

A Literary Development of the Cloud-and-Fire Pillar Motif in the Pentateuchal Wilderness Tradition

Jaeyoung Jeon

1. The Pentateuchal wilderness narrative is marked by its theme of the divine guidance of Israel in the wilderness. The most prevailing image of such an agent is the pillar of cloud-and-fire (e.g., Neh 9,12) that is introduced already at the beginning of the wilderness period (Exod 13,21-22). In the Pentateuchal wilderness narrative as a whole, nevertheless, a number of different guiding agents appear: (1) Hobab, son of Reuel (Num 10,31); (2) the Ark and cloud (Num 10,33-34); (3) cloud and fire (not the pillar form) on the Tabernacle (Exod 40,36-38; Num 9,15-23; 10,11); (4) YHWH Himself in cloud and fire (Deut 1,33); and (5) YHWH Himself in the pillar of cloud and fire (Exod 13,21-22).¹ These motifs of the different agents can be diachronically aligned in terms of a gradual development of the guidance motif; the cloud-and-fire pillar should be considered the last stage of this development.

1.1 The earliest among them must be the Hobab tradition (Num 10,29-32), which is connected to the Kenite tradition (e.g., Jud 1,16; 4,11). The present form of the text harmonizes the Kenite tradition and the early Pentateuchal tradition of Reuel, Moses' father-in-law, who is a Midianite priest (Exod 2,16-22).² Whereas the harmonization (esp. v.29a) reflects a relatively later Enneateuchal perspective, the Hobab-Kenite tradition seems to be an earlier fragment incorporated into the present text.³

1.2 The guidance by Hobab is, nevertheless, corrected immediately in the next verses by the motif of guidance by the Ark (Num 10,33-36*). The latter, which can be assigned to a late Deuteronomistic redaction with its emphasis on the Ark,⁴ was theologically intolerant of the idea that Israel depends on a non-Israelite nomad during their wilderness journey. The Ark,

¹ The motif of the guiding angel (e.g. Exod 14,19; 23,20-23; 32,30-34) is excluded, because the focus of this discussion is the development of cloud and pillar motifs. The motif of the guiding angel seems to be rooted in the conquest theme and to have been developed in another line from the cloud / fire pillar motif.

² See, e.g., Noth, *Exodus*, 77-78; Achenbach, *Vollendung*, 181-183.

³ See also, Achenbach, *Vollendung*.

⁴ Noth assigns only a part of v.33 to a later Deuteronomistic redaction. See, Noth, *Exodus*, 78. Achenbach assigns v.33-34 to a Hexateuch redaction. See, Achenbach, *Vollendung*, 189-196. The expression, "אָרֹן בְּרִית", is a late one.

according to the passage, goes ‘scouting’ (לְתוֹר) for the resting place for the Israelites. Albertz argues, therefore, that the present passage provides a “totally different perspective on the divine leadership in the wilderness”.⁵ He rightly maintains that the Ark motif is absent in the non-Priestly Exodus text and thus presupposes P in Exodus and Leviticus.⁶ The present text also introduces the cloud motif in the theme of the wilderness guidance (v. 34); yet the cloud here is on the people during their march, probably providing them with shade. It is separated from the Ark and does not yet signify the presence of YHWH nor has the guiding function.

1.3 The next stage must be the late priestly motif of the cloud on the Tabernacle as the guiding agent (Exod 40,36-38; Num 9,15-23; 10,11).⁷ These passages combine the P motif of the glory of YHWH that covers the Tabernacle (or Mount Sinai) in the form of a cloud (e.g., Exod 24,16; 40,34-35) and the guidance motif from the previous late Dtr redaction (Num 10,33-36*). The guiding agent changes from the Ark to the cloud, closely connected to the Tabernacle that is strictly a priestly realm. The present passage introduces the motif of transformation between cloud and fire in the day and the night (v.15-16). The fire motif is, nevertheless, not yet developed to have the lighting function, although the march during the night is mentioned for the first time (Num 9,21). In the aforementioned late Dtr text, the people march only during the daytime (Num 10,34).

1.4 Deut 1,33 represents the next stage. The verse presents YHWH Himself as the guiding agent, taking the motif of ‘scouting’ (לְתוֹר) from the late Dtr redaction (Num 10,33) and those of ‘encampment’ (לְהַחֲנֹךְ) and the guiding fire and cloud from the late priestly texts (Exod 40,36-38; Num 9,15-23). The literary innovation of this verse is that YHWH Himself is introduced as the guiding agent rather than the Ark or the cloud, and that He marches before the people (הַחֲלֹךְ לְפָנֵינוּ) in the cloud and fire. The fire has now the lighting function for the night march. This verse effectively combines the Tetrateuch and Deuteronomy in a post-Priestly Pentateuchal horizon.⁸

⁵ See, Albertz, Book, 254.

⁶ See, Albertz, Book, 253-254.

⁷ The text should be assigned to a later priestly scribal circle that worked in a post-P stage. After Thomas Pola’s suggestion that P ends at the Sinai narrative, critics increasingly agree on this thesis. For the detailed expositions of recent studies, see, Achenbach, *Vollendung*, 14-21; Nihan, *Torah*, 20-68; Jeon, *Zadokites*, 403-404; Jeon, *Promise*. See also, Pola, *Priesterschrift*.

⁸ See, e.g., Otto, *Deuteronomium* 1-11, 393-394. Otto, however, argues that the verse combines Exod 13,21-22 and Num 10,33 connecting Moses’ speech in Deut 1,28-33 to the Tetrateuch.

1.5 The motif of the pillar of cloud and fire (Exod 13,21-22; 14,19b. 24*) further develops the late priestly texts (Exod 40,36-38; Num 9,15-23) and Deut 1,33. The present passage (Exod 13,21-22) continues to present the notion that YHWH Himself is marching before the people with the identical wording (הלך לפניכם: v.21a α . cf. Deut 1,33a α) in the cloud and fire. Like Deut 1,33, our passage detaches the cloud and fire from the Priestly Tabernacle and develops it as an independent guiding entity. The motif of transformation to fire during the night from Num 9,15-16 is also fully described here as the fire pillar that lights the paths during the night march. Our passage develops the focus of guidance for encampment in late-P text and Deut 1,33 into a more general sense of guidance in the wilderness, even including military protection (Exod 14,19b. 24*).

The most significant literary innovation of our passage is to provide the shape of a pillar to the guiding cloud and fire. The pillar motif is, nevertheless, not the literary invention of the present passage, but comes from another post-Priestly redactional phase (Exod 33,7-10; Num 11,16-17. 24b-30; 12,4-10a; Deut 31,14-15. 23).⁹ This redactional layer introduces the advent of YHWH to the (non-Priestly) Tent of Meeting in the pillar of cloud, when He meets Moses. The cloud pillar here appears temporarily, signifying the presence of YHWH; no function of guidance in the wilderness nor transformation to a fire pillar is attached to the pillar. The present text (Exod 13,21-22) formulates the new concept of the guiding cloud and fire pillar, combining the motif of the advent in the cloud pillar from the above redaction layer and the motif of the guiding cloud as well as its transformation to fire, which was taken from the late priestly text and Deut 1,33. At the last stage of the gradual development of the guiding agent, the present text incorporates the different elements from the earlier texts, so that the pillar signifies YHWH's permanent presence, guidance, and protection in the wilderness.

2. The observation thus far reveals that the wilderness-guiding motif has been developed through various stages by different scribal circles. Each stage of the development borrows motifs from earlier stages and develops them in a creative way. Notably, the text from the priestly circle emphasizes the central role of the Priestly Tabernacle in providing guidance in the

⁹ Gunneweg, for instance, rightly attributes those passages to a separate redactional phase.

Albertz, following Gunneweg, assigns them to post-Priestly Deuteronomistic redaction. But Blum regards them as the pivotal texts for Deuteronomistic composition (KD). See, Gunneweg, *Gesetz*; Albertz, *Ex 33,7-11, 13-43*; Blum, *Studien*, 76-88.

wilderness, while later non-priestly texts detach the guiding agent from the priestly realm.

Another noteworthy aspect is that the description of the motifs gradually shifts from the natural realm to a supernatural one in the course of their development. Hobab the Midianite, probably the earliest agent, is a nomad who is supposed to know the wilderness geography well. The cloud in Num 10,33-36, the second stage, can be a natural phenomenon that one may expect from the wilderness. The cloud-and-fire shape on the Tabernacle (Num 9,15-23) may also be easily imagined from the continuous incense offering in the sanctuary and the light from the Menorah. The cloud's autonomous movement, however, already has an unnatural aspect. The permanent presence of YHWH and His guidance by means of cloud and fire detached from the Tabernacle (Deut 1,33) is purely a theological image that move the event beyond natural phenomena. The final stage, the permanent and moving cloud and fire in the shape of a pillar, is an even more supernatural image. Such a development was probably promoted by theologizing the wilderness events during the Persian period: interweaving the theme of YHWH's guidance, on the one hand, with the theme of people's rebellion, on the other.

Summary

The pillar of cloud and fire, the most popular motif symbolizing the divine guidance in the wilderness, represents the last stage in the gradual development of the guidance motif. The development of the various "guiding agents" can be aligned as follows: (1) Hobab, son of Reuel (Num 10,31); (2) the Ark and cloud (Num 10,33-34); (3) the cloud and fire on the Tabernacle (Exod 40,36-38; Num 9,15-23; 10,11); (4) YHWH in cloud and fire (Deut 1,33); (5) YHWH in the pillar of cloud and fire (Exod 13,21-22).

Zusammenfassung

Die Wolken- und Feuersäule, das beliebteste Motiv um die göttliche Führung in der Wüste symbolhaft auszudrücken, stellt die letzte Stufe in einer sukzessiven Entwicklung des Führungsmotivs dar. Die Entwicklung der verschiedenen „Führungsagenten“ kann wie folgt rekonstruiert werden: (1) Hobab, Sohn des Reguël (Num 10,31); (2) die Lade und die Wolke (Num 10,33-34); (3) die Wolke und das Feuer über dem Offenbarungszelt (Ex 40,36-38; Num 9,15-23; 10,11); (4) YHWH in Wolke und Feuer (Deut 1,33); (5) YHWH in der Wolken- und Feuersäule (Ex 13,21-22).

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Dr. Jaeyoung Jeon
FTSR, Bâtiment Anthropole 5092
Université de Lausanne
1010 Lausanne
Schweiz
E-mail: jaeyoung.jeon@unil.ch