

A Danger of Leadership: *Moses and the Rock* (Numbers 20:1-13)

“Brothers, it is easier to declaim against a thousand sins of others, than to mortify one sin in ourselves.”
~ John Flavel

I. Investigation: An Examination of Numbers 20:1-13

A. Introduction

The miraculous provision of water from a rock serves as bookends to this 40-year journey through the wilderness. However, unlike the first event in Exodus 17, Moses fails to adhere to the Lord’s instructions in this second occurrence. The consequences for Moses’ actions seem harsh. After all, the Scriptures portrayed Moses as the ideal and humble leader who had sacrificed greatly to lead the Israelites to this point. And yet, a closer examination of this passage reveals that Moses’ sin was no different than the Israelites. Sadly, his actions robbed the Lord of His glory and cost Moses the opportunity to enter into the Promised Land.

B. The Israelites’ Complain (20:1-5)

v. 1 - Without a eulogy or any qualifications, the writer simply records the death of Miriam. Her death marks the beginning of the end of an era in the life of Israel.

vv. 2-5 - In this 10th recorded complaint by the Israelites in the books of Exodus and Numbers, the Israelites once again blame Moses (and Aaron) for dragging them out of Egypt into the desert (Exod 14:10-14; 15:22-25; 16:1-35; 17:1-7; Num 11:1-3; 4:34; 14:1-45; 17:1-28).

The term “strove” denotes hostility and something far more serious than mere grumbling.

Observe the seriousness of their actions: (1) they act apart from God-ordained leadership; (2) they identify themselves with those who rebelled against the Lord (i.e., the Korahite rebels in 16:35); (3) they are ungrateful to the Lord for His previous provisions; (4) they fail to give credit for the Lord’s deliverance; (5) they equate God’s leading and provisions as evil; and (6) they impugn Moses’, Aaron’s, and God’s character.

The fruits they desired were the very same produce the spies brought back with them from Canaan (13:23). “In other words, the people were blaming Moses and Aaron because the wilderness was not like the Promised Land that the people themselves had refused to enter!” (Duguid, *Numbers*, 251). The reason the Israelites are in this quandary is because of their own sin!

C. Moses Responds (20:6-11)

v. 6 - Unlike previous incidences where the Israelites grumbled, the Scriptures make no mention of Moses interceding for the Israelites.

vv. 7-9 - Moses carries out the first two steps correctly; that is, he takes the staff and assembles the people. However, Moses fails to abide by the third step.

Note that the rod was sent throughout the books of Exodus and Numbers as a symbol of God's presence and power (e.g., the rod is first mentioned in Exodus 4:2). However, the will of God, not the rod of Moses, was to be seen as that which produces the water.

v. 10 - Instead of speaking to the rock, Moses speaks to the people! By referring to the Israelites as "rebels," Moses judges the people without authorization from the Lord (also, cf. Ps 106:32). He also misses the opportunity to highlight the Lord's grace and mercy in providing them the water (Note that the Lord's grace can be seen in the references to abundant water and the provision even for their animals.).

Striking the rock twice further indicates Moses' anger and disobedience.

D. The Lord Judges (20:12-13)

v. 12 - Observe how the Lord assesses Moses' and Aaron's actions:

- "did not trust me" - This phrase conveys the idea of acting in accordance with God's Word.
- "did not sanctify me before the people" - Moses' actions failed to exalt the Lord.

While the punishment is clear, the crime is not. Scholars have long debated what exactly did Moses do wrong. There are four different aspects proposed (as set forth by Milgrom in *Numbers*, 448):

- His action in relationship to the rock: (a) he struck the rock instead of speaking, or (b) he struck the rock twice.
- His character (i.e., his unbridled anger)
- His words: (a) he doubted God, (b) he called the Israelites "rebels," or (c) he failed to give the Lord credit (*notsi'* vs. *yotsi'*).
- Omitted. The text never tells us in order to preserve the glory of Israel's founder.

Moses (and Aaron) appear to be guilty of several serious offenses:

- a) *He robs God of His glory.* Not only does Moses state that "they" will bring out the water, he acts in accordance with cultic practices—activities that center upon the messenger rather than the god. Throughout Exodus and Numbers, miracles were performed in silence, rather than through a typical incantation or recitation of a formula. That Moses even spoke undoes the contrast the Lord is attempting to create between pagan worship and what is expected of the Israelites. In addition, the Lord would indicate what was to occur so there would be no question that He performs the miracle (Exod 9:5, 18; Josh 11:8). "In defying God, Moses did not merely countermand His order; indeed, his behavior could be interpreted as a denial of God's essence" (Milgrom, *Numbers*, 451).
- b) *He shows contempt for the Lord.* Moses' actions display great sacrilege as the rock symbolized God (cf. Pss 18:2; 31:3; 42:9; 1 Cor 10:4). Furthermore, one scholar notes that the phrase "and Moses raised his hand" should be seen figuratively as "representing his attitude, a demonstration of his own power to fight against a hostile and superior force before him . . . the 'enemy' of Moses was

probably God himself" (K. L. Wong, "'And Moses Raised His Hand'", 400; also, cf. J. de Vaux, *Les Nombres*, 226-27).

- c) *He failed to trust the Lord and operated out of self-reliance.* One commentator highlights that earlier in Moses' life, he attempted to judge the Israelites on his own strength—and now, Moses is reverting back to this old pattern of self-trust and reliance (cf. Duguid, *Numbers*, 253). At the end of the day, "Moses' failure to carry out the Lord's instructions precisely was as much an act of unbelief as the people's failure to trust God's promises instead of the spies' pessimistic reports (Num 14:11)" (Wenham, *Numbers*, 169).

In many ways, Moses' sin recapitulates all that was wrong concerning the old generation (cf. Exod 20:24; 27:14; Deut 1:37; 4:21).

II. Intersect

- A. Godly leadership ensures the Lord receives all the glory.

Leviticus 10:3 -

- B. Godly leadership recognizes that we are not the saviors; the Lord is responsible for the transformation of lives.

1 Corinthians 3:5-7 -

- C. Godly leadership needs to be characterized by grace and mercy. Motivation for obedience should be fostered out of grace and gratitude, not law and guilt.

1 Peter 4:7-11 -

"The fear of the Lord helps us recognize our accountability to God for the stewardship of leadership. It motivates us to seek the Lord's wisdom and understanding in difficult situations. And it challenges us to give our all to the Lord by serving those we lead with love and humility."

~ Paul Chappell