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The Sin of Moses and Aaron

20: 2-13

The sin of Moses and Aaron DIG: Consider the response of the people in this passage to the difficulty they were facing. Compare their reaction to that of Moshe. What is the difference? What was Moses' sin? Whatever sin Moses committed, why was Aaron also included in the ban from the Promised Land?

REFLECT: How can the account of Moses getting water from a rock encourage you in difficult times? What are you successful at? How might this success cause you to trust in yourself instead of God? He disciplined Moses for disobedience. How can we know if at any certain point we are being disciplined by the Lord?

ADONAI holds spiritual leaders to a greater responsibility; from everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded (Luke 12:48b).

Because the people had no water, they assembled themselves against Moshe and Aaron (20:2). Why was there no **water** just as **they** were about to enter the Promised Land? **They** were in a second location called **Kadesh (to see link click [Ge](#) - The Second Stage: Rephidim to Mount Hor 32 They left Etzion Geber and camped at Kadesh, in the wilderness of Tzin)**, and it was a great oasis! Perhaps they had become too comfortable and needed to move on. When we get too comfortable, too cozy in a certain place and do not want to move on, sometimes **ADONAI** will help us out a little bit! **He** did a similar thing to the Messianic community in Jerusalem (see the commentary on **[Acts Ax](#) - The Stoning of Stephen**). Only persecution drove them out so **the Word of God** could be spread to the nations. **Isra'el** had **no water** because **they** needed to get out of there.

They had encountered having **no water** before (see the commentary on **[Exodus Cu](#) - Strike the Rock and Water Will Come Out of It**) and should have learned

that **God** would provide for **them**. The **Exodus** version presents the request for **water** by refugee slave **people in the desert** as a legitimate need. But at this point in the story of **Numbers**, readers are conditioned to assume that any **complaint** here by **the people** is a sign of **sinful rebellion** – not only against **Moshe** and **Aaron**, but especially against **YHVH**. We are primed to believe **the people** are deserving of divine judgment whenever **they complain**.

The disobedience of the people: The cycle of **complaints** and **rebellions** in **Numbers** has been consistent and unrelenting. **The people complained** about **their** misfortunes, and **the anger of Ha'Shem burned the edges of the camp** (see **Bp - Complaining at Tav'erah**). **The Israelites complained** about **the manna** and yearned for **meat**, and **God** sent **a plague** in connection with **eating the quail meat** (see **Bt - ADONAI's Response**). A jealous **Aaron** and **Miryam** challenged the authority of **their** brother **Moses**, and **YHVH** struck **Miryam** with **leprosy** and banished **her from the camp for seven days** (see **Bu - The Rebellion of Miryam and Aaron**). **All the people** heard **the spy report** from **Canaan** and refused to enter **the Promised Land**, planning instead to **choose a new leader and return to Egypt** (see **Bz - Faith and Obedience**). **The LORD** responded in **anger** by condemning **the Exodus generation to die in the desert** (see **Cb - God's Response**). **Korah, Dathan, Abiram** and **250** other **lay leaders** challenged **Moshe and Aaron** in **their** roles as **leader** and **priest**, and **God** caused **the earth to swallow** some of **them**, while others were **burned alive with divine fire** (see **Cr - The Response of God**). **All the people** accused **Moses and Aaron** of **killing their leaders**, and **YHVH** sent **a plague** (see **Cs - The Rebellion of the People**). Every time we hear the first hint of **complaining** from **the people** in **Numbers**, we automatically assume that **the people's complaint** is illegitimate, that the attack on **Moshe and Aaron** is unjustified, and that **the anger** and **righteous judgment** of **ADONAI** on **the people** will follow like clockwork. This background information is crucial in understanding the dynamics of the perplexing story about **water from the rock**.

Numbers 20:2 states that **the people had no water**, and like **their** parents, **they** resorted to **complaining**. This is a somewhat jarring note because the lack of water in the desert seems to be a very legitimate **complaint**. Yet we have been conditioned to assume every **complaint** in **Numbers** is unreasonable and self-serving (see above). This is the first hint to the reader that something different is going on in this story.³⁹⁴ **The people complained against Moshe and said: We wish we had died when our [parents] died before ADONAI. Why did you**

bring ADONAI's people into this desert? To die there, we and our livestock? It is striking that **they** recognized **themselves** as **God's people**, yet did not **trust Him** to take care of **them**. **Why did you make us leave Egypt? To bring us to this terrible place without seed, figs, grapevines, pomegranates or even water to drink (20:3-5)?** The real problem was a hardened heart, **their** excuse was that **they had no water to drink**.

Moses and Aaron's response: The complaint against **Moses and Aaron** set in motion the same sequence of actions that **they** had performed in other **complaint** stories. **Moshe and Aaron left the assembly, went to the entrance of the Tabernacle and fell on their faces.** Then, as anticipated, **YHVH** appeared. **The Sh'khinah glory of ADONAI appeared to them** (see the commentary on [Isaiah Ju - The Glory of the LORD Rises Upon You](#)). But amazingly, in this case, there was no **fire**. Initially, there was no judgment. There was no anger. There was just a gentle word.³⁹⁵ **ADONAI said to Moshe, "Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the people together."** We notice that **the staff** is not **the staff** of **Aaron** that had budded, but the same **staff** that **Moses** had used to do wonders in **Egypt** and in **the wilderness** for forty years. Although **he** was to take **his staff**, the symbol of **his** power through **the LORD**, **he** was merely to **speak to that rock** (Hebrew: *sela*, meaning a *cliff rock, which has the definite article in front of it, so God was referring to a specific rock*) **before their eyes and it will pour out its water.** **YHVH** wanted to make sure that **the people** saw this miracle. **God's** directive seems to suggest that **the people's** need for **water** was legitimate and that **He** intended to satisfy their need. **You will bring them water out of the rock and thus enable the people and their livestock to drink (20:6-8).** But the reader cannot be sure; in an earlier request for **meat**, **Ha'Shem** had responded with abundant **quail**, but **it** was also accompanied with a **plague (11:33)**.³⁹⁶



The disobedience of Moses: Moshe took the staff from the presence of ADONAI, as he had ordered him. But after Moshe and Aaron had assembled the people in front of the rock, he angrily said to them, “Listen here, you rebels! Are **we** (not God) supposed to bring you water from this rock” (20:9-10)?” By saying **we**, it seems that Moses and Aaron wanted to take credit for a miracle that ADONAI intended for His own glory. Then Moshe raised his hand and hit the rock twice with his staff. Back in Exodus 17:1-7 he was told to strike the rock once. Here, he was only told to speak to the rock; however he hit the rock twice out of anger. This was clearly a sin of mistrust. Moses was the best man that Israelite society could produce, he even saw God face-to-face. But he fell. Thus, we are taught to trust in Messiah. No one else can help us. He is the Rock of our salvation (Psalm 62:6-8).

The grace of God: Grace is receiving what you don’t deserve, and mercy is not receiving what you do deserve. Here, YHVH demonstrated His grace on the children of Isra’el. In His unmerited favor, water flowed out in abundance, and the people and their livestock drank (20:11). Nehemiah 9:15a says: For their hunger you gave bread from heaven; for their thirst you brought forth for them water from the rock. Psalm 78:15-16 remembers: He broke apart the rocks in the desert and let them drink as if from boundless depths; yes, He brought streams out of the rock, making the water flow down like rivers. And finally, Isaiah 48:21 declares: They weren’t thirsty when He led them through the deserts, He made water flow from the rock for - He split the rock and out gushed the water.

The judgment of God: Whereas Aaron’s sons died on the spot for offering incense that was not commanded (see the commentary on Leviticus [Bh](#) - The Death of Nadab and Abihu), Moses and Aaron received a lighter sentence. ADONAI said to Moshe and Aaron, “Because you did not trust in Me enough to demonstrate My holiness to the people of Isra’el, you will not bring this people into the Land I have promised them” (20:12 NLT). This seems to be a rather harsh judgment for such a small act of disobedience. What exactly was the sin of Moses? There are seven reasons for God’s judgment on Moshe. First, Moses clearly displayed anger (Psalm 106:33); second, he took credit for the giving of water (20:10), third, he struck the rock twice (20:11); fourth, he failed to trust God (20:12a); fifth, he failed to trust God enough to demonstrate His holiness to the people of Isra’el (20:12b, 27:14; Deut 32:51); sixth, his action was viewed as an act of rebellion by God (Numbers

27:14; Deuteronomy 32:51). This was also true of **Aaron (Numbers 20:24)**; seventh, **Moses** suffered vicariously for **the people**, saying: **Ha'Shem was angry with me for your sakes (Deut 1:37)**. **Deuteronomy 4:21** also says: **But ADONAI was angry with me on account of you and swore that I would not cross the Jordan and go into the good Land, which ADONAI your God is giving you to inherit**. **Aaron** was also included in the ban. It seems strange that **he** was punished for this, an obscure **sin** that **he** barely participated in. But we must always remember that **ADONAI** holds spiritual leaders to a greater responsibility.³⁹⁷

The name of judgment: Once again, a name of judgment was given to a place of **Isra'el's** journey. This time the name is **Meribah**, a word that means *a place of strife or complaining*. **This is Meribah Spring (Hebrew: the waters of contention), where the people of Isra'el contended with ADONAI (Deuteronomy 33:38; Psalm 81:7 and 106:32; Ezeki'el 47:19 and 48:28), and He proved Himself holy, set apart, among them (20:13)**. The same name was used forty years earlier at the first occasion of bringing **water from the rock** in **Exodus 17:7**, also called **Massah**, or *testing*. **Psalm 95:8** laments the rebellion at **Meribah** and **Massah**, and **Psalm 114:8** celebrates both occasions of **God's** grace. For **Meribah** and **Massah** serve for both; **they** are reminders of the rebellion and symbols of the celebration of **God's** grace.³⁹⁸

The story of **the rock in the wilderness** and its life-giving **water** provided images for the B'rit Chadashah and early reflections on **Yeshua**; **the waters** of baptism and new life through the Gospel. In **First Corinthians 10:4**, **Paul** allegorizes **the rock** into an image of **Messiah**, **"And they all drank the same drink from the Spirit - for they drank from a Spirit-sent Rock which accompanied them, and that Rock was the Messiah"** (also see **Psalm 31:3**). The word **Paul** uses here for **Rock** is not *petros*, meaning *a small stone or pebble*, but *petra*, meaning *a massive immovable cliff, rock or ledge*, just like the one at **Caesarea Philippi** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ex - On This Rock I Will Build My Church**). **Messiah** was also **the source** of supernatural **water** for **the Corinthians**. The same image of **the rock** and **its water** stands behind **Yeshua's** words in **John 7:37b-38**: **Let anyone who is thirsty come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them**. **Messiah's** discussion with **the Samaritan woman** concerning **living water** is an echo of **the rock** in the Torah and its **living water (John 4:10)**.

When **Yeshua** told **His apostles** of **His** impending suffering and **death**, **Peter** pledged that it should never happen. Then, **the Lord** issued a surprisingly stern rebuke to **Peter** saying: **Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on divine things but on human things (Matthew 16:23)**. The severity of **Peter's** rebuke, the leader among **the twelve apostles**, echoed **Ha'Shem's** stern rebuke and judgment against **Moses and Aaron**, the leaders of **the twelve tribes**. Both the TaNaKh and the B'rit Chadashah share a healthy realism about the frailty of human leadership and the capacity of even the most trusted leaders to fail to discern **God's** will and fall into disobedience.³⁹⁹

*Dear Heavenly Father, Praise **You** for the victory over **death**, the ultimate penalty for our **sin (Romans 6:23)**. **Death** that separated mankind from **God** and broke that relationship, was crushed and destroyed by **Your** sacrifice on the cross (**John 1:29**) and resurrection victory (**Second Corinthians 5:21**). Though **You** won the ultimate victory over **sin**, it is so important for me to walk in such a way as to maintain with a pure and loving heart my daily relationship with **You** our dear Heavenly Father **God**. As **David, a man after your own heart (Acts 13:22)** realized after **he sinned**, that though **he** had had a wonderful relationship with **You**, **sin** hurt that relationship and **he** needed to repent, confessing **his sin** and turning back to **You**. **The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit. A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise (Psalms 51:17)**.*

*Thank **You** for providing the way for the relationship to be mended by confessing my **sins (First John 1:9)**. I want to show **You** my love and appreciation for all the great shame and pain you willing went thru (**Hebrews 12:2**) to buy my redemption. I desire to worship and obey **You**, and when I **sin** I desire to run quickly back to **You** with a humble heart asking for **Your** forgiveness. In **Messiah Yeshua's** holy **Name** and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*