

MOSES AT THE WATERS OF MERIBAH: A CASE OF TRANSFERENCE

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WATERS OF MERIBAH (NUMBERS 20) - YEAR 40 IN THE DESERT

The sin of Moses at the "waters of contention" [*Waters of Meribah*] is primarily narrated in Numbers 20: 2-13. The first five verses of the narration sets the scene, and includes words and phrases that echo another scene many years earlier.

2 *And there was **no water** for the congregation; and they **gathered themselves***

together against Moses and against Aaron.

3 *And the people **quarreled with Moses**, and spoke, saying, 'Would God that*

we had died when our brothers died before the Lord!

4 *'And why have you brought up **the congregation of the Lord** into this wilderness, that we and our cattle should die there?'*

5 *'And why have you made us come out of Egypt, to bring us in to this evil place? This is no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates;*

nor is there any water to drink.'

6 *And Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the door of*

the Tent of Meeting, and they fell upon their faces; and the glory of the Lord appeared to them (Num. 20:2-6).¹

In the following verses 7-13, God tells them to take the rod of Moses and gather the people together, and Moses should then speak to the rock and call upon it to have water pour forth. Instead, Moses strikes the rock with his rod, and water flows out.

God then tells Moses and Aaron that because they did not sanctify His name, neither of them will enter the Promised Land. As the story is told, a

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number of problems appear. First, the nature of Moses' sin is not clear. Was there even a sin? Moreover, two instructions – possibly ambiguous – were given to him: *'Take the rod . . . [but] speak to the rock'* (Num. 20:8). In addition, the same punishment ordained for Moses is also imposed on Aaron, even though his role appears to be quite minor. Finally, is there a concomitance, a connection, between the sin and the punishment, between not sanctifying God's name and not being allowed to enter the Promised Land?

Perhaps a way to answer these questions is to consider this incident in terms of psychological transference from the earlier quasi-rebellious situation at Rephidim (Ex. 17:1-6) and the clearly rebellious episode led by Korah (Num. 16:1-35). Psychological transference involves the influence of memories of past events on interpretation of and reaction to current events. In its psychoanalytic sense, Ernest Jones² offers two meanings: (1) Displacement of affect (emotions) from one idea to another; (2) more specifically, displacement of an affect, either positive or negative, from one person to another. It is the latter definition that has been primary in psychoanalysis, focusing upon the therapeutic process. Freud³ likewise refers to positive transference (related to love) and negative transference (hostility). However formulated, transference involves an affect or emotion within the person wherein the external object or objects are stimuli to the individual to experience affects associated with others in the past. Transference need not be limited to individuals. An intense emotional experience with a group of people in the present might recreate a similar emotional experience that had taken place in the past. I shall attempt to demonstrate that such was the case with Moses and Aaron at the Waters of Meribah by analyzing what happened years before at Rephidim and with the rebellion of Korah.

REPHIDIM⁴ (EXODUS 17) – YEAR 1 IN THE DESERT

Within weeks of the Exodus, 40 years before the encounter at Waters of Meribah, there was a similar complaint regarding lack of water at Rephidim.⁵

1 *And all the congregation of the people of Israel journeyed from the wilderness of Sin, after their journeys, according to the commandment of the Lord, and camped in Rephidim; and there was no water for the people to drink.*

2 *Therefore the people **complained to Moses**, and said, 'Give us water that we may drink.' And Moses said to them, 'Why do you strive with me? Why do you tempt the Lord?'*

3 *And the people thirsted there for water; and the people **murmured against Moses**, and said, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?'*

4 *And Moses cried to the Lord, saying, 'What shall I do to this people? They are almost ready to stone me.'*

5 *And the Lord said to Moses, '**Pass** before the people, and take with you of the elders of Israel; **and your rod, with which you struck the river, take in your hand, and go.***

6 *'Behold, I will stand before you there upon the rock in Horeb; and you shall **strike the rock**, and water shall come out of it, that the people may drink.' And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel (Ex. 17:1-6).⁶*

The Exodus narrative on the occurrence at Rephidim emphasizes an escalation of complaints in verse 3. Ibn Ezra in his commentary on the verse notes this escalation by pointing out that when the thirst intensified, the people – venting anger against Moses – criticized his engineering the Exodus from Egypt altogether. Fearing the development of an actual rebellion against him, *Moses cried to the Lord, saying, What shall I do to this people? They are almost ready to stone me'* (v. 4).

In the Numbers narrative on the occurrence at Waters of Meribah, the people do complain about leaving Egypt, but thereafter it develops differently. They add satirically: *'This [waterless tract of desert] is no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates; nor is there any water to drink'* (v. 5). The mention of *seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates* is a clear reference to the fruits of the Promised Land of Canaan.⁷ Their complaint now is not so much that they were taken out of Egypt, but that they are still in the desert rather than over the Jordan. Moses, on his part, may have misunderstood them, displaying here a transference from the past experience at Rephidim to the present one at Waters of Meribah.

The narrative in Numbers describing the sin of Moses at Waters of Meribah continues almost as if it were a reprise of the Exodus narrative on Rephidim:

7 *And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying,*

8 *Take the rod, and gather the assembly together, you, and Aaron your brother, and speak to the rock before their eyes; and it shall give forth his water, and you shall bring forth to them water out of the rock; so you shall give the congregation and their beasts drink.'*

9 *And Moses took the rod from before the Lord, as He commanded him.*

10 *And Moses and Aaron gathered the congregation together before the rock, and he said to them, 'Hear now, you rebels; must we fetch you water out of this rock?'*

11 *And Moses lifted up his hand, and with his rod he struck the rock twice; and the water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their beasts also.*

12 *And the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not believe me to sanctify me in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them.'*

13 *This is the water of Meribah, because the people of Israel strove with the Lord, and He was sanctified in them (Num. 20:7-13).⁸*

The issue of the rod of Moses, now arises. Three contrasts are evident:

1. Prior to the gathering of the people at Rephidim, Moses was commanded to march before the people with the rod, as though it were some emblem of authority. At the the Waters of Meribah, he is simply told to gather the people together.

2. At Rephidim, the central role of the rod is emphasized with God's command to *take the rod [and] strike the rock* (vv. 5-6). At the Waters of Meribah, however, the command is to *speak to the rock before their eyes* (v. 8).

3. The incident at Rephidim developed into a nearly open rebellion against Moses, his leadership and his authority. But at the Waters of Meribah there was no attack on Moses' leadership. However, it can be suggested that transference in Moses' mind from events at Rephidim led him even at the Waters of Meribah to call the children of Israel "rebels" (v. 10). The need to support Moses and his leadership quickly focused on his rod; an emblem of authority equivalent to the baton of a commander, the scepter or mace of a king. All

the references in the Bible to the rod of Moses⁹ seem to carry this connotation.

This brings us to the core of the nature of the "sin" of Moses.¹⁰ For the purpose of this paper, I would like to focus upon a genre of opinions that considers the sin as involving a redirection of the source of the miracle from God to Moses. The Ramban (Nahmanides), quoting R. Hananel, said that by saying, *are 'we' to bring forth water out of the rock* (Num. 20:10), the people thought that Moses and Aaron brought forth the water out of the rock through their own wisdom, that it was not a Divine miracle.¹¹ In a similar manner, the Hatam Sofer (Moses Sofer, in his commentary on Numbers 20:12 *Ya'an*), notes that the people could not deny the miracles performed by Moses, and attributed them to his superior wisdom and skills. Had Moses led the people into the land of Canaan, they would have perceived the ensuing victories as manifestations of the greatness of Moses, forgetting the greatness of God. He was, therefore, commanded to perform the miracle at the Waters of Meribah without recourse to implements such as his rod, which he was merely to carry. By using only a verbal command, the ensuing miracle of the emergence of the water would have been correctly perceived by the people as being the work of God, thereby sanctifying His name.

In an analogous but more intense view, the *Meshekh Hokhmah* sees the problem as related to the actual deification of Moses, a potential descent into idolatry. The higher wisdom was concerned lest when the people enter the land they would treat him [Moses] as a deity (*Meshekh Hokhmah*, Deuteronomy 4:15).¹²

In summary, at Rephidim the focus was on enhancing the authority and legitimacy of the rule of Moses. But such was not the case at the Waters of Meribah, where it was necessary to diminish the role of Moses so as to obviate the development of a potential idolatry. That Moses did not understand this necessity was his error, perhaps his sin.

ENTER KORAH AND OTHERS (NUMBERS 16) – YEAR 2 IN THE DESERT¹³

Korah and his followers cried, *'You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and the Lord is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the Lord's congregation?'* This rebellion by Korah seems to be directed toward attaining Aaron's position as high priest. Soon

after, came rebellion of Dathan and Abiram, at Rephidim and it was directed against the authority and leadership of Moses himself, using especially inflammatory rhetoric:

12 *And Moses sent to call Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, who said, 'We will not come up;*

13 *'Is it a small thing that you have brought us out of a land that flows with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, that you also make yourself a prince over us?*

14 *'Moreover, you have not brought us into a land that flows with milk and honey, or given us inheritance of fields and vineyards. Will you take out the eyes of these men? We will not come up.'*

15 *And Moses was very angry, and said to the Lord, 'Do not respect their offering; I have not taken one ass from them, nor have I hurt one of them'* (Num. 16:12-15).

This table displays the intermixture of words and tones that Moses and Aaron heard as background at the Waters of Meribah.

REPHIDIM (Exodus 17)	KORAH (Numbers 16)	WATERS OF MERIBAH (Numbers 20)
<i>1...in Rephidim; and there was no water for the people to drink.</i>		<i>2 And there was no water for the congregation;</i>
<i>2 Therefore the people complained to Moses</i> <i>3 and the people murmured against Moses</i>	<i>3 And they gathered themselves together against Moses and against Aaron</i>	<i>2 ...and they gathered themselves together against Moses and against Aaron.</i> <i>3 And the people quarreled with Moses, and spoke,</i>
<i>3 to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?</i>	<i>13 ... to kill us in the wilderness</i>	<i>4...that we and our cattle should die there?</i>
	<i>3 . . .Why then do you lift up yourselves above the congregation of the</i>	<i>4 And why have you brought up the congregation of the Lord ...</i>

	<i>Lord?</i>	
	<i>14 Moreover you have not brought us into a land that flows with milk and honey, or given us inheritance of fields and vineyards.</i>	<i>5 . . . This is no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates;</i>

Now we can understand how the distorting influence of transference descended on Moses and Aaron at the Waters of Meribah. It was a case of *déjà vu*. It led to the misperception of Moses and Aaron and their misinterpretation of the situation at the Waters of Meribah as an attack primarily upon themselves. And because of their misperception of another developing rebellion, and the need to support the authority of their leadership, they felt that the focus upon the rod, the proven symbol of their authority in the past, was again necessary: *And Moses lifted up his hand, and with his rod he struck the rock twice* (Num. 20:11).

What must have been especially stressful to Moses and Aaron was that this incident seemed to repeat events of 40 and 38 years in the past, this time carried out by the new generation that had been educated from childhood by Moses and Aaron themselves. However, in reality, they misunderstood the people, who at the Waters of Meribah were neither rebellious nor interested in returning to Egypt. If anything, the people were eagerly anticipating the entrance into the Promised Land, which is the true place of seed, figs, vines, and pomegranates (cf. Num. 20:5).

It would seem that Moses and Aaron did not fully appreciate the educational needs of the people in readying them for the imminent entry into the land of Canaan. It was this latter need that was paramount, however, in the command of God to Moses, to **speak** to the rock so that the people would more readily recognize the action of the Divine rather than attribute the water from the rock to the magical powers of Moses. In an auspicious pronouncement at the end of the Five Books of Moses, God recalls the sin of Moses and Aaron: . . . **M'altem bi** among the people of Israel at the waters of Meribah-Kadesh,

in the wilderness of Zin (Deut. 32:51). The phrase *m'altem bi* is translated as *ye have transgressed against me* (JPS 1916). The term *m'eilah* usually refers to the profanation of consecrated objects of Temple worship. In the present context, however, it indicates an assault against the sanctity of God Himself. Indeed, Sferno on Numbers 20:8 relates to the terminology in Deuteronomy 32:51 and translates *m'altem bi* as *you have profaned My honor*. As suggested in the present paper, the term is used in Deuteronomy with precision, accusing Moses and Aaron of a transformation from the Holy to the profane, from enhancing the authority of the Almighty to supporting the authority of their own temporal power.

As we have seen, the "sin" of Moses and Aaron was an error that originated in an intense emotional transference from previous episodes during the Korah rebellion and in part even from Rephidim. Moses and Aaron did not sin in the classical sense of the word,¹⁴ but they faltered. By responding to their own emotional surge, even unintentionally, rather than the needs of the people in readying them for entrance into the Promised Land, they indicated that they were no longer able to be the people's leaders in Canaan. The punishment indeed seems to fit the crime.

After a remarkable leadership of the people, through events most extraordinary, Moses and Aaron were forced to leave the stage of history. But while they led, their leadership was magnificent. They were the agents of God Himself. As the psalmist sings: *Your way was through the sea, and Your path through the great waters; and Your footsteps were not known. You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron* (Ps. 77:20-21).

And through it all, Moses was all too human. Nevertheless, what greater praise can be said about Moses than God's own eulogy in Deuteronomy concluding the Five Books of Moses:

10 *And there has not arisen since in Israel a prophet like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face,*

11 *In all the signs and the wonders, which the Lord sent him to do in the land of Egypt to Pharaoh, and to all his servants, and to all his land.*

12 *And in all that mighty hand, and in all the great and awesome deeds which Moses performed in the sight of all Israel* (Deut. 34:10-12).

NOTES

1. All translation from Soncino CD ROM.
2. E. Jones, *Papers on Psycho-Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961) Glossary p.500.
3. S. Freud, *Collected Papers*, Vol II (London: Hogarth Press, 1953) Chap. 28 pp.312-322.
4. In Exodus 17:7, three names are mentioned: Rephidim, Maasah, and Meribah. In this article, I shall refer to Rephidim when the text is in Exodus, and Waters of Meribah when the text is in Numbers. Apparently, the Torah is foreshadowing the text in Numbers by the earlier designation in Exodus of the place Rephidim as Meribah.
5. Most classical commentators follow the plain text and interpret the two incidents as different and separate. The *Bekhor Shor*, R. Joseph ben Isaac, however, interprets the narrative as describing a single event (his commentary on Numbers 20:8). So does Jacob Milgrom in the JPS commentary on Numbers p. 21:449-450. The present paper will accept the common view of two incidents separate in time, thereby engendering a transference situation.
6. For a discussion of the staff of Aaron, see Exodus.17:16-25.
7. This is not to be confused with the attack by Dathan and Abiram when they say, *Moreover you have not brought us into a land that flows with milk and honey, or given us inheritance of fields and vineyards* (Num. 16:14). Their statement was a clear reference to Egypt with a cynical association with the Promised Land.
8. The translation of the Exodus/Rephidim narrative reports that *the people complained to Moses* (v. 2), while the Numbers/Waters of Meribah narrative reports that *the people quarreled with Moses* (v. 3). This in itself is spurious translation, however, insofar as the Hebrew word in both verses is identical [*vayirav*].
9. For the staffs of Pharaohs's magicians, see Exodus 7:11-12. Even more obvious is the use of the scepter by Ahasuerus (Est. 5:2).
10. Summaries of classical solutions can be found in Abrabanel (Num. 20:1) and *Or Hahaim* (Num. 20: *Kakh et hamateh*).
11. Ramban, *Commentary on the Torah – Numbers*, trans. C. Chavel (New York: Shiloh Publishing House, 1974) pp. 215-216.
12. For a fuller discussion of these opinions, see Ari Kahn's analysis of the weekly Torah reading in A. Kahn, *Explorations* (Israel: Targum/Feldheim, 2001) pp. 361-365.
13. In the text of the Bible, the 38 years are skipped over, so that as narrative the incident of the Waters of Meribah is recorded almost immediately after the incident of Korah.
14. The word *het* also means to miss, to falter. See Proverbs 19:2.



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