

SHORT STUDY

WHY DID MOSES STRIKE OUT? THE NARRATIVE-GEOGRAPHICAL SHAPING OF MOSES' DISQUALIFICATION IN NUMBERS 20:1-13

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I. Introduction

Moses is the man whom God used to bring the Israelites out of their captivity in Egypt. He leads them into freedom through the sea, and we fully expect him to lead the Israelites through the Jordan River into the Promised Land. But suddenly and dramatically that hope is extinguished. Moses strikes a rock and is immediately disqualified from leading the Israelites to their geographical goal. The story of Moses' disqualification raises many difficult questions. Whose staff was used to strike the rock, that of Moses or that of Aaron? Why did Moses strike the rock twice? What was Aaron's role in this spiritual fiasco? But the most arresting question is the one raised here. Why did Moses strike out? What did this hero of Israel do that disqualified him from entering the Promised Land? Scholars old and new have wrestled with this question. Yet the passage of time has done little to overcome the enigma associated with this disqualification. In his day, Rambam called this matter one of the most difficult problems of the Torah.¹ Seven hundred and fifty years later Arden calls it "the most enigmatic incident of the Torah."²

This article will investigate Numbers 20 through the lens of narrative geography to determine what this approach may contribute to the conversation about this story. Narrative geography is distinct from both physical geography and historical geography. Physical geography investigates the topography, geology, hydrology, climate, forestation, land use, urbanization, and transportation associated with a place.³ Historical geography examines the role such physical geography plays in the shaping of history and culture.⁴ Narrative geography,

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¹ Nahmanides, *Commentary of the Torah By Rambam* (New York: Shilo Publishing House, 1975), 213.

² Eugene Arden, "How Moses Failed God," *JBL* 76 (1957): 50. Arden further observes that this text is so difficult because of its inconsistency. It is inconsistent with the heroics of Moses and inconsistent with God's previous responses to Moses' other outbursts.

³ Barry J. Beitzel, *The Moody Bible Atlas* (Chicago: Moody, 1985), 25-69.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xv.

however, analyzes the literary function of geographical references within a story. It acknowledges that the author may strategically use, reuse, and nuance geography in order to influence the reading experience. Of course, as Longman acknowledges, the choice of setting was restricted to where events actually occurred. Nevertheless, "these authors controlled the selectivity of detail in the description of settings, requiring the reader to pay close attention to these textual signals."⁵ Thus Bar-Efrat concludes that "places in the narrative are not merely geographical facts, but are to be regarded as literary elements in which fundamental significance is embodied."⁶

Why did Moses strike out? What did he do that merited such a significant judgment? We will begin by briefly surveying the traditional solutions offered by both Jewish and Christian scholars before moving into the narrative-geographical analysis of this text that will illuminate both why Moses struck out literally against the rock and why this caused him to strike out metaphorically as the Israelites' leader.

II. Traditional Solutions

Why was Moses disqualified? Medieval Jewish scholars worked this question very aggressively. Their thoughtful inquiry provides the ten answers most frequently given to explain the disqualification of Moses.⁷ Each of these solutions assumes that we are dealing with an intact and coherent text.⁸

(1) One possible answer to the question is that there is, in fact, no answer given in this text. In other words, the author has intentionally reproduced this event in a way that obscures the nature of Moses' sin, thereby preventing an explicit sin from tarnishing the reputation of this great leader.⁹ (2) Moses spoke rashly and harshly to the people (Ps 106:32-33).¹⁰ (3) Although God instructed

⁵ Tremper Longman III, "Biblical Narrative," in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* (ed. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 75.

⁶ Shimon Bar-Efrat, *The Art of Biblical Literature* (JSOT Bible and Literature Series 17; Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1989), 194. See also John A. Beck, "The Storyteller and Narrative Geography," in *Translators As Storytellers: A Study in Translation Technique* (Studies in Biblical Literature 25; New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 165-96; idem, "Geography and the Narrative Shape of Numbers 13," *BSac* 157 (2000): 271-80; idem, "Faith in the Face of Famine: The Narrative-Geographical Function of Famine in Genesis," *The Journal of Biblical Storytelling* 11 (2001): 58-66.

⁷ Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society; 1990), 448.

⁸ Martin Noth suggested that Numbers 20 is merely a retelling of Exodus 17 that is designed to explain why Moses did not enter the Promised Land. This retelling is assigned to the Priestly source. Martin Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 145-46. See also Philip J. Budd, *Numbers* (WBC 2; Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1984), 216.

⁹ Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers*, 448; John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch As Narrative* (Library of Biblical Interpretation; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 396-97; and Dennis T Olson, *Numbers* (Interpretation, Louisville: John Knox, 1996), 128.

¹⁰ Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers*, 448; Eugene Arden, "How Moses Failed God," 52; and C. E. Keil and E. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: The Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950-56), 130-31.

Moses to strike the rock once, he struck the rock twice.¹¹ (4) Moses sinned when he asked, "Shall we bring out water for you from this rock?" The question could either reflect doubt or reluctance on the part of Moses.¹² (5) A fifth explanation focuses upon the personal pronoun "we." "Shall we bring water for you from this rock?" If the "we" is a reference to Moses and Aaron, then this pronoun becomes the fatal pronoun through which Moses ascribes miraculous powers to himself and to Aaron.¹³ (6) Moses was distracted by the death of his sister and showed callous indifference to the thirst of the people.¹⁴ (7) Moses was afraid of the people and fled to the sanctuary of the Lord rather than facing them in their tracks.¹⁵ (8) Moses selected a rock other than the one the people wanted.¹⁶ According to one Jewish tradition, the rebels criticize Moses with these words: "Moses knows the properties of this particular rock! If he wishes to prove his miraculous powers, let him bring out water for us from this other one."¹⁷ (9) Moses struck the rock rather than speaking to it.¹⁸ (10) It was the people's sin, not the sin of Moses, which precipitated the divine judgment. Moses himself observes, "The Lord became angry with me because of you" (Dent 1:37).¹⁹ These are the ten explanations most frequently given for Moses' disqualification. If nothing else, these wide-ranging and distinctive answers point to the enduring challenge associated with this text. And the lack of consensus invites further reflection so that we might know, "Why did Moses strike out?"

III. The Geography of the Wilderness of Zin

We will now inquire into the contribution that narrative geography may make when answering this question. Narrative geography analyzes the careful mention of geography by the author in order to investigate its strategic influence on the reading process. This analysis begins by placing the story within the geographical context indicated by the author.

¹¹ A variety of reasons are given for this second blow See Nahmanides, *Commentary of the Torah By Rambam*, 218; Solomon Fisch, ed., *Midrash Ha-Gadol. Number*, (Jerusalem: Kiryath Sepher and , Sivan, 1957), 759; M. Margaliot, "The Transgression of Moses and Aaron," *JQR* 74 (1983): 221.

¹² Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 383-85. See also Milgrom, *Numbers*, 448; Eryl W Davies, *Numbers* (New Century Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 205; Baruch Levine, *Numbers: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 4A; New York: Doubleday), 490; and M. Margaliot, "The Transgression of Moses and Aaron," 213-14.

¹³ Jacob Milgrom, "Magic, Monotheism and the Sin of Moses," in *The Quest for the Kingdom of God* (ed. H. B. Huffman and A. R. W Green; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 258. See also Nahmanides, *Commentary of the Torah By Rambam*, 215; and Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, 383.

¹⁴ Milgrom, *Numbers*, 448.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Fisch, ed., *Midrash Ha-Gadol. Numbers* 758.

¹⁸ Milgrom reports on this view (*Numbers*, 448), but he also critiques it saying that Moses could not have been ordered to speak to the rock alone since this would make his act look like the incantations associated with pagan magic (*Numbers*, 454). See also John Sturdy, *Numbers: A Commentary* (CBC; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 140.

¹⁹ See also Dent 3:26 and 4:21.

The writer sets this particular story within the Wilderness of Zin (Num 20:1). But when the early Christian pilgrims report their visits to the site of this miracle, we find them in locations outside the traditional boundaries of the Wilderness of Zin. For example, Egeria visits the site of the miracle while traveling to visit Mt. Nebo. She says that she visited this unique rock while on the northeast side of the Dead Sea.²⁰ Later European pilgrims visited another traditional site associated with this miracle located in the northwestern portion of the Sinai Peninsula approximately one hundred miles northeast of Cairo.²¹ Both of these traditional sites are located some distance from the area that biblical geographers typically associate with the Wilderness of Zin. They appear to be traditional worship sites conveniently located for visiting pilgrims who are traveling to other nearby worship sites. Thus their connection to the authentic location is highly suspect. By contrast, biblical geographers use texts like Num 13:21 and 34:3-4 to place the Wilderness of Zin between Beersheba and Kadesh-Barnea just north of the Wilderness of Paran and between the Arabah and the Mediterranean Sea.²² The topography of this region is rugged and forbidding. A land of "bare landscapes, bold colors and fiery bright light,"²³ a land "that is hostile to humans"²⁴ whose entire surface is irregular, "running up here and down there into intolerable hills and all seamed with stony torrent beds."²⁵ Geologically, this rugged moonscape is generally layered with softer limestone rising above harder limestone.²⁶

Those who cross this barren wilderness will find it to be nearly waterless²⁷ with only meager vegetation presenting itself after a rain shower.²⁸ And that rain is scarce, totaling only about four inches per year at the highest elevations.²⁹ The rain that is absorbed percolates down through the softer layers of limestone until it encounters the harder, impermeable layers beneath. The water then runs laterally through the rock and in various places breaks out of the hillsides as a spring.³⁰ This is the barren, rugged, and waterless landscape faced by Moses and the Israelites in Numbers 20.

²⁰ John Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels* (3d ed.; Westminster, England: Aris and Phillips Ltd., 1999), 120.

²¹ Bellarmino Basgati, ed., *Visit to the Holy Places of Egypt, Sinai, Palestine and Syria in 1384 by Frescobaldi, Gucci and Sigoli* (Studium Biblicum Franciscanum 6; Jerusalem: Franciscan Press, 1948), 55, 100, and 101; Nicolo of Poggibonsi, *A Voyage Beyond the Seas* (Studium Biblicum Franciscanum 2; Jerusalem: Franciscan Press, 1945), 100.

²² Yohanan Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible: A Historical Geography* (Philadelphia: Westminster; 1967), 31; Nelson Glueck, *Rivers in the Desert: A History of the Negev* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1959), 34; Levine, *Numbers*, 487; and Milgrom, *Numbers*, 102.

²³ Glueck, *Rivers in the Desert*, 15.

²⁴ Beitzel, *The Moody Bible Atlas*, 37.

²⁵ C. Leonard Woolley and T E. Lawrence, *The Wilderness of Zin* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1936), 70.

²⁶ Efraim Orni and Elisha Efras, *Geography of Israel* (3d ed.; Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973), 24.

²⁷ George Turner, *Historical Geography of the Holy Land* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 292.

²⁸ George Smith, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 280.

²⁹ Orni and Efrat, *Geography of Israel*, 27.

³⁰ Arie Issar, *Water Shall Flow from the Rock: Hydrology and Climate in the Lands of the Bible* (New York: Springer, 1990), 119.

IV. Narrative Geography and Numbers 20

The author of our story employs reference to the geography noted above in the telling of this story. It is used to create tension in the plot and clarify the act of Moses that disqualified him from entering the Promised Land.

First of all, geography provides the tension that enlivens the plot of this story. The author places the word "water" (מַיִם) in over half of the verses in this story. In an ironic twist, that abundance of water in the text contrasts markedly with the lack of water faced by the thirsty Israelites. The narrator announces that there is no water for the community (20:2). Then the people bring this grievance to Moses in vv 4-5. "Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord to this wilderness to die, both we and our animals? Why did you lead us up from Egypt to bring us to this wicked place? There is no agriculture here, no fig tree, vine, or pomegranate. And there is no water to drink." Their complaint is constructed of many components. But they are all linked by and focused on the last phrase. There is no water. This lack of water provides the conflict that draws the reader in and calls for resolution as the plot unfolds.

The reader is led to anticipate that the resolution to this conflict will come from a rock (סֶלֶע). The unique choice of vocabulary invites more careful attention. This particular word for rock is used seven times in the Torah. Five of those seven times occur within this story. And all seven seem to have an association with the region we are studying.³² The writer could have used the more generic word for rock (סֶלֶע) that is used eighty-eight times in the Torah or the word צוּר that is used sixteen times in the Torah. The former would call no special attention to itself: The latter seems to be associated with the harder rock of Sinai or Moab (Exodus 17; 33:21-22; Num 23:9; and Deut 8:15). Given this, the choice of סֶלֶע is not serendipitous but strategic. Furthermore, this unique choice of vocabulary also helps distinguish this story from the story told in Exodus 17. In Numbers 20, Moses is to speak to the סֶלֶע in order to provide water for the people. In Exodus 17, Moses is to strike a צוּר in order to provide water for the people.³³ Thus the careful reader of the Torah presumes that there is something unique about this rock in Numbers 20 that will contribute to the resolution of this conflict.

The story seems to have reached its climactic moment when Moses strikes the rock and it produces water. But an even more arresting moment occurs at 20:12 when the author tells us that Moses has been disqualified as leader of the people because he failed to trust and to sanctify the Lord before the eyes of the Sons of

³¹ Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, 380.

³² Num 24:21 associates the Kenites with this word for rock. The Kenites are said to live in the Negev (Judg 1:16 and 1 Sam 27:10). The use in Deut 32:13 may well be an allusion to the events of Numbers 20.

³³ Ashley notes that it is details like this that make the two stories so distinct as to refute the claim of Noth and others that this is really the same story told by two different authors. Compare Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, 378-79; and Noth, *Numbers*, 145-46.

Israel.³⁴ Some contend that the true nature of Moses' failure is deliberately suppressed.³⁵ But if the geographical clues left by the author are carefully observed, the sin of Moses comes into view.

God's directions are clearly stated in our text at 20:8. Moses is to take the staff, assemble the people, and speak to the rock. Instead he assembles the people, speaks to the people, and strikes the rock with his staff. In doing this, "he prevented the full power and might of Yahweh from being evident to the people."³⁶ But why would striking the rock do that? The selection of the word **עלע** here provides the interpretive clue. Let's return to the geology of the region to deepen our understanding of this lexical choice.

Rainwater that gravity forced through the soft upper courses of limestone would dissolve and transport components of that soft chalk down through the upper strata. This mixture of water and chalk would settle through the upper layers of limestone until it reached a less permeable layer. The water would then flow laterally and would, at times, exit the rock face. As the water flowed from the rock, evaporation would occur leaving behind crystals that had formerly been dissolved in the water. Given enough time and the right conditions, a mineral cap would form sealing off the flow. Of course, water would continue to collect behind its former effusion point under increasing pressure. This hidden water resource awaited the blow from a shrewd water seeker who knew how to read the rock.³⁷ A sharp blow would break the mineral cap and cause water to flow from a rock.

Some have argued that there would have been no difference between speaking to and striking the rock.³⁸ Milgrom says, "If Moses was told to obtain water out of the rock by striking it (as he did in Exodus 17), how could he not but strike it again when asked to repeat the miracle (Numbers 20)?"³⁹ But these stories occur in two different geological environments. In Exodus 17, the Israelites are standing before impermeable granite. Given the properties of this rock, no amount of sustained striking could ever hope to produce water. Thus God instructs Moses to strike the rock and produce a miracle giving glory to God. By contrast, one could expect to get water from a rock in the Wilderness of Zin by striking it. Thus God instructs Moses to speak to the rock and produce a miracle giving glory to God. Moses sinned by failing to trust God.⁴⁰

Perhaps as Moses looked at the angry crowd pressing against him, he thought it unwise to risk a new paradigm. What would happen to him if he spoke to the

³⁴ See also Num 27:14 and Deut 32:5 1.

³⁵ John H. Sailhamer, "The Mosaic Law and the Theology of the Pentateuch," *WTJ* 53 (1991): 259.

³⁶ Budd, *Numbers*, 218.

³⁷ Bedouin living in this region still bring water from a rock by excavating this type of mineral cap. Issar, *Water Shall Flow from the Rock*, 121. See also Julius H. Greenstone, *The Holy Scriptures: Numbers with Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1939), 213.

³⁸ Nahmanides, *Commentary of the Torah By Rarnbam*, 211.

³⁹ Milgrom, "Magic, Monotheism and the Sin of Moses," 253.

⁴⁰ I am indebted to Dr. James Martin of Bible World Seminars who first suggested this understanding to me during our time in Israel.

rock and no water came out? So rather than speaking to the rock, he selects an approach that by human standards seems more prudent. Earlier he had struck a rock and produced water (Exodus 17). And here in the Wilderness of Zin, he knows something about the character of this rock. This is clearly implied in the Midrash. "The rebels began to say, 'Moses knows the natural properties of this particular rock!'"⁴¹ So instead of speaking to the rock, he strikes the rock. This act produces water but does not demonstrate or solicit faith. In this act, he defies the direction of God, demonstrates his lack of faith, and brings glory to himself rather than to the Lord. That is why Moses struck out.

⁴¹ Fisch, ed., *Midrash Ha-Gadol. Numbers*, 758.

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