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Song and Dance: The World of Carnival in the Exodus Story of the Golden Calf

Charles M. Rix

As readers, we experience a sudden jolt as the rowdy story of the golden calf in Exodus 32 suddenly interrupts an orderly narrative detailing the pattern for building the tabernacle (Exodus 25–40). Without warning, we trip into a world of inverted characterizations. The people, who elsewhere in Exodus behave with automated precision, are *now* animated and sing and dance around a calf. Aaron, who in the tabernacle sections of Exodus is set apart from the people as the priest with sacred vestments and rites of ordination, *now* quickly bends to the will of the people as he fashions a calf idol. Moses, who elsewhere in Exodus is renowned for speaking the law, *now* smashes the divinely scripted tablets of law. YHWH, who earlier in Exodus wants to take the people as treasured possessions, *now* threatens to disown them and turn Moses into a great nation. And last but not least, the Israelite's gold intended for making items for the tabernacle, *now* is appropriated to make a golden idol. What is a topsy-turvy story like this doing in the midst of pristine Tabernacle instructions?¹

The interpretive history of the golden calf story has privileged the Exodus proscriptions of idolatry as the optic through which to interpret the story. Traditionally, the story's counterpart in Deuteronomy, biblical references to the event and artistic interpretations² have conspired to showcase the Exodus account of the golden calf as the poster child for the sin of idolatry. Likewise, historical critics have called our attention to the parallel between Aaron's golden calf and Jeroboam's idolatrous cult of the calves established at Bethel and Dan (I Kings 12.26–33). Others suggest the calf story as originally pro-Aaronide in origin but one that in its present canonical form may reflect a post-exilic struggle for the priesthood: the faithful priests are represented by the Levites, while the unfaithful class of priests are associated with Aaron. Theological interpretations follow suit by suggesting Exodus 32–34 as a sequence of events illustrating the theme of sin and redemption: no matter how unfaithful the people may become, YHWH will be “slow to anger” and “abounding in steadfast love” and eventually find a means of redeeming the people.

Yet, for whatever merits accrue to a “sin and redemption” reading of the story, the presence of communal singing, dancing, laughing, and eating during a time when a community is dislocated in a wilderness mediates against a wholly negative interpretation. Such elements of collective joy cohere with positive social aspects of *carnival*, the social enactment of a popular critique of “official” structures. The carnivalesque world is by nature a *monde à l'envers* where beggars mix with kings and hierarchical structures are temporarily suspended or turned upside down. Sociologists, historians, literary critics, and artists inform us that the strength of the social bonding created through the elements of carnival—singing, dancing, eating, and laughing—is stronger than those achieved through a group's strict adherence to codes of rules and regulations.³ Such a social bonding is all the more potent and

1. The approach to Exodus 32 presented in this article was the subject of my dissertation. Charles M. Rix, “Carnivalizing Sinai: A Bakhtinian Reading of Exodus 32” (PhD dissertation, Drew University, 2010). Expanded versions of this article have been presented at the national and international meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature, 2011 and 2012 respectively.

2. Consider major artistic works on the story of the golden calf such as Emile Nolde's painting *Dance Around the Golden Calf* (1910) and Arnold Schoenberg's opera *Moses und Aron*.

3. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006). For other perspectives on the relationship between singing, dancing, festive forms, and community trauma, see Daniel J. Levitin, *The World in Six Songs: How the Musical Brain Created Human Nature* (New York: Dutton Press, 2008), 83–109.

necessary when a community is confronted with traumatic events that threaten the community's cohesion or even possible loss of life.⁴ In the story world of the calf, the impulse triggering the chain of events leading up to the festival around the golden calf coheres with that of communal trauma: dislocation in an inhospitable wilderness, the presence of enemies, the perceived loss of a leader and deity and the need for direction to get out of the dangerous situation.⁵ As a means of addressing their social situation, the people respond in a carnival-like fashion. But more importantly, at the literary level, the placement of a freewheeling carnival story in the midst of the exacting world of tabernacle texts suggests a critique of an official posture that highly regulates the way in which the rank and file will meet with the divine. Might the golden calf story be acting as a literary release valve in the midst of the airless world of tabernacle instructions? If so, reclaiming the world of carnival in the literary formulation of the story of the golden calf opens new insights to the way the story may function in the overall scheme of Exodus.

Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's exploration of carnival theory remarks that the impulse to enact carnival is central to the human condition across all time and culture.⁶ A group may socially enact carnival or, in a literary setting, a writer (or writers) may juxtapose texts to suggest a carnival spirit in play. Either way, carnival creates a space wherein an oppressed or traumatized community reclaims suppressed voices as it searches to explore the many facets of its identity. Laughter, which is inseparable from social and/or literary enactment of carnival, brings down hierarchical constructions seeking to control the community. In his landmark theory of laughter, Henri Bergson observes that the ceremonial and formal side of life always includes a latent comic element waiting for an opportunity to burst into view.⁷ As the story world of the calf disrupts the more formal and ceremonial side of the tabernacle narratives with the people rising up to sing, dance and laugh (Exod 32.6), might we imagine it as the latent comic embedded in the ominous and serious nature of tabernacle meetings? If so, how and what is the value of such an observation?

By its nature, polyphony—the presence of two or more voices moving in counterpoint (or in opposition to each other)—is inherent to the enactment of carnival. In its native musical setting, polyphony is that which gives music its vitality.⁸ As Bakhtin theorizes, the presence of polyphony in literature may be observed in the interplay between stories sharing similar themes and personalities but where the personalities behave in opposing ways. The thematic material gains vitality as personalities collide in dialogue with each other. Thus, the polyphonic nature of a carnivalized story world presents not solutions to a problem but depth of insight into the theme under consideration how will the people meet and interact with YHWH? The reader is pushed to engage multiple perspectives and therefore consider a variety of possible outcomes.

While the redactors of the book of Exodus are not self-consciously polyphonic authors, the interplay between the voice of the story world of the calf and the voice of the surrounding tabernacle texts creates a carnivalized literary space as two distinct bodies of writing share a common theme but with personalities that move in counterpoint. The theme of how human beings will live in relationship to their deity is thus deepened by this interplay of personalities.

The People

Throughout Exodus 25–31 and 35–40, the people are portrayed as robotic. They do not speak, and are asked to bring freewill offerings of precious metals and materials to build the tabernacle (Exod 25.1–9) according to a pattern.

4. Community trauma is a blow to the basic fabric of social life that damages the connections people have in establishing a basic sense of communality. There is a gradual realization that the community no longer provides the basic support structure for itself. For further reading on aspects of communal trauma, see Kai Erikson, "Notes on Trauma and Community" in *Trauma Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

5. For readings that explore Exodus 32 as a text and address issues of community, trauma and identity formation, see Emil Fackenheim, *Reading the Jewish Bible after the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 38–48.

6. Bakhtin's theory of carnival is worked out in his larger works, most notably Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981) and Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. H. Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

7. Henri Bergson, "Laughter," in *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), 89.

8. Walter Piston, *Counterpoint* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1982), 9–10. Further discussion of polyphony and counterpoint can be found in a number of musical analysis works such as Alfred Brendel, *Music Sounded Out* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990).

Prohibitions against misappropriating oils or food meant for the tabernacle are enjoined upon them. Exodus 31.15 cites a penalty of death for violating the Sabbath. Little else is imagined for the people in terms of their needs, feelings or state of well-being. However, as soon as the story of the calf begins, the people are not obedient but self-determined and playful as they bond together in the wilderness through singing, dancing and laughing. They run wild (Exod 32.19) and kill their own kin (Exod 32.28–29). Yet, in Exodus 35, the people suddenly return to being compliant and bring freewill offerings for building the tabernacle—so much they have to be told to stop!

Aaron

According to the Exodus 28–29, Aaron is an automaton. He is compliant, never speaks and is chosen to serve YHWH as a priest. Exodus 28–29 details Aaron's elaborate vestments that will ensure he appears decorous and dignified in his service. But as he comes under the circus tent of the calf story, Aaron is still a priest but suddenly a very different kind. In the wake of the people's trauma, Aaron responds religiously but creatively. In making the calf, he welds together a host of divergent and irreconcilable ideas together—addressing the people's need for a tangible divine presence and providing for communal relief from their sense of abandonment while still being attentive to YHWH's aversion to "other gods." Aaron turns the people's mourning into dancing by proclaiming the festival is for YHWH.

Moses

In the legal sections of Exodus, the mission of Moses is mono-voiced to receive and disseminate YHWH's laws. Throughout Exodus 25–31 and 35–40, Moses is flawlessly obedient. Exodus 32 introduces a counterpointed view of Moses as he becomes violent, erratic and unstable: one minute he pleads with YHWH to have mercy on the people (Exod 32.10–13) and the next minute he orders the execution of those not on the side of YHWH (Exod 32.25–29). Unlike the Moses who dutifully receives the laws and passes them on to the people, the Moses in this story world is prone to fits of anger and violence. This Moses smashes the sacred tablets of law and the calf idol, then makes the people drink of its remains (Exod 32.20). His subsequent conversations with YHWH are confusing as both talk past each other (Exod 33.12–23). As if Moses were not enigmatic enough, his face shines after being with YHWH a second time on the mountain to rewrite the tablets (Exod 34.30–35), suggesting that he is something "not quite human."

YHWH

Throughout the entire last half of Exodus, the character of YHWH is anything but finalized as the tabernacle and story world tangle with each other. At the end of Exodus, YHWH's glory fills the tabernacle. However, in the voice of the story, YHWH looms dark and large over the people. He is quick to become angry at the people's actions, he wants to be left alone to let his anger burn and he wants to destroy the very people he has delivered (Exod 32.7–10). He shows no signs of forgiveness or forbearance when confronted with the people's idol-making activity. Even though YHWH seems dissuaded from wiping out the people through Moses' intercession (Exod 32.14), YHWH still sends a plague on the people as punishment for the calf that Aaron made (Exod 32.35). Opposite to YHWH's self-description in Exodus 34.6–7, YHWH in the world of the calf is quick to anger, faithless to the people, unwilling to forgive and ready to annihilate everyone.

How do these counterpointed characterizations across Exodus 25–40 enhance the understanding of the function and placement of the story of the golden calf? In reading polyphonically across Exodus 25–40, we *experience* an unfinalized quality of the human-divine relationship in "lived experience" (not merely untested covenantal theology or theory): legal stipulations for regulating human behavior clash with the nature of humanity. To the extent the tabernacle vision for the YHWH-human relationship envisions (and mandates) a strictly compliant people, priesthood, leadership and divinity, it falters. If the story of the golden calf must, in the end, finally genuflect to the dominant theology advanced by the precision of the tabernacle texts and the legal stipulations articulated elsewhere in the book of Exodus, the people will appear self-indulgent, Aaron derelict, and Moses and YHWH justified in their anger and violent behavior. However, acknowledging the presence of carnival and polyphony and allowing the counterpoint of fully viable unmerged voices to stand, Exodus 25–40 becomes a portrayal of an ongoing struggle to

negotiate the complexities of the human-divine covenantal relationship. The tabernacle passages maintain boundaries and separations between the people themselves as well as between the people and YHWH. YHWH wants a special people; however, the people “want what they want.” They “desire” proximity to their deity but resist boundaries, rules and regulations for the relationship. Neither YHWH, nor the people, live effortlessly within the boundaries of legal stipulations that YHWH is reported to have established. The conversation between stories of the way people act/react and legal stipulations for behavior portrays the ongoing tension between the systemized approach to the mediation of the YHWH-human relationship and the human vitality that resists control.

Thematically, the book Exodus describes the early stages of forming YHWH’s covenant people. The interplay between prescriptive legal texts and a playful story world—the inscribing then smashing of texts—creates a literary conversation about such a relationship. The counterpointed characterizations cohere with the ethos of carnival where dichotomies and reversals, enacted through singing, dancing and laughing, bring down a hierarchically constructed world in order to imagine, *albeit temporarily*, new and more liberating possibilities. Thus, through reading, as we experience the ways in which the highly structured and wildly popular visions of YHWH’s relationship with the chosen people throw the other off-balance, we realize that for every law there is a calf, and for every calf there is a law. Neither the highly structured view of the tabernacle nor the wild world of the calf *alone* holds the key to regulating the lived experience of the human-divine relationship. It is the ongoing “song and dance” between these two worlds moving together simultaneously in counterpoint that provides not only the relationship’s vitality but insight into its meaning as well. In the end, engaging the world of carnival across the last half of Exodus invites us to consider how we negotiate the complexities of divine writ and will in counterpoint to the proclivities of our humanity.

Suggestions for further reading

My study of Bakhtin’s literary theory of carnival has also included other readings illuminating comic structures in literature. In addition to recent biblical scholarship that has found fruitful application of Bakhtin’s literary ideas, enjoy these other writings that explore the potential for identifying comic elements in Hebrew Bible.

- Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Laughing with God* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008).
- Kenneth Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnavalesque, Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).
- Mary Douglas, “Jokes,” in *Implicit Meanings: Selected Essays in Anthropology* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
- Barbara Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship: An Introduction*, Semeia Studies 38 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000).
- Carol Newsom, “Bakhtin, the Bible and Dialogic Truth,” *Journal of Religion* 76 (1996) 290–306 and “The Book of Job as Polyphonic Text,” *JSOT* 97 (2002) 87–108.
- Ilana Pardes, *The Biography of Ancient Israel: National Narratives in the Bible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
- Yehuda T. Radday, “On Missing the Humour in the Bible: An Introduction,” in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990).
- J. William Whedbee, *The Bible and The Comic Vision* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

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