

WHY WAS MOSES BARRED FROM LEADING THE PEOPLE INTO THE PROMISED LAND? A PSYCHOTHEOLOGICAL ANSWER

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In the 40th year of the Israelites' journey in the desert, just as they are about to proceed to conquer the Promised Land, God bars Moses and Aaron from continuing to lead the people (Num. 20:1-13). Denial of entry into the Promised Land was obviously a terrible blow to Moses. What did he do or say that warranted such a harsh verdict?

Both traditional exegetes and modern commentators¹ viewed the exclusion of Moses as punishment for a sin, attributing to him a variety of sins. The multiplication of proposed sins prompted S. D. Luzzato² to state in 1871: "Moses our teacher committed one sin, but the exegetes have piled up on him thirteen sins and more, each of them has invented a new sin." The purpose of this article is to present the thesis that Moses was barred from entering the land not because he committed a sin in the ordinary sense of the term, but because he failed to counteract the people's slide into blasphemy.

THE QUARREL WITH GOD AND THE DEIFICATION OF MOSES

The exclusion verdict occurred when the Israelites were encamped in Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin, and there was no water. The Israelites let out their frustration and anger on Moses and Aaron, as they had done before. In response to the people's complaint, God says to Moses: *'You and your brother Aaron take the rod and assemble the community, and before their very eyes speak to the rock³ [vedibartem el hasela] and it will yield its water'* (Num. 20:8). Moses took the rod and he and Aaron *assembled the congregation in front of the rock; and he said to them: 'Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?'* (Num. 20:10). Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with the rod, and abundant water flowed out (Num. 20:11). God then said to Moses and Aaron: *'Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity [ya'an lo he'emantem bi lehakdisheni] in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation*

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into the land that I have given them' (Num. 20:12). This is the Meribah incident.

Ten complaints of the people are recorded in the books of Exodus and Numbers, the Meribah incident being the ninth. All ten are listed below to provide a context for analyzing the Meribah incident, facilitating a comparison of the language the people used before Meribah as well as after.

1. Fear of pursuing Egyptians (Ex. 14:10-14).
2. Undrinkable bitter water (Ex. 15:22-25).
3. Hunger (Ex. 16:1-35).
4. No water to drink (Ex. 17:1-7).
5. Cause of complaint not specified (Num. 11:1-3).
6. Craving for meat (Num. 11:4-34).
7. Fear engendered by the report of the scouts suggesting that the Israelites will be defeated by the Canaanites (Num. 14:1-45).
8. Anger over death of participants in the Korahite rebellion (Num. 17:1-28).
9. No water to drink (Num. 20:1-13). According to Ibn Ezra and Rashbam (Num. 20:1) this occurred in the 40th year.
10. General malaise occasioned by the need to skirt Edom and thus lengthen the journey (Num. 21:4-9). This occurred in the 40th year (Hizkuni, Num. 21:4).

In all the confrontations the people blame Moses (and Aaron) for taking them out of Egypt into the wretched conditions of desert travel. The people's complaints against Moses and Aaron are characterized (in complaints 2-4, 7-8) by verbs of the root *l-u-n* (mostly *vayilonu*), translated as grumble or rail. In complaint 4 a verb of the root *r-i-v*, translated as quarrel, is used in addition to *l-u-n*. The people also weep (in 6-7).

The verb *r-i-v* is used prominently in complaint 9. The place where this complaint occurred is referred to as *the Waters of Meribath-kadesh in the wilderness of Zin* (Num. 27:14). In the conclusion of this complaint it is stated that the quarrel was with God: *Those are the Waters of Meribah [quarrel] – meaning that the Israelites quarreled with the Lord . . .* (Num. 20:13). But where in the complaint recorded in the text is there mention of quarrel with God? After stating (Num. 20:2) that the community joined against Moses and Aaron, there are three verses detailing the people's complaint. The first (20:3)

says that *the people quarreled with Moses . . .*, the second (20:4) says: '*Why have you [plural] brought the Lord's congregation into this wilderness . . . ?*' This verse refers to Moses and Aaron. The third verse (20:5) says: '*Why did you [plural] make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place . . . ?*'

The Hebrew verb used in the third verse is *he'elitunu* a plural form. The Ibn Ezra calls *he'elitunu* an unusual form, which indeed it is, occurring only here in complaint 9 and in complaint 10. I submit that in this verse the complaint was against God and Moses. The hifil form of the verb *a-l-h*, in the singular form in reference to the Exodus, is used in the Pentateuch (as well as throughout the Jewish Bible) with respect to God (Gen. 50:24, Ex. 3:8, 3:17, Num. 14:13) and with respect to Moses (Ex. 17:3, 32:1, 32:7, 32:23, 33:12, Num. 16:13). It is never used with respect to Moses and Aaron. When referring to the role of Moses and Aaron in the Exodus, the hifil form of *y-tz-a* is used (Ex. 6:13, 6:26-27, 16:3). The difference between hifil *y-tz-a* and hifil *a-l-a* is that the former verb designates a physical act whereas the latter verb also implies causal responsibility. This difference is amply reflected in the JPS translation: *hotzeitem* is translated as "you brought out," while *he'elitunu* is translated as "you made us leave."

The quarrel with God in complaint 9 contrasts with the earlier complaint concerning lack of water (#4) where *the people quarreled with Moses*. '*Give us water to drink*', they said; and Moses replied to them, '*Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you try the Lord?*' (Ex. 17:2). That place was named Massah (Trial) and Meribah (Quarrel), *because the Israelites quarreled and because they tried the Lord, saying: 'Is the Lord present among us or not?'* (Ex. 17:7). Thus, in the earlier water complaint (#4), the people tested whether God will provide for them, but their quarrel was with Moses, whereas here (in #9) it is with God.

Even before the Meribah incident, the people not only tested the Lord, but on occasion they also blamed Him for the Exodus and ensuing difficulties. In complaint 7, occasioned by the negative report of the scouts concerning the Land of Canaan, the people said, '*Why is the Lord taking us to that land to fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be carried off! It would be better for us to go back to Egypt!*' (Num. 14:3). Joshua and Caleb viewed the people's reaction as rebellion against God. Trying to calm the people and reassure them, they said: '*only you must not rebel against the Lord*' (Num.

14:9). But the people themselves, while willing to question God's plan, show some resistance to blaming God. In complaint 8, Moses told the people that through the unnatural death of the participants in the Korahite rebellion (being swallowed up by the earth), *'You shall know that it was the Lord who sent me to do all these things; that they are not of my own devising'* (Num. 16:28). But the people blame Moses and Aaron for the death, saying: *'You two have brought death to the Lord's people!'* (Num. 17:6).

In the Meribah complaint the people accept the view that God is responsible for their difficulties and at the same time they retain their long-held belief that Moses is responsible for their difficulties. What emerges is a partnering of Moses with God, implicit in their use of the plural verb *he'elitunu*. This partnering becomes explicit in the next and final confrontation (#10) where the text states: *And the people spoke against God and against Moses, 'Why did you make us leave [he'elitunu] Egypt to die in the wilderness . . . ?'* (Num. 21:5). In sharp language, Rashi highlights the blasphemous meaning of this verse and his reflexive repugnance of viewing man on a par with God. He says: *vayedaber ha'am be'elohim uve'moshe – hishvu eved lekono* [They have equated a servant with his master]; *lama he'elitunu mimitzraim – shneihem shavim* [The two of them are equal]. Thus, the people's inclination to partner Moses with God, which was implicit in complaint 9, bursts into the open in complaint 10.

This blatant narrowing of the distinction between Moses and God seems to have developed in the course of the events since the Exodus from Egypt. In the introduction to the Song of the Sea, it says: *The people feared the Lord; they had faith in the Lord and his servant Moses* (Ex. 14:31). At this initial point of excitement over the deliverance from Egypt, God is the people's savior; He is the one who is feared and trusted, and Moses is his loyal servant.

What led the people to blur the distinction between Moses and God? The supernatural status of Moses certainly played a role here. When Moses went up to Mount Sinai to receive the tablets, he spent 40 days not eating or drinking (Ex. 34:28). When he descended his face was radiant, causing the people to be afraid to get close to him (Ex. 34:29-30). It is not surprising that the people saw Moses as a divine being. Moses is indeed characterized as unique among the prophets in his closeness to God (Num. 12:6-8, Deut. 34:10). While Moses is being elevated to divine status in the eyes of the people,

God's image as a reliable provider is gradually dissipating in the course of the deprivations encountered in the desert travel.

Thus, at the point of the Meribah incident, the people were on the verge of deifying Moses and blaming God, as well as Moses, for the Exodus and subsequent troubles. My proposal is that God wanted Moses to counteract these blasphemous inclinations of the people. That is why God instructed him to speak in the presence of the whole community; in contrast to the earlier water event in #4 (Ex. 17:1-7) where God asked Moses to hit the rock in the presence of just the elders. In the earlier water event, Moses was not asked to speak. There the sole purpose was to provide water. But here the purpose was to provide water and in the course of this to restore the people's perception of God as the benevolent provider and Moses as His faithful messenger. In God's instructions to Moses it says, '*speak to [el] the rock*' (Num. 20:8). Ramban interprets the word *el* as having the meaning of *al* (i.e., about), citing Jeremiah 27:19 where the article *el* is used in parallel with *al*. Margaliot⁴ gives more examples of the use of *el* with the meaning of *al*. Milgrom⁵ provides theoretical reasons why Moses could not have been commanded to actually speak to the rock: This would have transformed the miracle into a magical performance. Milgrom notes that in all the miracles that Moses performed he never spoke.

What did God want Moses to say to the assembled community? We might assume that Moses was expected to recognize that the people were partnering him with God (implicit in *he'elitunu*) and say something to negate this perception and prevent it from turning into open blasphemy, as it does in complaint 10. Ramban (Num. 20:7) endorses the view of Rabbi Hananel that Moses and Aaron were expected to say that "God will get water for you from this rock." What Moses did say was: '*Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?*' (Num. 20:10). By *we* Moses presumably referred to himself and Aaron as God's agents. But he was not sensitive to the fact that in *he'elitunu* the people had partnered him with God, and were therefore likely to interpret the ambiguous *we* in the rhetorical question as referring to God and himself. Thus, by using the ambiguous *we* Moses reinforced the people's slide into blasphemy, instead of reversing it. He failed *lehakdisheni*, to assert God's exclusive sanctity. Furthermore, Moses' use of a question form allowed the people to think that he and Aaron did not fully trust [*ya'an lo he'emantem*

bi] that God will indeed provide water for them. The view that Moses' failure was in what he did and didn't say is consistent with the statement in Psalms: *because they* [the people] *rebelled against Him and he* [Moses] *spoke rashly* (106:33). We will discuss later why Moses did not rise to the occasion; for now we will focus on the consequences for Moses (and Aaron).

The reason given for the exclusion of Moses and Aaron from entering the Promised Land is '*Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity* [ya'an lo he'emantem bi lehakdisheni] *in the sight of the Israelite people*' (Num. 20:12). Moses is blamed for his failure of *lehakdisheni* in the eyes of the Israelites, for not affirming *publically* God's exclusive divinity. He is faulted for ignoring his being partnered with God in the verb *he'elitunu*. As Saadiah Gaon (Deut. 32:51) emphasizes, Moses is not faulted for his lack of faith in God's exclusive sanctity, but for allowing the people to have this belief. Indeed, it is noteworthy that in subsequent references to the exclusion of Moses, the perspective of the people is mentioned (Num. 27:14). At the end of Deuteronomy when Moses is instructed to ascend the heights of Abarim to Mount Nebo to die there (Deut. 32:49), the public aspect of the failure in the Meribah incident is mentioned twice in the same verse: '*for you both broke faith with Me* [ma'altam bi] *among the Israelite people . . . by failing to uphold my sanctity* [velo kidashtem oti] *among the Israelite people*' (Deut. 32:51).

The key feature of my thesis is that Moses was excluded from leading the people into the Promised Land because he failed to prevent the people from partnering him with God in regard to blame for the Exodus and in regard to credit for providing water. Moses failed to do this because he was insensitive to the beliefs of the people. And Aaron, even though he was close to the people, failed to counsel Moses concerning the way he was perceived by the people.

Milgrom⁶ also focused the failure of Moses on the rhetorical question '*shall we get water for you out of this rock?*' He posited that by *we* Moses and Aaron actually referred to themselves and thus committed heresy. Taking into consideration the designation of Moses as *ne'eman* [trusted] (Num. 12:7) and as the greatest prophet who will ever arise in Israel (Deut. 34:10), it does not seem reasonable to assume that he would commit heresy. In view of the repeated reference to the public nature of the words of Moses and Aaron to the

people, it seems more reasonable to assume that by *we* Moses and Aaron meant *we* as agents of God, but the people, having partnered Moses with God (in *he'elitunu*), mistakenly interpreted the *we* as referring to God and Moses.

THE ALIENATION OF MOSES FROM THE PEOPLE

Why did Moses not speak to the people in a way that would affirm God's exclusive divinity and assure them that God will have the rock yield water for them? The answer, I believe, is that Moses was so alienated from the people that he was insensitive to their state of mind, even when it was expressed verbally in *he'elitunu*. He had a confrontational relationship with the people. Almost from the start of the desert sojourn Moses appears exasperated by the constant bickering of the people. Thus, in the first water complaint (#4), Moses shows little sympathy for the people's plight: He *cried out to the Lord, saying, 'What shall I do with this people? Before long they will be stoning me!'* (Ex. 17:4). In complaint 6 (Num. 11:4-24), where the people express gluttonous craving for meat, Moses is completely demoralized, saying to God, *'I cannot carry all this people by myself, for it is too much for me. If You would deal thus with me, kill me rather, I beg You, and let me see no more of my wretchedness!'* (Num. 11:14-15). Indeed, how can a person who for 40 days goes without any food have sympathy for people who weep because they miss eating meat?! And in complaint 9 that we are analyzing, the text notes that *Moses and Aaron came away from the congregation to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting . . .* (Num. 20:6). Saadia Gaon and Ibn Ezra interpret their action as running away from the people in fear. Moses was so enraged by the people's request for water that he calls them "rebels."

Being a superhuman individual, Moses was unable to find a way to the hearts and minds of ordinary people. God's harsh verdict at the Meribah incident seems to have jolted Moses and made him become cognizant of his social limitations. After God tells Moses to ascend the heights of Abarim to view the land given to the Israelites and then die there (Num. 27:12-13), Moses asks God to appoint a successor, saying: *'Yifkod adonai elohei haruhot lekhol basar ish al haedah'* (Num. 27:16). *Elohei haruhot* is an unusual appellation for God, it appears only once more, in Numbers 16:22. Rashi comments that what Moses said to God was: You are *elohei haruhot*, You know that people differ psychologically from one another, appoint a leader who

will be sensitive to the individuality of each person. God responds: Joshua bin Nun meets your specifications. He is *ish asher ruah bo* (Num. 27:18). Joshua is a person who knows how to deal with people.

Joshua was indeed the right person for the intensely interactional job of conquering the land and dividing it. The contrast between his interaction with the people and Moses' could not be more striking. After the conquest of Jericho a person named Achan took some items from the spoils, which was forbidden. Listen to how Joshua talks to Achan: *'My son [bni], pay honor to the Lord . . . and make confession to Him . . .'* (Josh. 7:19). Joshua addresses one individual who violated God's command as *bni*. In contrast, Moses addresses a whole congregation, whose only fault was that they asked for water, as *hamorim* (the rebels).

GOD'S EXCLUSIVE SANCTITY AFFIRMED FOR THE PEOPLE

The verdict preventing Moses from leading the people into the Promised Land was designed to convey the message that despite Moses' intimacy with God, he was a mortal human being subject to God's rule. While Moses had privileged access to God, he was only a go-between and could not make things happen, good or bad. The verdict in complaint 9 affirmed God's exclusive sanctity, as it says at the conclusion of this event, *Those are the Waters of Meribah . . . through which He affirmed His sanctity* (Num. 20:13).

It is not stated how and when the message of God's exclusivity was disseminated to the people and internalized by them. It seems, however, that incident 10 constituted a turning point in this regard. This incident is recorded in the narrative (Num. 21:4-9) after the death (and public mourning) of Aaron (Num. 20:22-29), which constituted the first effect of the exclusion decree. In #10, the people, exhausted by the seemingly interminable desert travel with shortages of food and water, spoke openly against God, as well as Moses (Num. 21:5). As a punishment: *The Lord sent seraph serpents against the people. They bit the people and many of the Israelites died* (Num. 21:6). The people then approached Moses and asked him to pray to God to remove the serpents. In response to Moses' intercession, God told him what to do to stop the biting. Moses had interceded before on behalf of the people, but this is the first and only time that the people asked him to pray on their behalf. This suggests that the people understood that their fate was fully in the power of

God and all that Moses could do is advocate for them. One can only speculate as to why the message of the exclusion of Moses was not assimilated sooner. It takes time for individuals and groups to change their attitudes. Since both #9 and #10 occurred in the 40th year, the gap between the exclusion decree and the people's appreciation of its meaning was only a matter of months.

The present thesis that the exclusion of Moses and Aaron was designed to restore the people's faith in God's exclusivity is consistent with the statements by Moses in his parting address to the people and by the view expressed by the Psalmist:

1. *'Because of you [biglalkhem] the Lord was incensed with me too, and He said: You shall not enter it [the Promised Land] either'* (Deut. 1:37).

2. *'But the Lord was wrathful with me on your account [lema'ankhem]'* (Deut. 3:26).

3. *They provoked wrath at the waters of Meribah and Moses suffered on their account [ba'avuram]* (Ps.106:32).

The conjunctive *biglalkhem* means "because of you." The two other conjunctives – *lema'ankhem* and *ba'avuram* – can mean⁷ either: "because of you" (or "because of them" in the case of *ba'avuram*) or "for your sake" (or "for their sake"). According to the present analysis, both meanings are appropriate. It is because of the people's deification of Moses that he was excluded, and he was excluded for their sake so that they will regain belief in God's exclusivity.

THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF THE PRESENT INTERPRETATION

My thesis concerning the exclusion of Moses (and Aaron) has four elements. The first element is that the exclusion and death of Moses were designed to re-establish God's exclusive sanctity and authority to provide benefits and punishments to people. Even Moses, who had an intimate relationship with God, was not immune from God's judgment. The second element of my proposal is that the re-establishment of God's exclusivity was necessary because the people were sliding into blasphemy by implicitly partnering Moses with God as responsible for the Exodus. This was evident in their use of the verb *he'elitunu*. Third, God's harsh verdict was made necessary by the failure of Moses to speak to the people in a way that would reverse their

blasphemous inclination. Instead, Moses asked an ambiguous rhetorical question that reinforced the people's blasphemous tendency. Lastly, Moses' failure to speak as God expected him was due to his alienation from the people.

Previous commentators, both traditional and modern, have not brought into the picture the psychological dynamics of the relationship between Moses and the people. In the analysis offered here the exclusion of Moses was made necessary by the people's partnering him with God, and was meant to restore the people's belief in God's exclusivity.

NOTES

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1. E.g., M. Margaliot, "Het moshe veaharon bemei meribah" *Beth Mikra* 19 (1974) pp. 374-400; J. Milgrom, "Magic, Monotheism and the Sin of Moses," in H. B. Huffmon, F. A. Spina, and A. R. W. Green (eds.) *The Quest for the Kingdom of God: Studies in Honor of George E. Mendenhall* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1983), pp. 251-265; P. Kahn, "Moses at the Waters of Meribah: A Case of Transference" *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 35:2 (2007) pp. 85-93; W. Lee, "The Exclusion of Moses from the Promised Land: A Conceptual Approach," in M. A. Sweeney and E. Ben Zvi (eds.) *The Changing Face of Form Criticism for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 217-239.
2. Shadal on Num. 20:12.
3. This is the author's literal translation of the Hebrew text. All other translations in the article are from the new JPS.
4. Margaliot, *ibid.*, p. 381.
5. J. Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), pp. 453-454.
6. Milgrom, *op. cit.*, see note 1, p. 262.
7. A. Even-Shoshan, *Concordantzia Hadashah LeTorah Nevi'im Ukhtuvim* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1993).