

**A Partial Survey of the Structure of Offense Narratives in  
post-Sinai Israel**

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**28 Sep 2004**

## Introduction

In the Old Testament, the relationship between God and his created people exists in a dynamic tension, almost a knife-edge, between peace and disaster, prosperity and destruction. Not long from the beginning of the story, this unstable balance almost irretrievably gives way when the pervasive human evil drives the Creator to the point of un-creation: “The LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. The LORD said, ‘I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land’” (Gen 6:6-7, NASB). However the plot pivots and humankind is delivered from untimely annihilation because “Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD” (Gen 6:8).

The Flood narrative is an intense example of human offense and divine wrath, but only one of many similar cases in the OT. Time after time in the subsequent history, the people offend their God. And time after time utter destruction is narrowly averted. Many familiar OT stories fall into the category that I call ‘offense narratives’. David offends by taking Bathsheba and in effect murdering her husband. Israel offends by murmuring for meat in the wilderness. Achan offends by stealing from the banned booty of Jericho. The returning exiles offend by intermarrying with the people of the land. There is a pervasive OT theme of the people of God offending their God, suffering his wrath, and then moving on. But beyond a simple theme, there also appears to be a literary genre for telling such stories. These and many other narratives share common elements and a common structure: (1) an offense is committed; (2) God becomes angry; (3) other people are involved as agents of punishment, intercessors and prophets; (4) God’s anger cools.<sup>1</sup> There are also notable variations around this pattern as the artistic writer works with the genre to heighten its literary power.

In this essay, I survey a number of Old Testament offense narratives to examine their component elements and structure. I (rather arbitrarily) limit the study to interactions between Israel and God after the giving of the Law at Sinai so that certain common background elements are present in each episode, e.g., the people are the descendants of Abraham, the Mosaic covenant has been established (at least according to the canonical presentation). In the Appendix I provide a short list of offense narratives, with ten of them being considered in some detail for this initial survey:

1. Golden Calf – Ex 32
2. Wilderness Complaints – Num 11
3. Miriam Murmurs – Num 12
4. Korah’s Rebellion – Num 16
5. Baal at Peor – Num 25
6. Achan and Ai – Josh 7

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<sup>1</sup> It is notable that this pattern is explicitly described in Jdg 2:11ff. (1) Offense: the people of Israel do evil, forsake YHWH, and bow down to other gods; (2) the anger of YHWH burns against them; (3) Israel given into the hand of plunderers; (4) YHWH is moved to pity by Israel’s groaning under their oppressors, so he raises up a deliverer who delivers them. Interestingly, the Judges narratives expand on the deliverance part of the story, while many of the instances of offense narratives discussed below display divine cooling as a more simple removal of God’s hand of punishment.

7. Ehud and Eglon – Jdg 3
8. David and Bathsheba – 2 Sam 11-12
9. Naboth's Vineyard – 1 Ki 21
10. Mixed Marriages – Ez 9-10

The outline of this essay is as follows: I first describe the outstanding structural features of an offense narrative (which thereby defines the genre for my purposes) along with examples from the ten surveyed passages. I then describe several interesting variations in the structure that demonstrate some of the interpretational value of this approach. I close with observations and open questions that may stimulate further work on the topic. I emphasize that this survey is extraordinarily preliminary and represents reflections on the biblical text alone with explicit reference to neither the history of interpretation nor the tradition of biblical narrative criticism.

## The Component Parts of Offense Narratives

The bounds of an offense narrative are usually straightforward to observe. The beginning is marked by a stable setting being upset by a human offense against God, provoking his wrath. The end is marked by a return to the stable setting, though usually with the dramatic situation advanced by the resolution of the offense. Consider the example of Miriam's Murmuring (Num 12). The stable setting involves Israel having arrived at Hazeroth. The narrative begins with the offense: "Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses" (12:1). This offense leads to God's anger ("So the anger of the LORD burned against them" [12:9]) and Miriam's resulting leprosy ("But when the cloud had withdrawn from over the tent, behold, Miriam was leprous, as white as snow" [12:10]). After the rupture with God is resolved, Miriam is healed and "received again" (12:15) into the camp, and Israel then moves out from Hazeroth to the wilderness of Paran (12:16). The dramatic situation is not only moved forward geographically, but more importantly by the divine affirmation of Moses' unique privilege of speaking with God mouth-to-mouth (12:8), regardless of his Cushite wife (12:1).

Offense narratives usually contain a *statement of the offense* near the beginning of the narrative. This statement can come from the narrator, from God, from another character, or even from the offenders themselves. Statements of offense come in two distinct kinds: concrete and abstract. *Concrete offenses* are specific actions (or failures to act) that provoke divine wrath. *Abstract offenses* are interpretations of concrete offenses that position them within the theological or moral domain. For example, in the golden calf incident the concrete offense is first given in the people's direct speech to Aaron ("Come, make us a god who will go before us" [Ex 32:1]) and their narrated actions ("they rose early and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play" [32:6]). Yahweh interprets their activities with an abstract description for Moses ("Your people...have corrupted themselves" [32:7]). Subsequent descriptions of the offenses often occur later in the stories, as in this one when Moses offers a abstract/concrete pairing in his intercessory prayer ("Alas, this people has *committed a great sin*, and they have *made a god of gold*

for themselves” [32:31, emphasis added]). The concrete offenses are as varied as the rich creativity of fallen humanity, but the abstract offenses use a more constrained language. The most common language includes “sin” (חטא) and “do evil” (עשה רע), but other familiar terms also appeared in this survey, such as “transgress” (עבר), “turn aside” (סור), “reject (the LORD)” (מאס), “play the harlot” (זנה), “act unfaithfully” (מעל), “despise (the LORD or his word)” (בזוה). These abstract terms do not provide enough information to reconstruct what the offenders actually did, but interprets their actions as worthy of censure.

As mentioned above, the offense provokes divine wrath that is somehow quenched by the end of the episode. Thus the genre demands elements of *divine heat* and *divine cooling*. I choose the former term because of the common clause “the anger of the Lord was kindled” (וַיִּחַר־אַף יְהוָה), which often abstractly begins the divine response to the offense. The divine heat then often takes a more concrete form such as a fire (אש) or plague (בַּיָּדָה) that threatens to consume (אכל) or strike (נכה) or (נגף) the offenders. Concrete forms of divine heat are as widely varying as people’s concrete offenses; this survey observed such things as striking with leprosy (Num 12:10), ground splitting open (Num 16:31), a command to execute the offenders (Num 25:4), strengthening Israel’s enemy (Jdg 3:12), giving away the offender’s wives (2 Sam 12:11), slaying the offender’s child (2 Sam 12:14), and prophesying the offender’s death (1 Ki 21:19). In many cases the divine heat results in the death of the offender, sometimes expanding outward and consuming others in proximity. Divine cooling usually appears either as a quelling of the divine heat (e.g., the fire dying out [Num 11:2], the plague being checked [Num 16:48; Num 25:8], the LORD changing his mind about destroying the offenders [Ex 32:14]). Often there is a step beyond cooling to restoration, where the effects of the divine heat are reversed (e.g., the birth of Solomon after the death of the son of adultery [2 Sam 12:24-25], the promise of the defeat of Ai after the initial defeat [Josh 8:1], the subduing of Eglon and oppressive Moab [Jdg 3:30]).<sup>2</sup> Another indication of divine cooling is when the larger narrative is continued after the interruption of the offense (e.g., Israel is commanded to depart for Canaan again after the golden calf incident [Ex 33:1], Nathan tells David that he will not die for his sin [2 Sam 12:13]).

Thus far in our consideration, there have been only two parties: the offender(s) and God. However, there is a necessary third party in each offense narrative who plays *an interventional role* between God and the offender. This role can take on several forms. First, it can be as a human agent of the divine heat, thus adding *human heat* to the situation. In the golden calf incident, even after there has been some divine cooling (Ex 32:14), Moses’ anger is subsequently provoked and results in the death of 3,000 men at his command (Ex 32:19-28). In the case of Baal worship at Peor, Moses, the judges of Israel and Phinehas all act as agents of the divine heat. God commands Moses to execute the

<sup>2</sup> Possibly “restoration” should be added as an optional final element in the offense narrative structure. It is not always present by any means, but occurs in a number of the surveyed passages (e.g., Miriam Murmurs, Achan and Ai, Ehud and Eglon, David and Bathsheba).

offenders in broad daylight, which Moses relays to the judges of Israel for implementation (Num 25:5). Phinehas responds with his spear (Num 25:7-8). Thus the narrative portrays Moses, the judges of Israel and Phinehas all as contributors of human heat. In the case of Achan and the defeat at Ai, the men of Ai first make real to Israel the displeasure of the Lord (Josh 7:4-5), and then Joshua and “all Israel” become the human agents of the divine heat by stoning and burning Achan and all that belonged to him (Josh 7:24-25). In the case of Ehud and Eglon, the Moabites with Eglon their king act as the human heat emanating from the divine heat, defeating and subjugating Israel with their God-given strength (Jdg 3:12-14).

Another third-party role is one who gives voice to the divine mind and wrath—a *prophetic voice*, often providing interpretations for the offender. Though God himself sometimes voices his anger directly (e.g., speaking to Miriam and Aaron in the presence of Moses after their murmuring [Num 12:4-8]), he usually commissions a mouthpiece to bring his message to the offender. The prophetic voice does not simply predict judgment, but links the offense to the wrath, making clear the offense and impressing the causality on the offenders and bystanders. In the wilderness complaints, Moses is given the exact words to speak to the people, assuring them of meat and judging them for having “rejected the LORD who is among you” (Num 11:18-20). Without quoting God, Moses speaks to Israel after the golden calf, interpreting their acts as a “great sin” (Ex 32:30). Moses responds to Korah’s rebellion with words that reflect the divine intent, with the implication that they come from the LORD but without such being directly stated by the narrator (Num 16:5). Nathan brings God’s accusation against David in a parable (2 Sam 12:1-9) and goes on to voice the divine punishments on David and his household (2 Sam 12:10-12, 14) as well as his forgiveness (2 Sam 12:13). Along with this mouthpiece-style prophetic role, the prophet is often given additional insight into the mind of the Lord. This highlights the personal knowledge of God granted to his prophet that goes beyond his role as messenger. As a narrative technique, the divine voice is also speaking to the reader to further interpret the story. For example, after speaking directly to Miriam and Aaron about their offense, God then speaks only to Moses about the severity of Miriam’s offense and the duration of her expulsion (Num 12:14). In a similar vein, Moses is told that Phinehas’ zeal for executing an offender at Peor has saved Israel from God’s wrath and earned him a “covenant of perpetual priesthood” (Num 25:10-13). Likewise Joshua is told that Achan’s sin is the reason for the defeat at Ai (Josh 7:10-13).

A final third-party role in these narratives is that of *intercessor*. The intercessor has a complex task of mediating between God and the offender. The prophetic role described above is one aspect of intercession—speaking for God to the offender. But most notably the intercessor can also speak on behalf of the offender to God, as when Moses entreats the LORD on behalf of Israel after the golden calf (Ex 32:11-13, 31-32), when Moses prays to the LORD after the wilderness complaints and the consuming fire dies out (Num 11:2), when Moses prays for the healing of Miriam’s leprosy (Num 12:13). Interestingly in Korah’s rebellion, Moses and Aaron twice intercede not for the offenders but for the larger congregation that the Lord has threatened in his consuming anger (Num 16:22, 45-47).

When Joshua intercedes after the failure at Ai, he does so from the false belief that God has been unfaithful to Israel, but is quickly corrected that Israel is the unfaithful one (Josh 7:7-11). Ezra offers a most eloquent confession and plea on behalf of the returned exiles who have entered into mixed marriages (Ez 9:6-15). The intercessor sometimes reverses things and speaks to God against the offenders, as when Moses complains of the burden of the murmuring people in the wilderness (Num 11:11-15) and when he denounces Korah and his men (Num 16:15). In the other direction, the intercessor sometimes pleads with the offender to confess or turn from the wicked way, as when Joshua appeals to Achan: “My son, I implore you, give glory to the LORD, the God of Israel, and give praise to Him; and tell me now what you have done. Do not hide it from me.” (Josh 7:19). Finally, it should be mentioned that sometimes the offender appeals for intercession, as when the people cry out to Moses when the Lord’s fire begins to burn them after their wilderness complaints (Num 11:2) (note the counterexample when Ahab snubs his intercessor Elijah: “Have you found me, O my enemy?” [1 Ki 21:20]).

In summary, I have structured offense narratives into several constituent parts:

- offense (concrete and abstract)
- heat (divine and human) and subsequent cooling
- human intervention (prophecy from God, intercession from offender to God, appeal to offender, offender’s appeal)

The bounds of the narratives are set by the opening offense and the closing cooling that restores the original opening conditions, but with the plot having been advanced.

What does this repeated theme and structure of offense narratives tell us theologically? On a personal note, observing the repeated smiting of offenders has surprised and challenged me, as I have realized that I downplay this aspect of God’s character in my personal theology. I am reminded of the beliefs of John Bunyan and other Puritans who understood that a loving Son stood in the gap between an angry and offended God and sinful people. I have had difficulty holding together that sort of tension between Father and Son, but there certainly is something valid about its representation of God’s wrath. Regardless of these larger issues, clearly the biblical story of Israel is one where individuals, groups, and even the entire nation, move from one offense to another. Each offense of the living God puts human life in jeopardy. Another observation is that intercession is fundamentally necessary for maintaining relationship with God. The offender is often blind to the offense, is helpless to placate God’s anger, and depends on both a prophet to open his or her eyes, and an intercessor to plead for mercy. The pattern of divine cooling is also instructive, as we observe over and over that God’s wrath is not the final word. His anger is fierce, but reconciliation (at least for the nation, if not for the individual) comes in the end. The story does not end, but moves forward through this pattern of offense, anger, and cooling.

Sing praise to the LORD, you His godly ones, And give thanks to His holy name.

For His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for a lifetime;

Weeping may last for the night, But a shout of joy comes in the morning. (Ps 30:4-5)

## The Pattern and Its Variations

As Robert Alter describes in his chapter on biblical type scenes and the uses of convention in the OT, interpretation of an artistic work depends upon the reader's familiarity with the "elaborate set of tacit agreements between artist and audience" so that the reader can discriminate between "the verisimilar and the fabulous, pick up directional clues in a narrative work, see what is innovative and what is deliberately traditional at each nexus of the artistic creation."<sup>3</sup> In surveying the genre of offense narratives, the goal is to understand the conventions so that their use, both conventional and innovative, can be better understood.

The basic order and structure of an offense narrative is as follows:

1. abstract and concrete offense
2. divine heat
3. human intervention (human heat, prophetic word, intercession, offender's appeal)
4. divine and human cooling

As a straightforward example of this structure, consider the case of Baal worship at Peor (Num 25). The narrative begins with the narrator's statement of the abstract offense: "the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab" (25:1). This description is interpretive and censures whatever the people were concretely doing. The narrator then describes what has actually happened: "For they invited the people to sacrifice to their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods" (25:2). To round it out and make no mistake about the offense, the narrator closes with another abstract description: "So Israel joined themselves to Baal of Peor" (25:3), implicitly in preference to Yahweh.

The offense being established, the heat begins with the standard formula: "the LORD was angry against Israel" (וַיִּחַר-אַף יְהוָה בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל) (25:3). Once the divine heat begins, there is considerable variation among narratives for how the story plays out. In this case, Yahweh speaks to Moses as the agent of prophecy and wrath: "The LORD said to Moses, 'Take all the leaders of the people and execute them in broad daylight before the LORD, so that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel'" (25:4). The message of destruction is clear, along with its purpose in cooling the divine heat. When Moses then conveys the message to the judges of Israel the reason for the heat is also clear: "Each of you slay his men *who have joined themselves to Baal of Peor*" (25:5, emphasis added). Though no record is given for Yahweh having told Moses the reason for his anger, Moses nevertheless acts as the prophet who explains the divine mind. Moses draws the connection between eating and bowing down to Baal (expressed again abstractly as "joined themselves") and the subsequent bloodbath, so that the causality is clear. With the prophetic word declared, the narrator focuses on Phinehas as an especially jealous human agent and presents the vignette of him piercing

<sup>3</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books / HarperCollins, 1981), p. 47.

through the Israelite man and his daughter of Midian: “Then behold, one of the sons of Israel came and brought to his relatives a Midianite woman.... When Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he arose from the midst of the congregation and took a spear in his hand, and he went after the man of Israel into the tent and pierced both of them through, the man of Israel and the woman, through the body” (25:6-8).

With the heat played out, the narrative then cools in several ways. First, “the plague on the sons of Israel was checked” (25:8) – the first mention of such a plague. Second, God speaks to Moses in praise of Phinehas and confirms that his act has “turned away My wrath...so that I did not destroy the sons of Israel in My jealousy” (25:11). Third, the narrative closes with God commissioning Moses to fight the Midianites, saying, “Be hostile to the Midianites and strike them; for they have been hostile to you with their tricks” (25:17-18). Though gapped from the text, the clear implication is that Israel is successful in this venture and defeats their enemy—another sign of divine cooling. There is no explicit statement of human cooling, though it is implied that Phinehas and the judges of Israel put down their weapons and end their assault on the offenders, restoring peace within the camp.

So we see that this narrative follows the simplest pattern of an offense narrative with the basic structure of offense—heat—intervention—cooling. The plot advances in several ways through this text: (1) enmity between Israel and Midian grows, (2) Israel’s susceptibility to Baal worship is established, (3) the violent jealousy of the Lord is demonstrated, and (4) God bestows on Phinehas a perpetual priesthood for his jealousy (“Behold, I give [Phinehas] My covenant of peace; and it shall be for him and his descendants after him, a covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the sons of Israel” [25:12-13]).

In the remainder of this section, I describe some variations in the basic structure that seem to be used as narrative devices to communicate with the reader via structural changes from the expected pattern. Consider the case of David and Bathsheba. The basic structure is that of an offense narrative with David’s acts of adultery and murder at the beginning (2 Sam 11:1-27), Nathan’s prophetic voice expressing God’s anger and judgment, and then cooling. But an interesting point is that there is no expression of abstract offense until halfway through the narrative. The reader is indirectly told that David did not go into battle (11:1), dispassionately told that he saw and took Bathsheba (11:2-5), tortuously carried through the attempted cover-up and murder of Uriah (11:6-26), and plainly told of David marrying the widow (11:27). These are clearly offenses against God as well as neighbor, but the actions are not so interpreted for the reader until it is all over: “But the thing David had done was evil in the sight of the LORD” (11:27). This delay in labeling the abstract offense leaves the reader unsure of what will happen to David’s relationship with God. Until now, he has so plainly followed the ways of the LORD and been blessed. What is he now doing? How will God respond? The narrator’s delay in expressing God’s anger raises the tension substantially.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, even when God’s anger is

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<sup>4</sup> Sternberg interprets this divine censure of David as an almost redundant statement that David is in the wrong, an example of foolproof construction that ensures that even the most naive eyes are opened: Meir Sternberg, *The*



revealed, the reader must wait for Nathan to tell his tale before learning how God's wrath will be manifest. Another variation in this story is that David does not appeal to Nathan the prophet/intercessor for the life of his son, but appeals to God directly (12:16), highlighting his personal and unmediated relationship. A last surprise is that God's final response to David is not just cooling but blessing. He reaffirms his divine embrace of the covenant king: Bathsheba conceives again and gives birth to Solomon, who is beloved of the Lord and affirmed by the prophet (12:24-25). So in this offense narrative these variations emphasize that even righteous David can be an offender who provokes God's anger (with lifelong consequences), yet his personal relationship with God and everlasting kingdom are not put into jeopardy.

The narrative of Eglon and Ehud (Jdg 3:12-30) largely follows the basic pattern described above. First, Israel's offense is described in abstract terms ("The sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD" [Jdg 3:12a]). This offense is never described in concrete terms, but "again" seems to point back to the previous offense in 3:7 ("And the sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and forgot the Lord their God, and served the Baals and the Asheroth"), which does give concrete terms at least as far as Baal worship.<sup>5</sup> Second, the divine heat is expressed through the strengthening of Israel's enemy: "So the Lord strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel" (3:12b). Third, this empowered king becomes the human agent for God's wrath as he defeats Israel and subjugates them for eighteen years (3:13-14). Fourth, under this divinely inspired oppression, the offending Israel cries out to God (3:15)—their deliverer-intercessor Ehud has not yet been named—which is enough to turn the story and provoke divine cooling in the form of Ehud. The memorable narrative of Ehud's deception, killing of Eglon, and victory over the Moabites simply makes manifest the divine cooling. Finally, the narrative closes with the human cooling of relief from the Moabites: "So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land was undisturbed for eighty years" (3:30). The important variation from the standard pattern in this narrative is the missing prophetic word. It is completely blanked from the narrative whether Israel understood that Baal worship was the cause of the oppression, or whether they are aware of any linkage between their idolatry and their suffering. Although it might be inferred from the story that the Baal worship ceased under Ehud (since the land has rest for eighty years before Israel does evil again<sup>6</sup>), it is not an explicit part of the narrative. The missing word of God may indicate that Israel did not learn anything through this offense/judgment/grace cycle. Indeed, if a prophetic word were included in the story, the larger narrative would be forced to deal with how that word was received, why it had no lasting effect, and so on. Instead, the missing connection between offense and heat underlines Israel's mindless wandering

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*Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ Press, 1987), 219.

<sup>5</sup> And for the book of Judges, the overarching offense description is given in the prologue and carries throughout the book (2:11-12 and 3:5-6).

<sup>6</sup> Note that the single verse description of Shamgar's success against the Philistines is intercalated here (3:31) but without a fuller story of what the circumstances occasioned his "saving Israel".

between Yahweh and Baal. Like the other Judges cycles, the plot is not advanced here—Israel will simply continue to go around the cycle and provoke God again.

The narrative of Ezra and the mixed marriages is unusual in that it lacks any personal connection with God; in particular no divine heat appears in the story. The narrative begins (per the convention) with the concrete offense being reported to Ezra: “The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands...for they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has intermingled with the peoples of the lands” (Ez 9:1-2). The report then adds an abstract offense: “this unfaithfulness” (Ez 9:2).<sup>7</sup> But no divine heat follows the offense. This absence may be necessitated by the first-person narrative perspective of Ezra that does not benefit from the omniscient narrator of the Pentateuch and former prophets. But regardless, when compared with the other offense narratives, this one is hollow because the cold law has replaced the fiery God. Once the princes have delivered their ‘prophetic’ identification and interpretation of Israel’s sin, Ezra immediately begins his intercessory work: “And when I heard about this matter, I tore my garment and my robe, and pulled some of the hair from my head and my beard, and sat down appalled. ... But at the evening offering I arose from my humiliation, even with my garment and my robe torn, and I fell on my knees and stretched out my hands to the Lord my God; and I said, ‘O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to Thee, my God, for our iniquities have risen above our heads....’” (9:3-6). After his prayer, which clearly anticipates divine heat (“Wouldst Thou not be angry with us to the point of destruction, until there is no remnant nor any who escape?” [9:14]), Shecaniah suggests they “make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives and their children...according to the law” (10:3). The subsequent divorce proceedings and the public record of the offenders seem to be expressions of human heat<sup>8</sup> (10:5ff). And there the book ends, with no word from God, neither heat nor cooling. This variation of the standard pattern, where God is silent, leaves the reader uncertain about what God thinks of the whole affair. Was there really an offense? If so, have the proceedings quelled God’s anger? Are the people in right relationship with God again? These questions are not easily answered without God’s word.

In Korah’s rebellion (Num 16), the interesting variation is that the single story contains two sequential offense narratives. The initial offense is Korah and his gang “assembl[ing] together against Moses and Aaron” (16:3), which results in the earth splitting open and swallowing them up (16:32) and fire from the LORD consuming others (16:35). Divine cooling is expressed quite explicitly as command is given to consecrate the censers of the sinners as plating for the altar as a sign of warning to the sons of Israel (16:36-39). The reader’s expectation is that the story is now complete, but immediately another offense narrative begins: “But on the next day all the congregation of the sons of

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<sup>7</sup> In Ezra’s subsequent prayer, he offers further abstract terms for the offense: iniquity, guilt, forsaken [God’s] commandments, evil deeds, etc.

<sup>8</sup> though the non-believing divorcees seem to be the most burned.

Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron, saying, ‘You are the ones who have caused the death of the LORD’s people.’” (16:41). This offense raises another round of divine wrath that rages until Aaron makes atonement with incense and checks the plague (16:46-50). The double offense narrative underlines the intensity of the problem of priestly legitimacy. Both those who seek after the priesthood and the congregation offend in this matter, so God has two opportunities for affirming Aaron. This double narrative also leads to directly into the sign of Aaron’s budding rod (17:1-12). God commands that this sign of Aaron’s unique role be put before the testimony so that it will act “as a sign against the rebels, that you may put an end to their grumblings against Me, so that they should not die” (17:10). This commandment is expressed in terms that seek to prevent a future offense narrative—the rod’s testimony should prevent future offense and the divine heat that would ensue.

## Observations and Questions

In this survey, I have begun to define and analyze the narrative pattern of the offense narrative. A good number of OT narratives follow its basic structure of offense, divine heat, human involvement, and divine cooling. In closing, I offer a few observations and questions for further study.

First, this survey should be compared with the interpretive history of these passages. Has the genre of the offense narrative been previously identified, and if so, how has it been developed? Does it provide interpretive insight into the narratives that use the device, or is it simply a literary observation? I have suggested that variations in the basic pattern might provide some insights, but these suggestions need to be examined more carefully and other applications made from these generic patterns.

Second, it is obvious from these and many other examples that God can be provoked to fatal wrath by human actions. Furthermore, these human offenses are far from rare, both in the Bible and in everyday life. Idolatry, murmuring, seeking religious office unworthily, adultery, murder, and marrying outside of the faith happen all around. This fact raises many concerns and questions. In our culture, where almost any sort of violence is seen as highly morally suspect, this characteristic of God is troubling. How should we come to terms with God’s violent anger? Though the OT is obviously full of grace, this other side of the coin cannot be ignored. How can the people of God live in peaceful covenant with such destructive power? In light of the fact that this sort of divine wrath does not seem to come forth in the vast majority of similar offenses (both in the Bible and in contemporary life) it may be helpful to explore the particularities of these offenses over and against examples where such offenses do not provoke this sort of response. Is there a complementary theme of offense without ensuing destruction? On a biblical theological level, do these stories support popular allegations that the God of the OT is angry and violent, while the God of the NT is gentle and loving?

Third, the death of the offender(s) is quite common in these narratives, but is certainly not the exclusive rule. Miriam suffers leprosy, and that only for seven days. After their idolatry, the people of Israel suffer the oppression of Eglon, but they do not lose their lives. David survives his offense of adultery and murder. Those of the post-exilic remnant who marry the people of the land suffer the loss

of their wives, but do not die. What constitutes a capital crime against Yahweh? On the other side, those who keep bad company but do not necessarily themselves offend seem also to be at risk. The narratives present God's wrath as striking large numbers of people without making clear that they are the actual offenders. At Moses' word 3,000 perish after the golden calf (Ex 32:28). After Korah's rebellion, the plague kills "14,700, besides those who died on account of Korah" (Num 16:49). Thirty-six Israelite warriors die at Ai before Achan's sin is identified (Josh 7:4). David's son dies in his place (2 Sam 12:14). There is no rule of *lex talionis* here, at least in the individual details. Is this collective justice as arbitrary as it seems to our own individualistic culture? How do these narratives help us to understand that culture that produced them?

Fourth, it is curious that sacrifice plays such a small (nearly non-existent) role in these stories. The one reference I found to it is in the list of offenders at the end of Ezra's dealings with the mixed marriages: "Among the sons of the priests who had married foreign wives were found of the sons of Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brothers: Maaseiah, Eliezer, Jarib and Gedaliah. They pledged to put away their wives, and being guilty, they offered a ram of the flock for their offense" (Ez 10:18-19). Given the pervasive notion that the sacrificial system existed exactly in order to remedy offenses against God without killing the offender, I would have expected sacrifice to play a major role in these stories. Where are the narrative appearances of sacrifice? What role does it play in offense narratives, if any? Furthermore, given the significant use of sacrifice language in the NT for understanding Christ's cross as the means for reconciling offensive humanity to God (e.g., Rom 5:10, Col 1:20, Eph 5:2, Heb 9:26), where is the OT precedent for this understanding? Or, put the other way around, what foundation do these OT offense narratives lay for the subsequent understanding of Christ's work of reconciliation? What changes in our relationship with God under the New Covenant?

Finally, the term "atonement" (כַּפֵּר) appears in several of the surveyed narratives. Moses returns up the mountain after the golden calf with the words, "Perhaps I can make atonement for your sin" (Ex 32:30). Aaron takes fire from the altar and lays incense upon it to make atonement for the murmuring congregation after Korah's rebellion (Num 16:46-47), which cools the divine heat. God's praise of Phinehas' jealous spear at Peor brings the affirmation that he "has made atonement for the sons of Israel" (Num 25:13). While many connect this word exclusively to the sacrificial cultus, these uses suggest a very different idea that brings together Moses' words, Aaron's incense, and Phinehas' spear. What constitutes atoning for offenses?

These are simply some early observations and questions. The mystery of God's judgments, the nuanced mingling of his violence and self-giving love, the problem of God choosing stiff-necked people, the interplay of covenant making and breaking – all of these difficult themes are brought into sharp relief in these narratives of offense.

## Appendix: Examples of Offense Narratives

- **Golden Calf – Ex 32**
- Strange Fire – Lev 10
- **Wilderness Complaints – Num 11**
- **Miriam Murmurs – Num 12**
- Not Entering Land – Num 14
- **Korah’s Rebellion – Num 16**
- **Baal at Peor – Num 25**
- Moses Strikes the Rock – Num 20
- **Achan and Ai – Josh 7**
- Serving Baal (Judges Pattern) – Jdg 2:11ff
- **Idolatry – Jdg 3 (Ehud)**, Jdg 4 (Deborah), Jdg 6-8 (Gideon), Jdg 10-11 (Jephthah); Jdg 13-16 (Samson)
- Eli’s Sons – 1 Sam 2-7
- Saul – 1 Sam 15
- Uzzah and the Ark – 2 Sam 6
- **David and Bathsheba – 2 Sam 11-12**
- David’s Census – 2 Sam 24
- Solomon and Jeroboam – 1 Ki 12-13
- Ahab Violates Ban – 1 Ki 20:26ff
- **Naboth’s Vineyard – 1 Ki 21**
- Israel Destroyed – 2 Ki 17
- **Mixed Marriages – Ez 9-10**

examples in **bold** type were examined in the preparation of this essay