

## Chapter 17

### The Law of Moses, the Tabernacle, and the Mutiny of the Congregation

Moses was with the Israelitish host for forty years subsequent to the manifestation of the glory of Yahweh on the summit of Sinai in the presence of their assembled multitude. During those forty years, there were frequent occasions for the further exhibition of the visible hand of God—occasions calling for and requiring that further exhibition, without which, notwithstanding the stupendous display of power in Egypt and at Sinai, the purpose of God in the deliverance of Israel from Egypt must needs have fallen short of realisation. At the principal of these cases we will look, with a view to the discernment of their bearing and their significance even to this late generation when God is once more about to interpose for the salvation of His people, and the glory of His great Name.

First, and obviously, there was the communication of the law. The visible and audible demonstration on the summit of Sinai, already referred to, was only preliminary to this. The ten commandments orally addressed to Israel were not the law in its entirety, but the foundation merely, recited in the hearing of Israel that they might believe Moses in all the further communications to be made. After the ten commandments, came “all the commandments and the statutes, and the judgments” which Moses was commanded to teach all Israel, “that they might do them in the land which I give them to possess it” ([Deut. 5:31](#)). These are numerous and diverse; all put together, they constitute, with the ten commandments, “the law of Moses,” called by his name merely because he was the mouthpiece, and not at all because it was of his own devising. Moses never claimed and never received the credit of this law in Israel. It is only in these later hazy-minded generations that the enormous mistake is made of attributing to a man, who repudiates its authorship, a legislative code which a man could not have devised, and which is of manifestly divine production—manifest to the generations which witnessed its production, and manifest even in our day to any ordinary intelligence that will take the pains to look at it and candidly estimate all the facts of the case.

Certain general features strike at a glance, features extraordinary, and not intelligible except on the recognition of the divine authorship. Here is a code of laws complete at the start of a nation’s history—adapted to every national emergency, and providing for every need of individual and social life. How much in contrast is this with the case of other nations who have either no laws at all at their beginning, or only a few rude traditions which slowly crystallise into recognised laws, and even then, which have to be modified or changed, or added to or taken from, or repealed altogether, as circumstances change from year to year. Look at the British nation standing foremost (as is supposed) among all nations past and present, in political development; every year in every century, the wisest heads it can collect are brought to Westminster to labour for seven months out of every twelve, and sometimes longer, in the endless work of legislative cobbling. Then, this law of Moses has not been changed since the day it was handed by Moses to the priests of Israel for deposit in the Ark of the Covenant, to the

present day of Israel's world-wide dispersion. It remains unalterable. It is part of the law itself that it is not to be interfered with in any way. "Thou shalt not add thereto or diminish aught therefrom" ([Deut. 4:2](#)). Such a fact and such a command are alike inconceivable on the supposition of a human authorship. Had Moses wished such a thing, there could have been no probability of his wish being respected for ever, and there could have been no aim in enjoining it: for if Moses was such a wonderfully-gifted man as to have contrived this law by his own sagacity, he would also have been sagacious enough to know that his human prescience was unequal to the anticipation of all the future wants of Israel, and humane enough to recognise that he would be doing an unwise thing to tie the hands of coming generations, and prevent them from legislating for their own needs. But God, being the author of the law, none of these difficulties arise. And then the wonderful nature of the law is conclusive evidence of its miraculous origin. When the Psalmist exclaimed, "Oh how love I Thy law; it is my meditation all the day," he did not give utterance to a merely "pious" platitude: he expressed a feeling which has its foundations in deepest reason. It is some time before the mind arrives at an estimate of the excellence of the law of Moses. We cannot judge, in the first stage, of the needs of man, in his social relations, for lack of that discernment of what those needs are, which can only come with actual experience of the workings of things. After a while, we begin to see. Thomas Carlyle's works illustrate the impression made upon a penetrating mind of the first-class by the system of law in vogue among the nations of the current century. This impression is, without doubt, a correct one, though valueless in the absence of a remedy, which Thomas Carlyle confessed himself unable to apply, or even to suggest. When one has lived long enough, and had opportunity sufficient to see as he saw, one is then prepared to estimate the superlative and the unutterable excellence of the law of Moses, which, while tempering justice with mercy, prudence with liberality, and human occupation with the constant recognition of God, also provided the nation with institutions, which made poverty an impossibility (by insuring the distribution of wealth among all classes), and which secured the purity and joy of public and private life, by imposing the obligation of periodic seasons of travel and feasting, in connection with the most ennobling of national duties, and the glorification of the most magnificent ideals. It would be a grateful and profitable occupation to analyse some day, in chapters like these, the law of Moses in its practical details, with a view of exhibiting its excellence in these particulars. Some day, should the Lord's continuing absence allow of it, this may be done. Meanwhile, for present purposes, it is sufficient thus to allude to the manifest divinity of the only national law that ever came direct from God to man, and whose communication is the most signal feature of the many miraculous occurrences characterising the beginning of Israel's history in the earth.

The deliverance of the law,—statute by statute, precept by precept, commandment by commandment—took place by oral communication from Yahweh to Moses, face to face on Sinai's summit and in the seclusion of the sanctuary afterwards reared in the midst of the assembly. Moses wrote the law so communicated to him ([Deut. 31:9](#)). He did so by divine command ([Ex. 34:27](#); [Num. 33:2](#)); and it remains to this day unaltered as delivered—the most obvious and palpable form of the visible hand of God discernible in the whole range of human history. The law of Moses as it exists in our Bibles to-day, is, when rightly discerned, the visible hand of God itself. There could not have been such a thing if God had not wrought and spoken as recorded. If there were nothing else in the world, we should have an undeniable monument of God's interposition in the affairs of men. It is its own witness. Well might Jesus say, "If they believe not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead." The men who speak of invention, or fabrication, or forgery, or imposition, or even of

increment of ages, by accumulation of human traditions as accounting for the existence of the law of Moses, speak in ignorance either of the law of Moses, or of the habits and peculiarities of human faculty. They probably suffer, in addition, from incapacity to judge of either.

Passing from the law as a whole, we look at some details in which the hand of God was directly visible. Moses was directed to make a portable Tabernacle (capable of being taken to pieces) of gold-covered boards of shittim wood, standing on end and covered in with curtains and coverings. It was to be about 50 feet by 14 feet, and standing about 15 feet high—in round numbers. The interior was to be partitioned off at one end with a veil within which was to be placed an ark containing the law, and covered with gold and surmounted by a mercy-seat, having a cherubic figure with face inwards at either end. It is the use to which the ark and the mercy-seat were to be put (placed thus in a curtained interior) that calls for attention—not as to its spiritual significance (which is profound, but belonging to another branch of enquiry), but as to the literal manifestation of the divine presence of which it was the vehicle. This is the matter being considered in these chapters—the literal, actual, visible, “miraculous” exhibition of the visible hand of God: the allegorical significance of the tabernacle and its appurtenances may engage our attention another time. The manifestation of the divine presence is to be noted, both in connection with the tabernacle as a whole, and in connection with the mercy-seat as the kernel of the whole arrangement. The former manifestations have to do with the whole assembly of Israel, and the latter with Moses, in that face-to-face intercourse which he alone was privileged to hold with the Deity.

Taking the latter first, Moses when being directed as to the making of the mercy-seat, received this information concerning its practical utility: “*There I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy-seat from between the two cherubims which are upon the ark of the testimony, of all things which I will give thee in commandment unto the children of Israel*” ([Ex. 25:22](#)). This meeting and communing was of a very real sort. It was not a mere musing on the part of Moses, such as is popularly understood to constitute the act of communion. It was as real an intercourse as takes place between two men who meet in the same room. The form of the intercourse is thus plainly described: “When Moses was gone into the tabernacle of the congregation to speak with him, then HE HEARD THE VOICE OF ONE SPEAKING UNTO HIM FROM OFF THE MERCY-SEAT, that was upon the ark of testimony from between the two cherubims” ([Num. 7:89](#)).

In connection with the tabernacle as a whole, the intercourse with Moses took place in a form that was visible to the whole congregation. It is thus described: “When Moses went out unto the tabernacle, all the people rose up, and stood every man at his tent door, and looked after Moses until he was gone into the tabernacle. And it came to pass as Moses entered into the tabernacle, the *cloudy pillar descended and stood at the door of the tabernacle*, and the Lord talked with Moses. And all the people saw the cloudy pillar stand at the tabernacle door, and all the people rose up and worshipped every man in his tent door, and the Lord spake unto Moses face to face as a man speaketh unto his friend” ([Ex. 33:8–11](#)).

The visible intercourse through the medium of the tabernacle, played an important part at several vital turning points of the journey in the wilderness—so important as to have turned the scale against rebellion, which must otherwise have been successful. Take the effect produced by the report of the spies on their return from viewing the land at the beginning of the forty years ([Num. 14](#)). The spies reported the land good, but impregnable on account of the prowess of the inhabitants and the strength of their fortifications. “And all the people lifted up their voice and cried: and the people wept that night. And all the children of Israel murmured against Moses and

against Aaron. And the whole congregation said unto them, Would God that we had died in the land of Egypt! or would God we had died in this wilderness!... And they said to one another, Let us make a captain, and let us return unto Egypt.” Moses and Aaron prostrated themselves helplessly in the presence of the tumult. Joshua and Caleb—the minority of the twelve spies who were in favour of an immediate advance into the land on the strength of Yahweh’s promise—expostulated with the people. It was no use. The people were deaf to reason. They proposed to stone Joshua and Caleb, and were about to put their threat into execution when “THE GLORY OF THE LORD APPEARED IN THE TABERNACLE OF THE CONGREGATION, *before all the people of Israel.*” The brightness thus blazing forth upon them arrested their madness, and Yahweh angrily addressed Moses thus: “How long will this people provoke me? and how long will it be ere they believe Me for all the signs which I have showed among them? I will smite them with the pestilence, and disinherit them and will make of thee a greater nation and mightier than they.” Moses entreated Yahweh to turn from this purpose on account of the reproach which would arise against His name if Israel failed to enter the land. Yahweh listened to Moses so far as concerned the bulk of the congregation; but the spies who had disaffected the minds of the people were struck dead on the spot; Joshua and Caleb alone surviving of the twelve ([Num. 14:37, 38](#)). Even the whole congregation, though they escaped the summary vengeance they so richly merited, were not allowed to escape the consequences of their rebellion. The sentence against them was that “all those men which have seen My glory, and My miracles, which I did in Egypt, and in the wilderness,” and yet “have tempted Me now these ten times, and have not hearkened to My voice,” “in this wilderness they shall be consumed, and there they shall die” ([Num. 14:23–35](#)). They were directly addressed thus: “As ye have spoken in Mine ears (they had expressed a wish they had died in the wilderness, rather than have been called upon to invade the land of the Amorites), so will I do to you: your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness ... from twenty years old and upward, which have murmured against Me. Doubtless ye shall not come into the land concerning which I swear to make you dwell therein ... but your little ones, which ye said should be a prey, them will I bring in, and they shall know the land which ye have despised ... your children shall wander in the wilderness forty years, and bear your whoredoms, until your carcasses be wasted in the Wilderness.”

Supposing Moses and Aaron had not been thus supported against the mutiny of an unreasonable and discontented multitude, what could they have done? Must they not have succumbed? Must not the rebels have had their way, and relieved themselves of their unwelcome leaders by the easy process of stoning them? Must they not have succeeded, under other leadership, in getting back, as they proposed, by the nearest road, to the country of the Pharaohs, where they had all been born and bred—the desirable land of fish, leeks, melons, and garlic—where they felt more at home, even in the capacity of serfs, than in a strange land, in the quixotic enterprise of attempting the subjugation of seven well-armed and war-like nations by means of an untrained rabble? These questions touch the most miraculous part of the whole work of Israel’s transference from Egypt to the Holy Land. Bringing them out of Egypt was a stupendous feat of power, but to manage a restless and untrained multitude, under the irksome circumstances of wilderness life, was the most difficult part of the enterprise, especially when the prospect of entering the land was entirely withdrawn from them. That it was accomplished—that Israel, after forty years’ wanderings, emerged from the seclusion of the desert as a military nation, under Joshua—is the strongest proof there could be of the presence of a divine repressive control in their midst, keeping them down by strong acts of discipline, such as took place in connection with the report of the spies.

No more signal instance of the visible hand of God can be quoted than this sentence of a whole generation to death in the Wilderness within a period of forty years. The sentence was not only passed, but carried out. When the multitude was renumbered, at the end of the forty years, just before their entrance into the land, it was found that not a single man who had taken part in the rebellion, over twenty, was among the survivors. We read ([Num. 26:63–64](#)) that they were numbered by Moses, and Eleazar the priest (Aaron having died) in the plains of Moab, by Jordan, near Jericho; and “among them, *there was not a man of them whom Moses and Aaron the priest numbered, when they numbered the children of Israel, in the wilderness of Sinai.*” Moses, referring to this in his rehearsal on the plains of Moab, said that they had wandered in the wilderness “until all the generation of the men of war were wasted out from among the host, as the Lord swore unto them: for indeed *the hand of the Lord was against them to destroy them from among the host, until they were consumed*” ([Deut. 2:14–15](#)). There must have been a divine interposition to have entirely extirpated within 40 years a generation of men of whom many thousands must have been just over twenty at the commencement of that period. The natural chances would certainly have preserved some of them to an age beyond 60. The whole episode is self-manifestly divine. It is impossible to get away from the evidence of it: for if the objecting reader were even to fall back on the fond thought of unbelief, that the Mosaic account is mythical, he is confronted with the impossibility in that case of giving a reasonable account of the object in writing such a purposeless and nationally-insulting narrative, and of the fact that such a damaging history should have been preserved for ages by the very people on whom it throws so little credit.

The Tabernacle, as a medium of visible intercourse, comes prominently into view, also, in the case of Aaron’s and Miriam’s mutiny against Moses. That there should have been such a mutiny may appear strange; on second thought, it will appear perfectly natural, in view of the grounds of it. They said: “Hath Yahweh, indeed, spoken only by Moses? Hath he not spoken also by us?” ([Num. 12:2](#)). This is human nature to the life. Aaron and Miriam had become familiar with the occurrence of divine communication, and with divine works and wonders; they even stood within the elect and privileged circle that stood officially related to these wondrous events. Familiarity had blunted perception of the true relation of things, and feeling came into play. They did not receive the amount of personal respect and consideration shown to Moses. For this reason they were hurt, and began to argue for an equality that, in the nature of things, could not exist. Moses had not aimed at personal elevation; he had aimed strenuously at the accomplishment of the objects associated with the divine work in their midst. The deference shown to him sprang out of this earnest, faithful, self-abnegatory attitude, and the deference was a thing he did not value. Aaron and Miriam were not so earnestly bent on divine objects, and, consequently, could not command the deference which disinterestedness alone calls forth. They were more susceptible than Moses to considerations of personal importance, as the natural result of being less in love with wisdom, and its work and aims; consequently, the overshadowing influence wielded by Moses was disagreeable to them; it was hurtful to their dignity. The result was the use of argument where argument was altogether irrelevant. “Hath not the Lord spoken also by us?” Yes: But you are not what Moses is: Moses is “faithful in all Yahweh’s house” ([Num. 12:7](#)). You are only faintly faithful, and more faithful to yourselves than to Yahweh, and therefore less powerful than Moses to influence others or to please Yahweh. But argument with Aaron and Miriam would have been powerless: you cannot silence feeling by argument except where feeling is the offspring of reason, which it rarely is. Envy is unappeasable, and requires the harsh voice of authority. “Yahweh spake suddenly unto Moses and unto Aaron and unto

Miriam, *Come out ye three unto the tabernacle of the congregation;* and they three came out. And Yahweh came down in the pillar of the cloud and stood in the door of the tabernacle and called Aaron and Miriam. And he said, *“Hear now my words, If there be a prophet among you, I, the Lord, will make myself known unto him in a vision and will speak unto him in a dream. My servant Moses is not so WHO IS FAITHFUL IN ALL MINE HOUSE. To him will I speak mouth to mouth, even apparently and not in dark speeches; and the similitude of the Lord shall he behold. WHEREFORE, THEN, WERE YE NOT AFRAID TO SPEAK AGAINST MY SERVANT MOSES?”* And the anger of Yahweh was kindled against them, and he departed. And the cloud departed from off the tabernacle, and behold, Miriam became leprous, white as snow. In this way, mutiny was stifled in the very heart of Moses’ family circle; the divine voice speaking thus in its reproof was adequate to its stifling; but, had there been no such voice, what could have stopped it? Moses himself could not, and there was no man in the camp higher than Moses. If there had been no divine presence in the camp, it would not have been stopped, but would have smouldered until it had broken forth as a raging fire to the destruction of all concerned, and the dispersal of the whole congregation in anarchy, as has happened countless numbers of times in Gentile experience. But in that case there would have been no congregation to disperse, for had God not spoken by and worked with Moses, there would have been no departure of Israel from Egypt, and no assembly to guide through the wilderness, with deference shown or no deference.

Another interesting and instructive case, in which the tabernacle of the congregation was the pivot of operations, relates to the appointment of helpers to Moses. Moses felt the burden of the leadership greatly, when the people murmured all through the camp at having nothing but manna to eat. His appeal to Yahweh on the subject is most pathetic. “Wherefore hast Thou afflicted Thy servant? And wherefore have I not found favour in Thy sight, that Thou layest the burden of all this people upon me? Have I conceived all this people? Have I begotten them, that Thou shouldst say unto me, Carry them in thy bosom, as a nursing father beareth the sucking child, unto the land which Thou swarest unto their fathers?... I am not able to bear all this people alone, because it is too heavy for me. And if Thou deal thus with me, kill me, I pray Thee, out of hand, if I have found favour in Thy sight, and let me not see my wretchedness” ([Num. 11:11](#)). Nothing more forcibly illustrates the genuineness of the Mosaic narrative than this appeal. Had Moses been the personal originator and director of the Israelitish enterprise, such an appeal could not have come into existence either in fact or in writing, for Moses, in that case, knew there was none to appeal to, and the commonest of political expediency would have precluded him from incorporating in the national archives such an evidence of faintheartedness on his own part, and such a reflection upon the character of the nation, as a lamentation of his inability to cope with the discontent and mutiny of the people. It is impossible to conceive of such an incident either arising or being put on record, apart from the fact that God had devised the work and entrusted it to Moses, and that Moses was finding it more than human strength was equal to. Any theory that denies the divine initiation of the work, and the divine co-operation from the beginning throughout, creates many insoluble problems in the Mosaic history, of which this is one. But this denial appears the more and more impossible at every stage. The existence of the Mosaic narrative and the performance of the Mosaic work become more and more explicable on one principle only, namely, that the narrative is true in all its parts. They cannot rationally be accounted for on any other principle.

It is the response to the appeal of Moses that brings before us the further case of the supernatural use of the tabernacle, which it was introduced to illustrate. “Yahweh said unto Moses, Gather unto me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom thou knowest to be elders of the people and officers over them, and bring them unto the tabernacle of the congregation, that

they may stand there with thee. And I will come down and talk with thee there; and I will take of the spirit which is upon thee, and will put it upon them: and they shall bear the burden of the people with thee, that thou bear it not thyself alone.” We are informed that Moses complied with this direction. He went out to the people, selected the seventy men required, and set them round about the tabernacle; and that which Yahweh promised was then performed. “Yahweh came down in a cloud, and spake unto him, and took of the spirit that was upon him and gave it unto the seventy elders.” The reality of this spirit-transfer to the seventy elders was manifest in the effect produced upon them: “They prophesied and did not cease.” It was illustrated in a still more signal way in the case of two of the seventy who were absent, Eldad and Medad, who, for some reason not recorded, though nominated in writing, remained in the camp instead of repairing with the others to the tabernacle. Of these we are told that “they prophesied in the camp.” The spirit-operation performed upon the sixty-eight surrounding the tabernacle, affected these also in their retirement, because they were included in the intended effect. In this, we have a glimpse of the all-discriminative, penetrating, and limitless power of the Spirit of God, whose laws are inscrutable to mortal man. The laws of modern electrical discovery help to make them credible to our poor intellects—not that our understanding is assisted; for the electrical laws are as inscrutable as anything could be. But when men are familiar with facts, which would be incredible unless known, they are the more capable of believing other authenticated facts, though equally inscrutable.

This prophesying in the camp, on the part of these isolated units of the seventy, seems to have struck bystanders as an abnormal and improper thing. A young man ran out of the camp and reported the circumstances to Moses. Joshua, who was the companion and servant to Moses, suggested to Moses to forbid this prophesying on the part of Eldad and Medad. The response of Moses to this suggestion is worthy of the largest record and the profoundest reflection—it involves so unutterably much as to the character of Moses, and therefore the nature of the whole work of which he was the central figure! “*Enviest thou for my sake? Would God all Yahweh’s people were prophets, and that Yahweh would put His Spirit upon them.*”