

A PUZZLE IN THE PENTATEUCH ?

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Ancient and contemporary exegetes never fail to mention the fact that understanding the sin of Aaron is one of the most difficult Gordian knots to untie. His sin is the least explicable in Numbers 20:1-13 because, even though he was physically present, he was not personally involved in the episode of Moses striking the rock. Yet, after the whole incident, he is forbidden by God to lead the people into the Promised Land. He seems to have been an innocent bystander. How, then, can we account for his sin? Many exegetes simply say: We do not know.

The attempts by exegetes to solve this pentateuchal puzzle have produced many different answers, yet none of them has been accepted as satisfactory by a majority of scholars. Some exegetes are inclined to view the sin of Aaron as inaction and silence during the entire episode.¹ Others maintain that it is cowardice. Another suggests that it is an abdication of his leadership during this time of crisis.² It has also been suggested that Aaron sins by default by associating with Moses in that episode.³ In other words, Aaron happens to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. On the other hand, it could have been an etiological explanation for his not entering into the Promised Land.⁴ Another possible explanation for the punishment of Aaron is Divine caprice.⁵

It has also been ingeniously argued that the sin of Aaron must be located elsewhere; in the incident of the golden calf in Exodus 32, rather than in Numbers 20. There, Aaron, by making the calf, causes the Israelites to commit the sin of worshipping it. He is instrumental in bringing about a tragedy and, in effect, causing the death of thousands of Israelites who perished either by the sword or in the plague that followed. Furthermore, because of his act many people did not enter the land of Israel. According to this view, God showed consideration for Aaron by not making his punishment known at the same time that the other Israelites are punished, and postponed it until the later occasion.⁶

In our opinion, all the above explanations are unsatisfactory and textually untenable because they go against the very grain of the text. Exegetes have some-

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how failed to engage in a close reading of the text and to take notice of the grammatical construction in the Hebrew narrative. It is clear in Numbers 20:1-13 that:

1. The people were against Moses and Aaron.
2. Moses and Aaron went to the Tent of the Meeting to seek God.
3. God then gave a set of specific instruction to Moses:

'You and your brother Aaron take the rod and assemble the community, and before their very eyes order the rock to yield its water. Thus you shall produce water for them from the rock and provide drink for the congregation and their beasts' (v. 8).

4. Aaron is equally guilty. Three references to Moses and Aaron at Meribah, use the plural pronoun: *you* [בְּכֶם] *have disobeyed* (20:24); *you* [בְּכֶם] *disobeyed* (27:13-14), and *you* [בְּכֶם] *both broke faith* (Deut. 32:50-51). When God gives the command to speak to the rock, He emphasises *You* [Moses] *and your brother Aaron* [Num. 20:8]. This suggests strongly that Aaron is implicated in the entire incident. Aaron was ordered to speak to the rock along with Moses, and failed to do it.

Earlier, in Exodus 4:15, he was told: *'You* [Aaron] *shall speak to him* [Moses] *and put the words in his mouth – I will be with you and with him as you speak, and tell both of you what to do.* In the Scripture, Aaron's task seems to be linked to Moses (Ex. 6:13,7:8,9:8,12:1; Lev. 11:1; Num. 14:26,16:20,19:1), rarely to him alone (Lev. 10:8; Num. 18:1, 8).⁷ While Moses did what he was not supposed to do [striking the rock],⁸ Aaron did not do what he was supposed to [speak to the rock]. The former was guilty of sin of commission, and the latter guilty of the sin of omission. Aaron should have spoken to the rock on behalf of Moses and himself.

But he stood by, said nothing, did nothing, did not interfere when Moses rebuked the assembly. Aaron remained mute when he should have spoken. He should have told Moses that he would speak to the rock on his behalf, before Moses took action with his staff. Aaron as the brother of Moses had an obligation to stop Moses from striking the rock.

As an appointed spokesman, Aaron also had the responsibility to keep Moses from calling the people rebels. But he did not. The act of Moses in striking the Nile water in Exodus 7:19-20 is understood explicitly as an act of obedience by both, so also in Numbers 20 the act of one (again Moses) is explicitly regarded

as an act of disobedience by both.⁹ Since Aaron failed to carry out his responsibility and he also failed to heed God's instruction, in the light of his appointed task he is no less guilty than Moses.¹⁰

In our considered judgment, Aaron is not innocent in the light of the textual data.¹¹ In sum, it seems clear that Aaron was as guilty as Moses. He was punished because he did not carry out the instruction of God; that is, to speak to the rock (Num. 20:8).¹² That act is to be interpreted as rebellion against God (cf. I Sam. 15:23). Textually, intratextually and intertextually, we believe this is the most satisfactory answer.¹³

NOTES

1. Norman Asher, "Why was Aaron punished?", *Dor le Dor* 18 (1989-1990) pp. 44-45.
2. Jeffrey M. Cohen, "The Striking of the Rock," *Dor le Dor* 12 (1984) p. 158.
3. William H. Propp, "The Rod of Aaron and the Sin of Moses," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107/1 (1988) p. 24.
4. For a different explanation, see Richard A. Freund, "Thou Shalt not go Thither," *Scandinavian Journal of Theology* 8/1 (1994) pp.105-125. He says "... perhaps ancient readers of this section saw the reason for Moses and Aaron's exclusion as expiation for the people's actions and to avoid continuous rebellions in the future" (p. 124).
5. Such a reading imposes an inordinate strain upon the credulity of the text.
6. Yitzchok Magriso, *The Torah Anthology*, trans Tzvi Faier (Jerusalem: Moznaim, 1764 repr 1991) p. 90. This makes God a petty God. All attempts to situate the sin of Moses and Aaron outside the text border more on speculation.
7. Note that in later quotations (e.g., Ps. 77:21; 99:6; 105:26; 106:16) Moses is never mentioned alone.
8. It is outside the purview of this paper to discuss the sin of Moses. For an exegetical explication on the sin of Moses see my articles, "Whose Staff is it Anyway?" *Biblische Notizen* 85 (1996) pp. 7-21; "A Fresh Perspective on a Familiar Problem", *Henoch* 19 (1997) pp. 161-174 ; "Parallel Scripts, Paradigm Shifts", *Biblische Zeitschrift* 42/1 (1998) pp. 81-90 and my monograph, *The Sin of Moses and the Staff of God: A Narrative Approach* Studia Semitica Neerlandica 35 (The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1997).
9. Katherine D. Sakenfeld, "Theological and Redactional Problems in Numbers 20:2-13," in James T. Butler, et al (eds), *Understanding The Word: Essays in Honor of Bernhard W. Anderson*, in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* , Supl. 37 (1985) p. 145.
10. For an excellent discussion concerning the relationship between Moses and Aaron, see Katherine D. Sakenfeld, op. cit., pp. 140-147.

11. E.g. Richard Elliot Freedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: Summit Books, 1987), p. 210; Robert C. Culley, "Five Tales of Punishment", in Susan Niditch (ed), *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990) p. 30.
 12. The centrality of the rebellion can be seen at the close of the chapter (20:24) when death of Aaron recounted with reference to his and his brother's disobedience.
 13. See my monograph, *A Strategy For Reading Biblical Texts* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000, forthcoming).
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ANSWERS

from Rabbi Hayyim Halpern's book
TORAH DIALOGUES

1. The hair is not to be cut and clothing should be torn as symbols of grief. We learn these by negative deduction from 10:6 where these are specifically prohibited to the bereaved priestly family in this instance. **TALMUD ON THE TORAH** --"Do not let your heads remain unshorn and do not rend your clothes. . . ." (10:6, after S.R. Hirsch). From this we deduce that a mourner is prohibited to cut his hair . . . for thirty days...and obliged to tear his garment, since these were forbidden to Aaron's family. Moed Katan 14b, 15a, 19b
2. Some sages and commentators point out that the positive fulfilment of this *mitzvah*, if pursued literally, is virtually impossible. Hillel's interpretation brings it into the realm of reality. Also, the golden rule appears to be a summation of all the laws beginning with verse nine and they are all stated in the negative form.
3. The Arch of Titus in Rome is a graphic indication that these objects, clearly visible in bas-relief, were carried off to Rome. Various theories and legends account for their later wanderings in France, North Africa and elsewhere. Some believe that the objects were returned to Jerusalem and buried there.