

# MOSES'S NON-GENEALOGY

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## INTRODUCTION

In the middle of one of the Torah's epic stories, we are confronted with a peculiar genealogy (Ex. 6:14-28) that ostensibly provides background into Moses and Aaron<sup>1</sup> before we continue with the exodus saga. This is only ostensible, as we will see that such an approach runs into some major obstacles. Yet its broad acceptance is not without very strong foundations. For the genealogy interrupts a narrative about Moses and Aaron and heavy-handedly concludes the genealogy (Ex. 6:27-8), *It is the same Aaron and Moses to whom the Lord said, 'Bring forth the Israelites from the land of Egypt, troop by troop.'* *It was they who spoke to Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to free the Israelites from the Egyptians; these are the same Moses and Aaron.*

The general outline is clear enough – the focus, as expected, is on the Tribe of Levi.<sup>2</sup> But it is by no means linear – some wives are mentioned while others aren't; likewise some lines are developed while others aren't. For example – in this long list, we only read about three marriages: Amram to Jochebed; Aaron to Elisheva; and Aaron's son Elazar to a daughter of Putiel. Moreover, not only are all of Aaron's sons mentioned, so is one of his grandsons – namely Phinehas. In contrast, neither Moses's wife nor children are mentioned, even though – given that we only know the name of one of them at this point – this would have been informative.

In a genealogy ostensibly designed to give us more background into Moses and Aaron, the contrast just mentioned could not be more pronounced, especially as – if anything – we would expect the contrast to go in the opposite direction. The narrative has just followed Moses for the last four chapters. And with little interruption, it will continue to do so until the legal sections towards the end of the book of Exodus. All the other human characters are, and will remain, secondary to Moses. Hence any theory proposed must, first and foremost, address this anomaly.

## THE CLASSICAL COMMENTATORS

Some classical commentators do address the strange contours of the genealogy in a more general fashion. Ibn Ezra claims that the Torah is picking out those names that deserve special mention or whom are necessary to list in order to get to one of their progeny worthy of such mention. A character's worth here is defined by some claim to notability. So Korach is mentioned because he would later stand out by his fight with Moshe, whereas Yizhar is listed because he is Korach's father. Going in the other direction of this line, Korach's sons are ironically mentioned because of their righteousness.

As we can see from the last example, characters need not play any active role to be included in the genealogy. Reading Ibn Ezra this way is strengthened by his explanation that Elisheva is mentioned due to the greatness that comes from being the mother of Phinehas. This would be in contrast to Rashbam's position. For him, the whole point is the listing of characters that will appear in future narratives, going all the way to the Korach story. Of course, it is not an exhaustive list of all the future characters in the Torah, but rather only of those descended from Levi.

One weakness in Ibn Ezra is that the definition of notability seems contrived. That is to say that in order to include all of those mentioned in the genealogy, he gives it a very elastic – though admittedly still defensible – definition. While Rashbam avoids this weakness, he is left making the dubious claim that the passing remark that Korach's sons did not die in Numbers 26:11 is enough of a mention to cite their names here. Moreover if this list is meant to give us a genealogy of future characters with even such a minor role, why limit it to the Levites? Especially since doing otherwise would allow for the mention of more outstanding characters such as Bezalel, Joshua and Caleb – just to mention a few of the most obvious examples.

Regardless, these explanations fail to convincingly explain the disparity between Moses and Aaron. They fail to do so, because they likely also agree with our original assumption – that the center of this genealogy is Moses *and* Aaron.<sup>3</sup> Yet such an assumption is difficult to sustain. We have already noted the total lack of symmetry between the treatment of Moses and that of Aaron. But that is not the only problem. If the genealogy was truly aimed at giving us more background about Moses and Aaron, it should have ended with them. Such is what we see in the famous genealogy at the end of the book of

Ruth (4:18-22), which logically concludes with David. Just as it would have obscured the point to mention David's children and grandchildren, so too does the mention of children and a grandchild seem to obscure the spotlight from Moses and Aaron here. Ending two generations later with Phinehas simply overshoots the mark. And yet – given the summary statement (6:26-27), *This is Aaron and Moses... this is Moses and Aaron* – it is admittedly a challenge to find a better explanation for this section.

However precisely within the summary statement above, I believe there is a strong clue that can help us reframe the contours of this section in a way that will allow them to more gracefully fall into place: *This is Aaron and Moses...* is not the order we would expect, nor is it the order we find elsewhere – ordinarily the order is only Moses and Aaron, according to their importance.<sup>4</sup> But given what we have seen above, the change makes perfect sense. For if we drop our original assumption, it becomes abundantly clear that the genealogy is exclusively Aaron's; and not Moses' at all. Though the brothers obviously share parents and ancestors, once the two lines diverge, the Torah only tells us about Aaron's family (with a short interruption about Korach, but that is for another day).<sup>5</sup>

#### THE MIDRASH

Understood correctly, I believe that this reading is supported by *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael* 12:1, the midrash endorsed by Rashi on verse 26 – that the mention of Aaron first is to show us that Moses and Aaron are equal. Understood correctly – for as R. Baruch HaLevi Epstein alertly notes, Moses and Aaron are certainly not equal.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Aaron gets thoroughly scolded by God later in Numbers 12: 6-9 for thinking as much! Moreover, I would add that the midrash seems to fail to explain why this point about their equality is being made specifically here.

Yet I believe that if we think more carefully about the midrash, it may not only be endorsing our understanding that the genealogy is only about Aaron, but also explaining its significance. For though we have found good evidence to conclude that the genealogy is Aaron's and not Moses', we have yet to find a good reason for that. This is where the midrash comes in. It is telling us that although Aaron is a less important individual than Moses, the *role* he

plays is ultimately as important. As to exactly what that role is, however, neither the verses nor the midrash spell out.

#### POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS

Any attempt at an answer to this last question should be based on the genealogy (hence why Aaron is mentioned first specifically here). It should also explain why Aaron's sons are mentioned and, ideally, why the lineage continues to his grandson, Phinehas.

I think one could go in two directions here. The first is that it is coming to strengthen the office of the priesthood, even though that office has not yet been established.<sup>7</sup> This is an office that will notably be shared by Aaron's and Phinehas' descendants.<sup>8</sup> Beyond that – as opposed to Moses' office of prophecy – Aaron's office will be bequeathed from father to son. And so his children and grandchildren are relevant to the story in a way that Moses' are not.

The second possible explanation is that Moses required a partner. That is to say that if all men were like Moses, there could be no Jewish people. Moses teaches the Jewish people God's Torah; he is the prophet par excellence and the most important Jew to have ever lived. But he has one important flaw – that he was not an outstanding family man. Indeed, he could not have been – as this is the exact flip side of his being a greater prophet than Aaron. Prophecy on the level of Moses requires the time and focus that prevents one from being very engaged with one's children.<sup>9</sup>

Accordingly, Jewish tradition informs us that not only were Moses' offspring not extraordinary, at least one of his grandchildren was actually an idolater.<sup>10</sup> Not so Aaron's line, which is free of such stains (Nadav and Avihu's sin likely coming from too much love of God, rather than too little) in the next generation; and represented in the third generation by no less a figure than Phinehas. This would then be the reason for the genealogy's emphasis on Aaron's line, while not mentioning Moses' progeny at all. The message here would be that alongside the very greats who lead and inspire the Jewish people, the people also needs good family men that provide its continuity – specifically more Jews that will continue following the path taught by the greats. Indeed, the gift that will be given to Aaron's descendants would be one of regularity, to keep doing the same service day in and day out – a natural expression of their own continuity.

According to either of the explanations above – while the story line belongs to Moses, the genealogy belongs to Aaron. And the survival of Judaism belongs to both.

#### CONCLUSION

In summary, we have noted the strange contours of the genealogy of the Tribe of Levi at the beginning of the exodus saga, focusing on the complete lack of parallelism between Aaron and Moses. The existing theories in the classical commentators fail to answer this in a systematic way. By suggesting that the disparities are intentional and designed to spotlight Aaron, we believe that we have effectively explained the central anomalies in this section, including the unusual order of Aaron before Moses specifically here (6:26). We have further elucidated how this theory could be the understanding of the midrash that equates Aaron with Moses specifically here. As to how Aaron could be equal to his clearly superior younger brother, we have given two suggestions connected to the notion of genealogy in general, as well as to some of the particularities of this genealogy more specifically.

#### NOTES

1. Rashi 6:14, *Ohr HaChaim* 6:26, *Da'at Mikra* 6:27 et. al.
2. An additional issue raised by many commentators is why Reuben and Simon are mentioned in this list at all. The most common answer is that it would be a slight to the two older brothers not to mention them before Levi (Rashi, Ramban on 6:14), and this is quite reasonable. There are other approaches, but they need not concern us here, as the mention is clearly tangential. For a different perspective, see Zvi Ron, "The Genealogy of Moses and Aaron," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 31:3 (2003), pp. 190-194.
3. Though not explicit, this seems to be Ibn Ezra's assumption. And even if Rashbam on 6:14 remains consistent to his general theory that the genealogy is designed to also present the background of Korach, Phinehas and the sons of Uziel, he nevertheless seems to assume that Moses and Aaron equally stand at its center.
4. This is the case even before this mention. See Exodus 4:29, 5:1, 5:4, 5:20 and 6:13.
5. Another issue that we will not attempt to address – though it admittedly strengthens the approaches of both Ibn Ezra and Rashbam – is the mention of only three of Kehat's four sets of grandchildren, skipping over the children of Chevron. While Yizhar is connected to the Korach enigma (since Yizhar is his father), the question is why the Torah mentions the children of Uziel but not those of Chevron (the reason for mentioning Amram's children being obvious in this context). We believe that like the mention of Reuben and Simon (note 2), these issues are ultimately tangential and do not affect our conclusions. That is to say that our approach can co-exist with the answers given by Rashbam, Ibn Ezra or any other reader that does not use these issues as evidence for some grander theory.

6. *Torah Temimah* on 6:26, note 19.

7. This explanation has the additional advantage of explaining a similar anomaly in Numbers 3:1-4.

8. Though it is significantly pointed out that he too was a descendant of Aaron, he was not originally chosen to serve and pass the office down to his children. That only changed after his famous act of zealotry – see Numbers 25:13.

9. See Francis Nataf, *Redeeming Relevance in the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2010), pp. 52-57.

10. See TB *Bava Batra* 109b.



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