

17. Defining a Spiritual Hierarchy (Exodus 24, 31–34)

The account of Moses' ascent on Mount Sinai with Aaron and his sons and Israel's seventy elders evidenced the existence a spiritual hierarchy among God's people Israel: "Then went up Moses, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel: And they saw the God of Israel: and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone, and as it were the body of heaven in its clearness. And upon the nobles of the children of Israel he laid not his hand: also they saw God, and did eat and drink" (Exodus 24:9–11).

While Israel's elders "saw the God of Israel"—Jehovah—in person, the people of Israel who remained at the foot of the mount experienced only the larger-than-life reality of God manifested as a "devouring fire" on top of the mount, which they viewed from a distance: "And the glory of the Lord abode upon Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days: and the seventh day he called unto Moses out of the midst of the cloud. And the sight of the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mount in the eyes of the children of Israel. And Moses went into the midst of the cloud, and gat him up into the mount: and Moses was in the mount forty days and forty nights" (Exodus 24:16–18).

True to his divine plan to raise the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to the spiritual stature of their ancestors, the Lord offered the people of Israel the higher law he himself had written on tablets of stone. Instead, almost immediately—at the first test of their loyalty to him—they transgressed the commandment to worship no other gods by making a golden calf: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the waters under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them" (Exodus 20:3–5).

The Lord's response—while harsh against his people for transgressing this first commandment—was also a test of Moses: "And the Lord said unto Moses, Go, get thee down; for thy people, which thou broughtest out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves: They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them: they have made them a molten calf, and have worshipped it, and have sacrificed thereunto, and said, These are thy gods, O Israel, which have brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. And the Lord said unto Moses, I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiff-necked people: Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them: and I will make of thee a great nation" (Exodus 32:7–10).

In other words, to all appearances the Lord was willing to destroy his people on account of this grave transgression and start over with Moses as he had done with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is in that context that Moses' savior role—not just of leading the people out of Egypt and mediating God's covenant with them—now emerges as he intercedes on their behalf so that the Lord might spare them alive:

"And Moses besought the Lord his God, and said, Lord, why doth thy wrath wax hot against thy people, which thou hast brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power, and with a

mighty hand? Wherefore should the Egyptians speak, and say, For mischief did he bring them out, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth? Turn from thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against thy people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, thy servants, to whom thou swarest by thine own self, and saidst unto them, I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have spoken of will I give unto your seed, and they shall inherit it forever. And the Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people” (Exodus 32:11–14);

“And it came to pass on the morrow, that Moses said unto the people, Ye have sinned a great sin: and now I will go up unto the Lord; peradventure I shall make an atonement for your sin. And Moses returned unto the Lord, and said, Oh, this people have sinned a great sin, and have made them gods of gold. Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written” (Exodus 32:30–32).

Behind Moses’ influence with God, therefore, was his commitment to pay any price for his people’s deliverance. His loyalty to God expressed itself in his loyalty toward God’s people. He passes up the Lord’s offer to make of *him* “a great nation” instead of them—the same blessing God had bestowed on Israel’s ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Instead, he offers to have his name blotted out of the Book of Life. In other words, he is willing to perish and sacrifice all the spiritual advancement he had made in life for the sake of saving the people. When Moses passes this test of serving as a savior to his people, the Lord relents and refrains from slaying them.

Additionally, the Lord chooses the Levites to fulfill the “savior” role of Israel’s firstborn sons when they rally to his side at Israel’s worship of the Golden Calf (Exodus 32:26–29). Their lives become “consecrated” to God in place of the firstborn sons of the people in order to “make atonement” for Israel when performing the service of the Tabernacle (Numbers 3:5–13; 8:5–19). Still, God didn’t intend the Levites’ office to be limited to them. It was an interim arrangement until Israel—as a nation—learned to live up to its divine calling as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6).

In summing up, in the Sinai wilderness we thus observe four spiritual categories of people: (1) the congregation of Israel; (2) priests and Levites; (3) the seventy elders; and (4) Moses. These coincide with four ascending spiritual categories of persons on Isaiah’s spiritual ladder—Jacob/Israel, Zion/Jerusalem, God’s sons and daughters, and seraphs. They also match four levels of purity and sanctity represented by the outer, middle, and inner courts of the Tabernacle that led to the Holy of Holies.

Architectural models of a ladder to heaven, such as the Tabernacle in the wilderness or temple in Jerusalem, illustrate the idea of spiritual ascent into God’s presence. Three courts marked the boundaries within which one could enter: the people of Israel, the outer court; Levites, the inner court; and priests, the sanctuary. In the “Holy of Holies,” which housed the Ark of the Covenant, the Lord spoke with Moses face to face in the flesh, attesting to his stature of seraph on Isaiah’s spiritual ladder. Cherubim—the equivalent of seraphim—encompassed the Lord’s throne. Each of us, too, currently fits somewhere, or will fit somewhere, within this spiritual hierarchy.