

# A Comment on Moses, Aaron, the Rock, and the Water

## Ashby Camp

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Early in the Exodus, before Israel was judged by God to remain in the wilderness for 40 years (Num. 14:26-35), the people quarreled with and grumbled against Moses at Rephidim in the wilderness of Sin over the lack of water. Moses cried to the Lord, who instructed him in Ex. 17:5-6: "Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. <sup>6</sup> Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders, and he named the place Massah (testing) and Meribah (quarreling) (17:6-7). Decades later, a similar event occurred in Kadesh Barnea (Num. 20:1-12), which location became known as Meribah Kadesh (Num. 27:14; Deut. 32:51; Ezek. 47:19, 48:28).

In Num. 20:1-5, the people assembled against Moses and Aaron and quarreled with Moses about him having led them to a terrible place that lacked water. Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces at the entrance to the tent of meeting, and the Lord spoke to Moses (20:6-7). He commanded Moses to take the staff, and he commanded both Moses and Aaron to assemble the congregation and to speak to the rock before their eyes, which would thereafter yield its water (20:8a). By the two of them doing what they were told, Moses would bring water from the rock and provide water for the people and their cattle (20:8b).<sup>1</sup> In other words, this was Moses' operation, under the authority of God and with Aaron's participation.

Moses took the staff, as he had been commanded, and he and Aaron assembled the congregation, as they had been commanded. And then, instead of both Moses and Aaron speaking to the rock, neither of them did so. Rather, Moses spoke to the people in anger. He called them rebels, asked rhetorically, "Must we bring water for you out of this rock?" and struck the rock twice. For this, both Moses and Aaron were denied entry into the promised land.

God explains that in this episode both Moses and Aaron rebelled against his command/word (Num. 20:24, 27:14). Since they obeyed his commands about taking the staff and gathering the people, the command they disobeyed, the only other command given, was the command to speak to the rock (Num. 20:8a). Instead, Moses substituted his own judgment for

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<sup>1</sup> Note the use of singular and plural in Num. 20:6-12: <sup>6</sup> Then Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting and fell on their faces. And the glory of the LORD appeared to them, <sup>7</sup> and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>8</sup> "Take [singular] the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and speak [plural] to the rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. So you shall bring [singular] water out of the rock for them and give drink [singular] to the congregation and their cattle." <sup>9</sup> And Moses took the staff from before the LORD, as he commanded him. <sup>10</sup> Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said [singular] to them, "Hear now, you rebels: must we bring water for you out of this rock?" <sup>11</sup> And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock. <sup>12</sup> And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe [plural] in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring [plural] this assembly into the land that I have given them."

how the water should be provided in light of the people's complaining, a method that cast the provision as a rebuke (and possibly as something under Moses' and Aaron's authority), and Aaron remained silent. God also says about this event that Moses and Aaron did not believe in him (Num. 20:12), broke faith with him (Deut. 32:51), and did not treat him as holy in the midst of the people (Num. 20:12, 27:14; Deut. 32:51).

Moses and Aaron did not believe in God, which is to break faith with him, in the sense they did not believe that he knew best how the water should be provided to the people in that situation. They felt his instruction needed modification under the circumstances to express anger toward the people for their quarreling and complaining. Thus, Moses took it on himself to rebuke the people as rebels, asked condemningly if their faith was so shallow that an immediate miraculous provision of water was necessary to end their grumbling, and struck the rock twice with the staff, apparently in exasperation. In doing this, Moses and Aaron did not treat God as holy, uphold him as holy in the eyes of the people, meaning they did not show him the honor, reverence, and obedience he is due as the ultimate holy one, the ultimate in transcendence, glory, power, and purity.

God provided the people with water from the rock despite Moses' and Aaron's disobedience, presumably to protect their leadership at a tense time by avoiding any impression that he had abandoned them. But he was displeased with their actions. As a punishment, they were excluded from entering the promised land.

It is true that Moses' sin was precipitated by the people's rebellion (Ps. 106:32), but for Moses to suggest that his exclusion from the promised land was because the Lord was angry with him on account of the people (Deut. 1:37, 3:26, 4:21) ignores his personal culpability. Yes, they drove him to his action and were wrong in doing so, but being driven to sin is not an excuse for sin. He and Aaron disobeyed the Lord's command, albeit under stress, and were judged accordingly.