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Aaron and the Golden Calf in the Rhetoric of the Pentateuch

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In the Pentateuch, the contrast between legal or instructional material, on the one hand, and stories, on the other, is nowhere more stark than in the relationship between the story of the golden calf (Exodus 32–34) and the instructions and narratives (Exodus 25–31; 35–40) that surround it. The story tells of ritual failure with disastrous consequences, while the ritual instructions and narratives around it recount fulfilling those divine instructions to the letter. The contrast becomes most excruciating in each section's characterization of the high priest: the golden calf story seems to vilify Aaron by placing him at the center of the idolatrous event, while the ritual texts celebrate Aaron and his sons as divinely consecrated priests. Though source and redaction criticism have long since distinguished the authors of these accounts, the critics ^{cannot} explain the intentions behind a literary juxtaposition that is too stark to be anything but intentional. Why did the Aaronide dynasties who controlled both the Second Temple and its Torah allow this negative depiction of Aaron to stand? Over the last decade, increasing numbers of scholars have dated part or all of Exodus 32 to the postexilic period, which makes the problem of an anti-Aaronide polemic in an otherwise pro-Aaronide Pentateuch even harder to explain. Thus, both synchronic and diachronic approaches have trouble explaining the depiction of Aaron in this story. Rhetorical analysis of the possible function of Exodus 32 in the Pentateuch of the Second Temple period provides new answers to these questions.



An abbreviated version of this paper was read in a joint session of the Pentateuch and Biblical Law sections of the Society of Biblical Literature on the theme of Law and Narrativity at the annual meeting in New Orleans, Louisiana, November 23, 2009. The article has been improved by the comments and suggestions of several audience members, including Diana Lipton, Roy Gane, and Reinhard Achenbach, as well as Ben Sommer, for which I am very grateful.

I. EXODUS 32 IN HISTORICAL CRITICISM

By “rhetorical analysis,” I mean the study of persuasion.¹ Who is trying to persuade whom of what by recounting this story in this context? Because of the negative depiction of Aaron, historical criticism has traditionally identified the “who” as anti-priestly/anti-Aaronide but pro-Levite groups in various historical time periods. This claim finds its basis in the contrast between Aaron creating the calf (32:3) and the Levites killing its worshipers, for which they are rewarded with ordination (32:26–29). Critics also consider Exodus 32 to be a projection of Judean polemics against the northern kingdom of Israel, because the calf is greeted with the call “These are your gods, Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (32:4), which echoes the story of Jeroboam’s golden calf in 1 Kgs 12:28.² The appearance of both polemics together in this story has generated speculation about the Aaronides’ priestly roles in the temples of the northern kingdom, especially at Bethel.³ Thus, the story is often used as a mine where interpreters dig for information about the historical development of Israel’s priesthood as well as the politics of the two preexilic kingdoms.

¹ For a survey and discussion of the history of rhetoric in terms of persuasion, see Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950), 49–55, 61–62; for studies of the rhetorical practices of non-Greco-Roman cultures, see the essays in *Rhetoric before and beyond the Greeks* (ed. Roberta A. Binkley and Carol S. Lipson; Albany: SUNY Press, 2004); and *Ancient Non-Greek Rhetorics* (ed. Carol S. Lipson and Roberta A. Binkley; West Lafayette, IN: Parlor, 2009); for persuasive rhetoric in the Pentateuch, see Dale Patrick and Allen Scult, *Rhetoric and Biblical Interpretation* (JSOTSup 82; Bible and Literature 26; Sheffield: Almond, 1990); and James W. Watts, *Reading Law: The Rhetorical Shaping of the Pentateuch* (Biblical Seminar 59; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

² W. M. L. de Wette, *Beiträge zur Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (2 vols.; Halle: Schimmelpfennig, 1806, 1807), 247; Julius Wellhausen, *Die Composition des Hexateuch und der historischen Bücher des Alten Testament* (4th ed.; Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1899), 91–92; for further literature and discussion, see Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 559–62; Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus* (3 vols.; Historical Commentary on the Old Testament; Leuven: Peeters, 1993–2000), 3:619–24; William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 19–40: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 2A; New York: Doubleday, 2006), 567–78.

³ E.g., S. R. Driver, *The Book of Exodus: In the Revised Version, with Introduction and Notes* (Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), 348–49; Antonius H. J. Gunneweg, *Levitens und Priester: Hauptlinien der Traditionsbildung und Geschichte des israelitisch-jüdischen Kultpersonals* (FRLANT 89; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965), 89–95; Moses Aberbach and Leivy Smolar, “Aaron, Jeroboam, and the Golden Calves,” *JBL* 86 (1967): 129–40; George W. Coats, *Rebellion in the Wilderness: The Murmuring Motif in the Wilderness Traditions of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 189–91; Aelred Cody, *A History of Old Testament Priesthood* (AnBib 35; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969), 148; Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the*

The Aaronides' prominence in postexilic politics draws my attention in this essay to the priesthood. Some have argued that the original story valued Aaron's bull/calf as a positive representation of YHWH. Only later editing turned it into a story of idolatry.⁴ Others argue that the references to Aaron, the Levites, or both were added to the original story in response to later conflicts between priesthoods.⁵ (Modern preachers have even picked up this theme to juxtapose Aaron to Moses as representing the "church of the world" versus the "church of the Word."⁶)

Much of the discussion that takes Exodus 32 as evidence for the history of the priesthood focuses on preexilic times. It ignores the literary context of the golden calf story within P's tabernacle traditions (Exodus 25–40).⁷ It is, however, this context and its likely historical origins in the Persian period that pose the greatest difficulties for understanding Exodus 32 as an anti-Aaronide polemic. How did the story survive Priestly editing in a period when avowedly Aaronide priests controlled not only the Jerusalem temple and its Torah, but increasingly also wielded political power as representatives of the Jewish people?

The issue of Priestly editing, or rather the lack of it, in Exodus 32 has been made even more pressing by recent redactional research that regards part or all of Exodus 32–34 as post-P additions.⁸ Eckart Otto, for example, argued that chs. 32–

Religion of Israel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 198–200; Joachim Schaper, *Priester und Leviten im achämenidischen Juda: Studien zur Kult- und Sozialgeschichte Israels in persischer Zeit* (FAT 31; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 172–73, 275–76.

⁴ Hugo Gressmann, *Mose und seine Zeit: Ein Kommentar zu den Mose-Sagen* (FRLANT n.F. 1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913), 205; Walter Beyerlin, *Herkunft und Geschichte der ältesten Sinaitraditionen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1961), 144–47. The opposite view is maintained by Childs (*Exodus*, 561–62) and R. W. L. Moberly (*At the Mountain of God: Story and Theology in Exodus 32–34* [JSOTSup 22; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983], 167–71).

⁵ Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary* (trans. John S. Bowden; London: SCM, 1962), 244–45; Gunneweg, *Leviten und Priester*, 93–95. The nearly unanimous tendency to find the remains of priestly conflicts in the story has elicited rebuttals from Heinrich Valentin (*Aaron: Eine Studie zur vor-priesterschriftlichen Aaron-Überlieferung* [OBO 18; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978], 246) and Dany Nocquet ("Pourquoi Aaron n'a-t-il pas été châtié après la fabrication du taurillon d'or? Essai sur les mentions d'Aaron en Exode 32, 1–33, 6," *ETR* 81 [2006]: 229–54).

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, sermon, 1936, in *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures, Notes, 1928–1936* (ed. E. H. Robinson; New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 243–48; for similar uses, see Scott M. Langston, *Exodus through the Centuries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 246–48.

⁷ The contradiction between P's celebration of Aaron and the critical depiction of him in Exodus 32 fueled theories that the Pentateuch was the product of a compromise between competing parties in the Persian period (e.g., Erhard Blum, *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch* [BZAW 189; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1990], 333–34).

⁸ For a survey of critical approaches to the golden calf story through the end of the twentieth century, see Konrad Schmid, "Israel am Sinai: Etappen der Forschungsgeschichte zu Ex 32–34 in seinen Kontexten," in *Gottes Volk am Sinai: Untersuchungen zu Ex 32–34 und Dtn 9–10* (ed. Matthias Köckert and Erhard Blum; Veröffentlichungen der Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft für Theologie 18; Gütersloh: Kaiser, 2001), 9–40.

34 were constructed by the final redactor of the Pentateuch in direct dependence on P's tabernacle account in order to make the theological point that God will not abolish the covenant with Israel regardless of Israel's sins (just as the Holiness Code of Leviticus 17–26 does).⁹ Jan Christian Gertz also argued for a post-P redaction that utilized preexisting P material.¹⁰ Yet the P context of Exodus 25–40 is unmitigatingly pro-Aaronide priests, clear evidence of their influence over the Torah's postexilic shaping.¹¹ Furthermore, this pro-priestly bias matches very well what little we know about the political situation in Persian-period Judea during which the Torah emerged as Scripture. In this milieu, how could an anti-Aaronide story survive in Exodus?

This problem involves only direct attacks on priestly preeminence, such as in Numbers 16–18, which rejects them by divine fiat, and such as those presupposed by historians who see struggles for supremacy among Levites, Zadokites, and Aaronides in Exodus 32 and other stories. It does not apply to criticisms of priests for corruption and incompetence, which appear frequently in biblical and post-biblical literature (e.g., Lev 10:1–3; 1 Samuel 2–4; Malachi; MMT and other Qumran texts; Mark 14:53–65 and parallels; Josephus; and frequently in rabbinic literature) but which, by their nature, affirm the ideal of priesthood while criticizing current priests for failing to live up to it.¹² Apart from the stories in Numbers, only in the NT does the critique actually rise to the level of challenging the ideal of Aaronide preeminence itself (so Hebrews, especially 7:12).¹³

⁹ Otto, "Kritik der Pentateuchkomposition" (1995), in idem, *Die Tora: Studien zum Pentateuch. Gesammelte Schriften* (Beihefte zur ZABR 9; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009), 154–55; idem, "Die nachpriesterschriftliche Pentateuchredaktion im Buch Exodus," in *Studies in the Book of Exodus: Redaction, Reception, Interpretation* (ed. Marc Vervenne; BETL 126; Leuven: Peeters, 1996), 61–111.

¹⁰ Gertz, "Beobachtungen zu Komposition und Redaktion in Exodus 32–34," in Köckert and Blum, *Gottes Volk am Sinai*, 88–106. A recent reexamination of Exodus 32–34 that defends a pre-P and preexilic kernel to the story, including Aaron's role in it, can be found in Michael Konkel, *Sünde und Vergebung: Eine Rekonstruktion der Redaktionsgeschichte der hinteren Sinaiperikope (Exodus 32–34) vor dem Hintergrund aktueller Pentateuchmodelle* (FAT 58; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008).

¹¹ See James W. Watts, *Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus: From Sacrifice to Scripture* (Cambridge/ New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 142–72; reprinted as "The Torah as the Rhetoric of Priesthood," in *The Pentateuch as Torah: New Models for Understanding Its Promulgation and Acceptance* (ed. Gary N. Knoppers and Bernard M. Levinson; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 319–31.

¹² Konkel's attempt (*Sünde und Vergebung*, 285–86) to find a context for a postexilic anti-Aaronide critique in Exodus 32 in criticisms of priestly marriage practices in Neh 13:28 confuses these very different rhetorical strategies.

¹³ See further James W. Watts, "Political and Legal Uses of Scripture," in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 1 (ed. J. Schaper and J. C. Paget; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

Because of political developments in Second Temple Judaism, attempts to find anti-priestly redactional layers in the Pentateuch become less and less credible the later they are dated. In this period of the Aaronides' rising political as well as religious preeminence, we should instead wonder at the survival of stories like Exodus 32, or at least Aaron's role in it. Why was he not edited out?

II. EXODUS 32 IN ANCIENT INTERPRETATION

Another way to get at this problem is to ask: Could the story have been read in such a way as to support the claims of the Aaronide dynasty, rather than undermining them? Its survival in this form suggests that, in Persian- and Hellenistic-period Judea, it must have been read in a way that was not damaging to the preeminence of the Aaronides. So what value would the priestly dynasties have found in the story of the golden calf?

Unfortunately, the history of interpretation does not preserve any such Aaronide interpretations.¹⁴ Only a few texts in the rest of the Hebrew Bible explicitly mention the golden calf story. Deuteronomy 9 narrates it and, unlike Exodus 32, says that God was angry with Aaron. Only Moses' intercession saved him. Deuteronomy thus extends the theme of divine retribution forestalled or ameliorated by prophetic intercession, which is found also in Exodus 32, to include the high priest. Deuteronomy 33:8–11 seems to allude to the golden calf story to celebrate the Levites' ordination, but makes no mention of Aaron. Psalm 106:19–23 omits Aaron entirely from its summary of the story, though just four verses earlier it calls Aaron "holy to YHWH" while narrating the rebellion of Dathan and Abiram (v. 16). Nehemiah 9:18 also omits Aaron in its allusion to the golden calf in a longer historical summary, though it quotes the crucial "these are your gods" line. The prayer of Nehemiah 9, unlike Psalm 106, makes no references at all to tabernacle, sacrifices, priests, or temple. Biblical literature then draws no consequences

¹⁴ The history of ancient interpretation of the golden calf story has been summarized and analyzed by Leivy Smoler and Moses Aberbach, "The Golden Calf Episode in Postbiblical Literature," *HUCA* 39 (1968): 91–116; Childs, *Exodus*, 574–79; Christopher T. Begg, "The Golden Calf Episode according to Pseudo-Philo," in Vervenne, *Studies in the Book of Exodus*, 577–94; James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible As It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 712–41; Louis H. Feldman, *Studies in Josephus' Rewritten Bible* (JSJSup 58; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 55–73; idem, "Philo's Account of the Golden Calf Incident," *JJS* 56 (2005): 245–64; Joseph T. Lienhard, *Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (ACCS, OT 3; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 139–56; Karla R. Suomala, *Moses and God in Dialogue: Exodus 32–34 in Postbiblical Literature* (Studies in Biblical Literature 61; New York: P. Lang, 2004); Langston, *Exodus*, 232–49; and Pekka Lindqvist, *Sin at Sinai: Early Judaism Encounters Exodus 32* (Studies in Rewritten Bible 2; Turku: Åbo Akademi; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008).

for either Aaron or the priesthood from the golden calf story, and only one text (Deut 9:8) bothers to provide an explanation for why not.

Aside from these biblical references, no allusions to the golden calf story appear in Jewish literature until the first century C.E. Then Philo recounts the story (*Moses* 2.159–73) but, like Psalm 106 and Nehemiah 9, omits Aaron.¹⁵ He instead emphasizes heavily the piety of the Levites.¹⁶ Josephus omits the incident entirely, narrating only the Israelites' fears during Moses' protracted absence on the mountain (*Ant.* 3.95–101). The omission may have been motivated by Josephus's desire to protect Moses' reputation from accusations of impetuosity and failure of leadership by Gentile readers.¹⁷ Pseudo-Philo, on the other hand, retells the story in detail for a Jewish audience but contrasts a righteous Aaron who protests the people's request for a calf with the idolatrous people who make the idol themselves (*L.A.B.* 12:2–7). Though addressed to different audiences in various situations, all three show a concern to idealize the leadership of Moses and Aaron.¹⁸

Rabbinic and Christian discussions of the story show the same tendencies. Stephen's speech in Acts 7:40 mentions Aaron incidentally, but without evaluating him one way or the other. Patristic and later authors tend to present apologies for Aaron, often comparing him with Peter, who also maintained a place of preeminence in the tradition despite his act of betrayal.¹⁹ Christian exegesis was perhaps influenced by rabbinic examples that excuse Aaron.²⁰ Rabbinic authorities also attempted to suppress the publication of certain troublesome biblical texts, including the "second" account of the golden calf (Aaron's recital of events to Moses in Exod 32:21–25), which they ruled may be read but not translated.²¹ The attempt to suppress part of the story reveals considerable unease about how the calf was created and especially Aaron's discredit for obscuring his own role in it.²² Aaron's actions continued to be excused, explained away, or ignored in medieval Jewish commentaries.²³

¹⁵ See also Philo, *Moses* 2.270–74; *Spec. Laws* 1.79; 3.124–27; his allegorical interpretation of the story can be found in *Drunkenness* 66–70; *Sacrifices* 128–30; *Flight* 90–92; for discussion, see Feldman, "Philo's Account"

¹⁶ Lindqvist, *Sin at Sinai*, 121–28.

¹⁷ Feldman, *Josephus' Rewritten Bible*, 377, 437–42; Lindqvist, *Sin at Sinai*, 133–41.

¹⁸ Lindqvist, *Sin at Sinai*, 152–55.

¹⁹ Houtman, *Exodus*, 630.

²⁰ Childs, *Exodus*, 575; Lindqvist, *Sin at Sinai*, 101.

²¹ *M. Meg* 4:10; *t. Meg.* 3:31–38; *y. Meg.* 75c; *b. Meg.* 25a–b. Though the lists of prohibited passages do not agree with each other on all points, the golden calf story appears with the same restriction in all of them. For a comparison of the lists, see Feldman, "Philo's Account," 245–46; and Lindqvist, *Sin at Sinai*, 168–69, who also points out that, while *Targums Pseudo-Jonathan* and *Onqelos* include the passage, *Targum Neofiti* seems to observe a variant form of the rabbinic prescription (pp. 178–80).

²² Lindqvist, *Sin at Sinai*, 183–90.

²³ Langston, *Exodus*, 239.

So Aaron does not just get off scot-free in Exodus 32–34; later interpreters also let him off, either omitting his role in the affair entirely or excusing his participation in one way or another. Even sources eager to use the golden calf episode to disparage Jews as a group (e.g., patristic writers) do not latch on to Aaron as a target of their polemics. Writers who criticized later high priests or even the priesthood and sacrificial system in general do not impugn the character of Aaron. He is at most depicted as second-best in the ranks of divinely ordained priests (so the NT letter to the Hebrews, but without reference to this story), but his integrity remains unimpeached. Of all the ancient reflections on the golden calf story, the most critical is also the earliest, Deuteronomy 9, but this account immediately mitigates God's anger with Aaron through Moses' successful mediation on his behalf, so that nothing follows from it.

Deuteronomy 9 may be the only version of the golden calf story that does not reflect its position in Exodus within the Priestly tabernacle account.²⁴ It may well be older than the setting of Exodus 32–34 within P's tabernacle account and was therefore unhampered by the unconditional celebration of his eternal priesthood in Exodus 28–29, Leviticus 8–10, and Numbers 16–18. Yet even here, Aaron gets off as a result of Moses' mediation. Deuteronomy does not seize the opportunity to disparage Aaron in comparison to the Levitical priests it celebrates. Aaron always gets off scot-free.

III. EXODUS 32 IN THE CONTEXT OF EXODUS 25–40

Though later Jewish interpreters do not use Exodus 32 to attack the Aaronide dynasties, neither do they help us understand why the Aaronides preserved the story. We are left to reconstruct their readings inductively from the extant text as we have it. When viewed from the perspective of the Second Temple priesthood, the story actually provides much material that not only supports the standard Aaronide view of the priesthood but also presents an excuse for priestly participation in pre-exilic cult practices that were considered heterodox after Deuteronomic and Priestly reforms.

In terms of the broad thematic development of the book of Exodus, the golden calf story plays an important role in its present location. It creates narrative suspense and intrigue between the giving of the tabernacle instructions (chs. 25–31)

²⁴ It may not even reflect Exodus 32. Thomas B. Dozeman argues that Exodus 32 used both Deuteronomy 9 and 1 Kings 12 as sources and is therefore a Deuteronomistic, but pre-P, composition ("The Composition of Exodus 32 within the Context of the Enneateuch," in *Auf dem Weg zur Endgestalt von Genesis bis II Regum: Festschrift Hans-Christoph Schmitt zum 65. Geburtstag* [BZAW 370; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2006], 175–89). Gertz thinks that a post-P Exodus 32 utilized materials from 1 Kings 12 ("Beobachtungen," 93–95).

and their fulfillment (chs. 35–40).²⁵ The counter-story in chs. 32–34 greatly enhances the sense of closure conveyed by the later stories of the tabernacle's completion and God's inhabiting it (ch. 40) as well as the ordination of Aaron and his sons and their inauguration of cultic service (Leviticus 8–9). Inclusion of the golden calf story gives the P tabernacle story a creation (Exodus 25–31)/fall (Exodus 32–33)/restoration (Exodus 34–40) plot that echoes themes elsewhere in the Pentateuch.²⁶ The sense of satisfaction that these stories engender would be considerably lessened if they did not include the golden calf story.

The story actually mentions Aaron only in 32:1–5, 21–25, while the narrator reemphasizes his involvement in v. 35. The rest of chs. 32–34 focuses on interactions among God, Moses, and the people. Even the first five verses depict the people taking the initiative; Aaron only responds. For this reason, Dany Nocquet agrees with ancient interpreters that the story depicts Aaron's actions as involuntary.²⁷ It is the people, then, who play the villain in contrast to the hero, Moses, and it is they who suffer the consequences.

The characters with priestly identities are differentiated in an unusual manner: on the one hand, the word “priest” (כֹּהֵן) never appears in Exodus 32–34 and priests are represented only by the solitary figure of Aaron, not “Aaron and his sons,” as in the surrounding chapters. On the other hand, an undifferentiated group of Levites distinguish themselves as Moses' zealous supporters (32:25–29). Mention of both Aaron and the Levites is restricted to small portions of a story that otherwise revolves around the conflict between Moses and the people.²⁸

The story's themes do not accord well with its usual reputation as depicting Israel's sin of idolatry. Idolatry is mentioned explicitly only late in the story (32:31), and one has to wait until 34:17 for a general prohibition of this kind of behavior. The dominant theme in ch. 32 instead revolves around credit for the exodus. The refrain “who brought you/us/them out of the land of Egypt” appears nine times but with different speakers and subjects: in v. 1 the people credit Moses; in v. 4 they credit “your gods” represented by the calf; in v. 7 YHWH credits Moses; in v. 8

²⁵ So Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken, 1986), 190–91, 215–20. Helmut Utzschneider (*Das Heiligtum und das Gesetz: Studien zur Bedeutung der sinaitischen Heiligtumstexte [Ex 25–40; Lev 8–9]* [OBO 77; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988], 85–88) details the close parallels between accounts of building the calf (Exod 32:1–6) and constructing the tabernacle (Exodus 35–36).

²⁶ Peter J. Kearney, “Creation and Liturgy: the P Redaction of Ex 25–40,” *ZAW* 89 (1977): 375–87; Gertz, “Beobachtungen,” 89–90; Benjamin D. Sommer points out that stories of troubled beginnings can be found throughout the Hebrew Bible (“Expulsion as Initiation: Displacement, Divine Presence, and Divine Exile in the Torah,” in *Beginning/Again: Toward a Hermeneutics of Jewish Texts* [ed. Aryeh Cohen and Shaul Magid; New York: Seven Bridges, 2001], 23–48).

²⁷ Nocquet, “Pourquoi Aaron,” 235.

²⁸ That is why scholars have long suggested that one or both priestly parties may have been added secondarily to the story. See n. 5 above.

YHWH quotes the people (v. 4) crediting “your gods”; in v. 11 Moses credits YHWH; in v. 12 Moses imaginatively quotes the Egyptians crediting YHWH; in v. 23 Aaron quotes the people (v. 1) crediting Moses; in 33:1 YHWH credits Moses; and in 34:18 YHWH uses an intransitive verb for Israel’s exodus (“you came out from Egypt”). Thus, YHWH never claims credit for the exodus from Egypt in chs. 32–34, unlike in 19:4. Nor does YHWH claim to have accompanied Israel from Egypt. Instead, God sends an angel to lead Israel to the land *in place of* God’s presence (33:2–3; cf. 32:34).²⁹ That angel previously appeared in the pillar of cloud and fire that led and defended the Israelites on their wilderness journey (14:19; cf. 23:20, 23 for positive reference to the angel without invoking the cloud).³⁰

YHWH does in the end concede that “my presence will go up” with Israel (Exod 33:14). If God’s presence is not represented by the pillar of cloud/fire that is linked to the angel, what concrete action does this concession represent? The other obvious symbol of God’s presence is the tabernacle/tent of meeting. The account of the function of the tent of meeting in 33:7–11 intrudes so obviously into the story that critical commentators almost unanimously regard it as a fragment from a different tradition. More recent interpreters who focus on its role in context note the emphasis on the tent’s position outside the camp in contrast to P’s tabernacle in the center of the camp, and take that as a judgment on Israel’s behavior.³¹ These interpreters, however, still limit their interpretive context to chs. 32–34. If one takes into account the larger P story, which culminates in God’s glory inhabiting the newly constructed tabernacle in the center of the camp (Exod 40:34–48) and then setting

²⁹ YHWH’s attachment to the mountain stimulated Gressman’s theory (*Mose*, 218–20) that the original story depicted Sinai as God’s home and site of his presence; similarly, Gustav Westphal (*Jahwes Wohnstätten nach den Anschauungen der alten Hebräer: Eine alttestamentliche Untersuchung* [BZAW 15; Giessen: Töpelmann, 1908], 24, 46); see the summary and critique by Houtman (*Exodus*, 3:683–85).

³⁰ Childs, *Exodus*, 588: “Nor does Ex. 33 indicate that the refusal of God to accompany Israel has any effect on the cloud and pillar of fire which had guided the people earlier.”

³¹ Childs, *Exodus*, 592; Houtman, *Exodus*, 3:685. A number of recent interpreters consider the fragment a post-P addition: A. H. J. Gunneweg, “Das Gesetz und die Propheten,” *ZAW* 102 (1990): 169–80, esp. 174–75; Christoph Levin, *Der Jahwist* (FRLANT 157; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 368; Otto, “Die nachpriesterschriftliche Pentateuchredaktion, 91–92; Reinhard Achenbach, “Grundlinien redaktioneller Arbeit in der Sinai-Perikope,” in *Das Deuteronomium zwischen Pentateuch und deuteronomistischen Geschichtswerk* (ed. Reinhard Achenbach and Eckart Otto; FRLANT 168; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 79–80. Konkel rightly criticizes these reconstructions for postulating an opposition between Torah, represented here by the tent of meeting, and the temple cult represented by P’s tabernacle, an opposition that corresponds neither to the overall perspective of the Pentateuch nor to the Persian-period situation in Judea (*Sünde und Vergebung*, 171–72). Konkel finds vv. 7–9 to be pre-P, perhaps pre-D, and considers v. 7 the oldest kernel of the tradition (pp. 172–73). One could, however, defend a postexilic date for this material without assuming that the story juxtaposes the temple with the Torah.

off with that tabernacle for the journey to the land (Num 9:15–23; 10:35–36), the sequence in Exodus 33 makes more sense.³² Verses 7–11 depict the tent outside the camp until Moses protests YHWH's refusal to go with Israel (vv. 12–16). Once YHWH relents (vv. 14, 17), Moses can see God's "glory" on Mount Sinai just as Israel will later see that same "glory" descend in the cloud onto the new tabernacle (40:34) that will find its place in the middle of the camp (Numbers 2–3).³³ Thus, even the description of the tent of meeting "outside the camp" works well in the larger P context to describe an interim situation later corrected by God's agreement to accompany Israel, which in context means in the tabernacle.³⁴

There is sufficient unevenness in vocabulary and plot to justify the critical judgment that the internal contents of Exodus 32–34, as well as their placement in the book, are the results of a great deal of editorial activity. But the point here is that the theme of God's presence with Israel and its connection to the tent/tabernacle unify the golden calf story with its P context. In fact, the story as it stands in chs. 32–34 depends on its context in the narrative of the construction of the tabernacle to make sense of the theme of God's presence with Israel.

The account of the Levites "ordaining themselves" to temple guard service also plays a complementary role in this larger context. P's unwavering attention on the Aaronides leaves the place of the Levites in doubt until the book of Numbers (8:5–26), where their status is explained by stories of conflict and rivalry (chs. 16–18). The golden calf story fills this lacuna with a positive explanation for why the Levites gained their status as the guardians of the sanctuary.

While concerns for God's presence with Israel and for which leader gets credit for the exodus run throughout Exodus 32–34, the dialogue between Moses and Aaron focuses on control—or rather the lack of it (32:25) and reestablishing control (vv. 28–29)—which is where the Levites earn their credit.³⁵ Verses 29–35 are full of priestly language used in unconventional ways. Moses, rather than Aaron, attempts to "atone" (כפר) for the people (v. 30). God's promise to "reckon" (פקד)

³² For Exod 33:7–11 in the context of chs. 25–40, see Otto, "Pentateuchredaktion," 91.

³³ Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967; Hebrew, 1951), 429–31; also already Ibn Ezra on 33:3, Rashi on 33:11.

³⁴ "Presence" is literally "face" (פני) in Hebrew, so the theme of God's presence with Israel (33:14–15) echoes in Moses' standing up to YHWH's "face" (32:11), YHWH and Moses speaking "face to face" in the tent of meeting (33:11), YHWH's refusal to allow Moses to see his face but only his back on Mount Horeb (33:20, 23), and Moses' shining face, which must be veiled from the view of the Israelites at the end of the story (34:29–30, 33–35). See Friedhelm Hartenstein, "Das 'Angesicht Gottes' in Exodus 32–34," in Köckert and Blum, *Gottes Volk am Sinai*, 157–83.

³⁵ See George W. Coats ("The King's Loyal Opposition," in *Canon and Authority: Essays in Old Testament Religion and Theology* [ed. George W. Coats and Burke O. Long; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977], 91–109), who analyzes the story as a story of replacing leaders (revolution) and counter-revolution rather than idolatry.

sins (v. 34) echoes the language of census taking in 30:12–14. Most relevant for our topic is the fact that the Levites are “ordained” (מלאך יד) by slaughtering their relatives (v. 29; cf. Phinehas in Num 25:6–13). Though older criticism has regularly seen pro-Levite and anti-priestly polemic in this depiction of the Levites as zealous defenders of the covenant over against Aaron’s idolatrous behavior, newer critics point out that v. 26 speaks of “all the Levites,” which in the context necessarily includes the Aaronides. The story, then, cannot reflect a Levite vs. priest conflict in its current setting.³⁶ Instead, the story celebrates the Levites for showing their militaristic zeal for YHWH, which qualifies them to perform one of the duties delegated to the non-priestly Levitical clans, namely, guarding the sanctuary and its holy furnishings (Num 3:7–8; 18:1–5; 1 Chr 9:17–27; cf. 23:32; 26:1).

IV. AARONIDE RHETORIC AND AARON’S ROLE

Thus, the sole point of possible concern for Second Temple Aaronides in Exodus 32–34 is the depiction of Aaron himself.³⁷ The above analysis has pointed out, however, that the story (1) never identifies Aaron with his dynasty by the typical P collocation, “Aaron and his sons,” but depicts him alone, (2) emphasizes the people as instigators of the problem, and (3) depicts Aaron as serving the people’s desires to the point of being criticized by Moses for losing control of them.

Nor does the echo of the calf story in 1 Kings 12 necessarily point to a polemical association of the Aaronides with the temples of the northern kingdom, as critics have usually maintained. The protagonist in Exodus 32, who matches Jeroboam by initiating the calf cult, is not after all Aaron but the people as a whole: they ask Aaron to make gods for them. If Aaron later minimizes his involvement even more (vv. 23–24), the narrator nevertheless agrees with him that it was the people who started it (vv. 1–2). Aaron simply serves the people’s wishes, a detail of the story

³⁶ Recent tradition- and redaction-critical studies have categorized vv. 26–29 as a postexilic, post-P insertion, which means that this story never reflected a preexilic situation, when Aaronides might have been categorized separately from the tribe of Levi. Thus, Konkel argues that vv. 26–28 are a narrative explanation for why the Levites became privileged (Deut 33:8–11) despite Jacob’s curse on Levi (Gen 49:5–7, which is itself explicated narratively in Gen 34:25–26). He concludes that Exod 33:26–28 is therefore a post-P addition that reconciles not-P Genesis with P’s elevation of the Levites and the priests (*Sünde und Vergebung*, 164, 167–68). For previous post-P datings of these verses, see Ulrich Dahmen, *Levitens und Priester im Deuteronomium: Literarkritische und redaktionsgeschichtliche Studien* (BBB 110; Bodenheim: Philo, 1996), 79; Otto, “Pentateuch-redaktion,” 90; and Achenbach, “Grundlinien,” 76–78.

³⁷ I leave aside here issues of legal contradiction between Exodus 34 and the P code. On the question of how to understand legal contradictions in the Pentateuch, see Watts, *Reading Law*, 73–84.

that later Jewish and Christian interpreters capitalized on to depict his compliance as coerced.³⁸ Moses chastises Aaron for yielding to the people's pressure ("what did this people do to you?" v. 21) and for letting them get out of control (v. 26).

So comparison of the two golden calf stories shows a shift from blaming Israel's and Judah's kings to blaming the people themselves for heterodox religious practices. It reproduces the shift from the rhetoric of the Deuteronomistic History to the communal guilt emphasized by prophetic books and by the sanctions concluding both Deuteronomy (chs. 27–30) and Leviticus (ch. 26). In comparison with the version of the golden calf story in Deuteronomy 9, Exodus 32 also places greater emphasis on differentiating individual responsibility (vv. 20, 28), something Aaron escapes.³⁹ The postexilic community in Jerusalem had internalized both corporate guilt and individual responsibility by accepting the prophetic judgment that the kingdoms' disastrous histories were punishment for the people's sins. Nehemiah 9 shows people and priests together recounting and repenting their preexilic sins (so also Ezra 9–10; Psalm 106). Exodus 32, then, portrays Aaron acting as priest at the people's behest, but not as uniquely guilty of the sin. Here Aaron appears not as a type for Jeroboam, as critical scholarship has usually maintained,⁴⁰ but quite the opposite, almost an anti-king. He represents and carries out the people's desires rather than violently suppressing them.⁴¹ The role of enforcer is left to Moses.

Reading Aaron's role as "representative" may sound anachronistically liberal and modern. However, P gives the priests in general and the high priest in particular explicitly representational roles in the cult: they mediate the offerings of the individual Israelites (Leviticus 1–3; 4:27–5:19), they present offerings on behalf of the people as a whole (Lev 4:13–21; Numbers 28–29), and the high priest represents the whole people in the holy of holies on Yom Kippur (Lev 16:15–34). Leviticus highlights the equivalence between high priest and people by making his sin offering identical to that of the whole community (4:1–21), while prescribing a different ritual for secular leaders and individuals (4:22–35). The golden calf story emphasizes Aaron's representational role in the cult as well, though this time in a situation of ritual misconduct. Thus, in its depiction of both Aaron and the undifferentiated Levites, Exodus 32 portrays them fulfilling their appropriate roles according to P's conception of them. Though Aaron may be doing his job badly

³⁸ Kugel, *Traditions*, 718–19.

³⁹ Dozeman finds a new emphasis on individual rather than corporate responsibility in the expansion of Deuteronomy 9 and 1 Kings 12 in Exodus 32 ("Composition," 188). Aaron, however, does not seem to be held responsible in Exodus, in contrast to Deuteronomy. Dozeman thinks that Aaron's appearance in the Deuteronomy story is a post-P addition (p. 182), as does Nocquet, "Pourquoi Aaron," 252.

⁴⁰ Nocquet ("Pourquoi Aaron," 248) is an exception.

⁴¹ Nocquet interprets Aaron's role in the story as emphasizing, in a postexilic milieu, the essential role of priestly mediation for YHWH's presence in the midst of Israel ("Pourquoi Aaron," 253–54).

while the Levites do theirs well, according to the explicit judgment of Moses, their actions nevertheless conform to the model of the two-tier Second Temple priesthood.

Exodus 32 can be read, then, not as an anti-Aaronide polemic but rather as a pro-Aaronide apologia for the priests' complicity in preexilic heterodoxy. In the Second Temple period, when priests led the people to internalize the guilt of their ancestors, the story admits their role in preexilic calf cults. But it lays the principal blame for going astray not on the kings, as the Deuteronomistic History does, much less on the priests, but rather on the people. In other words, the message from Aaronide priests to people is: "Like you, we did wrong, but we were only doing what you wanted!"

V. THE RHETORICAL LIMITS ON GUILT BY ANCESTRAL ASSOCIATION

Did this negative depiction of Aaron cast his powerful, Second Temple-period descendants into disrepute? Contrary to the nearly unanimous consensus of two hundred years of critical scholarship, the answer is, "Probably not." Comparisons with polemics from better-documented times and places show that there is no rhetorical payoff in attacking venerated cultural heroes. Some figures achieve such high status in subsequent culture that any criticism of them is more likely to boomerang against the critic's cause than to advance it. The high cultural status of such heroes transcends their identification with any particular group of descendants, institutions, or parties. Though they may have well-known faults, those faults do not reflect negatively on their later followers and successors. Their status is too high and universal to allow use of them for a divisive purpose.

Two contemporary examples can illustrate this rhetorical restriction. In American politics, Abraham Lincoln is such a figure. Though he was the first president from the Republican Party, which therefore celebrates itself as "the party of Lincoln," the wider country regards Lincoln too positively for that identification to be exclusive. Thus, the current Democratic president, Barack Obama, repeatedly invoked the mantle of Lincoln during his campaign for office without any sense of irony. Nor did his Republican opponents, who did not waste other opportunities for attacking him, try to claim the heritage of Lincoln as exclusively their own. The fact that Lincoln plunged the country into civil war does not in the least diminish his glorification in subsequent American culture. Historians remember and discuss his faults and mistakes, but there can be no possible political advantage in attacking Lincoln today.

Another example can be found in the great sarcasm, even glee, that the British take in telling the bloody history of their own monarchy. Depictions aimed at mass audiences, such as tours of the Tower of London, tend to emphasize the gorier, and hence more entertaining, parts of their history. This does not seem to undermine

the present-day institution of the monarchy; it actually seems to contribute to its glamour and mystique. Though the marital difficulties of the current Prince of Wales have certainly fueled antimonarchic sentiment, the considerably more outrageous behavior of Henry VIII in the sixteenth century serves only to stimulate book sales, movie receipts, and of course tourism.

Thus, the faults of venerated cultural heroes do not detract from their standing. They may even be recounted fondly by those in the tradition that celebrates them. In other words, time and prestige place a rhetorical statute of limitations on character assassination and guilt by association. So long as the biblical story of Aaron remains compelling for interpreters, whether in oral or scriptural form, Aaron's role in the golden calf episode can be ignored or puzzled over, but the scriptural endorsement of his eternal priesthood stops any thought of using his actions to attack his successors.⁴² In the Second Temple period, there is every reason to think that Aaron's prestige had already reached this level. His status and antiquity meant that his part in the golden calf story presented no risk to Persian-period high priests. His depiction as a representative who bows to the people's will could even have been used to deflect attention from the Aaronides' gradual accumulation of political power, which would eventually allow high priests of the Hasmonean dynasty to claim the title "king."⁴³

Of course, this statute of limitations does not apply to outsiders who have no stake in the cultural tradition or reason to defend the sacred text. But for such critics, both in antiquity and in modern times, the Bible offers many more tempting targets than Aaron. Nevertheless, the increasingly defensive and apologetic stance of later Jewish interpreters about Aaron's role in the golden calf story shows their worries about external appearances before the gaze of hostile Hellenistic, Roman, and later Christian and Muslim readers.⁴⁴

In the Second Temple period, however, the story of the golden calf posed no dangers to the growing force of Aaronide priestly ideology. Quite the contrary, it reinforced certain key priestly themes: God's presence in the tabernacle/temple cult, the ordination of the Levites to separate, noncultic forms of temple services, and the high priest's role representing Israel before God. Therefore, the critical habit of reading the story as a polemic against the Aaronide priesthood should not be accepted uncritically.

⁴² Perhaps David benefits from this same effect in the Deuteronomistic History.

⁴³ The first to do so was Alexander Jannaeus, who minted coins with the title; see James C. VanderKam, *From Joshua to Caiaphas: High Priests after the Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 333–34.

⁴⁴ See Smoler and Aberbach, "Golden Calf Episode," 91–116; Feldman, "Philo's Account," 245–64; Lindqvist, *Sin at Sinai*, 152–55.