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Punishing Chaos: the Problem of Responsibility in *Exodus* 32

I want to talk about Moses’ maturity. I’m not going to argue that he has it—that would be too time consuming. Instead, let us start from the assumption that Moses gains a new level of maturity as the result of the events of *Exodus* 32, aka, as a result of the incident of the Golden Calf. This is hardly a stretch; after the incident, he reaches such a level of godliness he must hide his face from his fellows.

So, what characterizes this new maturity? I see two notable features. First of all, Moses insists on holding people accountable for their choices. Secondly, Moses sees that the state of the people is not the result of evil choices by moral agents at all, but is instead a sort of amoral chaos. But, if I am right that these are the two features of Moses’s maturity, then maturity might be a bit troubling. After all, if a person has no agency, how can he be justly held accountable for his actions?

Enforcing Responsibility

To see what constitutes maturity with full clarity, we should seek out some sort of immaturity for contrast. Eden will be helpful, in this regard; so let us start by quickly returning there.

In Eden, the fall is triggered by a concession to appetite, but of a strange kind. The serpent promises that upon eating the forbidden fruit, “your eyes will be opened and you will become as gods knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:6). As it will be in the incident of the Golden Calf, sensuality (represented by the fruit) and desire for godliness are conflated.

After violating God’s will, Adam and Eve find themselves incapable of taking responsibility for what they have done. Instead, we are given the following scene:

“the human and his woman hid from the Lord God in the midst of the trees of the garden. And the Lord God called to the human and said to him, ‘Where are you?’ And he said, ‘I heard Your sound in the garden and I was afraid, for I was naked, and I hid.’ And He said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? From the tree I commanded you not to eat have you eaten?’ And the human said, ‘The woman whom you gave by me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate.’ And the Lord God said to the woman, ‘What is this you have done?’ And the woman said, ‘The serpent beguiled me and I ate.’” (Gen 3:8-24).

Adam evades God and then passes blame off on Eve. In fact, everyone involved passes blame off to another. Everyone blames the creature just below him (in this account, Eve appears to be lower in the order of created things than Adam) for what has happened. The chain of blame ends with the serpent; but maybe, if the serpent had been given a second chance to speak, it would have used the opportunity to blame a bug or a snail.

As they did in Eden, on Sinai, the people fall prey to the dual temptation of sensual delight and easy divinity; also as in Eden, this temptation causes them to violate the divine will. Also like in Eden, humanity grapples with the question of who is at fault for what they have done. But it is here where we see the difference between the immaturity of Adam and Eve and the maturity of Moses. Violently, decisively, and mercilessly, Moses forces the Israelites to take responsibility for their actions.

The people are held accountable: “he took the calf that they had made and burned it in fire and ground it fine and scattered it over the water and made the Israelites drink it” (Exo 32:30). As Professor Howland expressed it so well: Moses makes the people literally *eat their words*.

Next comes Aaron. Aaron tries to shrug off blame, claiming he was powerless in the whole affair and that the people were evil. Like Adam and Eve did, Aaron tries to blame the people below him. But Moses is having none of this, and he asks, accusatorily: “what did this people do to you that you should have brought upon it great offense?” (Exo 32:21). Moses implies that Aaron has more responsibility than the people.

Finally, Moses himself takes on responsibility. He tells his fellows that “thus said the Lord God of Israel, ‘Put every man his sword on his thigh, and cross over and back from gate to gate in the camp, and each man kill his brother and each man his fellow and each man his kin.’” (Exo 32: 27-28). Of course, God said no such thing, and Moses knows it. The recourse to God might appear to pass responsibility for this brutal command onto God, not Moses; however, I suspect its real function is the exact opposite. His conversation with God at the end of 32 indicates that Moses is hardly ashamed of what he has done.

Instead, by putting his own command into the mouth of God, Moses makes it clear to himself and to the readers that *he alone* is source of this terrible order. His will, not God’s, provides the authority for the terrible justice that is to follow.

Whereas Adam and Eve hid, Moses seeks God out. Whereas Adam claimed he could not possibly be at fault, Moses volunteers himself for punishment. God has to force Adam and Eve to take responsibility for what they are done, but Moses enforces responsibility without recourse to the divine. Moses deliberately chooses to make Aaron and the people be held accountable himself, substituting divine wrath for his own human wrath.

Moses’s New Justice

The first defining feature of Moses’ maturity is an insistence on assigning responsibility; awkwardly, the second feature seems to be the exact opposite. To reach his new state of maturity Moses has to let go of his simpler notions of what constitutes responsibility for injustice.

To see this side of Moses’s maturity, we need to use a different model of immaturity as a foil. Eden won’t do; instead, let us turn to Moses’s youth as recounted in *Exodus* 2. The following scene was our introduction to Moses:

“And he saw an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man of his brothers. And he turned this way and that and struck down the Egyptian and buried him in the sand. And he went out the next day, and, look, two Hebrew men were brawling, and he said to the one in the wrong, ‘Why should you strike your fellow?” (Exo 2:11-14).

This anecdote illustrates both the most important features of Moses’s pre-calf personality. Let us separate it into two smaller episodes: incident one, the striking down of the Egyptian beating the Hebrew, and incident two, the breaking up of the fight between the two Hebrew men.

It will be useful for us to treat the second incident first. Here Moses, demonstrating his irrepressible curiosity, wants to know *why* a man would strike his fellow. He does not only want to correct injustice, he wants a rational explanation for why this unjust and irrational thing is happening. In fact, Moses’s constant demanding “why” has got to be the most salient feature of his personality. When he sees the burning bush, he demands why: let me, pray, turn aside that I may see this great sight, why the bush does not burn up” (Exo 3:3-4).

In the other introductory incident (in which Moses kills a master beating a slave) Moses acts as ferocious agent of justice. I would argue that most of Moses’s independent political actions, prior to the incident of the calf, are performed this spirit. (By the perhaps awkward phrase “independent political action,” I mean all the things Moses does in his capacity as a leader that are *not* directly ordered by God. I want to focus on the political acts Moses does on his own account, and based on his own prerogative, not God’s. These acts serve as windows into Moses’s beliefs regarding good and evil.)

Prior to the incident of the calf, we aren’t given a large sample of independent actions by Moses. Most of Moses’s political actions were just him being God’s messenger or struggling to get the Israelites to conform to God’s plan. But we are given some idea of what Moses does on his own initiative in *Exodus* 18.

*Exodus* 18 focuses on Moses as a judge. In it, Jethro sees how “Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood over Moses from the morning till the evening” (Exo 18: 13). Moses reveals to Jethro that “when they have some matter, it comes to me and I judge between a man and his fellow and I make known God’s statutes and His teachings” (Exo 18:15-16). Jethro is astonished by the fact that Moses spends all day judging matters of right and wrong--it simply takes up too much time. It is in this anecdote where we get our clearest picture of Moses as a leader in a day-to-day capacity, and, in this picture, Moses is all about justice. Moses is so insistent on personally judging right and wrong that it detracts from his other leadership duties. Moses was not ordered to take on the role of judge by God. The fact that he takes on this role by his own initiative (and that he spends so much time doing it) demonstrates the desire to enact justice is still integral to his personality.

So these are the two features of pre-calf Moses: the incessant need to know why and an urge to do justice. Let us see what happens to these two traits during the incident of the Golden Calf. First, we should look to see if Moses demonstrates his characteristic curiosity.

Like in *Exodus* 2, in 32, Israelites are acting harmfully, unjustly, irrationally. But in 32, Moses does not stop them and demand why they are doing what they are doing. In fact, he does the opposite: even though rational explanations for the Golden Calf incident are offered to him, Moses rejects them.

The first proposed “why” comes from Joshua. Joshua, upon hearing cries, asks if what he hears is war. Moses responds, grimly, saying: “not the sound of crying out in triumph, and not the sound of crying out in defeat. A sound of crying out I hear” (Exo 32:18). As Alter explains it: “Moses’s response to Joshua, then, is that he hears an indiscriminate uproar” (497). Moses rejects the morally simple explanation, in favor of observing that the cries have no reason: they are just cries.

The second explanation comes from Aaron. Aaron gives Moses a two-pronged explanation:

“you yourself know that this people is in an evil way. And they said to me, ‘Make us gods that will go before us, for this man Moses who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him.’ And I said to them, ‘Whoever has gold, take it off.’ And they gave it to me, and I flung it into the fire, and out came this calf.” (Exo 32:22-26).

The first part of Aaron’s explanation can be summarized as follows: the people were evil, and they forced Aaron to do it. Of course, this first aspect has quite a bit of truth to it: the opening of 32, and Moses’s feeble attempts to reconcile the Calf with God, suggest that Aaron was in a tight spot. It is true that Aaron does not seem to have intended to do evil in any way. On the other hand, second part is entirely fictional. Aaron claims: I don’t know how it happened, there was nothing I could have done – all I did was, innocently, fling the gold into the fire!

When Moses considers the situation, he does not see an evil people or a blameless Aaron: “Moses saw the people, that it was let loose, for Aaron had let them loose as a shameful thing to their adversaries” (Exo 32:26).

In lieu of being evil, the people had been “let loose.” One wonders if the people would even be capable of being evil; they seem to have no moral agency at all. Moses surveys them and sees not evil choices, but unleashed passions. Throughout the episode of the calf, the people are described more like a walking, talking, fornicating mass of pure chaos than agents that could be held responsible for their actions. They are never described individually, only as a single amorphous agent: “the people.” The narrator, when describing what Moses sees before him, seems to strip their revelry of any moral status whatsoever. Their cries are not of victory or defeat, just pandemonium, and they are “let loose”—they are more formless than they are evil. One could say that their activity is amoral more than it is immoral.

On the other hand, Moses does consider Aaron responsible—but his responsibility looks very different from the wickedness Moses presumably attributed to the slave master in Exodus 2. It’s strange: the people do more unjust things (at least, one can say that they violate God’s will more thoroughly and more enthusiastically) than Aaron does, but they are less responsible. On the other hand, Aaron committed less injustice, but is more morally responsible. And, when Moses considers Aaron’s culpability, it appears to come not from any evil actions Aaron has done, but rather for allowing the Israelites to do something *shameful*. They have sunk below their correct position in the world, and Aaron has allowed it. Aaron is at fault for his weakness, not his ill intent.

By informing us that Moses considers Aaron, and not the people, to be morally accountable, the text immediately refutes both parts Aaron’s explanation. We see that Moses has not bought the “why” that Aaron presents to him.

In this way, Moses comprehensively rejects two narratives that might have satisfied the Moses of *Exodus* 2. Both *war* and *evil* are digestible, perfectly coherent explanations, in which one party is in the right and one party is in the wrong. Instead, Moses sees in the mess before him not moral agents acting wickedly, *but* *a lack of moral agency altogether*. The only person Moses considers morally responsible is Aaron, but it is not for a bad or evil use of his moral agency, but for a certain moral weakness.

One sees the departure from the simple moral reasoning Moses displayed in *Exodus* 2. The question Moses posed to the brawler (“why should you strike your fellow?”) looks nearly absurd. In posing this question, Moses implies the brawler is striking his fellow because of a reason. He suggests that the brawler has made a choice. But on Sinai, there is no rational reason why the people did what they did--in fact, there could not be. The people are so enslaved to their passions that they are not capable of moral freedom. They are not capable of having reasons. Any answer to Moses’s original question—why—could only serve to mask the truth: injustice, evil, and wildness are not always produced by choices by moral agents. Instead, they are the amoral and natural outcome of what happens when human beings give in to their passions and cease to be moral agents at all.

This brings us to Moses’s other role: the enactor of justice. I have argued that Moses does not see the incident of the calf as the result of evil so much as moral weakness. But despite his appreciation of the situation, in all its moral complexity, *Moses’s wrath flares*.

To see the form this wrath takes, let us return to a line we have already quoted: “Moses saw the people, that it was let loose, for Aaron had let them loose” (32:26). This sentence suggests that Moses sees Aaron as more morally responsible than the people, who simply have been “let loose.” And yet, despite this assessment of responsibility, *Moses punishes the people but not Aaron*. His wrath is primarily directed towards that very thing that seems to have no agency: the people. The people must drink the ground up calf, and then three thousand of them are slaughtered. Aaron, on the other hand, will continue to be revered as a priest.

Therefore, it seems that Moses’s wrath, and his punishments, aim not at enacting justice at all. He might be enraged, but he is not indignant. Were he indignant, his wrath surely would have been directed at what he perceived as the source of injustice.

The tension between the first and second aspects of Moses’ maturity should be clear by now. Politically, Moses’s maturity is defined by an emphasis on responsibility; simultaneously, on a moral level*, he does not consider the people he is forcing to take responsibility to be capable of moral responsibility*. He is violently punishing what is, in fact, the moral equivalent of the primordial chaos of 1.1.

Clearly, Moses, while still an enactor of justice, is no longer simply interested in righting wrongs. By punishing people who are not morally responsible, and sparing an individual who is responsible, one might even be able to claim that Moses’s justice was at least partially *unjust*. If this is moral maturity, well, then, yikes.

Moses’s new, mature role—orderer of chaos, not righter of wrongs—is underscored by Moses’s first independent political act after the incident of the Golden Calf. As before, when we discussed 18, we will define “independent political act” as a political act Moses does on his own accord, without being directed by God.

This newest independent act is snuck, covertly, into the beginning of 35. This chapter begins in the following way: “And Moses assembled the community of Israelites and said to them, ‘These are the things that the Lord has charged to do: Six days shall tasks be done and on the seventh day there shall be holiness for you, an absolute Sabbath for the Lord. Whosoever does a task on it shall be put to death.” All of this is standard, but Moses goes on to add a new prohibition: “you shall not kindle a fire in all your dwelling places on the Sabbath day” (Exo 35:1-3).

In the previous chapter, God reiterated what should be done on the Sabbath. He said, “six days you shall work and on the seventh day you shall cease.” (Exo 34:21). But there is nothing said about fire, and certainly nothing said about a harsh death penalty for lighting one. Although Moses implies all these commands are God’s will, the prohibition against fire seems to be his own invention.

Let us examine the thing being prohibited. I am not quite sure what the significance of fire is, but I do know that it has some. Professor Howland emphasized the symbolic importance of gold in the story of the golden calf. But, I wonder if the role of fire is not at least *as*—if not *more*—thematically important in this story. The calf came from fire, and Moses uses fire to destroy it. In 32, when the calf is described by God, it is described as a “molten calf” in both 32:4 and 32:8. When God seeks to prohibit future incidents like these, he orders that “no molten gods shall you make for yourself” (Exo 34:17-18). Not *golden* gods, *molten* gods. It is Moses who refers to the god as golden (see: Exo 32:31) – to my knowledge, God always refers to the calf as molten. (Wrath is also a big part of this story. Wrath always seems to *flare*, like fire. I don’t know if the fiery implications of “wrath” also hold up in the original Hebrew, though—but if do, it would support my point quite nicely.)

What does fire symbolize? On the one hand, it is creative: the calf came from the fire, and, if one goes all the way back to babel, we will recall that the people “bake[d] bricks and burn[ed] them hard” (Gen 11:3) in order to build their colossus. It is also destructive. To unmake the calf, Moses “took the calf that they had made and burned it in fire and ground it fine” (Exo 32:20)—God also uses fire to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. In either direction, it is decidedly un- or anti-natural, either destroying something already in creation, or creating something that does not have a natural basis.

(There is one major exception: “and the Lord’s messenger appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of the bush, and he saw, and look, the bush was burning with fire and the bush was not consumed” (Exo 3:2-3). Moses looks, wanting to “see this great sight, why the bush does not burn up” (Exo 3:3) Here, fire—perhaps representing power, willfulness, or a sort of anti-natural force—is seen co-existing harmoniously with nature. Could the burning bush, this strange agent of the divine, promise a way of reconciling nature with all that fire represents?)

All this is interesting speculation, but it almost doesn’t matter. What is most important in understanding the nature of this new prohibition is seeing what fire is not. It is not unjust. Fire, in itself, is a tool; it is *completely morally ambiguous*. In this incident alone, fire serves as both the source of injustice (how the calf was made) and an instrument of justice (how the calf was destroyed).

Moses’s first independent political act is to prohibit this ambiguous thing with death. As when he punished the people, Moses is punishing something, but not because he thinks it is unjust. This piece of evidence hammers home what we already knew: Moses, the enactor of justice we met in 2 and 18, is gone. Instead, Moses focuses on *containing* human impulses and passions, so as to keep the human heart strong enough to make moral choices.

It is no longer about rewarding good choices and punishing evil ones; rather, it is about preserving the human ability to have a moral status—be it good or evil—in the first place.