THE COVENANT RITUAL IN EXODUS XXIV 3-8

by

E. W. NICHOLSON

Oxford

I

It is widely agreed that Exod. xxiv 1-11, which brings the Sinai pericope to its conclusion, comprises two originally separate traditions, the one contained in vv. 1-2, 9-11 and the other in vv. 3-8. My main concern here is with the latter of these two passages, though I shall turn briefly to the former at a later stage in this article. Several problems arise in the study of vv. 3-8: first, its unity and the Pentateuchal source or sources to which it belongs; secondly, its antiquity; and thirdly, the meaning of the ritual it describes.

With regard to the first of these, opinion has been divided. The unity of the passage (with the possible exception of “and all the judgements” in v.3aβ) is accepted by, for example, Driver, Eissfeldt, and Beyerlin, who ascribe it to E 1), by S. Mowinckel, who assigns it to his Jv source 2), and by M. Noth who associates it with the Book of the Covenant 3). More recently, D. J. McCarthy too has defended its unity, though he regards it as deriving from a source independent of the main Pentateuchal sources whilst reflecting the same tradition represented by them (especially E) 4). Others (for example, Kraetzschmar, Dillmann, Holzinger, Baentsch, Beer, Hyatt) regard vv. 3aβ, 4aa (“And Moses wrote all the words of the Lord”) and 7 as redactional, without agreeing to which redactor they are to be attributed,


and ascribe the remaining material to E 5). None of these commentators sever the connection between the sacrificial offerings described in 4αβ-6 and the ritual described in v. 8 6). Both Perlitt and Zenger, however, have severed this connection, arguing that an earlier tradition of sacrificial offering (4αβ-6 [Perlitt] and 4αβ-5 [Zenger]) has subsequently been reinterpreted by a Deuteronomic redactor as a covenant rite 7). I shall return to this later.

At an earlier stage in Old Testament study when many leading scholars argued, following Wellhausen, that the notion of a covenant between God and Israel was a late development, any suggestion that this passage preserves an ancient tradition of the making of such a covenant was rejected. This view was succinctly stated by, for example, Kraetzschmar in his well-known monograph published in 1896 (p. 84). He assigned the passage, with the exception of 3αβ, 4αξ, 7 which he regarded as insertions by a Deuteronomic redactor, to a late E stratum (E3) which he dated circa 700 B.C. He argued that the lateness of the scene described is indicated by the fact that Yahweh himself does not participate in the ritual in person; a covenant mediator has become necessary. This contrasts with the covenant ceremony in Gen. xv in which Yahweh is described as participating directly. Accordingly, Exod. xxiv 3 ff. represents a much less anthropomorphic concept and is therefore to be assigned to a relatively late period in the development of Israelite religion.

Today, however, there is widespread agreement that this passage embodies an ancient tradition. Decisive in this respect, as far as most modern commentators are concerned, was an article by C. Steuernagel published just a few years after Kraetzschmar’s work 8). Against the latter Steuernagel argued that in describing “the young men of Israel” (v. 5) as having offered the sacrifices here mentioned this


6) Dillmann and Holzinger regard all or part of v. 8b as secondary.
