meat, a staple they had become accustomed to during their days in Egypt, is evidenced by their cry, “We remember the fish which we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic” (Num 11:5). Essentially, the Israelites are demanding from

¹ Jacob Milgrom, “The Structures of Numbers: Chapters 11-12 and 13-14 and Their Redaction. Preliminary Gropings,” in *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel* (ed. Jacob Neusner, Baruch Levine, and Ernest Fredrichs; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 49-61.

Yahweh food of their own choosing, of their own craving.² Their grumbling once again kindles the anger of the Lord, but to a greater degree (וַיִּזְדַּרְאֵף יְהוָה מְאֹד) (Num 11:10). The reader notes that the text contains the added descriptor “greatly” (מְאֹד). By way of this insertion, the narrator magnifies the deity’s anger. An immediate response by the deity, however, is not specified in the text.

In this context, Moses also contributes to the pervasive disaffection in the Israelite camp. His inquiries of Yahweh indicate that he specifically doubts the deity’s power to satisfy the peoples’ desires. In his first question, he expresses skepticism about the feasibility of feeding a multitude of six thousand Israelites for a month using only their flocks and herds of livestock (Num 11:21-22). Then he asks, “Or should all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, to be sufficient for them?” A barrage of previous questions fired at the deity portray Moses, the head the Israelite people, as a character who grumbles. He bemoans one problem after another. “Why hast thou been so hard on thy servant?” “Why have I not found favor in thy sight?” “Was it I who conceived all this people?” “Was it I who brought them forth?” “Where am I to get meat to give to all this people?” (Num 11:11-13).

The narrator quotes Moses as saying that he is unable to handle the people by himself and that the weight and pressure of leadership is too great (Num 11:14). Moses complains, “I alone am not able to carry all this people, because it is too burdensome for me.” The text explicitly presents Yahweh’s response to Moses’ expressed angst. Yahweh instructs Moses to select seventy elders to share the responsibilities with him. “Bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you,” so

² See also Ps 78:18.

Yahweh orders (Num 11:16). As the scene continues, the Lord proceeds to descend in a cloud and takes the Spirit which he had initially placed only upon Moses and disburses it among the designated others (Num 11:25). A close reading of the text reveals that Aaron, the supreme religious leader of the Israelites, is not mentioned as a member of that privileged group.

Given the undercurrent of unrest existing within the camp as revealed by the larger context of the book of Numbers, the reader rightly concludes that these conditions must make it ripe for Aaron and his sister Miriam to join the carping.³ Their dissatisfaction is presented in the form of a challenge to the uniqueness of Moses as prophet, and thereby generates the first threshold encounter of Numbers 12 (vv. 1-9)

First Threshold Encounter

Aaron's Situation

Within the threshold encounters of Leviticus 10, the reader notes that Aaron is a reactive participant. He responds to tragic events and personal confrontation as they befall him. Conversely, throughout the Numbers 12 account, one observes that he presents as a much more proactive character. Even though he joins Miriam's charge in the first threshold event, he becomes initiator of the action in the second encounter.

The long view of the narrative leads the reader to conclude that Aaron must be aware of the distribution of leadership that Yahweh and Moses transact as an attempt to relieve Moses of his stress. Thus, the juxtaposition of the two accounts of grumbling (Num 11 and Num 12) is significant. Aaron's exclusion from among those chosen

³ Miriam and Aaron are identified as brother and sister in Exod 15:20. They both, along with Moses, are mentioned as siblings in Num 26:59.

seventy elders marks a departure from an earlier assignment of managerial duties explained in the book of Exodus (24:12-14). In that context, Yahweh summons Moses to ascend Mt. Sinai in order to receive the stone tablets containing the law and commandments. In his act of compliance, Moses leaves behind not only Aaron and his sons, Nadab and Abihu, but also a contingency of seventy other elders. On that occasion, Moses appoints Aaron, along with Hur, as a mediator to adjudicate any legal issues that might develop within the camp. Thus, having formerly been recognized as well positioned in the administrative hierarchy, it is reasonable to infer that Aaron becomes sensitive to the current omission. This study suggests that Aaron's feeling, in combination with the atmosphere of general discontent in which he finds himself, leads him to speak. The content of his words and the personal characteristics reflected in his response are discussed in the next section.

Aaron and Miriam Level Charges Against Moses

As the scene opens in Numbers 12 the narrator reports, "then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses" (וַתְּדַבֵּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמֹשֶׁה) (v.1). The statement contains two rhetorical devices pertinent to this study. First, the grammatical construction דַּבֵּר בְּ lends itself to multiple interpretations, including "spoke against" and "spoke to." Both interpretations are used within the narrative under consideration. Baruch Levine notes that the inclusion of both meanings creates an intentional ambiguity within the text.⁴ The former rendering, as an expression of hostility, is more applicable to the context containing Miriam and Aaron's comment for two reasons. First, as previously pointed

⁴ Baruch Levine, *Numbers 1-20* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 328.

out, the larger context in which the words are spoken is a context of rebellion. Second, the utterance that flows from their lips is filled with criticism. Their words make an issue of both Moses' marriage to a foreign woman and of his exclusivity as a recipient of Yahweh's words.

The reader additionally observes that Yahweh uses the identical term when immediately intervening on Moses' behalf.⁵ Yahweh asks the siblings, "Why did you speak against my servant" (לְדַבֵּר בְּעַבְדִּי), "against Moses?" (בַּמֹּשֶׁה). The repeated use of the term "against" (ב) (Num 12:8) serves to indicate that the deity sharply rebukes both Miriam and Aaron. By forming an inclusio around the verbalizations spoken by all characters in the first threshold encounter, the expression (דַּבֵּר ב) effectively emphasizes the mounting tension.

The other notable rhetorical device, the sequential order of speakers' names, becomes significant from a literary perspective. Various scholars point out that the positioning of Miriam's name ahead of Aaron's is unconventional in Hebrew writings.⁶ In the patriarchal society of ancient Israel, the masculine name traditionally was placed first, as is evident in subsequent verses of Num 12.⁷ Because of the non-standard usage in this passage, these commentators suggest that Miriam instigated the criticism of

⁵ This expression of hostility is also detected in the speech of the people in Num 21:5, 7.

⁶ Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (JPSTC; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 93. See also Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 223; Bernard P. Robinson, "The Jealousy of Miriam: A Note on Num 12," *Zeitschrift alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 101 (1989): 430.

⁷ The text in Num 12:4 reads the conventional way, "And suddenly the Lord said to Moses and Aaron and to Miriam," as does the text in Num 12:5, "and he [the Lord] called Aaron and Miriam." See Milgrom, *Numbers*, 93.

Moses. To strengthen their claim, they call attention to another indicator which suggests her dominance: the form of the verb “spoke” (תדבר) in the narrator’s opening statement *והתדבר מרים ואהרן במשה* is feminine, singular.⁸ Because of the occurrence of these salient grammatical features, name order and verb form, this study appropriates the view claiming that Miriam takes the lead in the charge against Moses. This study additionally suggests that Aaron allows her to do so. An explanation is provided in the section below.

Aaron, Easily Influenced Again

The suggestion is based upon a previous response made by Aaron when the Israelites were also experiencing duress. This study recalls the text which recounts Moses’ failure to return after a reasonable time from atop Mt. Sinai (Exod 32:1-4). The people react by turning to Aaron in a mob-like frenzy. They call for the making of an idol which would lead their way in Moses’ absence. Aaron, who desires to please the people, unhesitatingly complies. One can reasonably conclude, therefore, that again in the current context, Aaron succumbs to the prevailing wind, which is the peoples’ dissatisfaction with authority. He and Miriam must be riding the wave of discontent. She speaks up first against Moses, as denoted by the feminine, singular verb form (תדבר) and the positioning of her name before his. Aaron follows her influence, as connoted by the plural verb form used in the narrator’s report contained in the subsequent verse, “and they said” (ויאמרו) (v. 2). Such action on Aaron’s part betrays for a second time a previously identified negative character trait. He is swayed easily by popular opinion and readily acquiesces to it.

⁸ Milgrom, *Numbers*, 93; Robinson, “The Jealousy of Miriam,” 430; R. K. Harrison, *Numbers* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1992), 199.

Issues Behind the Charges

Raymond Brown posits that there are three issues at work behind Miriam and Aaron's verbal attack on Moses: ethnicity, divine relationship, and domestic rivalry.⁹ He contends that the siblings initially raise an ethnic objection to their brother's leadership. They criticize his taking of a Cushite wife.

Scholars have offered various speculations as to the location of Cush. Some associate Cush with Midian on the Sinai Peninsula, the place where Moses sought refuge when he fled to Egypt forty years earlier.¹⁰ A different theory identifies Cush as the land bordering ancient Egypt on the south, corresponding to either Nubia or Ethiopia (not modern Ethiopia).¹¹ Another equates the place with an area east of Babylonia, the home of the Cassites.¹² A fourth idea connects Cush with the name Kusi, a tribe in northern Arabia attested to in Assyrian inscriptions.¹³ Regardless of the exact geographical location of Cush, each of these interpretations bears a common implication. The Cushite wife is a non-Israelite. The long view of the narrative indicates that the marriage of an

⁹ Raymond Brown, *The Message of Numbers: Journey to the Promised Land* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 2002), 106.

¹⁰ Lloyd R. Bailey, *Leviticus-Numbers* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 2005), 461; Martin Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary*. (OTL; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1968), 94; Brown, *The Message of Numbers*, 107.

¹¹ Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, 223; R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers*. (NAC 3B; Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 200.

¹² Philip J. Budd, *Numbers* (WBC 5; Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1984), 136; George Buchanan Gray, *Numbers* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), 121; Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, 223.

¹³ Gray, *Numbers*, 121; Eryl W. Davies, *Numbers* (NCBC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 119.

Israelite to a foreigner was prohibited by ordinance (see Exod 34:14-16).¹⁴ Though Miriam and Aaron's intent for announcing the wife's homeland is not mentioned in the text, the reader can reasonably consider that they were trying to cast Moses in an unfavorable light. Specifically, they were attempting to taint Moses' ability to lead. The implication of their remark is that his integrity has been compromised because he is not in compliance with religious law. Phyllis Tribble maintains that the assertion also contains the possibly damaging innuendo that Moses' marriage is in violation of the cleanliness code.¹⁵

Brown suggests that the second objection voiced by Miriam and Aaron concerns Moses' vocation.¹⁶ Immediately following their condemnation of Moses' marriage, the narrator reports that, "they said, 'Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? (ויאמרו הרק אך־במשה דבר יהוה). Has he not spoken through us as well?'" (הלא גם־בנו דבר). The narrator's use of the plural form of "said" (ויאמרו) prior to quoting the first question which was raised as well as the use of the plural pronoun "us" (בנו) by the speakers in the second question leave no ambiguity as to the identity of the speakers. Both siblings are implicated by way of these two grammatical terms. Curiously, the audience to whom Miriam and Aaron are addressing is not mentioned in the text.

¹⁴ S. David Sperling, "Miriam, Aaron and Moses: Sibling Rivalry," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 70-71 (1999-2000): 50. Sperling points out that there is no stated prohibition in the biblical text specifically against marriage to a Cushite. Additionally, he offers an altogether different theory by his recognition that the Cushite people were longtime residents of Israel.

¹⁵ Phyllis Tribble, "Bringing Miriam Out of the Shadows," *Bible Review* 5 (1989): 21.

¹⁶ Brown, *The Message*, 107.

Essentially that means, observes Iain M. Duguid, Miriam and Aaron did not talk directly to Moses or to God about the problem.¹⁷ Therefore, one can infer that they groused openly to anyone who might listen. Martin Noth ventures to assert that the two siblings made their voices clearly known within the Israelite camp.¹⁸

George Buchanan Gray claims that, for Miriam and Aaron, neither Moses' prophetic position or his right to lead are at issue. Instead, the focus of their criticism is upon the uniqueness of his role and the exclusivity of his authority.¹⁹ In their first question, "Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses," (הֲרַק אֶךְ-בְּמֹשֶׁה דַּבַּר יְהוָה), the operative language is contained in the two adverbs אֶךְ הֲרַק, translated as "only indeed." Several commentators point out that the juxtaposition of these terms serves to place emphasis on Moses' uniqueness.²⁰ Aaron and Miriam's wording betrays their dismay at the reason for Moses' regard as someone special. A long view of the pentateuchal narrative shows that they, too, possess credentials similar to his. In the book of Exodus the text refers to Miriam as a prophetess (Exod 15:20) and Aaron as a prophet (Exod 4:16).²¹ In fact, in several other contexts, Yahweh spoke directly and solely to Aaron. For example, the Lord instructed him to meet Moses in the wilderness (Exod

¹⁷ Iain M. Duguid, *Numbers: God's Presence in the Wilderness* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2006), 158.

¹⁸ Noth, *Numbers*, 95.

¹⁹ Gray, *Numbers*, 122.

²⁰ Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, 220; Budd, *Numbers*, 136; Davies, *Numbers*, 120; Sperling, "Miriam, Aaron and Moses," 43. Sperling observes that this particular collocation of synonyms occurs only at this place within the biblical text, implying its significance.

²¹ See also Micah 6:4.

4:27). And again, in the midst of the inaugural service of sacrifice, Yahweh clarified to him individually the divine expectations for priestly conduct during the execution of the ceremonial duties (Lev 10:8-10).²²

The tenor of their second question, “Has he not spoken through us as well?” (הלֵא גַם־בְּנוּ דַבַּר), suggests that Miriam and Aaron allege to have equal status with Moses. The adverb “as well” (גַּם־) serves to accentuate their claim. Duguid makes another interesting observation. He maintains that the Lord’s own previous action of empowering the seventy elders with the Spirit for the purpose of assisting Moses indicates that Moses was not entirely unique.²³ In that same context, the narrator presents Moses himself as being willing to welcome others into the circle of prophecy. The text mentions that, following the Lord’s distribution of the Spirit, Joshua becomes disturbed with two specific men, Eldad and Medad, who continue “to speak” within the camp. Moses addresses his concern with this reply, “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, that the Lord would put his spirit upon them” (Num 11:29).

Brown offers the possibility of a third issue centering on family protocol with which Aaron conceivably is dealing.²⁴ He notes that Aaron, the first born son of Jethro, is taking divine instructions from his younger brother Moses.²⁵ A long view of the pentateuchal narrative shows that in the Israelite culture this arrangement was contrary to

²² In addition, beyond the scope of this study, Yahweh spoke to Aaron individually regarding priestly duties, allotments, and inheritance (Num 18:1-24).

²³ Duguid, *Numbers: God’s Presence*, 160.

²⁴ Brown, *The Message*, 107.

²⁵ Brown, *The Message*, 107.

the custom of the elder son being given privilege and precedence.²⁶ It is reasonable for the reader to consider that all three of these grievances to which Brown has called attention, the ethnicity of Moses' wife, the special relationship Moses enjoyed with Yahweh, and the reversal of filial status, must contribute to a feeling within Aaron of rivalry toward his brother.

In the larger view of the pentateuchal narrative, texts clearly specify that Yahweh assigned certain important roles to Aaron. For example, Yahweh designated him as Moses' mouthpiece (Exod 4:16; 7:1). The deity also appointed him to the highest religious office in the cult (Exod 28).²⁷ A close look at the content of Aaron's questions, however, suggests that the tasks inherent in these roles do not satisfy Aaron's appetite. Hence, it is reasonable to conclude that Aaron's speech in the first threshold encounter of Numbers 12 reveals an envious nature. A consideration of the defensive and challenging tone of his two questions, must lead the reader to infer that Aaron feels resentment and envy toward Moses.

Aaron and Moses: Contrasting Figures

It is a matter of speculation as to whether Aaron and Miriam raise their questions in a conversation carried on among themselves or direct the questions to a specific audience. As Duguid has mentioned, their target listener is not named in the text. The narrator, however, explicitly states that Yahweh overhears their remarks. After their words are uttered, the narrator succinctly says, "And the Lord heard it" (Num 12:2). But

²⁶ See the Jacob-Esau narratives in Genesis 25 and 27.

²⁷ Brown, *The Message*, 108. Brown also suggests that Aaron provided the people with pastoral counseling.

before the deity or any other character responds to the complaint, the narrator interjects an editorial comment. In the form of a parenthetical aside, it contains a direct description favorably characterizing Moses. The narrator says, “Now the man Moses was very humble” (וְהָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עָנָו מְאֹד) (v. 3a).

The word עָנָו, translated here as “humble,” has produced various interpretations. George Buchanan Gray points out that this is the only instance in the Old Testament where the term is used in the singular form.²⁸ The implication of his comment is that intertextual comparison is difficult. He asserts that the descriptor is usually rendered by exegetes as “meek,” in the sense of being patient or of enduring wrongs without resistance. He cautions, however, that this nuanced meaning of the word is not found in other contexts. Additionally, Gray notes that the term possibly connotes a state of humbleness before God, as illustrated by the text “Seek the Lord, all you humble (עָנָוִים) of the earth who have carried out his ordinances” (Zeph 2:3).²⁹

Contra Gray, Milgrom argues that the word עָנָו never means “meek.”³⁰ Rather, he understands the term to be illumined by its synonymous and parallel expression, “who seek the Lord” found in the text of Psalm 22:26. By way of this comparison Milgrom suggests that Moses possesses the traits of devotion and trust. Other scholars understand the term to have a variety of connotations. From R. K. Harrison’s perspective, עָנָו means “more tolerant” or “more long-suffering.”³¹ For this specific context, N. H. Snaith offers

²⁸ Gray, *Numbers*, 123; Milgrom, *Numbers*, 94.

²⁹ See also Levine, *Numbers 1-20*, 329.

³⁰ Milgrom, *Numbers*, 94.

³¹ Harrison, *Numbers*, 195.

the interpretation “modest and non-assertive.”³² Brown proposes the meaning “bowed down.” He claims, therefore, that Moses subordinated his own personal interests to the service of Yahweh.³³

Albert Abbott opts for the unconventional or minimalist reading, “oppressed.”³⁴ He views Moses as a man carrying the weight of the entire Israelite people as they wander toward the Promised Land. His interpretation stands in synchrony with Moses’ own complaint to Yahweh about his weariness caused by the people’s demands. He cries out, “Why hast thou been so hard on thy servant? And why have I not found favor in thy sight, that thou hast laid the burden of all this people on me?” (Num 11:11).

Each of the aforementioned meanings for עני, exclusive of Abbott’s, has the effect of portraying Moses’ character in opposition to that of Aaron within this first threshold encounter. The significance of the term עני as used in this context is captured by Eryl Davies. He says that the word choice serves to deflect any implication that Moses might be boastful or might claim to have a monopoly on Yahweh’s word.³⁵ In contrast, Aaron presents as an arrogant figure through the content of his questions and because of the rebellious context in which he participates. The text lends support to this assessment of Aaron’s attitude first by way of divine response and then by narrative remark. Yahweh poses a reproving question back to Aaron (and Miriam) after hearing the charges.

³² N. H. Snaith, *Leviticus & Numbers* (CB; London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, Ltd., 1967), 235.

³³ Brown, *The Message*, 107.

³⁴ Albert Abbott, “Was Moses the Meekest of Men?” *The Expository Times* 45 (1933-34): 524.

³⁵ Davies, *Numbers*, 120-1.

Yahweh asks, “Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant?” (Num 12: 8). The term “afraid” used by Yahweh implies the antithesis of arrogance. In other words, Aaron exemplifies boldness in his speaking. At the conclusion of Yahweh’s rebuke, the narrator makes a comment regarding Yahweh’s reaction. He explicitly states, “So the anger of the Lord burned against them” (Aaron and Miriam) (Num 12:9). Though Aaron’s words portray him as an arrogant figure in this setting, a close examination of subsequent actions and speech in the second threshold encounter (Num 12:10-16) reveals a very different demeanor. The discussion now turns to an analysis of his bold words, which draw an immediate response.

Yahweh’s First Response

Gordon J. Wenham points out that Aaron’s challenge to Moses’ uniqueness elicits silence from his brother.³⁶ Katharine Doob Sakenfeld claims that any lack of self-justification on Moses’ part is in keeping with the narrator’s parenthetical characterization of him as עני (Num 12:3).³⁷ In contrast, however, the response from Yahweh is vocal. It is also immediate and intrusive, as conveyed by the narrator’s term, “suddenly” (פְּתָאֵם) (Num 12:4). The text clearly indicates that Yahweh comes to Moses’ defense and through divine speech squashes any thought of equality on the siblings’ part. The narrator reports that the Lord initially summons all three characters, Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, into the divine presence. As the scene progresses, Yahweh descends in a

³⁶ Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers* (TOTC; Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 111.

³⁷ Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Journeying With God: A Commentary on the Book of Numbers* (ITC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 79.

pillar of cloud onto the grounds of the tabernacle and stands in its doorway. The deity calls again, but this time for only Aaron and Miriam to step forward. The act separates them physically from Moses. At this juncture in the encounter, the deity's direct discourse begins. It bears the tone of reproach as evidenced by the closing rhetorical question, "Then why were you (pl.) not afraid (וּמָדוּעַ לֹא יִרְאִיתֶם) to speak against my servant, against Moses?" (Num 12:8). The use of the plural verb form (יִרְאִיתֶם) signifies that both Aaron and Miriam must stand accountable for their assertions.

The content of the deity's speech (Num 12:6-8) also sets the siblings apart from Moses. Yahweh's retort makes no mention of their first complaint about the Cushite wife. Duguid maintains, therefore, that the omission indicates that it was a non-issue with Yahweh.³⁸ Yahweh's words, instead, focus solely upon Aaron's and Miriam's questions regarding status. A close reading of the script shows that the Lord chooses to hone in on the differentiated relationships established with these three characters. Roy Gane points out that in Yahweh's direct statement, "If there is a prophet among you" (Num 12:6a), there is no denial that Miriam and Aaron are recipients of prophecy.³⁹ The distinction of their roles in comparison to Moses must lie in the way divine revelation is communicated. Yahweh states that he makes himself known to Aaron, Miriam, and other prophets through visions, dreams, riddles, or obscure sayings. David Sperling and

³⁸ Duguid, *Numbers: God's Presence*, 160.

³⁹ Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 2004), 591.

Bernard P. Robinson note that these media necessitate both interpretation and solution.⁴⁰ But that is not the case with Moses.

By contrast, Yahweh calls Moses “my servant” (עבדִי), not “my prophet.” The repetition two times of this epithet for Moses (Num 12:7, 8) adds emphasis to the deity’s ascription. Scholars agree that the term “servant” generally is conferred upon persons close to Yahweh, that is, those who display loyalty and devotion. Martin Noth likens Moses’ role relative to Yahweh to that of the chief slave who serves his master as both confidant and household trustee.⁴¹ The reader reasonably concludes that Yahweh’s own choice of language, “with him I speak mouth to mouth,” (פה אל־פה אִדְבַר־בוֹ) conveys intimacy as well as direct access. Gane suggests through the use of this expression the deity wants to point out that Moses is more than a prophet.⁴² John Sturdy observes that the phrase, “mouth to mouth,” (פה אל־פה) occurs only in this context; it appears nowhere else within the biblical text.⁴³ Such a phenomenon adds credence to the idea that Moses’ relationship with the deity is exclusive or special. The divine speech to Aaron and Miriam indicates that Yahweh privileges Moses with select information and reveals it with clarity. What is said to him requires neither interpretation nor problem solving.

⁴⁰ Sperling, “Miriam, Aaron and Moses,” 52-53; Robinson, “The Jealousy of Miriam,” 431.

⁴¹ Noth, *Numbers*, 96. Contra Robinson, “The Jealousy of Miriam,” 431-32. Robinson contends that the issue behind Miriam’s and Aaron’s questions was Miriam’s jealousy and her resistance to a new wife in Moses’ household.

⁴² Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 591.

⁴³ John Sturdy, *Numbers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 91.

The reader must assume that, to a degree, Yahweh's response is perplexing to both Aaron and Miriam. The conclusion is reasonable because in the context of the divine speech addressed to them, Yahweh plainly states that he speaks directly only to Moses (Num 12:7-8a).⁴⁴ In contrast, Yahweh explicitly states that communication is given to prophets indirectly through dreams, visions, and riddles (Num 12:6). Yet, Sperling points out these very words run counter to Yahweh's claim of differentiation, because in the present context the deity uses the direct medium of speech with Aaron and Miriam.⁴⁵ In addition, the reader readily notes that the divine remarks are prefaced with the admonition, "Hear now my words" (Num 12:6). Furthermore, as cited previously in this study, Yahweh has confronted Aaron directly within several other contexts (see Exod 4:27; Lev 10:8-11).

At the end of the direct address to Aaron and Miriam and after distinguishing the differences in revelation, Yahweh unleashes a stinging question. The deity asks, "Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant, against Moses?" (Num 12:8). Several scholars suggest that the divine words cast judgment upon these siblings of Moses.⁴⁶ The reader reasonably senses that these are rife with intimidation. These words also impart a strong message. Duguid claims that the thrust of what Yahweh is saying is evident: Aaron and Miriam should not profess equality with Moses, but

⁴⁴ Milgrom, *Numbers*, 94. See also Sperling, "Miriam, Aaron and Moses," 54. Both Milgrom and Sperling point out this phenomenon.

⁴⁵ Sperling, "Miriam, Aaron and Moses," 54. In this article, Sperling focuses on the irony in Yahweh's speech.

⁴⁶ Walter Riggans, *Numbers* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 103. See also Duguid, *Numbers: God's Presence*, 163.

conversely, they should defer to him with respect.⁴⁷ Aaron and Miriam, once audacious and verbose in their charges against Moses, now stand without a response in the wake of Yahweh's rebuke. The text makes no mention of action or word on their part. Thus, the first threshold encounter in Numbers 12 closes with the narrator's assessment of Yahweh's state of being. He reports, "So the anger of the Lord burned against them and he departed" (ויחר אף יהוה בם וילך) (Num 12:9). The pronoun in the grammatical construction "against them" (בם) is plural. The effect of the narrator's declaration is, therefore, unmistakable to the reader. Aaron, along with his sister Miriam, has provoked Yahweh's verbal expression of ire.

Summary

The first threshold encounter (Num 12:1-9) illuminates two negative qualities specific to the character Aaron. It indicates that he is a swayable and envious persona. The positioning of Miriam's name first in the text suggests that Aaron follows her lead, and the narrative scene is thereby set in motion. Together the siblings join the cadre of grumbling Israelites. Succumbing to the prevailing milieu of dissatisfaction within the encampment, Aaron can neither resist the influence of the masses, nor that of Miriam. His sister Miriam must embolden him, for he criticizes Moses, an act borne out by the initial verses (Num 12:1-2). The reader observes that he presents for the second time within the texts being analyzed as a character that is influenced easily. This characteristic first surfaces in the threshold encounter involving the crafting of the golden calf (Exod 32:1-6).

⁴⁷ Duguid, *Numbers: God's Presence*, 163.

Though Aaron is the religious leader of the people, the nature of his criticism suggests that he aspires to attain the same level of authority in mediating Yahweh's word as his younger brother Moses now possesses. His envy of Moses' status before Yahweh is betrayed by the two questions he raises. As David L. Stubbs perceives the situation, "Aaron wants to be at the top."⁴⁸ The text reveals that his direct and presumptive words evoke a silent response from Moses, but an angry lecture from Yahweh.

Second Threshold Encounter

Punishment for Miriam

Yahweh's anger is not only manifested through the divine speech but also by the execution of harsh action against Miriam. As the second threshold encounter opens (Num 12:10-16), the narrator informs the reader that the holy cloud has lifted. Yahweh has departed from the doorway of the tabernacle leaving Miriam stranded with a skin condition which the MT records as *מצרעת כשלג*. The term frequently is translated "leprous as snow." The narrator names her condition two times within a single verse (Num 12:10). He prefaces the first mention of it with the interjection *הנה*, meaning "look" or "behold." T.O. Lambdin asserts that *הנה* connotes immediacy.⁴⁹ The repetition and the innuendo of urgency serve to emphasize the nature of her malady.

Judith Abrams claims that Yahweh uses the disease to punish Miriam for a specific slander, which Abrams asserts is the unjustified questioning of Yahweh's

⁴⁸ David L. Stubbs, *Numbers* (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2009), 123.

⁴⁹ T. O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (New York: Scribner's, 1971), 135.

prophet, Moses.⁵⁰ She also notes that the phrase *מצרעת כשלג* occurs only two other times in the biblical text, namely Exodus 4:1-8, and 2 Kings 5.⁵¹ In each of these three contexts, she observes the same sequence of events. The challenge to a prophet's power is voiced first, and then the punishment of a skin disease follows.

The translation of *מצרעת* as "leprous" has generated scholarly discussion. Baruch A. Levine, Gordon J. Wenham, and Carol A. Newsom agree that leprosy, or Hansen's disease which is the modern clinical diagnosis, is not the appropriate designation for this context. The latter two interpreters purport that leprosy was not prevalent in the Middle East during the early period in which this narrative is set.⁵² R. Dennis Cole claims that the designation of the affliction as *צרעת* does not refer to a single physical condition but rather to a category of serious cutaneous diseases which cause white flaking of the skin. He additionally notes that leprosy is not the probable disorder within the context under study, because whiteness is not one of the presenting symptoms of leprosy.⁵³

The translation of *מצרעת כשלג* as "white as snow" by various commentators must be inaccurate. Davies points out that the MT does not include the descriptor

⁵⁰ Judith Abrams, "Metzora (at) Kashaleg: Leprosy, Challenges to Authority in the Bible," *The Jewish Bible Quarterly* 21 (1993): 45.

⁵¹ Abrams, "Metzora (at) Kashaleg: Leprosy," 41.

⁵² Levine, *Numbers 1-20*, 332. See also Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, "Numbers," in *The Women's Bible Commentary* (ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 48; Wenham, *Numbers*, 113. See also "Leprosy," *The World Book Encyclopedia* 12:204-205. According to the information in *The World Book Encyclopedia*, historians do not know the exact time and place of leprosy's origination.

⁵³ Cole, *Numbers*, 206. See also Harrison, *Numbers*, 197; Davies, *Numbers*, 124. Harrison and Davies also consider the term *צרעת* to refer to a generic label under which a variety of skin infections are grouped. See also "Leprosy," 12:205. The data provided in *The World Book Encyclopedia* supports the opinion held by Harrison and Davies.

“white.”⁵⁴ Therefore, Cole’s idea becomes a moot point. Davies further speculates that the similarity of snow and צרעת may center upon their common characteristic of flakiness.⁵⁵ On the other hand, Snaith focuses upon snow’s property of wetness. He surmises that the comparison of the skin condition to snow, evident in the text, may be attributable to an open wound or ulcer. This visible manifestation he perceives to be more compatible with leprosy.⁵⁶

In the biblical literature devoted to purity laws, specifically Leviticus 13, the disease termed leprosy (צרעת) is associated with a variety of symptoms. It could manifest itself as a swelling of the skin, as a scab, or as a bright spot with a concomitant infection deep below the surface surrounded by hairs turned white (Lev 13:2-3; 19-20). Also, places on the skin could appear as raw flesh (Lev 13:14-15).⁵⁷ Given these graphic features presented by the text, the sight of Miriam must be horrifying for Aaron to behold. That which he witnesses motivates him to speak, as is indicated by the immediate action of his appeal to Moses and the desperate tenor of his spoken words. Aaron’s response and the implied toll which Yahweh’s action has on him are discussed below.

⁵⁴ Davies, *Numbers*, 124.

⁵⁵ Davies, *Numbers*, 124. See also Milgrom, *Numbers*, 97.

⁵⁶ Snaith, *Leviticus & Numbers*, 236.

⁵⁷ “Leprosy,” *The World Book Encyclopedia*, 204. This resource reports manifestations of leprosy as being white or reddish patches of skin, thickened skin, and/or dark nodules. See also John R. Trautman, M.D., “A Brief History of Hansen’s Disease,” *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 60 (1984): 692. Trautman states that the biblical description of leprosy does not match the symptoms presented by the modern disease.

Punishment for Aaron

The text makes it very clear that Miriam suffers a disfigured body at the hand of an enraged deity. The narrator states two times in one verse that she is leprous (Num 12:10), but he ascribes no consequences to Aaron. To the reader, Aaron seemingly escapes unscathed. The text does not provide any explanation for the discrepancy. Academicians, however, have debated extensively as to why Aaron is not physically punished. Though this study presents several of the main arguments, the listing of speculative theories is not exhaustive. Knierim and Coats, as well as Noth, suggest that the punishment is targeted at Miriam because they credit her with making the remark about Moses' Cushite wife.⁵⁸ Another prevalent argument contends that Miriam instigated the charges against Moses, therefore, she is more to blame.⁵⁹ Several scholars advance the idea that Aaron is protected because of his role as high priest and because the necessity for maintaining ritual cleanliness is paramount.⁶⁰

R. K. Harrison entertains an opposing view. He claims that Aaron actually does encounter consequences. He submits that the shock of seeing Miriam serves as his punishment.⁶¹ W. Gunther Plaut develops this proposition more extensively. He makes

⁵⁸ Rolf Knierim and George W. Coats, *Numbers* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005), 180. See also Noth, *Numbers*, 92.

⁵⁹ Naomi Graetz, "Miriam: Guilty or Not Guilty?" *Judaism* 2 (1991): 190. See also Gray, *Numbers*, 127; Cole, *Numbers*, 206-207; James Philip, *Numbers* (The Communicator's Commentary; Waco: Word Books, 1987), 147; Tribble, "Bringing Miriam Out of the Shadows," 21-22.

⁶⁰ Sakenfeld, "Numbers," 48. See also Sakenfeld, *Journeying with God*, 83; Wenham, *Numbers*, 113.

⁶¹ Harrison, *Numbers*, 197.

the case that even though Aaron is not punished corporally like Miriam, he experiences emotional duress.⁶² On one level, Plaut says, Aaron is overcome with mental anguish as a result of Yahweh's rebuke of him (Num 12:6-8). On another, Plaut claims that Aaron is plagued by guilt, a guilt stemming from the sight of his disfigured sister combined with the realization that his own body remains untouched. The text makes no mention of these emotional states. Rather, they are mere conjecture on the part of Plaut. He additionally suggests that on a third level Aaron experiences humiliation. Once again, the text does not explicitly state that Aaron endures this feeling. A close reading, however, of Aaron's own actions and direct speech enables the reader to infer that he does indeed suffer personal disgrace.

For example, in order to obtain help for Miriam, he has to resort to pleading, as indicated by multiple textual clues. One is the repeated use of the term אָנִי, which often carries the translation, "I pray."⁶³ Aaron prefaces each of his two requests of Moses with this expression of exhortation. "I pray (אָנִי), my lord, I beg you, do not account sin to us" (Num 12:11). "I pray (אָנִי), do not let her be like one dead" (Num 12:12). Another indicator is evidenced in the subject of the address, "Oh/Please, my lord," (בִּי אֲדֹנָי). Aaron directs these to Moses, and not to Yahweh (Num 12:11). They betray the fact that Aaron has a new sense of self-awareness, a new sense of his status relative to Moses. By turning to Moses, Aaron acknowledges that it is his younger brother, not he himself, who

⁶² W. Gunther Plaut, *Numbers* (The Torah: A Modern Commentary IV; New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1979), 119-120.

⁶³ A. E. Cowley, ed. *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (2d ed.; Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1910), 308. In *Gesenius* it is stated that the term אָנִי is used to give emphasis to a demand, warning, or entreaty.

is able to effectively initiate Yahweh's intercession. One notes a third clue in the expression, "Oh/Please, my lord," (בִּי אֲדֹנָי). It contains the particle of entreaty בִּי, which Marsha White points out signals the earnest desire to address a person of higher standing.⁶⁴ This is the same language of deference that Moses uses while addressing Yahweh in his attempt to evade the divine call (Exod 4:10, 13).

Milgrom calls attention to the fact that the designation "lord" also denotes superiority.⁶⁵ In addition, Sperling notes that the utterance of this specific title shows that Aaron admits to his inequality with Moses.⁶⁶ In his speech, Aaron uses one particle of entreaty after another, first בִּי, then אֵנִי. The effect is telling: Aaron is begging Moses. The sibling, who previously and unabashedly follows Miriam's lead, and in an act of rashness speaks out against his brother, now has to "eat crow." Aaron, the character who in the first threshold encounter of Numbers 12 exhibits arrogance, now in the second encounter is humbled and transformed by the mighty power of Yahweh.

Aaron's Transformed Attitude

As noted in the previous section, the narrator reports that Aaron, who is appalled by the disfigurement of his sister and is given a reality check by Yahweh's might, immediately resorts to his gift of speech. He addresses Moses (Num 12:11-12), the one

⁶⁴ Marsha White, "The Elohist's Depiction of Aaron: A Study in the Levite-Zadokite Controversy," in *Studies in the Pentateuch* (ed. J. A. Emerton, New York: E.J. Brill, 1990), 158. See Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs-Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1997), 106.

⁶⁵ Milgrom, *Numbers*, 97.

⁶⁶ Sperling, "Miriam, Aaron and Moses," 48.

whom moments earlier in narrative time he had criticized and challenged (Num 12:1-2). His petition to Moses attests to the fact that he quickly recognizes the special relationship which his younger brother and the deity share. The tone of his speech no longer conveys the haughtiness detected in the first threshold encounter, but now signals beseechment. From the opening interjections of entreaty, ׀ב and ׀נ, the reader must infer that Aaron's attitude is transformed. The reader also observes that his words of assertiveness now change to words of submission.

George W. Coats notes that the substance of Aaron's response consists of two parts: a confession and a petition.⁶⁷ The first half of his speech contains the admission of culpability. Aaron says, in direct speech to Moses, "Oh/Please, my lord, I pray, do not account this sin to *us*, in which *we* have acted foolishly and in which *we* have sinned" (Num 12:11). The presence of the plural pronouns, "us" once and "we" two times, explicitly shows that Aaron indicts himself alongside the afflicted Miriam. The specific inclusion of the plural pronoun *us* in the phrase, "do not account the sin to *us*," indicates that he confesses his own blameworthiness.⁶⁸

The attitude reflected in Aaron's words of contrition is in stark contrast to the one exposed by the golden calf episode which occurs in an earlier part of the grand narrative of the Pentateuch. In the immediate context, Aaron presents as a character willing to accept responsibility for his poor judgment. This is not the response disclosed by the scene at the base of Mt. Sinai. As the reader recalls that place in the narrative, Aaron

⁶⁷ George W. Coats, "Humility and Honor: A Moses Legend in Numbers 12," *JSOT* 19 (1982): 103.

⁶⁸ Contra Sakenfeld, *Journeying with God*, 82. She contends that the phrase reveals Aaron's fear of the possibility of his own subsequent affliction.

dodges incrimination. When he encounters Moses' accusatory question, he shifts the blame to the people and concocts an incredible story about the magical origin of the idol (Exod 32:21-24). Within this threshold encounter in Numbers 12, the reader witnesses a character whose demeanor has matured. The long view of the narrative suggests, therefore, that Aaron's ability to accept responsibility for ignoble actions has developed favorably over the course of time.⁶⁹

The attitudinal change is also evident when the two threshold encounters contained within Numbers 12 are compared. In just a brief period of time as suggested by the narrative, the reader observes notable differences in the character of Aaron. In the first threshold encounter, his charges against Moses directed to no one in particular portray him to be an arrogant antagonist. In contrast, his words of entreaty addressed specifically to Moses in the second threshold encounter betray him as a humble solicitor. In the first threshold encounter, his competitive spirit is manifested by the content of the questions he raises. In the second threshold encounter, there is no evidence of sibling rivalry. The requests Aaron makes of his brother clearly show that his character acquiesces to the superiority of Moses. His demand for equality, which is revealed in the first threshold encounter, devolves into submissive requests in the context of the second threshold encounter.

Aaron, the Compassionate Brother

For the second time within the larger narrative of the Pentateuch, the text places Aaron in the midst of a family crisis. The experience of personal tragedy within the

⁶⁹ Contra Cole, *Numbers*, 207 and Sakenfeld, *Journeying with God*, 82. Both of these commentators suggest that Aaron's motivation was driven in part by fear that he, too, might become afflicted with the same malady.

second threshold encounter of Numbers 12 draws out the sensitive and compassionate nature of Aaron's character. The qualities are borne out by his direct speech to Moses. Yahweh's smiting of Miriam in Aaron's presence may cause the reader to recall Aaron's witness to the destruction of his older sons, Nadab and Abihu within the book of Leviticus. In that scene (10:1-3), like in the present context, Aaron is overcome with emotion. An analysis of the previous text shows that he wails publicly, but does not speak. Undaunted by the public arena in which he stands, the character of Aaron unbridles his feelings in full view of the Israelite congregation. His action implies that he is a compassionate father. In the current context, his response is different. Aaron neither wails nor moans. Instead, he chooses to appeal to Moses directly. It is plausible to consider that the text of his speech, which is presented in the form of exhortations, is a sign that Aaron has been moved by sensitivity just as he was in Leviticus 10.

The narrator clearly states that Aaron witnesses the physical distress of his sister. The narrator says, "As Aaron turned toward Miriam, behold, she was leprous" (Num 12:10). The narrator, however, makes no mention of the inner workings of Aaron's mind or of what motivates Aaron to speak. On the other hand, the reader rightly speculates that Aaron, the high priest, is aware that Miriam's blemished body now violates the purity code. Her uncleanness is at risk of generating severe social consequences for the community. One can infer therefore, that Aaron does not let his own humiliation deter him from seeking help. We observe one of Aaron's positive traits for the second time. His character is not immobilized by his emotion.

In the second half of his speech in the second threshold encounter (Num 12:12), Aaron implores Moses to intercede on Miriam's behalf. The plea begins with the particle

of entreaty, “I pray” (אָנאָן). A detailed and graphic description of the physical condition of his stricken sister follows. In the text of his speech, Miriam’s body is likened to that of a dead fetus. Her flesh is portrayed as being putrefied and half consumed by rot. This vivid and dramatic comparison of Miriam to a stillborn child betrays a voice of desperation. The intense empathy suggested by Aaron’s words may be palpable to the reader, leading him or her to conclude that Aaron as a brother is compassionate.⁷⁰

Aaron and Moses: Contrasting Figures Again

The text indicates that in response, Moses readily acts upon Aaron’s plea (Num 12:13). The narrator reports that Moses cries out to Yahweh. Though no comment is made about the inner workings of Moses’ mind, it is plausible to consider that Moses identifies with Miriam’s plight. The reader recalls that Moses himself had experienced a similar skin condition when arguing with Yahweh over his call (Exod 4:6-7).⁷¹ Therefore, he must have recognized it when it appeared upon Miriam’s body. Yet, materially, Moses’ intercessory prayer seems somewhat enigmatic. On the one hand, the prayer contains the term of entreaty אָנאָן two times. The repetition suggests earnestness in the voice of the intercessor. On the other hand, in contrast to Aaron’s lengthier request of him, Moses’ supplication to Yahweh is brief. In Hebrew, it consists of only five words אֱלֹהִים רַחֵם נָא לְמִירְיָם. Additionally, the prayer contains none of the details about Miriam’s condition which Aaron has so poignantly described. Raising another curiosity, Milgrom

⁷⁰ See Brown, *The Message of Numbers*, 111. He describes Aaron as heartbroken over the sight of his sister.

⁷¹ In Exodus 4:6 the text indicates that Yahweh, in a display of wondrous acts, turned Moses’ hand “leprous like snow.” As in the text of Numbers 12:10, there is no mention of the descriptor white.

points out that the subject of Moses' prayer has no identity.⁷² To Yahweh, Moses does not mention Miriam by name. Instead, he refers to the party in need of healing with the impersonal pronoun "her" (לָהּ).

Thus, when the two brothers' speeches are juxtaposed, Moses' words come across as being more insensitive or stoic than those of Aaron.⁷³ They convey no feeling for Miriam. In addition, Milgrom observes that the rhythm of Moses' speech is monosyllabic, a feature which he claims indicates a lack of enthusiasm.⁷⁴ Even though Moses' response is immediate, a close examination suggests that it is devoid of the personal element. Thus, it is plausible to conclude that Moses' prayer is a perfunctory response, that he is merely going through the motion of intercession. His questionable level of empathy for his sister's circumstances in this narrative recalls his lack of sympathy for Aaron upon the loss of his two sons in the previous narrative (Lev 10:1-7).

Conclusion

In sum, the narrative of Numbers 12 portrays Aaron, the brother. Aaron's interactions with his two siblings in the first threshold encounter bring out several negative qualities. At the beginning of the encounter, which Aaron and Miriam initiate, Aaron appears to be swayed easily by his sister. The reader observes this trait for the second time, as it is also apparent in his reaction to the Israelite people at Mt. Sinai. Not

⁷² Milgrom, *Numbers*, 98.

⁷³ Contra Bernhard W. Anderson, "Miriam's Challenge: Why was Miriam Severely Punished for Challenging Moses' Authority While Aaron Got Off Scot-free?," *Biblical Research* 10 (1994): 55. Anderson argues that Moses displays the same sensitivity as Aaron due to his act of intercession with Yahweh.

⁷⁴ Milgrom, *Numbers*, 98.

only does Aaron follow Miriam's lead in the current account, but he must also be emboldened by her. In her company, he readily and arrogantly asserts his opinions and challenges Moses.

As noted in the Leviticus 10 narrative toward the end of the inaugural ritual of sacrifice, hints of a competitive rivalry between Moses and Aaron began to surface. The two brothers disagreed about the disposition of the sin offering. Aaron's envy of Moses becomes openly expressed in the narrative currently under study. The reader perceives through Aaron's prideful remarks his craving for equal vocational rank and access to Yahweh. His presumptuous words leveled at Moses arouse no response from his brother, however. But they do incur divine wrath.

The second threshold encounter is triggered by Yahweh's punishment of Miriam. Though the consequences for her are tragic, Aaron's response to the punishment accentuates his positive qualities. His immediate and merciful plea for the reversal of her condition reflects a compassionate nature. The reader observes this characteristic for the second time, as he or she recalls the profound emotion he displayed for his sons Nadab and Abihu. In that scene, Aaron's actions portrayed him as a compassionate father, and in this encounter his words demonstrate that he is a compassionate brother.

In Chapter One of this study, Berlin's notion of contrast as a character indicator was discussed. The narrative in Numbers 12 offers a prime example of one type mentioned: contrastive actions of the same character performed within different encounters. When the two threshold encounters in Numbers 12 are examined together, the reader notes a contrast in the tone of Aaron's speeches. His first speech, uttered in the first threshold encounter (Num 12:1-9), presents a posture of arrogance toward

Moses. In the second threshold encounter where he speaks to Miriam's suffering, it is possible for the reader to perceive a transformation in Aaron's demeanor. When he turns to Moses for help, his words convey deference.

Furthermore, when his action in Numbers 12 is contrasted with his action in Exodus 32, the reader notes a change in attitude toward his own wrongful decisions. In the context of the golden calf incident, Aaron comes across as evasive when accusations are directed at him. On the other hand, in the Numbers 12 narrative, he stands accountable and assumes responsibility when at fault. Thus, the reader must conclude that several aspects of Aaron's persona show signs of malleability.

CHAPTER FIVE

Numbers 20:1-13

Introduction

In narrative time, almost forty years have elapsed since the Israelites gathered at the base of Mount Sinai. The text recounts the northward movement of the people en masse across the desert from Hazeroth to Kadesh on the border of the Wilderness of Zin. A new generation has grown up. Various reports indicate that the grumbling and accusations of the people are incessant. One account, for example, relates that scouts return from the land of promise and share their findings with the congregation (Num 13:25-33). The text clearly states that these spies confirm previous divine descriptors that the land flows with milk and honey.¹ The text explicitly mentions that the scouts actually show the people samples of its fruits. The details of the people's reaction are equally transparent. Rather than focusing upon the region's fertility and productivity, the people complain to Moses and Aaron (Num 14:1-39). They express their fear of the larger than life people who reportedly inhabit the area. They question the intent of Yahweh and grouse about needing to return to Egypt. They say, "And why is the Lord bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become plunder; would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?" (Num 14:3).

The narrator reports that there are rumblings about replacing Moses and Aaron. In this context, Moses and Aaron respond to the general unrest by falling on their faces in front of the whole assembly (Num 14:5). At this juncture in the scene, the glory of the

¹ See Exodus 3:8, 17.

Lord appears. The deity expresses dismay at the people's lack of trust and threatens them with harsh punishment. Ultimately, everyone is barred by Yahweh from entering Canaan, except for Joshua and Caleb (Num 14:21-24).

Another example of discontent in the book of Numbers depicts Korah and a contingent of his followers challenging both Moses and Aaron's priestly leadership as well as their exalted status with Yahweh. The narrator relates a sequence of resulting actions (Num 16:1-22). First, these rebels assemble against (ויקהלו על-) Moses and Aaron. Yahweh responds by announcing the divine intent to consume them, at which point the two brothers fall on their faces once again (Num 16:22). They earnestly pray to Yahweh for the sparing of those not involved in the uprising. The following day, as depicted in narrative time, all of Israel blames Moses and Aaron for the killing of Korah's group (Num 16:41-50). Yahweh responds by inflicting a plague upon them. Then Moses and Aaron, as in previous fashion, fall on their faces in front of the tabernacle (Num 16:45).

Steven Sanchez observes a predictable pattern within these grumbling texts contained in the book of Numbers.² Because of their similar plot structure, he identifies them as type scenes. According to his analysis, the action in each text consists of an initial, and typically unwarranted, complaint by Israel followed by judgment from Yahweh. Moses intercedes on behalf of the people and effectively brings about a cessation of the punishment. Upon completion of the event, it is memorialized. Sanchez additionally notes that the narrative comprising Numbers 20:1-13 deviates from this

² Steven H. Sanchez, "A Literary-Theological Analysis of Numbers 20:1-13" (Master's Thesis; Dallas Theological Seminary, 2000), 53-54, 72.

pattern.³ He claims that the reason for Moses' and Aaron's punishment – their prohibition from leading the people into the land of promise – becomes evident by way of this variation.

The narrative of Numbers 20:1-13 opens with the narrator's report of Miriam's death and burial in Kadesh. The people who must be desperate, as suggested by the expression "assembled against" (ויקהלו על-), initiate the first threshold encounter (Num 20:1-6) by bringing another complaint to Moses and Aaron. In this scene, Sanchez points out; the complaint is legitimate for there is no water in the harsh environs of the wilderness.⁴ The text mentions the scarcity of the life-giving sustenance two times (Num 20:2, 5). Yahweh drives the second threshold encounter by directing Moses, with Aaron's assistance, to provide for the Israelites' needs (Num 20:7-12). The narrator sums up the events by stating that the encampment is to be renamed Meribah (מריבה). The new name stems from the term "contend" (רבו) because, as the threshold encounters indicate, the sons of Israel, including their leaders, have striven with Yahweh. The narrator's final word, "he (Yahweh) proved himself holy among them" (ויקרש בהם) (Num 20:13), reiterates the crux of the issue for Yahweh, which was explained to Moses and Aaron during the pronouncement of their punishment (Num 20:12).

³ Sanchez, "A Literary-Theological Analysis of Numbers 20:1-13," 58.

⁴ Sanchez, "A Literary-Theological Analysis of Numbers 20:1-13," 64-65, 72.

The First Threshold Encounter

The Israelites Grumble

At the beginning of the first threshold encounter, the narrator succinctly states a problem that the new generation of Israelites is experiencing. “And there was no water for the congregation” (Num 20:2). The text indicates that the wandering people manifest their desperation through both their action and speech. Initially, they assemble themselves against both Moses and Aaron (ויקהלו על־משה ועל־אהרן) (Num 20:2). This behavior recalls their ancestors’ confrontation with Aaron on Mt. Sinai (Exod 32:1-6). In that context, the people were in a frantic state of mind due to Moses’ prolonged absence, so they mobbed Aaron who was acting in Moses’ stead. The expression translated “assemble themselves against” (ויקהלו על) is utilized in both the Exodus and the Numbers accounts. Though the narrator explicitly states in the Numbers 20 narrative event that the people accosted both Moses and Aaron, he makes it clear that they spoke to Moses alone. He states, “The people thus contended with Moses and spoke” (Num 20:3).

The omission of Aaron’s name by the narrator implies the notion that Aaron’s role as leader is “equal but subordinate.”⁵ Though he stands before the Israelite people, they do not address him directly. The second person masculine plural form of the verbs evident in their accusatory questions, however, clearly indicates that they do hold him equally responsible alongside Moses for their situation. They ask of Moses, “Why have

⁵ Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Journeying With God: A Commentary on the Book of Numbers* (ITC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 113. This is the terminology which Sakenfeld uses.

you (pl.) brought (הבאתם) the Lord's assembly into this wilderness?" and "Why have you (pl.) made us come up (העליתנו) from Egypt?" (Num 20:4-5).

Within their speech to Moses, the second generation of Israelites unleashes a string of grievances. The sequence of their complaints, as presented in the text, builds in intensity. William H. Propp maintains that the ordering of the specifics on their list effectively dramatizes the Israelites' predicament.⁶ First, they mention that their beasts thirst (Num 20:4). Subsequently, they add that lush vegetation does not grow in the place to which Moses and Aaron have brought them. They characterize the wilderness as "wretched" (Num 20:5). The people end their grumbling by saying that there is no water for them to drink (Num 20:5).

Harrison points out that this congregation has known life only in the wilderness.⁷ Their circumstances in this context must be so dire that they express a death wish. "If only we had perished when our brothers (Korah and his followers) perished before the Lord" (Num 20:3). Sanchez argues that, in the long view of the narrative, grouching by the Israelites and their ancestors in other contexts has not been well-founded. Their expressed needs have not been legitimate.⁸ For example, the people harped about their three days' walk from one camp to another (Num 11:1-3). They whined about the monotony of their diet (Num 11:4-35). Their leader Aaron and his sister Miriam bemoaned their lack of status (Num 12:1-2). The entire community fretted about the

⁶ William H. Propp, "The Rod of Aaron and the Sin of Moses," *JBL* 107 (1988): 21.

⁷ R. K. Harrison, *Numbers* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1992), 262.

⁸ Sanchez, "A Literary-Theological Analysis," 65.

formidable, giant-like inhabitants residing in the Promised Land (Num 14:1-3). Korah and other Levites challenged Moses and Aaron's leadership because they coveted a greater role in the tabernacle (Num 16:1-40). Their followers grumbled about their consequential slaying (Num 16:41-50). All of these unwarranted and unnecessary gripes had provoked Yahweh to anger.

In the context of Numbers 20, the people's death wish evolves into an attack against both Moses and Aaron. They demand, "Why have you brought (הבאתם) the assembly of Yahweh into this wilderness for us and our beasts to die here?" (v. 4). "And why have you made us come up (העלייתנו) from Egypt to bring us in to this wretched place?" (Num 20:5). In the latter question, Plaut calls attention to a hint which lies beneath the murmur.⁹ The Israelites prefer a life in Egypt, although unlike their parents, they have never lived there prior to the exodus. The tenor of the back to back "whys" contained in their speech connotes an aggressive spirit, as does their action of "assembling against" (ויקהלו על-).

Moses and Aaron Respond

When faced with the people's assault expressed in both word and deed in this context, both Aaron and Moses resort to the response which has worked successfully for them in past encounters. They retreat to the tabernacle and fall prostrate at its door (Num 20:6). Such a posture generally connotes deference. In some scenes, Ashley notes, this

⁹ W. Gunther Plaut, *Numbers* (The Torah: A Modern Commentary IV; New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1979), 198. See also Sanchez, "A Literary-Theological Analysis," 57.

act of bowing down is accompanied by a verbal request.¹⁰ Such action is evidenced in several of the examples previously cited in this section of the study. But in this first encounter of Numbers 20, the text makes no mention of either character speaking. Therefore, the reader must conclude that Moses and Aaron remain in complete silence.

This reaction of both Moses and Aaron is a departure from their characteristic behaviors. In this encounter, Moses neither chastises the people nor pleads for divine intervention as he has done in past experiences.¹¹ The reader notes that Aaron, who in another setting challenged Moses and consequently was admonished by Yahweh to recognize his superior relationship to the deity (Num 12:6-8), now acts in concert with Moses. Within this threshold encounter, one also observes that Aaron neither capitulates to the people nor works toward pacification, as was his style when left alone with the people on Mt. Sinai (Exod 32:2-4). Instead, Aaron's behavior in the first threshold encounter of Numbers 20 presents as starkly different. Therefore, it is plausible for the reader to surmise that Aaron defers to Moses' lead in bowed silence. By Aaron's acknowledgement of Moses' superiority, the reader may also assume that Aaron has internalized Yahweh's admonition (Num 12:6-8) and, thereby in this context, manifests his respect for and obedience to Yahweh.

¹⁰ Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 247.

¹¹ Plaut, *Numbers*, 198.

The Second Threshold Encounter

Yahweh Responds

Yahweh initiates the second threshold encounter by responding to the people's complaint. The narrator reports that Yahweh utters a set of instructions directed only to Moses, though Aaron is present. Sakenfeld claims that this exclusion of Aaron in the divine address is another indication of his equal but subordinate status.¹² Furthermore, Sanchez points out that the positioning of the names in the expression, "you and Aaron your brother," spoken by the deity serves to accentuate Moses' superior relationship as the conveyor of information.¹³ The content of Yahweh's speech to Moses contains multiple commands. A close reading of the text shows that the only directive which designates Aaron to be a participant in the action is the command to speak to the rock. "Take (s.) the rod; and you and your brother Aaron assemble (s.) the congregation and speak (pl.) to the rock before their eyes, that it may yield its water. You (s.) shall thus bring forth water for them out of the rock and [you (s.)] let the congregation and their beasts drink"(Num 20:8).

Dennis Olson suggests that the deity's words come as a surprise to the reader, who has been conditioned by previous texts to anticipate a pattern of divine judgment following the peoples' complaint.¹⁴ This phenomenon is exemplified in earlier scenes where the grumblings have been observed to be unreasonable and self-serving. In this

¹² Sakenfeld, *Journeying With God*, 113.

¹³ Sanchez, "A Literary-Theological Analysis," 28. Sanchez emphasizes, however, that the instructions were also given to Aaron.

¹⁴ Dennis T. Olson, *Numbers* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996), 125.

context, however, the circumstances are different. Olson points out that the people's description of their predicament – there is no water to drink (v. 5) – matches the narrator's report – there was no water for the community (v. 2).¹⁵ Sanchez argues that the content of Yahweh's speech to Moses indicates the deity recognizes that the people's currently expressed need is legitimate.¹⁶ Additionally, he rightly claims, it shows that Yahweh's intention is to provide for them rather than to inflict punishment. Yahweh's expressed words (as noted in verse 8) attest to that conclusion. Eugene Arden also makes a notable observation: in Yahweh's speech, there is no hint of anger toward the Israelites.¹⁷

Moses Acts and Speaks

The narrator reports that Moses takes the rod as instructed. He also affirms that Moses' performance is in accordance with Yahweh's command (Num 20:9). But, he does not mention Aaron as joining in on this move. This silence of the text serves as another example of his "equal but subordinate" role. He does, however, along with Moses, gather the congregation together (Num 20:10). At this juncture in the narrative scene, either Moses or Aaron addresses the people, though Yahweh has not stipulated either one to do so. A close read of Yahweh's directive to Moses indicates that Moses is to speak to the rock. Again, there is no evidence in Yahweh's words of the need for Moses to address the people.

¹⁵ Olson, *Numbers*, 126.

¹⁶ Sanchez, "A Literary-Theological Analysis," 67.

¹⁷ Eugene Arden, "How Moses Failed God," *JBL* 76 (1957): 52. See also Sanchez, "A Literary-Theological Analysis," 67.

The text is ambiguous regarding the speaker's identity. The speaker is designated only by the pronoun "he": "And he said to them" (וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם) (Num 20:10). Most scholars consider the speaker to be Moses. Sakenfeld concurs and bases her assumption upon the fact that in the Numbers 20 narrative most of the focus is upon Moses.¹⁸ A close examination of the text reveals, for example, that the people contended with him (Num 20:3a). Furthermore, Yahweh spoke to him (Num 20:7). Moses took the rod (Num 20:9). He lifted his hand and struck the rock (Num 20:11). Another factor pointing to Moses as the presumptive speaker is the attitude toward the people which is conveyed by the pejorative term, "rebels" (הַמְרִיבִים). The label implies a feeling of irritation or impatience on the part of the speaker. Such a tone is consonant with Moses' quick-tempered persona, which has been evident in several other contexts. Thus, this study supports the majority opinion that it is Moses who addresses the people.

Moses asks the so-called rebels a question. He says, "Shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?" (הַמַּן-הַסֵּלַע הַזֶּה נּוֹצֵיאַ לָכֶם מַיִם) (Num 20:10). Because the subject of the verb is plural (נוֹצֵיאַ), the reader must infer that Moses implicates Aaron in the anticipated action. Exegetes have interpreted and nuanced Moses' remark in several ways, each of which places Yahweh in a negative light. For example, both Ashley and Sakenfeld suggest that a rendering of "from this rock *can we bring* for you waters?" either casts an element of doubt upon God's power to perform or intimates Moses' and

¹⁸ Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, "Theological and Redactional Problems in Numbers 20:2-13," in *Understanding the Word* (ed. James T. Butler, Edgar W. Conrad, and Ben C. Ollenburger; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 133-154.

Aaron's own uncertainty about the possibility of the miracle.¹⁹ A translation of "from this rock *shall we bring* for you waters," opens an opportunity for the people to reply. Sakenfeld notes that it allows them to assume a pleading stance with their leaders because of their condition, in spite of the fact that Yahweh has already commanded the deed to be done.²⁰ Ashley asserts that the option of "from this rock *must we bring* for you waters," gives the impression that Moses and Aaron are reluctant to carry out the order.²¹ None of these interpretations, Sakenfeld and Ashley point out, can be conclusively corroborated by context, philology, or grammar.²² What is crucial about the different renderings is the similarity of effect that each one has on the reader. Sakenfeld emphasizes that whether the translation connotes doubt, the people's choice, or the leaders' reluctance, each of these detracts from the holiness of Yahweh.²³

As the scene progresses, Moses hits the rock, more than once as indicated by the term פַּעַמַיִם (Num 20:11), which in numerous translations is rendered as "twice." A long view of the pentateuchal narrative reveals that the first generation of Israelites faced an equally dire state of thirst at the site of Rephidim (Exod 17:5-6). In that context, Yahweh instructs Moses to strike the rock, and Moses complies. Though there was no report in that scene of Moses offering more than one blow. Thus, the multiple lashing which

¹⁹ Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, 384. See also Sakenfeld, *Journeying with God*, 114.

²⁰ Sakenfeld, *Journeying with God*, 114.

²¹ Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, 384.

²² Sakenfeld, *Journeying With God*, 114. See also Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, 384.

²³ Sakenfeld, *Journeying With God*, 114.

occurs at Kadesh in the second threshold encounter of Numbers 20 must suggest an angry spirit on Moses' part. Erhard Blum dramatically describes Moses in this act as being "blinded with rage."²⁴

Aaron Neither Acts Nor Speaks

There is no mention in the text of Aaron's participation in this particular action. The narrator explicitly states that Moses performs by himself. He says, "Then Moses lifted (וַיִּרֶם) up his hand (וַיָּדוּ) and struck (וַיִּדֶךְ) the rock twice with his rod (בַּמִּזְטָהוּ)" (Num 20:11). The fact that Moses acted alone is corroborated grammatically. Each of the pronominal and verbal constructions is singular. In effect, Moses does accomplish Yahweh's goal of providing the people with drink. His action elicits a gusher of water from the rock as indicated by the continuation of the narrator's report, "and water came forth abundantly and the congregation and their beasts drank." The move by Moses, however, is not in accordance with Yahweh's command. To the reader, Moses' deed appears to stem from his own volition.

Yahweh Indicts Aaron Alongside Moses

The striking of the rock brings words of condemnation from the deity. The text discloses Yahweh's verbal response, which contains a two-fold indictment. In essence, the Lord offers these accusations: you have not believed me and you have not treated me as holy in front of the sons of Israel (לֹא־הֵאֱמַנְתֶּם בִּי לְהַקְדִּישֵׁנִי לְעֵינֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל) (Num 20:12). The charges are leveled against both leaders even though the text explicitly states that Aaron participates only in the action of gathering the congregation. Yahweh's words

²⁴ Erhard Blum, *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 189 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990), 271-278.

are clearly directed at Aaron, as demonstrated by the usage of the second person masculine plural verb (האמנתם). Yahweh's speech also includes the pronouncement of a devastating sentence upon both Moses and Aaron. The deity informs them, "You shall not bring" (לכן לא תביאו) the assembly into the land which I have given them" (Num 20:12). Once again, Aaron is clearly included in the judgment as indicated by the usage of the second person masculine plural verb (תביאו).

Scholars have offered a plethora of opinions regarding the nature of the infraction committed within this threshold encounter, as well as the party responsible for it.²⁵ Propp, for example, considers Moses the sole perpetrator.²⁶ He claims that Moses does not follow Yahweh's directions exactly. Instead of speaking to the rock, he strikes it. Instead of displaying the rod, which Propp maintains was intended as a monitory sign against rebellion (as designated by Yahweh in the narrative of Numbers 17), Moses addresses the people.

Sanchez offers a compelling interpretation based upon his identification of Numbers 20:1-13 as a grumbling type scene.²⁷ He notes that in the scene's plot structure various narrative elements are reversed. Namely, Moses and Aaron act in the role of judge instead of intercessor. This change is exemplified by Moses' lashing out at the people with the disparaging and incriminating term, "rebels." Sanchez argues that Moses' tempestuous display and words convey the wrong message about Yahweh to the

²⁵ For a survey of scholarship, see J. Milgrom, "Magic, Monotheism and the Sin of Moses," in *The Quest for the Kingdom of God* (ed. H. B. Huffmon, F. A. Spina, A. R. W. Green; Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 251-265.

²⁶ Propp, "The Rod of Aaron," 26.

²⁷ Sanchez, "A Literary-Theological Analysis," 63-64.

people.²⁸ As a result, the Israelites must read into Moses' behavior the idea that he represents an angry deity, as opposed to the merciful one characterized by the instructions which Yahweh gave him. Sanchez also concludes that both Moses and Aaron misrepresent Yahweh's intention to provide for the Israelite's needs.²⁹ Because of Moses' fitful speech and action, Sanchez argues that the people must be expecting a response of divine judgment. Along the same line of thought, Blum proposes that both Moses and Aaron have substituted their rage for Yahweh's divine wrath.³⁰

Yahweh's words of reproach, "You have not believed me, to treat me as holy (להקדישני) in the sight of the sons of Israel," recall a threshold encounter from the Leviticus 10 narrative.³¹ Several commonalities exist within the two texts. The language Moses uses to explain the spectacularly fiery deaths of Nadab and Abihu sounds very similar to the wording used by the deity in this context. In the Leviticus encounter, Moses cites Aaron's two sons, who were serving in the setting of the tabernacle, for failing to treat Yahweh as holy. Their failure, as does Moses' action in this context, takes place in front of all the people (Lev 10:3). The same verbal root of "holy" (קדש) is evident in both narratives, twice in the second encounter of Numbers 20. It appears in

²⁸ Sanchez, "A Literary-Theological Analysis," 73. Sanchez claims that Aaron repeated Moses' speech, though the text does not support this idea. See also M. Margalio, "The Transgression of Moses and Aaron: Num 20:1-13," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 74 (1983): 196-228.

²⁹ Sanchez, "A Literary-Theological Analysis," 71, 73. See also Margalio, "The Transgression of Moses," 218; Arden, "How Moses Failed God," 52.

³⁰ Blum, *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch*, 271-278.

³¹ Samuel E. Karff, "Silence and Weeping before the Song," in *Preaching Biblical Texts* (ed. F. Holmgren and H. E. Schaalman; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 110. Karff also makes this connection.

Yahweh's speech and in the narrator's words used to memorialize the people's complaint of no water. Furthermore, in his closing statement the narrator reports that Yahweh reclaims holiness for himself among the people (יהוה ויקדש בם) (Num 20:13). This final action of Yahweh confirms for the reader that regard for holiness is a crucial issue in this second encounter of Numbers 20.

The Extent of Aaron's Guilt

As to Aaron's culpability, most modern commentators hold him accountable along with Moses. On the other hand, Propp, who espouses a minority point of view, considers him completely innocent.³² Any blame on Aaron's part, Propp attributes to the fact that he is present at the scene.³³ At most, Propp considers him guilty due to his association with Moses. Similarly, this study perceives Aaron's guilt to be the indirect result of his "equal, but subordinate" status. In the long view of the narrative, one sees that Yahweh severely rebukes Aaron, along with Miriam, for their challenge to Moses' pre-eminent position with the deity (Num 12:6-8). In that same context, Yahweh explicitly affirms Moses' special standing by referring to him as "my servant Moses." As a result of Yahweh's action, this study proposes from that point forward, Aaron recognizes his lesser position and begins to assume an attitude of deference toward his younger brother, Moses.

There are several indications within the second threshold encounter of Numbers 20 which point to Moses' elevated status with Yahweh. At the end of the first narrative

³² Propp, "Why Moses Could Not Enter the Promised Land," *Bible Review* 14 (1998): 42.

³³ Propp, "The Rod of Aaron," 26.

scene the text clearly states, “the glory of the Lord appeared to them” (Num 20:6). But at the outset of the second encounter, Yahweh addresses and instructs only Moses regarding the divine intent. The narrator states, “and the Lord spoke to Moses, saying” (Num 20:7). In this speech, Yahweh speaks to Moses in terms of “you and your brother Aaron” (Num 20:8). Though Aaron is present, Yahweh directs only Moses to take the rod (Num 20:8). Given these examples, it is reasonable to conclude that in this context, too, Aaron recognizes Moses’ superior authority in relation to Yahweh. As a result, it is also reasonable to conclude that when it comes time for the execution of the deity’s commands, Aaron defers to Moses’ higher rank of leadership. Because he assumes this stance, Aaron must make a conscious decision not to act.³⁴ For example, he does not temper Moses’ angry feelings toward the people. He does not attempt to dissuade him from calling them “rebels,” nor does he try to minimize the impact of the term. In addition, Aaron does not interfere with Moses’ action of striking the rock.

A Transformation of Character

In the drama of this encounter, the reader notes a change in the way Aaron handles charges against him, particularly when it is considered in contrast with the scene in Exodus 32. In the current context, Aaron does not take issue with Yahweh’s inclusion of him in the pronouncement of punishment. The text makes no mention of a response from him. Gauging from Aaron’s silence, the reader can reasonably infer that he recognizes the magnitude of the infraction because of his past experience with his sons, Nadab and Abihu. In that context, he witnesses not only their mistake while they

³⁴ Norman Asher, “Why Was Aaron Punished?” *Dor le dor, Dor le dor* 18 (1989): 44-45. Asher argues that Aaron was punished for his inaction, though he does not specify a motivation for that lack of action.

performed the sacrificial ritual but also the calamitous consequences that ensued. Aaron hears from Moses' very lips that these two sons have violated Yahweh's holiness (Lev 10:3). Ironically, by his own acquiescence to Moses' status while they stand together at Kadesh, as portrayed in the Numbers 20 narrative, Aaron, too, fails to preserve a distinction between the holy and the profane. This responsibility Yahweh had ascribed to him directly in an earlier segment of the larger narrative (Lev 10:10-11). As Aaron stands before the people at the rock, he chooses not to persuade Moses to separate his own intention from that of Yahweh.

Aaron recognizes his blameworthiness in the incident at Kadesh, even though it comes as a result of his obeisance to Moses and his obedience to Yahweh. This acknowledgment stands in stark contrast to the evasive techniques he utilizes when confronted by Moses' harsh interrogation on Mt. Sinai. His response is a far cry from the fantasy he conjures up about the golden calf creating itself. When the two texts, Exodus 32 and Numbers 20, are read in juxtaposition, it is evident that Aaron's attitude toward assuming his own guilt changes over the course of the larger pentateuchal narrative. Additionally, in an encounter beyond the scope of this study, Aaron faces his own death without raising a single protest. He ascends Mt. Hor, as Yahweh has prescribed. He passes his mantle to his son Eleazar and quietly dies on the mountaintop (Num 20:23-29). The reader infers from the action which Aaron exhibits in this additional context that he has come to terms with his own culpability.

Conclusion

The narrative in Numbers 20 portrays Aaron as an "equal, but subordinate" leader. Due to the decision which Aaron makes as a consequence of this status, he has to

pay the price of exclusion from the Promised Land. In the first threshold encounter (Num 20:1-6), the people by their action, clearly recognize him as leader alongside Moses. They accost them both under the duress of thirst (Num 20:2). But by their speech, they indicate that Moses is superior. It is to Moses that they turn to address their problem. The text informs that they not only speak to Moses but they also contend with him (Num 20:3).

In the second threshold encounter (Num 20:7-12), Yahweh's speech also demonstrates that Moses holds a more favored position with the deity. Although both Aaron and Moses lie prostrate at the door of the tabernacle, overwrought from the peoples' complaints, Yahweh directs the divine instructions to Moses. The content of that five-fold command is revelatory, as well. Only one part of the directive is inclusive of Aaron, as indicated by the plural verb וּדְבַרְתֶּם. He and Moses are to speak to the rock. The rest of the responsibility in Yahweh's speech is weighted toward Moses.

In the first threshold encounter, Aaron acts, but he does not speak. In response to an agitated congregation, he does not rely upon his own resources nor does he seize control as was his style in the setting at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 32). Instead, his bowed posture at the front of the tent of meeting signals that he appeals to the intervention of Yahweh (Num 20:6). His action in the first threshold encounter also suggests that his strained relationship with Moses which began to develop in the Exodus 32 narrative and became prominent in the Numbers 12 encounters is being replaced by his more deferential attitude. For example, his reaction to the people in this context does not indicate competition with Moses. Together the brothers fall on their faces in a display of supplication.

In the second threshold encounter, Aaron remains silent. There is no narratorial report of his speaking to the rock, as Yahweh commanded him to do through Moses (Num 20:8). Furthermore, the only textual mention of action on his part is the narrator's statement that he and Moses summoned all of the Israelites to a rock (Num 20:10). It is plausible for the reader to interpret his silence and inaction as a mark of submission to Moses for two reasons. On the one hand, the textual evidence portrays Moses as the lead character and the primary executor of Yahweh's plan to nourish the people. On the other hand, Yahweh makes it plain within the divine speech delivered to Aaron and Miriam in the Numbers 12 narrative that to question Moses displeases the deity. Yahweh asks in that context, "Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant, against Moses?" (Num 12:8). Yahweh's lecture to Aaron must have made an indelible impression upon him. In sum, the encounters in the Numbers 20:1-13 narrative illuminate Aaron's emerging positive characteristic: deference to Moses.

The Numbers 20:1-13 narrative also shows that Aaron begins to bear charges of guilt differently, especially when one contrasts this text with the threshold encounters in Exodus 32. In response to Yahweh's accusations and judgment delivered at the rock of Kadesh, Aaron does not rely upon his gift of speech to talk his way out of incrimination, as he did at the scene of the golden calf. This silence when viewed in juxtaposition with the silence which Aaron displays at his death scene (Num 20:23-29) suggests to the reader that Aaron accepts Yahweh's condemnation of him.

CHAPTER SIX

Summary, Conclusions, and Implications

Summary

The purpose of this dissertation is to identify and analyze responses made by Aaron in the context of the pentateuchal narrative in order to develop a composite portrait of that character whom Yahweh called to be the high priest of the Israelites, Yahweh's chosen people. The underlying premise guiding this study is based upon David McCracken's supposition, formulated upon the secular work of literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, that a biblical character is defined by the responses he or she makes in relationship to other characters.¹ In essence, these scholars are claiming that a character does not exist as an individual, but instead as an "interdividual," who at the moment of interaction with other characters is required to make a decision to respond.² McCracken claims that it is in the moment of decision that a characteristic is reflected.

The point at which the interaction occurs and the decision is demanded, McCracken calls a "threshold encounter."³ He maintains that a characteristic will never be fixed because he takes the view that responses in these threshold encounters are dynamic and encounter specific. In other words, a response elicited within a threshold encounter is determined by a particular circumstance. McCracken states that responses

¹ David McCracken, "Character in the Boundary: Bakhtin's Interdividuality in Biblical Narratives," *Semeia* 63 (1993): 30.

² McCracken, "Character in the Boundary," 33.

³ McCracken, "Character in the Boundary," 32.

are unpredictable and unknowable until the moment in which a character responds to the words addressed to him or her. By extension, his premise also applies to any action performed which has an effect upon the character. McCracken's idea runs counter to the conventional thought that a character is an individual described by an authoritative voice.

Certain theoretical aspects of the work of Shimon Bar-Efrat and Robert Alter, other renowned literary critics, support McCracken's supposition. Bar-Efrat, for example, notes that readers "meet biblical characters in special and unusual circumstances, in times of crisis and stress, when they have to undergo severe tests"⁴ and by implication have to respond. Alter asserts that character is not only unpredictable but that it also changes in nature over time.⁵ Because the potential for change always exists, he, too, claims that biblical personages cannot be adequately represented by a fixed epithet.

This study is also guided by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, who considers characterization to be a construct of the reader.⁶ Under her paradigm, the reader looks for patterns in a character's speech and actions. Rimmon-Kenan points out common elements become apparent through repetition, similarity, contrast, and implication. As these common elements are identified, the reader organizes them into a unifying category, which then translates into a generalized trait or characteristic. Her model also allows for the transformation of a character. This phenomenon of change becomes a

⁴ Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield, England: The Almond Press, 1989), 78.

⁵ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 126.

⁶ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (New York: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1983), 37.

plausible consideration when the reader is unable to integrate a common element into a constructed category.⁷

Because Aaron actively appears as a character only in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, the scope of this work was confined to these pentateuchal books. The methodological approach to these texts involved a process of narrowing. Initially, four narrative events were selected and closely examined. Robert Alter defines narrative events as those places where the tempo slows down enough for a scene to be examined and for a character, in this case Aaron, to become more transparent to the reader.⁸ Texts selected for study included: the golden calf incident in Exodus 32; the destruction of Nadab and Abihu during the inaugural sacrificial service in Leviticus 10; Miriam and Aaron's challenge to Moses' authority in Numbers 12; and Moses' disobedience of Yahweh in Numbers 20:1-13. Within these narrative events, threshold encounters involving Aaron's interaction with other characters were identified. Subsequently, within these threshold encounters, character indicators were isolated.

A number of indicators was discussed in Chapter One. Three of these proved to be most effective in illuminating Aaron's character traits: his own actions and speech, as well as contrast. Specifically, contrast between Aaron and one other character, his brother Moses, was analyzed. In addition, the contrast of Aaron's own responses from one text to another yielded meaningful insight for determining changes in his character.

Prior to a discussion of the first threshold encounter (Exod 32:1-6), three descriptors of Aaron attributed to the authoritative voice of Yahweh were identified. In

⁷ Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 38. The other implication is that the generalization was made in error.

⁸ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 63.

the early part of the book of Exodus (4:14), Yahweh defines Aaron using epithets, a type of character indicator detailed in Chapter One. While trying to persuade Moses to accept a call to divine service, the deity characterizes Aaron as Moses' brother, as a Levite, and as being able to speak fluently. The man whom Yahweh selected to be the high priest of the Israelite people proved to be a much more complex character than these authoritative descriptors portrayed him to be. Consequently, other aspects of Aaron's character were inferred from Aaron's interrelationships as provided in the discourse of the selected narratives. Thus, a close reading of the texts enabled me to construct and present an interindividual portrait of the character known as Aaron.

The dissertation contains several distinctive features. One being that other characterizations of Aaron, save for Findlay's work, have focused primarily upon single traits. I, in contrast, have identified six unified reader-constructed traits and two transformed qualities, the composite of which provides a fuller picture of the character Aaron. In order to accomplish this broader look at the Israelites' high priest, Aaron's interaction with four other narrative figures within nine separate threshold encounters was analyzed. This approach has not been utilized in the previous work of scholars devoted to Aaron. Focus upon Aaron's relationship with Miriam, the Israelite people, Moses, and Yahweh reveals that each one elicits a specific type of response from him.

Unprecedented in other studies but pertinent to the portrayal of Aaron contained herein is the classification of his identifiable traits into two categories: those which remain consistent for him across the progression of the pentateuchal narrative and those which undergo change. When Aaron's participation in the grand narrative is traced from his activity at Mt. Sinai to his death sentence at Kadesh, traits which were subjected to

transformation become significant. These traits indicate that his character develops positively. To date, such recognition has not been documented in the scholarly literature.

Conclusions

As Aaron encounters and responds to other narrative figures, he repeats certain similar behaviors thereby confirming Rimmon-Kenan's thesis that unifying categories comprised of common denominators can be observed and generalized as character traits. Miriam, the Israelite people, Moses, and Yahweh actively engage Aaron in a threshold encounter, and each one elicits a response from him. In his responses, Aaron reveals facets of his character. Therefore, Aaron as portrayed in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers fits the model of an "interdividual" character as described by McCracken and Bakhtin. In accordance with the paradigm delineated by Rimmon-Kenan, one observes that several of Aaron's identifiable responses recur; some are made salient by contrast; and some bear similarity. As a result, I have compiled a number of established patterns of responses exhibited by Aaron, both positive and negative, and present those as unified reader-constructed traits specific to his character. Throughout the progression of the larger narrative in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, a number of these traits appear to remain consistent. The following section reviews these traits.

Consistent Traits

Several of Aaron's responses signify that his character is easily influenced, especially by the Israelite people and his sister Miriam. Response to personal tragedy bears out that Aaron, the narrative figure, is devoted to his family. The actions he takes to ameliorate tension between himself and the people and between himself and Moses

indicate that he is a peacemaker. When he assumes a temporary governing role within the community, his actions reveal him to possess a lenient leadership style. Conversely, in his capacity as the high priest, Aaron's responses demonstrate that he is conscientious relative to his duties, and also obedient, especially to Yahweh.

Easily influenced. One recurring pattern of behavior reflected in Aaron's responses to the Israelites and his sister Miriam reveals his susceptibility to outside influence. This facet of his character proves to be a weakness for him. In two different threshold encounters (Exod 32:1-6; Num 12:1-9), involving these two sets of characters, Aaron's actions and words reveal him to be a person easily swayed by others. Both of these encounters are set in the context of community unrest and public grumbling. In the Exodus context, for example, the Israelites are impatient with and disheartened by Moses' long absence. When they confront Aaron en masse with the idea of a concrete god, he readily accommodates their wish through word and deed. He orders the Israelites to tear off and bring to him their ornamental gold. With his own hands, he produces a golden calf.

This trait of being easily influenced may be inferred additionally from what Aaron does not do in the encounter. One notes that he neither acts nor speaks in an attempt to stand down the people who are in violation of the second commandment, a commandment which they have promised Yahweh two times to obey (Exod 24:3, 7). The reader infers from the silence of the text that Aaron does not uphold Mosaic authority. He does not resolutely support his commitment to the invisible Yahweh. He does not enforce the covenantal prohibition against images bearing likenesses to earthly

creatures. The contrast between Aaron's commission and omission of deeds makes apparent his weakness as a community leader.

This perceived weakness in Aaron's character is accentuated by narrative contrast with Moses. The text of Exodus 32 presents Moses' personage as one of strength. His interaction with the Israelites comes across as bold, decisive, and assertive. For instance, in two separate threshold encounters, which in narrative time immediately follow Aaron's acquiescence to the people's demand for a visible object, Moses obliterates the golden calf (Exod 32:15-20) and extinguishes those persons involved in the image-making (Exod 32:25-30).

Within the larger context of Numbers 11-12, another example of Aaron's capitulation to public opinion is noted. The entire Israelite camp is mired in a state of grumbling. The people complain to Moses about their provisions (Num 11:4-6). Moses, in turn, grouses to Yahweh about the burden which the people have become (Num 11:11-15). Miriam voices her disgruntlement over Moses' marriage to a Cushite woman (Num 12:1). The pervasive negative climate has an effect upon Aaron. His subsequent action in the threshold encounter involving Miriam and Yahweh (Num 12:1-9) indicates that he is unable to resist becoming part of the general discontent. He, too, becomes a grumbler with an added touch of arrogance. When in Miriam's company, as portrayed by the narrative, Aaron follows her lead and joins her in verbalizing a charge against Moses. Together, they audaciously claim that their brother presumes to possess authorial superiority and a unique relationship with Yahweh (Num 12:2).

Devoted to family. A second recurring pattern of behavior which is reflected initially through Aaron's response to his two elder sons and then to his sister Miriam

demonstrates his intense empathy for family members. A strong indication of this dimension of Aaron's persona is evidenced within two different contexts (Lev 10:1-7; Num 12:1-9). In the Leviticus 10 encounter, Aaron witnesses Yahweh's execution of his elder sons. Aaron's response is one of wailing (Lev 10:3). He expresses his emotion openly in the court of the tabernacle. In this setting, his action shows no concern for what the public might think, contrary to the previously discussed encounters where he does allow others to influence his decisions.

His display of humanness becomes more pronounced when set over against the reaction of Moses, who is also present at the catastrophe. In contrast to Aaron's display of profound sensitivity, Moses upholds a stoic, legalistic posture. He responds to the destruction of Nadab and Abihu by speaking. His first words contain a justification of their fiery deaths (Lev 10:3). His ensuing words issue orders: he calls for the removal of the dead bodies (Lev 10:4) and he commands Aaron to show no outward signs of mourning (Lev 10:6-7). Ultimately he calls for the resumption of the ritual (Lev 10:12).

In the Numbers 12 narrative, Yahweh causes the disfigurement of Miriam's skin through an act of divine judgment (Num 12:9-10). The horrific sight of open and flaking flesh stirs Aaron to respond by speaking. His address, directed at Moses, is laden with words of entreaty and images described in vivid detail (Num 12:11-12). Aaron's reliance upon his verbal skills serves him well, for Moses promptly intercedes with Yahweh on Miriam's behalf (Num 12:13). Aaron's impassioned plea for her restoration reveals him to be a brother filled with anguish for his sister. Though these two responses to personal tragedy are expressed differently by Aaron, they both reflect his capacity to feel deeply.

Peace seeking. A third recurring pattern of behavior observable in the texts and readily inferred by way of Aaron's interaction with other characters is his predilection toward the maintenance of peaceful relationships. In the golden calf narrative depicted in Exodus 32, Aaron is first faced with the community's internal unrest and then is confronted by an angry individual, Moses. Both of Aaron's responses reflect an attempt at pacification, though his manner of dealing with each character differs. With Moses, Aaron's quest for peace is more direct. After listening to Moses' pointed question about the calf's origin, Aaron explicitly expresses the need for Moses to calm down (Exod 32:22). He says, "Do not let the anger of my lord burn." His direct reference to Moses through the use of the deferential title "my lord" also insinuates an attempt to settle his brother down.

On the other hand, in his response to a frantic and unruly people concerning the same issue, Aaron's peacemaking effort is perceived as being more indirect (Exod 32:2). The words he speaks to them contain no ingratiating address comparable to "my lord." Though his speech conveys a commanding tone, he does not order the Israelites who assemble against him to calm down as was his style with Moses. Rather he placates them by giving in to their demand for a visible symbol, which they wanted to lead them on their journey. As it turns out, Aaron's quest for this temporary peace among the Israelites is achieved at a high price: syncretism in worship, violation of the covenant, and a compromised relationship with the deity.

Lenient leadership style. Aaron's vulnerability to public pressure and opinion has a negative impact on his decision-making skills. The text shows that when left provisionally in charge of the entire Israelite camp during Moses' absence, he is required

to make several judgments (Exod 32:1-4). His decision to make a golden calf suggests that he condones the existence of a visible object to represent the invisible Yahweh. It also indicates that he chooses to participate in its fabrication. The decision reflects his lax enforcement of the covenant stipulations.

Furthermore, when he witnesses the reassuring effect which the calf has upon the people, he immediately elects to proclaim a feast for Yahweh (Exod 32:5). By doing so, he allows the incorporation of the image into the festival activities. In effect, Aaron compromises the exclusive worship of his Lord. During the feast, the Israelites engage in wild, playful celebration, including dancing. Though their behavior is an aberration from the worship standard exemplified by Moses (Exod 24:4-8) and from the covenantal rules governing feasts (Exod 23:14-19), Aaron does not choose to stop this raucous rejoicing (Exod 32:6). In the two instances cited, Aaron assumes a permissive posture toward the people. Therefore, when viewing Aaron's interactions with an assertive group of Israelites, one concludes that he possesses a lenient leadership style when placed in a governing position.

Conscientious high priest. On the other hand, when one strictly considers Aaron's handling of ritual matters, a different set of traits is observed. His leadership skills within the religious realm ultimately portray him in a more favorable light. Through his act of spontaneity as leader pro-tem on Mt. Sinai, Aaron gets worship wrong, but at the tabernacle, he gets worship right. The difference is attributable to several factors evident in the text. For one, Yahweh has him ordained to the office of high priest (Lev 8). For another, Aaron has the opportunity to practice the divine rites. Specifically, he performs the inaugural service of sacrifice (Lev 9).

In addition to these factors, Aaron experiences an encounter with Yahweh (Lev 10:8-11). In this meeting, Yahweh clarifies for him the instruction regarding holiness and speaks to him about the importance of teaching the parameters of holiness. The Lord delivers the message directly to Aaron and to him solely. It is not mediated through Moses. Yahweh's deadly punishment of Nadab and Abihu for improper behavior serves as another form of instruction for Aaron (Lev 10:1-2). It causes him to realize the solemnity of his duties. After Yahweh's intervention and Aaron's "on-the-job" training, albeit brief, Aaron becomes better equipped to be the religious leader of the Israelites than he had been during the time of Moses' absence from the people at Mt. Sinai.

The effect of Aaron's preparation for the priesthood becomes manifest in the threshold encounter involving Moses (Lev 10:12-20). He demonstrates a more matured response to Moses' anger than he had in the Exodus 32 narrative. In this particular encounter, Moses has resumed the inaugural service following the deaths of Nadab and Abihu. After discovering a discrepancy in the ritual, Moses fires a question at Aaron's sons Eleazar and Ithamar (Lev 10:17-18). Aaron intercepts it (Lev 10:19). Instead of trying to calm Moses' temper at the outset, as he did in his previous dealings at Mt. Sinai (Exod 32:22), Aaron immediately presents the facts. Instead of trying to trivialize the question, as he did regarding the golden calf (Exod 32:24), Aaron provides a logical explanation for his substitution of the burnt offering for the sin offering (Lev 10:19). Through his interaction with Moses, Aaron reflects several positive traits. He demonstrates that he is a conscientious and dutiful officiant of the ritual; that he is knowledgeable regarding cultic law; and that he takes his role as high priest seriously.

Obedient high priest. Aaron, while performing the duties of high priest in the setting of the tabernacle, repeatedly demonstrates his obedience to authority figures. This observation is drawn from various statements made by the narrator. The narrator, for example, reports that Aaron conforms to the ordination requirements established by Yahweh, “Thus Aaron and his sons did all the things which the Lord had commanded through Moses” (Lev 8:36). The narrator also reports that Aaron performs the inaugural sacrifices with exactitude, “just as the Lord had commanded Moses” (Lev 9:10). In addition, the narrator uses these words, “just as Moses had commanded,” to convey Aaron’s adherence to Moses’ directives (Lev 9:21).

Aaron’s responses of obedience are evident in other situations. When Moses instructs him to abstain from mourning the deaths of his stricken sons, the narrator states that he complies. There is no textual mention of Aaron offering verbal objections (Lev 10:6-7). When Yahweh commissions him to teach the people about holiness, he follows through. This obedience to Yahweh subsequently puts Aaron in contention with Moses who takes issue with his presentation of the burnt offering (Lev 10:16-19). When the Lord orders him and Moses to assemble a thirsty congregation so that they might receive water, he obeys. An analysis of this encounter leads the author of this study to make the bold assertion that this act of obedience ultimately results in Aaron’s prohibition from entering the Promised Land (Num 20:7-12). This claim is further addressed in the section presenting ways that other characters define Aaron.

In addition to these traits which remain consistent for Aaron’s character, one also recognizes two patterned responses which were initially grouped into unified categories but ultimately showed evolvment as the pentateuchal narrative progressed. In early

encounters, Aaron's competitiveness with Moses and his failure to acknowledge his own responsibility for certain actions were identified as traits. As Aaron continued to interact, however, additional responses no longer fit neatly into these two categorizations. In other words, as subsequent threshold encounters unfolded, these characteristics did not remain constant. Those traits initially judged to be negative in nature ultimately appear to develop in more positive directions. Such movement suggests growth and change on the part of Aaron's character. It is to this transformation that the discussion now turns.

Traits Undergoing Transformation

Aaron's unwillingness to assume responsibility for certain actions ultimately transforms into the ability to accept fault. The competitiveness Aaron displays toward Moses in their early encounters evolves into deference for Moses, or at least for his position. As a result of these observed changes, Aaron cannot be considered a static character. In relation to the Israelite people and especially to Moses, his response patterns change. Therefore, Aaron presents as a complex narrative figure.

Lack of responsibility for actions. In the texts under study, the first appearance of Aaron's failure to accept blame occurs on Mt. Sinai when Moses confronts him regarding his role in the calf-making episode (Exod 32:21-24). Within his reply, Aaron makes two evasive moves. The first one is subtle and requires a close reading of the text. As Aaron relates the words which he had spoken to the Israelites, he makes linguistic changes. In effect, he distorts several details which imply a shift in responsibility to the people. Aaron's second attempt at eluding participation in the event, however, is more obvious. During his reply to Moses' interrogation, he insinuates that the calf magically appeared

without any human assistance. Aaron makes light of the calf's significance in order to deflect blame from him.

Subsequently, in a second threshold encounter involving Moses' intense questioning plus an added intimation of guilt, Aaron reacts differently. This particular confrontation with Moses occurs at the tabernacle during the inaugural sacrificial ritual (Lev 10:16-19). Moses challenges Aaron regarding his substitution of the burnt offering for the sin offering. In this context, Aaron does not sidestep the question. But he does not admit wrongdoing either. Instead, he rationalizes his action in a logical way and informs Moses that his decision is in compliance with purity regulations. By this response, he effectively educates Moses on a point of cultic law.

In a third threshold encounter that ensues (Num 12:10-12), Aaron actually admits his guilt, though it is not brought on by interrogation. His change in behavior follows a harsh rebuke by Yahweh and the deity's punishment of Miriam, to which he is a witness. To Moses' face, Aaron confesses that he, too, had sinned along with his sister. In contrast to his previous evasive responses to accusations, in this context Aaron accepts responsibility for his earlier involvement in casting aspersion upon his brother (Num 12:1-2). By looking at these three threshold encounters together, one observes a change in Aaron's response toward personal culpability. The tendency toward evasion does not remain static. His reactive behavior shows movement from the making of a ridiculous excuse to logical reasoning to the admission of guilt. Through the contrast of these successive responses, one draws the conclusion that Aaron does not continue to be a person who resists blame.

By viewing a threshold encounter beyond the scope of this study (Num 20:23-29), it is asserted that Aaron's character shows even further development. By his response on Mount Hor, Aaron indicates that he accepts Yahweh's punishment for his lack of action at the rock of Kadesh. He responds without offering any resistance to Yahweh's call to ascend the mountain. In a previous encounter, Yahweh had accused Aaron, along with Moses, of failing to treat him as holy in front of the people (Num 20:12). As a consequence, Aaron is denied entrance into the Promised Land. At the appointed time for his death, Aaron complies completely with Yahweh's instructions. He ascends Mount Hor and vests his son Eleazar with the high priest's garments. There he dies without uttering a word.

Aaron's response to his death conceivably stems from his recognition of the solemnity and gravity surrounding Moses' offense at Kadesh. For Aaron, the failure to uphold the Lord's holiness in that setting may have recalled the time when his two sons also tarnished Yahweh's sanctity before the congregation. In stark contrast to Aaron, a reaction of acceptance to Yahweh's judgment does not come from Moses. Moses, before the time of his death, begs Yahweh to allow him access to Canaan. He says, "Let me, I pray, cross over and see the fair land that is beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and Lebanon" (Deut 3:23-25).

Competitiveness with Moses. Another foible in Aaron's character where favorable change has been traced is the sense of rivalry which Aaron initially feels toward his younger brother Moses. The tension between the two siblings is foreshadowed in the text recounting Yahweh's call of Moses to the office of prophet (Exod 4:16). In this setting, Yahweh emphasizes to Moses that Aaron's role, though

helpful, is subordinate. Yahweh states, “he (Aaron) shall be, he, he shall be as a mouth for you, and you, you shall be as God to him.” The repetition of the personal pronouns serves to make clear the specific function of each character. A second time, Yahweh makes the distinction of roles clear to Moses alone by saying, “See, I make you as God to pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet” (Exod 7:1).

Aaron begins to show his competitive spirit in the context of sacrificial worship at the tabernacle, the very place where Yahweh has designated him to be the religious authority. The threshold encounter in Leviticus 10:16-19 again comes into focus. By disputing Aaron’s ritual decision at the tabernacle, Moses puts at odds his and Aaron’s interpretations of the cultic law. Aaron’s credibility as high priest is therefore at stake. Aaron takes a stand against Moses’ conflicting opinion and explains his own action. His rationale is well-thought out and predicated upon an unforeseen circumstance. The deaths of Nadab and Abihu, which occur in the middle of the inaugural ceremony, created impurity. Hence, Aaron’s choice of the burnt offering is the correct and necessary sacrifice to make in response so that the holiness of the tabernacle would be preserved.

Aaron’s competitive nature reaches a crescendo when he and Miriam audaciously question Moses’ status with Yahweh (Num 12:2). One detects in their words, “Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has (Yahweh) not spoken through us as well?” a twinge of envy. Their questions imply that Aaron and Miriam desire the same relationship with Yahweh which Moses already experiences. Aaron’s negative attitude toward Moses, however, quickly converts into humility. The change follows Yahweh’s harsh reprimand of both him and Miriam and the physical punishment inflicted upon only

Miriam (Num 12:10-12). Shocked and dismayed by the deity's latter response, Aaron recognizes and appeals to Moses' intercessory privilege. Aaron's once brazen words are supplanted by expressions of deference in this context. When he seeks restoration for Miriam, Aaron addresses Moses as "my lord," and the verbal constructions he uses connote a tenor of begging.

Aaron's deference toward Moses continues as the narrative progresses. This inference is drawn from an analysis of the Numbers 20 text. In this particular context, Moses makes the decision to deviate from Yahweh's instructions (Num 20:9-11). Instead of speaking to the rock at Kadesh, which would issue forth water for the thirsty, grumbling people, Moses speaks to the Israelites. His voice betrays a begrudging tone, as connoted by his direct address of them as "rebels." Subsequently, Moses strikes the rock more than once, though this procedure is not specified by Yahweh. The text makes clear that Aaron is in the company of Moses, but there is no additional reporting of his taking issue with Moses' words or deed.

With regard to Aaron, the text only mentions that Yahweh commands him, along with Moses, to speak to the rock, as indicated by the plural verb **וידברתם** (Num 20:8). The text, however, does not confirm that Aaron accomplishes this task, only that he helps in the gathering of the assembly, as indicated again by the plural verb **ויקהלו משה ואהרן אתהקהל** (Num 20:10). After Aaron has been humbled by Yahweh's condemnation of him for criticizing Moses, he, in this subsequent context, defers to Moses' lead and superior status as the Lord's servant. According to the text, Aaron does nothing to dissuade or usurp Moses as Moses interacts with the Israelites. Aaron, for example, does not stand up to Moses as he does during their disagreement over the burnt

offering (Lev 10:19). Nor does he utilize his verbal skills to stifle Moses' angry reaction toward the people, as he had done at the tabernacle when his sons were the target of Moses' ire (Lev 10:19). Because Aaron's drive to compete with his brother has been tempered by a speech from Yahweh and because signs of sibling rivalry are not observable in this encounter, this study argues that it is not a consistent response and therefore cannot be classified as a permanent character trait.

How Other Characters Define Aaron

As has been mentioned more than once in previous discussions, David McCracken proposes that a character within a narrative is not an individual but an "interindividual," who is defined by the people with whom he interacts. Therefore, Aaron's relationship with four other narrative figures, Miriam, the Israelite people, Moses, and Yahweh, has been brought into focus. Though there is some obvious overlap, each one of these characters does illuminate a distinctive quality belonging to Aaron.

Miriam. His sister Miriam, for example, has significant influence on how he reacts. In fact, she emboldens him. As evidenced in the text, when he is in her presence, his speech becomes more assertive. For example, in the Numbers 12 narrative, he openly challenges Moses' authoritative status (Num 12:2). On the other hand, when Miriam experiences distress, Aaron's response to her suffering calls attention to his sensitive nature. The putrescence of her skin, caused by an angry deity, evokes an impassioned plea from him (Num 12:11-12). In essence, Miriam's interaction with Aaron highlights his negative quality of being easily compromised as well as his positive feature of being devoted to family.

The Israelite people. Not only does Aaron succumb to his sibling Miriam's influence, but he also craters under pressure and caters to the power of the public masses. Aaron's interaction with the Israelite people further reinforces the conclusion that Aaron's decisions – exclusive of the cultic realm – can be swayed easily. In the Exodus 32 narrative, the throng's need for a visible object to represent Yahweh (Exod 32:1-4) causes Aaron to override his previous covenantal promises to reject the crafting of graven images (Exod 24:3, 7). The peoples' frantic onrush additionally betrays his predilection to placate (Exod 32:2-4). In this particular context, his peacemaking effort is achieved at a high price: syncretism. These frenetic people, who become uncontrollable at the feast which he proclaimed (Exod 32:6), particularly highlight his ineffective governing skills. For example, Aaron fails to stand up to them when they press beyond the bounds which Yahweh had established for festivals (Exod 23:14-19). The people define Aaron as a weak and inexperienced provisional leader, vulnerable to public opinion. Their interaction with him shows that he is a peacemaker who gives no forethought to the cost of peace.

Moses. Moses' relationship with Aaron initially brings to the forefront their sibling rivalry and Aaron's envy. In particular, Moses' questioning of Aaron's procedures within the realm of ritual, that place where Yahweh had given Aaron the authority, reveals Aaron's competitiveness with his brother (Lev 10:16-20). In this context, Aaron strives to prove that his interpretation for the need of a burnt offering during the sacrificial ritual because of a contamination threat is more appropriate than Moses' adherence to the regulations governing the sin offering. In addition, Moses' privileged relationship with Yahweh brings out Aaron's envy (Num 12:1-9). Aaron's

quest for equality is evident in the two challenging questions which he raises about his own standing with the Lord (Num 12:2). Yahweh responds with a clear differentiation between the communication methods established for Moses and Aaron (Num 12:6-8). As a result, tension in Aaron's responses is no longer observable within successive narratives.

When Moses' and Aaron's responses to similar circumstances are contrasted within the text, Aaron's positive and negative traits are magnified. In the Leviticus 10 narrative, for example, the juxtaposition of Moses' stoic reaction to the deaths of Nadab and Abihu against the reaction of Aaron's wailing makes the latter's deep feelings for his family more palpable. Additionally, the narrative of Leviticus 10 portrays a contrast in Moses' and Aaron's understanding of cultic law. Moses' ultimate acceptance of Aaron's rational explanation emphasizes that Aaron is a knowledgeable high priest. On the other hand, Moses' firm, decisive stance with the floundering Israelites as portrayed in the Exodus 32 narrative, combined with his loyalty to Yahweh as demonstrated on Mt. Sinai, accentuates Aaron's weak and permissive leadership style.

Yahweh. Yahweh's verbal interaction with Aaron calls attention to Aaron's deference for the Lord, a quality indicated by Aaron's responses of compliance. Although Aaron fails Yahweh indirectly at Mt. Sinai by sanctioning the making of an image (Exod 32), in successive narratives whenever the deity directly addresses Aaron, his responses consistently reflect obedience. In the Leviticus 10 narrative, for example, Aaron proves that he listened to and followed Yahweh's instructions to distinguish between the profane and the holy (Lev 10:8-11). Aaron's compliance is evident when the tabernacle is contaminated by the deaths of Nadab and Abihu. In response, Aaron

institutes the appropriate burnt offering to ensure the sanctuary's purification (Lev 10:16-20). He then clarifies his action to Moses, in effect, educating him on a ritual technicality. Through this instruction of Moses, Aaron fulfills Yahweh's command to teach the ordinances, a command which is also contained in Leviticus 10:8-11.

Another example of Aaron's obedience to Yahweh is revealed after the Israelites' move to Hazeroth. In that context, Yahweh lectures Aaron and Miriam regarding Moses' privileged status with the deity (Num 12:6-8). Yahweh informs them that he and Moses have a face to face relationship. This speech has a significant impact on Aaron. It immediately elicits a response of compliance from him, which is observable at the moment Miriam is punished with a skin disease. Aaron, instead of relying upon himself to appeal to Yahweh for her restoration, defers to Moses to execute the role of intercessor.

A third example of Aaron's obedient response to Yahweh is noted when the Israelites move onward to Kadesh. There the deity directs Moses and Aaron to gather a people desperate for water around a rock. Aaron, along with Moses, faithfully executes the command (Num 20:8-10). It is evident in Aaron's next response that Yahweh's previous lecture regarding Moses' special status (Num 12:6-8) again becomes an influential factor. That speech was precipitated by Aaron's and Miriam's challenge to Moses' status with Yahweh, and their words had provoked an upbraiding from Yahweh. Yahweh's rebuke, "Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant, against Moses," implies that Moses should be given deference (Num 12:8). Therefore, I make the claim that it is out of obedience to Yahweh that Aaron does not protest Moses'

deviant action of striking the rock (Num 20:10-11). In other words, Aaron's lack of action stems from his recognition that Moses holds a superior status.

A final example of Aaron's obedience to Yahweh is found in an encounter beyond the scope of this study (Num 20:23-29). In this context, Yahweh summons Aaron to the top of Mount Hor so that he might join his ancestors in death. The divine directive elicits a dutiful response from Aaron. Thus, the text makes it clear that Aaron's final act in the pentateuchal narrative is an act of obedience to his Lord.

Each instance of Yahweh's interaction with Aaron defines him as an obedient character. As a result, the reader faces a daunting question: why was Aaron denied entrance to the Promised Land if he indeed responded, in the Numbers 20:1-13 narrative, out of obedience to Yahweh? Yahweh's bitter reproof of Miriam and Aaron in the previous encounter of Numbers 12:1-9 had implied that they should not question Moses' authority. By choosing not to interfere with either Moses' speech to the people gathered at Kadesh or with his action against the rock, Aaron responds in accordance with that implication.

Implications

In addition to raising this difficult question, the portrayal of Aaron obtained through the close read of threshold encounters in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers offers new ways to think about the character who Yahweh anointed to head the Israelite cult. First, instead of perceiving Aaron as a reprobate for his role in the crafting of the golden calf, as much of the recent literature casts him, one is able to read him as an untested,

inexperienced substitute who sympathizes with the plight of a stressed people and who becomes overwhelmed by their need for reassurance.⁹

Second, in this context (Exod 32), Aaron's point of view takes on new significance. Instead of perceiving the Israelites to be evil people, as most translations indicate, it is conceivable that Aaron understands them to be mentally distraught or "in trouble" as a result of feelings associated with Moses' long absence from them. Aaron understands the people's demand for a god as stemming from their newness to Yahwism and from the invisibility of their new deity.

Third, the portrayal of Aaron in Leviticus 10:1-7 enables the reader to perceive him as a father filled with compassion instead of as a solemn high priest. The traditional translation of this biblical text renders Aaron as watching in stoic silence as his sons burn to death. An alternative interpretation of the pivotal verb **גמגם** contained in his response, which is supported by the context, depicts Aaron as moaning or wailing in an involuntary expression of his grief. Therefore, the reader understands that the character of Aaron is not devoid of feeling.

The compilation of numerous traits which was achieved by characterizing Aaron through his interactions with other narrative players confirms that the notion of interdividuality is an effective way to approach biblical characters. The concept of Aaron as an interdividual brings vitality to his character, a character which is regularly overlooked by readers and students alike in their pursuit of his more recognizable

⁹ This portrayal of Aaron stands in tension with the text of Deuteronomy 9.

younger brother. Borrowing a phrase from Phyllis Tribble, the depiction of Aaron contained herein brings him “out from beneath the shadow” of Moses.¹⁰

The concept of interdividuality also shows that Aaron is not a static character. The reading of the two encounters in Numbers 12 together offers one illustration of this conclusion. In Aaron’s role as brother in the Numbers 12:1-9 encounter, his action of following Miriam’s lead reflects a persona who is easily swayed, and his speech against Moses paints him as arrogant. However, Aaron’s demeanor changes and his response portrays him as being deferential in the successive encounter of Numbers 12:10-16.

As an interdividual, Aaron’s responses to Miriam, the Israelite people, Moses, and Yahweh reveal the various dimensions of his humanity. Aaron’s speech and action reflect his positive attributes and his flaws thereby signifying that he is not merely a functionary as the focus of Findlay’s work depicts him. Though Aaron does function as Moses’ assistant and as an exalted priest, and is recognized as the founder of the Israelite priesthood, the portrait drawn within this study shows that Aaron’s character make-up encompasses more than the roles he fulfills.

The concept of interdividuality also demonstrates that the spoken epithet, even from an authority as reliable as Yahweh, leaves the reader wanting. Though Aaron is a brother, a Levite, and speaks fluently as Yahweh describes him, it is the provocation of other narrative figures which gives the reader a glimpse of Aaron’s personal traits. It is Miriam’s grumbling that influences her brother Aaron to follow suit, and it is Moses who evokes his older brother’s envy and competitiveness. It is character interaction which defines Aaron most completely.

¹⁰ Phyllis Tribble, “Bringing Miriam Out of the Shadows,” *Bible Review* 5 (1989): 14.

Finally, the portrayal of Aaron obtained through the close read of threshold encounters in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers brings life and prominence to those otherwise obscure texts of Leviticus 10, Numbers 12, and Numbers 20:1-13.

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