

Betrayal and Terror: Exodus 32:25-26

I got into studying the Old Testament because of Exodus 32: the story of the Golden Calf. I read a mentor's paper on this text from her seminary days, and it opened my eyes to its theological profundity. I have selected a sermon by Miskotte—or really, a “sketch” preparatory to a sermon—on this biblical chapter because Miskotte draws out this profundity, and with some of his characteristic accents: first, his confidence that “all of the Bible is teaching,” including dark and even grotesque parts of the Bible; his daring theological attention to divine anthropomorphism; and his practice of re-telling the scriptural story in an “unbloody repetition.”¹ I also note that this is one of few sermons (or sermon-like productions!) by Miskotte presently available in English.

Teaching. Exodus 32:25-26 takes place after Aaron makes the Golden Calf and Moses intercedes for the people. It is also after Moses smashes the two tablets and melts the statue down. The verses in question are thus a kind of epilogue, a “denouement” in Miskotte's words.² They narrate Moses's call, “Who is on the LORD's side? Come to me!” (v. 26b), and then the Levites' response: they gather to Moses and slaughter three thousand of their fellow Israelites, brother, friend, and neighbor. The episode is grisly and disturbing, an awful moment of seeming human rivalry, the Levites over against Aaron, dropped into a touchstone text (cf. the footrace between the beloved disciple and Peter to the tomb in John 20).

And yet Miskotte does not demur. He accepts that “the Bible is,” in its entirety, “meant for proclamation, and it leads us as teaching.”³ His sketch pursues both these dimensions: re-telling the scriptural story as *kerygma*—such that “truth happens” as an existential event⁴—and as *didache* that more coolly lays out scripture in its formal and literary contour. Perhaps especially in view of the latter, educative task, Miskotte acknowledges the Levites' massacre as “a ghastly judgment of the sword.”⁵ But he connects this ghastliness to the chapter's larger theme of *horror*: the “horror vacui” [fear of the empty] experienced by the people in Moses's absence; the horror of Yhwh's threatened turning away from Israel; and lastly, the horror that the whole nation, except for the Levites, did not heed Moses's call.⁶

Anthropomorphism. Miskotte also situates the Levites' response within a rich literary network of divine action and human imitation. In wrath over the Golden Calf, Yhwh proposed to relinquish Israel and start afresh with Moses, but Moses “‘flattered’ and softened” the Lord.⁷ As one among other “priceless [divine] anthropomorphisms” in the chapter, the Lord *repented*.⁸

¹ Miskotte describes part three of *When the Gods are Silent*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1967) not “as sermon sketches [but] rather, nothing more than marginalia, glosses on the commentaries” (ibid., xvii; hereafter *WGS*). His claim that “all the Bible is teaching” comes from *Biblical ABCs: The Basics of Christian Resistance*, trans. Eleonora Hof and Collin Cornell (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2022), 12. “Unbloody repetition” can be found in *WGS*, 204.

² *WGS*, 386.

³ *Biblical ABCs*, 49-50.

⁴ *WGS*, 205.

⁵ *WGS*, 387.

⁶ *WGS*, 384.

⁷ *WGS*, 384.

⁸ *WGS*, 384.

Miskotte makes much of this verb, which identifies the same activity that the prophets sought to induce in Israel. Theologically, it epitomizes God's gracious freedom: "There is no fate to which the Lord is subject."⁹ Practically, it requires of humans in relationship with this God that they remain spiritually alert, flexible, motile.

Repentance is only one instance of divine and human reciprocity in the chapter. Instead of seeing Moses's own anger at the foot of the mountain as a separate, subsequent incident, Miskotte frames it as a human echo of Yhwh's own anger. Similarly, on the other side of Yhwh's resolution to remain with the people Israel, Miskotte identifies the Levites' response as a new and matching human initiative. Moses's rallying cry, "Who is for Yhwh?" seeks "a response of repentance which would answer God's repentance."¹⁰ The Levites stay abreast of the Lord's new dispensation; they are unfrozen, while the rest of the nation is "unmoved, inflexible."¹¹

Re-telling. The "great swelling and sustaining pedal point of the narrative" is, in Miskotte's words, the imperative to "abide with your Deliverer."¹² The sermonic challenge he issues is to keep pace with the living God. Such abiding is not a matter of *seeing with the eyes*. The sin of Israel was exactly that: grasping at the available, disposable Godhead; making a visible god.¹³ Rather, Miskotte's own procedure as a preacher emphasizes *hearing* in the event of re-telling.¹⁴ There is a deep consonance for him between the freedom of God, the concreteness of God's coming, and the *aurality* of the Word of God. I close with this quote: "According to the Reformation insight, everything depends upon the letter rising up and becoming spirit, the past event becoming a present event, the narrative becoming a testimony, the testimony becoming the act of God...it is the ever-recurring springtime of the presence."¹⁵

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⁹ WGS, 385.

¹⁰ WGS, 386.

¹¹ WGS, 387.

¹² WGS 387-88; cf. also 383.

¹³ WGS, 383.

¹⁴ See the final paragraph of his sketch on Exod 32: "What we *hear* as we read on shows us that we shall never *see* the end of it. The Name is near at hand" (WGS, 388).

¹⁵ WGS, 338.