

## HEROIC LEADERSHIP IN THE WILDERNESS, Part 2

David Hymes

### 5. Miriam & Aaron

Aaron's divine appointment as the head of the tribe of Levi and the priesthood has a core component that resists general application. In Num 3.6 the Levites are to stand (עמד) before Aaron and serve him (אזרו ושרתו). His family becomes a priestly dynasty that receives special treatment (Num 3.2-3). They have exclusive rights to ministry (שמד), while others are prohibited to approach (קרב). At the same time, there are some aspects within the narrative depictions of Aaron that can be applied without twisting basic exegetical principles, however they tend to be negative rather than positive.

In the book of Numbers, chapter 12 stands out.<sup>1</sup> Here it is both Aaron and Miriam that are contesting the singular authority of Moses with two complaints. It seems Miriam takes the lead in speaking against<sup>2</sup> Moses and

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<sup>1</sup> Critical scholarship has tended to argue that the negative depictions of Aaron are earlier, while the later sources are more positive. The golden calf incident of Exod 32 would be another so-called earlier text. I have argued against the use of the standard source critical analysis in Num 12 and suggested reading it within the context of the so-called "old Tent of Meeting" tradition. See Hymes, "Numbers 12: Of Priests, Prophets, or "None of the Above," 17-25. The most exhaustive treatment of Numbers 12 is Ursula Rapp, *Mirjam: Eine feministisch-rhetorische Lektüre der Mirjamtexte in der hebräischen Bibel*, BZAW, no. 317 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 31-193.

Naomi G. Cohen, "דבר וי: An Enthusiastic Prophetic Formula," ZAW 99, no. 2 (1987), 220 argues that the formula b . . . rbd, used here "refers to the content of an 'enthusiastic' prophetic experience - i.e. that this is a *terminus technicus* for a specific type of the first stage of prophetic experience."

his Cushite wife in 12.1. while 12.2 focuses on Moses' monopoly of divine revelation.<sup>3</sup> Both of these complaints are heard by YHWH (12.2ב יְהוָה בְּיָדוֹ). In 12.4-5 the three leaders are summoned to the "tent of meeting" (מִוֶּעֵד מִוֶּעֵד), not to be confused with the Tabernacle.

Several pericopes with events taking place at this "tent of meeting" form a thematic cluster that is called the "old Tent of Meeting" tradition: that is helpful in interpreting the leadership significance of this pericope. The primary texts are Exod 33.7-11; Num 11.14-17, 24-30; Num 12, but Trygve Mettinger suggest that Deut 31.14-15; Josh 18.1; 19.51; 1 Sam 2.22; 2 Sam 6.17; 1 Kgs 8.4 may be added.<sup>5</sup> Erhard Blum includes some verses from Exod 34 along with Deut 34.10-12.<sup>6</sup> These texts have recurrent elements according to Blum:

- 1) Der Ohel Mo'ed: Ex 33,7-11 (A), 34,34f. (B); Nu 11,16 (C); Nu 12,4ff. (D); Dtn 31,14f. (E).
- 2) *Jhwh's* Herkommen (יָרַד) in der Wolkensäule (עֲנַן הָעֵנָן): Ex 33,9f. (A); 34,5 (B); Nu 11, 25 (C); 12,5.[10] (D); Dtn 31,14f. (MT. יָרַד נִרְאָה statt יָרַד) (E).
- 3) Moses »face-to-face« - Umgang mit Gott: Ex 33,11 (A); 34,5ff.29b (B); Nu 12,8 (D); Dtn 34,10 (F)
- 4) Mose und die Prophetie/Propheten: Nu 11 (C); 12 (D); Dtn 34,10 (F).
- 5) Josua, Gehilfe (מְשִׁירָה) und Nachfolger Moses: Ex 33,11 (A); Nu 11,28 (C); Dtn 31,14f.23 (E)<sup>7</sup>

Mettinger enumerates the following:

It is located outside of the camp. Its function is non-cultic. Neither sacrifice nor priests are named, nor is the Ark; rather, this Tent functions in connection with oracular consultations. A theophany takes place at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting; here the divinity descends (yārad), and the murky cloud (ʿānān) is the vehicle of communication. The theophany

is concluded when the cloud "removed [sūr] from over the Tent." God is not constantly present in the Tent; rather, the idea represented is a sort of rendezvous-theology.<sup>8</sup>

As I argued back in 1998,<sup>9</sup> my contention is that, although the Num 11.14-17, 24-30 pericope includes the strong notion of prophecy and Num 12.6 specifically mentions prophets, neither Exod 33.7-11 nor Deut 31.14-15 highlight this arena. Instead, the texts deal with political realities. In Exod 33.7, 8, and 10 the pericope emphasizes that there were observers (יְהוָה כָּל־עַם, כָּל־עַם, כָּל־עַם, כָּל־עַם), while in Exod 33.11, Joshua would not leave the tent site. These "public" acts affirmed Moses' unique leadership role. The pericope being written in a "frequentative" format sets the stage to understand "what customarily happened at the tent of meeting."<sup>10</sup> In Num 11.14-17, 24-30, it is not the prophesying, but the initiation of the designated elders that necessitated the congregating at the tent of meeting. The prophesying is described as a one time act (וַיִּתְנַבְּאוּ וְלֹא יִסְפוּ) and therefore secondary to receiving a portion of the רוּחַ. The very fact that Eldad and Medad can prophesy within the camp implies that the tent of meeting is not necessarily a prophetic loci. Moses' response to Joshua, "Are you jealous for my sake" (הֲמִקְנָא אֶתְּךָ לִי) highlights the political nature of their actions. While the enigmatic phrase, "Would that all of Yahweh's people were prophets, and that Yahweh would put his spirit on them!" detaches prophesying from the tent. I would agree with Philip J. Budd's observation that "in both components - the elders and the activity of Eldad and Medad - there is evidently a concern that possession of the spirit should play its part in the professional institutions, represented by the elders, and in the charisma of men freely raised by God to declare word."<sup>11</sup> However, his conjecture that "for the Yahwist a leadership which has no place for the prophetic insights is doomed to be misled,"<sup>12</sup> goes too far. Wonsuk Ma answers this contention, "One can say the manifestation is purely symbolic rather than functional, since they are not to be prophets."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth: Studies in the Shem and Kabod Theologies*, 81-82.

<sup>4</sup> Hymes, "Numbers 12: Of Priests, Prophets, or 'None of the Above'," 22-24.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas W. Mann, *Divine Presence and Guidance in Israelite Traditions: The Typology of Exaltation*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 144.

<sup>6</sup> Philip J. Budd, *Numbers*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 5, (Waco, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1984), 126-27.

<sup>7</sup> Budd, *Numbers*, 130.

<sup>8</sup> Wonsuk Ma, *The Spirit (רוּחַ) of God in the Book of Isaiah and Its Eschatological*

<sup>3</sup> Rapp, *Mirjam*, 126

<sup>4</sup> See Erhard Blum, *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch*, BZAW, no. 189 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990), 76-88.

<sup>5</sup> Trygve N. D. Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth: Studies in the Shem and Kabod Theologies*, Coniectanea Biblica Old Testament Series 18, (Lund, Sweden: CWK Gleerup, 1982), 81.

<sup>6</sup> Blum, *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch*, 76.

<sup>7</sup> Blum, *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch*, 76.

As a tent of meeting pericope, Deut 31.14-15 can also be categorized as involved in the political rather than the prophetic sphere. Here the purpose of the meeting at the tent is to commission Joshua as the new leader.

Returning to Numbers 12, the contention that Miriam and Aaron bring up deals with Moses being the one through whom Yahweh speaks. The issue is not prophetic authorization, since neither Miriam nor Aaron should be considered prophets per se.<sup>14</sup> The issue is Moses' unique leadership role which in its present literary context was meant to be highlighted as superior to the 70 elders, Miriam and Aaron. Even the justification for the punishment of Miriam places Moses in the role of father verses Miriam as child (Num 12.14).

Ursula Rapp has recently protested that I have viewed these tent of meeting texts too narrowly, focusing singularly on the "political." Rapp has correctly indicated that prophecy and specifically revelation (*Offenbarung*) does integrally relate to the leadership conflict in this pericope.<sup>15</sup> The issue should not be taken as an either/or, the revelatory is a function in both Mosaic leadership (which will be discussed below) and in the contentions of Miriam and Aaron.

The inappropriate challenge to Moses ultimately did not disqualify Miriam and Aaron from a continuance of their leadership roles. The recording of Miriam's death in Num 20.1, right before the critical "Waters of Meribah" (20.2-13) debacle is significant, since Aaron's death report<sup>16</sup> quickly follows

*Significance*, (Ph.D. dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1996), 89.

<sup>14</sup> Rita J. Burns, *Has the Lord Indeed Spoken only Through Moses? A Study of the Biblical Portrait of Miriam*, SBL Dissertation Series 84 (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1987), 79: "Regarding the biblical portrait of Miriam as prophetess, I conclude that, although Miriam figures prominently in Num 12.2-9 as an oracular figure, her role there is not specifically a prophetic one. Neither is her activity which is described in Exod 15.20-21 specifically prophetic. When it is said, then, that Miriam was called a prophetess, it must at the same time be admitted that the title is probably anachronistic and hence does not shed much light at all on the portrait of Miriam in the scriptures."

<sup>15</sup> See Rapp, *Mirjam*, 162, where she writes: "Hymes kann allerdings diesen vermeintlichen Gegensatz zwischen politischem und prophetischem Interesse kaum begründen. Er behauptet, es gehe den AutorInnen um die alleinige Autorität des Mose, die aber nichts mit Prophetie zu tun habe. Dem lässt sich nur der Textbefund entgegenhalten, denn die AutorInnen verbinden die politische Führung eben gerade schon mit der Frage nach Prophetie, was nur daran liegen kann, dass die Führung etwas mit Offenbarung bzw. ihrer Auslegung oder anders mit Tora-Auslegung und Toraautorität zu tun hat. So gesehen erhält die Frage nach der Prophetie einen zentralen Ort im Konflikt um die Führung Israels."

<sup>16</sup> On Num 20.22-29 as a "Death Report" rather than a "report of commissioning" for Eleazar, see Knierim and Coats. *Numbers*, 235.

the same pericope in 20.22-29. Both of these death notifications play a significant structural role in the narrative, as they follow the ritual for purification from death defilement in chapter 19.<sup>17</sup>

Miriam's death redactionally functions as a "warning to Moses and Aaron. Nevertheless both of them miss it."<sup>18</sup> What does this death report tell us about Miriam? Rita Burns has ventured the following suggestions:

First of all, the fact that Miriam's death and burial were recorded at all is striking. Whereas other figures in the wilderness community (Hur, Eldad and Medad, Moses' wife and father-in-law, etc.) disappeared without mention, the notice of Num 20.1b seems to be at least an implicit witness that Miriam was a figure of some significance whose memory was valued in Israelite tradition.

Secondly, the notice of Num 20.1b has all the appearances of being both an early and an authentic tradition. It is noteworthy that Miriam is the only member of the wilderness community whose death is recorded without being explicitly connected with divine punishment (cf. Num 20.2-13, 22ff.; 16; Deut 32.48-52).

Thirdly, in placing this early notice of Miriam's death and burial in Numbers 20 (instead of with another reference to Kadesh) a late writer (editor) implicitly contributes to the tradition that Miriam was a leader of some import in the wilderness community. It can hardly be accidental that, in the texts as they now stand the deaths of Miriam, Aaron and Moses coincide with the last three stops on the wilderness journey.

Finally, Marlin Noth has written that "a grave tradition usually gives the most reliable indication of the original provenance of a particular figure of tradition." If this is true (and, to my knowledge it has not been refuted in recent scholarship), then the notice which appears in Num 20.1b most likely indicates that the Hebrew tradition about Miriam had its starting point at Kadesh. At the very least, it can be said that early (and probably authentic

<sup>17</sup> See Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 463-467, where he parallels the structure of chapter 21 with chapter 22. The theme, "failure of the leaders" is followed in chapter 22 with the failure of the people and their deliverance.

<sup>18</sup> Aaron Schart, *Mose und Israel im Konflikt: Eine Redaktionsgeschichtliche Studie Zu Den Wüstenerzählungen*, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis, no. 98 (Freiburg, Schwiez & Göttingen: Universitätsverlag & Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), 113. See also Rapp, *Mirjam*, 233.

tradition firmly linked Miriam with Kadesh, an important shrine for the wilderness generation of Israelites."

Although the exact nature of Miriam's leadership role is hard to decipher, enough is given in the Wilderness narratives to indicate a powerful presence. On the other hand, it is not difficult to weigh the considerable role of Aaron as the anointed priest.<sup>19</sup> As has already been touched on, Aaron's special role in approaching YHWH was defended against the Levites, Korah and the 250 leaders in chapters 16-17. Beyond this, the crucial pericopes in Numbers are 20.1-13, which deals with the sin of Moses and Aaron and 20.22-29, Aaron's death report.

Jacob Milgrom makes reference to the fact that Num 20.1-13 "has been regarded as one of the Gordian knots of the Bible."<sup>21</sup> One of the more intriguing puzzles in this pericope is the identification of the sin of Aaron, which leads to his demise. Num 20.24b indicates that "because you (plural) rebelled against my command at the waters of Meribah" (אחרי לבי מריבה) על אשר מריבתם, see also Num 27.14); while earlier in Num 20.12, we read: "Then YHWH said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you (plural) did not believe me (האמנתי) to sanctify me (להקדישני) in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you (plural) shall not lead (תביאו) this assembly (הקהל הזה) into the land that I have given them.'" In the context of both of these verses Aaron's judgment seems to be based on his association with Moses and not a specific act on his part.<sup>22</sup> The Masoretic Text of 20.2-13, however

<sup>19</sup> Burns, *Has the Lord Indeed Spoken only Through Moses? A Study of the Biblical Portrait of Miriam*, 119-20.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Fleming, "The Biblical Tradition of Anointing Priests, *JBL* 117, no. 3 (1998), 401-14, argues against the critical consensus that the "anointed priest" was a post-exilic adaptation of the anointing of kings. He evidences ancient Near Eastern parallels and also identifies "two dissimilar rites" of anointing as depicted in Exodus 29 and Leviticus 8.

<sup>21</sup> Jacob Milgrom, "Magic, Monotheism and the Sin of Moses," in *The Quest for the Kingdom of God: Studies in Honor of Geovge E. Mendenhall*, ed. H. B. Huffinon, F. A. Spina and A. R. W. Green (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 251. Milgrom's article gives an excellent review of the older Jewish interpretations along with modern scholarship. Johnson Lim, "A Fresh Perspective on a Familiar Problem," *Henoah* 19 (1997), 161-63 continues the summary of scholarship.

<sup>22</sup> William H. Propp, "The Rod of Aaron and the Sin of Moses," *JBL* 107, no. 1 (1988), 24. Propp, writing about what he understands as the P author, states, "evidently, he wrote Aaron into the story just enough to implicate him by association. Although Aaron does nothing wrong, the misuse of his own rod by his brother taints him as if by sympathetic magic, and thus Moses causes the death of Aaron." Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, "Theological and Redactional Problems in

is not so clean cut, and thereby has fostered complex source critical and redactional studies." The oscillation between the singular and plural number throughout the text shifts the onus from Moses to both Moses and Aaron.<sup>24</sup> Although Moses is the one that strikes the rock (20.11a), it is both Aaron and Moses that gathered the assembly (הקהל)<sup>25</sup> and spoke to them in a defamatory manner, "Listen, you rebels (המרדים), shall we bring out water for you from this rock?" (20.10b).<sup>26</sup> It is more than ironic that Aaron and Moses have called the קהל rebellious, when in fact their words and deeds amounted to rebellion. Is it possible that part of the sin of Moses and Aaron involved an inappropriate accusation against the collective legal body? Is it not possible that the "not sanctifying" (קדש) YHWH before the בני ישראל involved the breach of the governance infrastructure of the wilderness community? A breach that had no valid basis when Moses and Aaron had been charged with it in Num 16.3,<sup>27</sup> but now, they are guilty as charged. Furthermore, if

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Numbers 20.2-13," in *Understanding the Word: Essays in Honor of Bernhard Anderson*, ed. James T. Butler, Edgar W. Conrad and Ben C. Ollenburger, JSOT Supplement Series, no. 37 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 133, states as the thesis of the article "that the relationship between Moses and Aaron is a focal concern of Numbers 20.2-13 and that a number of theological and redactional problems associated with the passage can at least be comprehended, if not solved, by keeping this focal concern at the forefront."

<sup>24</sup> See M. Margaliot, "The Transgression of Moses and Aaron – Num. 20.1-13," *JQR* 74, no. 2 (1983), 196-228, who attempts to deal with the text without making source critical divisions. However, his harmonistic approach loses credibility when he proposes that the plural verbs in 20.4, 5 refer to Moses and YHWH rather than Moses and Aaron. (See, pages 203-4.)

<sup>25</sup> Plurals or both Aaron and Moses are referred to in verses: 2, 4, 5, 6 (although the first verb in the verse is singular the actual subject is both Aaron and Moses), 8aβ (Both Moses and Aaron are to speak to the rock!), 10, 12; the singular with Moses or specifically name on Moses as the referent is used in verses: 3, 7 (YHWH addresses only to Moses), 8aα (The second part commands both Aaron and Moses with a singular verb.), 8b (The bringing out water out of rock and giving it out to drink is in the singular.), 9, 11.

<sup>26</sup> I understand the קהל and the עדה to be basically synonymous in the book of Numbers. Both therefore should be understood as the collective governing body.

<sup>27</sup> I ohfink, "Original Sins in the Priestly Historical Narratives," 113-14, argues that the sin of Aaron and Moses is that of "lack of faith and trust," based on verses 10 and 12. Sakenfeld, "Theological and Redactional Problems in Numbers 20.2-13," 147-50; Eugene Arden, "How Moses Failed God," *JBL* 76 (1957), 50-52; and M. Margaliot, "The Transgression of Moses and Aaron," 211-21, all find the sin of Aaron and Moses in the words that were spoken.

<sup>28</sup> Note the use of קדש and the combination of עדה and קהל in 16.3.

the intended rod that was supposed to be taken and made visible to the קהל was Aaron's rod of Num 17,<sup>28</sup> then the striking of the rock by Moses with this rod would have further implicated Aaron for allowing Moses to use it.

My contention, in terms of this paper, is to highlight a possible connection to the issue of leadership and this difficult pericope. I argue that the text reveals a specific case in which Moses and Aaron fail in their role as leaders. This failure was specifically related to the legally recognized collective assembly. In spite of the fact that throughout the narratives of Numbers, the קהל/עדה do not fare well, a defamation of the congregation, a breach of leadership hierarchy by Moses in terms of the use of Aaron's famous rod, and disobedience in the commanded details would cut both Aaron and Moses off.

Saltenfeld concludes her article on Num 20.2-13, which is based on source and redaction criticism, by highlighting what the P source is attempting to say:

Whatever our modern opinions about the gravity of some specific action, P understood what transpired as disbelief and as a failure to sanctify God before the people. For God's chosen leadership, no sin could be more serious than that which by lack of trust impedes God's mercy to the community. The tragic and painful warning which P offers to Israel's leadership in the crisis of the exile echoes down through the ages and stands as reminder even to us today. For the sake of the people, God needs faithful leadership. Because God cares for the people, unfaithful leadership, especially any leadership which disdains or disparages the flock, will not finally endure.<sup>29</sup>

## 6. Moses

There is no doubt that Moses is the primary leader of the בני ישראל throughout the narratives of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

Benjamin Uffenheimer paints the picture of Moses and his leadership with unique brush strokes. He writes:

The narrators of these stories picture Moses' life as an ongoing effort to educate and lead the people along a divinely ordained path, in accordance with directives communicated to

<sup>28</sup> Propp, "The Rod of Aaron and the Sin of Moses," 22-23.

<sup>29</sup> Saltenfeld, "Theological and Redactional Problems in Numbers 20.2-13," 151

him from time to time by God. They seem to be occupied more with Moses' failures – which were numerous and frequent – than with his successes; but in the final analysis these failures add up to a monumental success: an entire nation was subject to the rule of its divine king and opened its hearts to His words and His commandments. Balancing the narrators' inner fervor was a tendency to theological reflection, thanks to which they refrained from projecting Moses into the realm of the mythical and the superhuman, as happened so coincidentally to the legendary heroes of other nations."<sup>30</sup>

The centrality of Moses' failures are incontestable, however, it would be wrong to view the stories as utilizing the classic *deus ex machina*, in some mechanical way. Ari Zivotofsky, for example offers a series of "preselection" stories (Exod 2.11-12, 13-14, 15-19; 3.1-4) in which Moses is depicted as the ideal candidate to lead the בני ישראל out of Egypt and through the wilderness. He understands that there is a common theme that can be pieced together from these texts, i.e., "Moses is consistently portrayed as not only caring and concerned for others, but also as willing and ready to act upon those feelings. He was the true Empath."<sup>31</sup> Zivotofsky is not alone in this type of analysis. George Coats earlier wrote concerning Exod 2.11-22 that the intention of the pericope was to describe:

... the heroic Moses in order to depict his leadership as an event that unites leader and led in a very intimate bond. The leader does not simply tolerate the people who live under his care. This shepherd of the sheep identifies with his people so that their suffering becomes his suffering, their cry for redemption his cry.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin Uffenheimer, *Early Prophecy in Israel*, trans. David Louvish (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1999), 197.

<sup>31</sup> Ari Z. Zivotofsky, "The Leadership Qualities of Moses," *Judaism* 43, no. 3 (1994), 259.

<sup>32</sup> George W. Coats, "Moses as a Model for Ministry: An Exegesis of Exodus 2.11-22," in *The Moses Tradition*, JSOT Supplement Series, no. 161 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 112. Also see his earlier article, George W. Coats, "The Birth Tale & the Midianite Tradition," in *Moses: Heroic Man, Man of God*, JSOT Supplement Series, no. 57 (Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 49-53.

The birth story in Exod 2.1-10 may be even more proleptic. Scholarship has attempted to interpret this pericope based on the birth of Sargon of Akkad.<sup>33</sup> Putting to the side Brevard Child's view that the *Vorlage* of the story is "the common ancient custom of exposing the unwanted children,"<sup>34</sup> Coats proposes that this "birth-adoption tale" of Moses qualifies as a heroic tale because the child is identified with his people.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, "the tale is heroic because of the mood of anxiety that threatens the birth of the child, a mood broken only by the careful planning of the child's family and, of course, the stroke of fortune which the audience can understand as the hand of God."<sup>36</sup> Moses therefore is ushered into the narrative as a leader of heroic proportions, called to save the בני ישראל.

It is this leader, with heroic potentials that stands out in graphic realism, when he is portrayed as repeatedly failing. Once again, Coats has captured well this aspect, the failure in Moses' ministry from the get-go, in Exod 5. He understands Moses' first attempt to accomplish the task to deliver the בני ישראל as a gross failure,<sup>37</sup> one in which the people go as far as to bring a suit against him, therefore Moses and YHWH are viewed as having failed.<sup>38</sup> However, and this is the crucial element in Coats' proposition concerning Moses as a failure. He writes:

When the failure occurs, the hero goes back to the drawing board and creates a new plan. And then he tries again. Indeed, the hero receives a new plan from the hand of God. When God's plan for saving the people fail, then God tries a new plan. The hero demonstrates the tenacity of God to pursue the plan of salvation despite repeated failures in the plan."<sup>39</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Beginning with Hugo Gressmann, *Mose und seine Zeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913), 1-16. See also the significant article by Brevard S. Childs, "The Birth of Moses," JBL 84, no. 2 (1965), 109-122. More recently James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 136-138, provides an important update.

<sup>34</sup> Childs, "The Birth of Moses," 110.

<sup>35</sup> Coats, "The Birth Tale & the Midianite Tradition," 47.

<sup>36</sup> Coats, "The Birth Tale & the Midianite Tradition," 47-8.

<sup>37</sup> George W. Coats, "The Failure of the Hero: Moses as a Model for Ministry," in *The Moses Tradition*, JSOT Supplement Series, no. 161 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 116-122.

<sup>38</sup> Propp, *Exodus 1-18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 259, on the other hand, views Moses' failure in Exod 5 as possibly caused by "Moses' inattention to his instruction."

<sup>39</sup> Coats, "The Failure of the Hero: Moses as a Model for Ministry," 120-21.

This pattern is heavily concentrated through Exod 10, but it takes on a paradigmatic stature for Coats. "This pattern of failure and renewed effort to gain success by approaching the issue from a new direction marks the entire history of God's efforts to save the people."<sup>40</sup> This then is the picture of Moses in the book of Numbers as well. His heroism is based on his empathetic care for the בני ישראל along with a cycle of failures and renewed efforts. The harsh stories of confrontation with all levels of governance, i.e., the עדה, tribal leaders/chieftains, the elders, the rebellious faction with Korah, some Levites, Dathan and Abiram, the 250 tribal leaders, Miriam and Aaron, all may be understood within this paradigm. The clash-point may not always be as dramatic as those already discussed. The intriguing Zelophahad's daughters episodes (Num 27.1-11; 36.1-12) are a case-in-point for a less volatile failure and regrouping process. The initial issue was "the question of the preservation of the father's name (chap. 27),"<sup>41</sup> which will be followed by "the question of property rights (chap. 36)."<sup>42</sup> Both of these issues had not been foreseen by Moses the leader and even more crucial, the second, in spite of the oracular decision (27.5ff.) had not been foreseen. The processing of a renewed plan based on oracular consultation was necessary in this harmonious inquiry.

An untapped area of research that may be applicable to the study of Moses' leadership is both Moses' laments and his intercessory prayers as presented in the Pentateuchal narratives. It is in light of Moses' first "on-the-job" failure (Exod 5) that he begins to lament and intercede (Exod 5.22-23). It may be argued that the lamenting and/or intercession are an important first step toward a renewed plan. The rubric here is that of a "loyal opposition," in contrast to a disloyal revolutionary. Coats, for example reflects on Moses' role in Exod 32-34 and writes, "the tradition presents Moses as a creative innovator who defends his people at the risk of the favor he holds with God. The basis of the relationship is, to be sure, a mutual trust. And out of the assumptions established by the trust, God apparently takes the audacious intercession as the work of a loyal devotee, a loyal servant."<sup>43</sup>

Two of what may be considered the most important verses to understand Moses' leadership as depicted in the book of Numbers are 12.3 and 12.6-8.

<sup>40</sup> Coats, "The Failure of the Hero: Moses as a Model for Ministry," 122.

<sup>41</sup> Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, "Zelophahad's Daughters," *Perspectives of Religious Studies* 14, no. 5 (1988), 40.

<sup>42</sup> Sakenfeld, "Zelophahad's Daughters," 40.

<sup>43</sup> George W. Coats, "The King's Loyal Opposition: Obedience and Authority in Exodus 32-34," in *The Moses Tradition*, JSOT Supplement Series, no. 161

The first, 12.3 "Now the man, Moses was exceedingly miserable more than any human being on the surface of the earth." I have followed Cleon Rogers in translating עני as "miserable." He has subjected the word to an etymological, overall biblical usages and contextual investigation. He concludes that the "meaning of the word and its specific context make it appear that the best understanding of Num 12.3 is that Moses was saying that in light of the burden of the people and the complaint of his family he was the most 'miserable' person in the world."<sup>44</sup> Coats also finds the translation "meek" as problematic. He sees it as incongruous with the depiction of Moses when confronted by opposition to his leadership, especially in Numbers 16.<sup>45</sup> He argues that the root 'nw connoted "responsibility or integrity,"<sup>46</sup> and it implies a loyalty to God in leadership. He concludes this study with three theological implications:

- (i) The legendary quality of leadership exemplified by Moses does not call for a deficiency of spirit and courage, a meek, retiring, unassertive leadership. It calls rather for a strong, effective, responsible leadership. (ii) That leadership is not a strong silent

(Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 73. For further study in this area see: Samuel E. Balentine, "The Prophet as Intercessor: A Reassessment," *JBL* 103, no. 2 (1984), 161-73; Samuel E. Balentine, "Prayer in the Wilderness Traditions: In Pursuit of Divine Justice," *HAR* 9 (1985), 53-74; Samuel E. Balentine, "Prayer for Justice in the Old Testament: Theodicy and Theology," *CBO* 51, no. 4 (1989), 597-616; Samuel E. Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of Divine-Human Dialogue*. Overtures to Biblical Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); Patrick D. Miller, Jr., *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 262-280; Michael Widiner, *Moses, God and the Dynamics of Intercessory Prayer: A Study of Exodus 32-34 and Numbers 13-14*, Forschung zum Alten Testament, no. 2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004).

<sup>44</sup> Cleon Rogers, "Moses: Meek or Miserable?" *JETS* 29, no. 3 (1986), 263. Rogers also explains the translation as "meek" as derived from the LXX *prauj* which has a broader semantic range. This combined with its usage in Zech 9.9 and the later development in Judaism, forged the notion: "Humility was a noble quality, and Moses was an important person in Judaism." N.B. Stephen B. Dawes, "Numbers 12.3: What was special about Moses?" *The Bible Translator* 41, no. 3 (1990), 336-340 argues for the traditional rendering. While Edgar Kellenberger, "Der Geplagte Mose: Pladoyer für ein nicht-moralisierendes Verständnis von wn' [und prauj]," *Protokolle zur Bibel* 6 (1997), 81-86, blames moralizing/spiritualizing tendencies in translations that enable them to follow the etymological and contextual evidence.

<sup>45</sup> George W. Coats, "Humility and Honor: A Moses Legend in Numbers 12," in *The Moses Tradition*, JSOT Supplement Series, no. 161 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 89.

<sup>46</sup> Coats, "Humility and Honor: A Moses Legend in Numbers 12," 92.

type. Rather, it involves articulation of needs among the led. (iii) Loyalty within the scope of such leadership belongs to God. But loyalty to God means loyalty in responsibility to the hero's people. Moses does not show his obedience to God by a meek acceptance of Miriam's punishment as the obvious will of God. To the contrary, his obedience emerges only when he stands face to face with God and defends his own.<sup>47</sup>

Coats' etymology based translation seems somewhat weak compared to Roger's well-worked study, however the theological implications may be valid since they represent a broader contextual reading.

An important corollary is the dovetailing of the interpretation of 12.3 with the poem in 12.6-8. I have translated this poem before as:

- A. Please<sup>48</sup> Hear my words!  
 B. If there should be a prophet of yours, of Yahweh,<sup>49</sup>  
 C. In a vision, I will make myself known to him,  
 D. In a dream, I will speak to him.  
 E. Not so my servant Moses,  
 E'. In all my house, he is most faithful.  
 D'. Mouth to Mouth, I speak to him,  
 C'. In clarity<sup>50</sup> and not in riddles,  
 B'. But he looks on the form of Yahweh.  
 A'. Why were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?

<sup>47</sup> Coats, "Humility and Honor: A Moses Legend in Numbers 12," 98.

<sup>48</sup> Timothy Wilt, "A Sociolinguistic Analysis of NĀ'"), *VT*, 46, (1996), 237-255, has argued that the particle nā' "is indeed a politeness marker" that should be translated by the English "please." However, in the case of šim'û nā' in Numbers a difference is noted. He writes, "all the Numbers speech situations, that na4) is being used by a divine or political superior that normally would not use na4) in addressing his subjects, na' ) seems to be used sarcastically. . . ." pp. 254-255.

<sup>49</sup> This line which reads אִם-יִהְיֶה נְבִיאָהֶם יְהוָה, literally "if your prophet was Yahweh," is obviously corrupted. Although Freedman (David Noel Freedman, *Pottery, Poetry and Prophecy*, (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1980), 167. Originally, "Early Israelite Poetry and Historical Reconstructions," *Symposia Celebrating the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Founding of the American Schools of Oriental Research (1900-1975)*, ed. Frank Moore Cross (Cambridge, Massachusetts: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1979), 237, has attempted to understand it as a broken construct chain without amending the text, Ehrlich through Levine (*ibid.*, 329-331) has been followed. Here then the "suffixed noun nebī'akem" is viewed as "an anticipatory genitive."

<sup>50</sup> I have followed F. M. Cross' emendation of harmw to harmb, with the support of 4QNum<sup>a</sup>, 4QNum<sup>b</sup>, G and Syr. in his *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, 204.

This poem centers on the revelatory levels that are found in the prophetic, differentiating the degrees of revelation. Line B which I have translated, "If there should be a prophet of yours, of Yahweh" is most interesting. It may be contextually presumed that the prophets mentioned are Miriam and Aaron." However, I would argue that Miriam and Aaron are instead represented by the second person, masculine plural suffix, i.e. "of yours." In this case, Miriam and Aaron are viewed as Israelite leaders who rely on their own community of prophets. In this way Miriam and Aaron's use of their own prophetic advisers are contrasted with the direct and deeper level of revelation that is imparted to Moses. There is insufficient evidence to fully develop the role in governance that this prophetic system implies.

It is however, quite obvious that Moses' capacity for prophetic revelation and its use in governance far exceeds these prophets. Yahweh's statement that Moses was his servant and that he was the most faithful one in Yahweh's house makes the poem speak of Moses' unique authority. Kselman cites Akkadian parallels to Moses' loyal servanthood. He writes,

First, a century before Moses, Canaanite vassals writing to Pharaoh could speak of themselves as loyal servants (*urad kitti*) of the suzerain. Second, a prayer inscribed on a Kassite seal describes the owner as a loyal servant (*ardu kinu*) of the god Lugalbanda.<sup>52</sup>

This means that Moses is the loyal servant of the "divine suzerain Yahweh."

However, the term servant may well be attested more frequently as a title for a king. Antti Laato writes, "Another common title for the king in the Akkadian inscriptions is (*w*)*ardu*, "servant." It is often connected with the name of the god: "the servant of N.N." or with a suffix which refers to the divinity."<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the Ugaritic epic, Kirta utilizes the same epithet:

Who will bear a child for Kirta,  
A lad for the Servant of El. (Column III, 48-49)

Kirta awakes – it's a dream!

<sup>51</sup> Uffenheimer, *Early Prophecy in Israel*, 202, has, I believe, wrongly argued that the poem is dealing with "non-Israelite prophets, of whom the outstanding representative is Balaam."

<sup>52</sup> J. S. Kselman, "A Note on Numbers XII 6-8," VT 26 (1976), 503.

<sup>53</sup> Antti Laato, *The Servant of YHWH and Cyrus: A Reinterpretation of the Exilic Messianic Programme in Isaiah 40-55*, Coniectanea Biblica, Old Testament Series, 35 (Stockholm, Sweden: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1992), 54.

### The Servant of El – a vision! (Column III, 50-51)<sup>54</sup>

The Kirta parallel is even more interesting because Kirta desires to have an heir and therefore needs to have a "new" wife. The Numbers pericope begins with a controversy over Moses' Cushite wife. However, the issue of an heir is not mentioned explicitly and therefore lacks any parallel. Also Kirta receives his communication from El via the medium of dreams and visions. It is tempting to wonder if a polemic is behind the use of "servant" combined with the revelatory agencies of dreams and visions to say nothing of cryptic riddles.

In spite of the use of "servant" as a royal epithet, it is probably more prudent to be cautious as to its applications to Moses in this pericope. Donald B. Redford has focused more on the phrase "in all my house, he is most faithful" and questions its meaning. He writes,

He-who-is-over-the-house" (i.e., the palace), if derived from a literal rendering of an Egyptian original, poses a conundrum, for the *hry-pr* was a much less important officer, and "vizier" with whom the title is often compared enjoyed an infinitely broader purview as head of the entire civil service.<sup>55</sup>

This argument would return to Kselman's contention that Moses is seen as a "loyal servant." These reflections should give pause to the simplistic application of "servant leadership" slogans that have not grappled with the biblical materials.

Overall the poem accentuates the "means" of divine revelation as the point of differentiation between others and Moses. The phrases: "my words," "in a vision," "I will make myself known to him," "in a dream," "I will speak to him," "mouth to mouth," "in clarity," "not in riddles", "he looks on the form of Yahweh," all focus on modes of divine self-revelation. The awkward phrase *מה אל-פה אל-פנים* in Exod 33.11. There the text adds an explanatory "as one speaks to a friend," making the point that Moses has a unique intimacy with God. Here also the issue is that Moses has this type of "deep" understanding that is not known by the prophets. The "form of Yahweh" (*חַמְצוֹת יְהוָה*) that Moses sees is usually contrasted with other terms

<sup>54</sup> Translation by Edward L. Greenstein in Simon B. Parker, ed., *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, SBL Writings from the Ancient World Series, Vol. 9 (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1997), 18.

<sup>55</sup> Donald B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 371.

so that Exod 33.20 is no longer problematic.<sup>56</sup> Yet, Moses' relationship with Yahweh is such that his leadership is given priority.

Rodney Hutton capitalizes on the servant rubric and writes:

The picture of Moses as "chief steward" does not represent the vested interest of some narrowly defined social group, whether the priests, prophets, or royal administration. The analogy of the "chief steward" can result only from theological reflection, which in fact *refused* to allow Moses to be domesticated or co-opted by any single group or party. His authority is not simply unique: it is *singularly* unique and is identified with no institution - neither the "word of the prophet nor the "law" of the priest nor the "counsel" of the elder nor the "judgment" of the King. To come in contact with Moses was to come in contact with the very primal form of legitimation itself.<sup>57</sup>

It is exactly this singularity, the Mosaic uniqueness, that must inform any application of Moses' leadership experiences to modern day leadership. The narrative depictions of his failures and persevering to renew plans, his royal opposition in lament and intercession, and even the necessity of a revelatory factor in leadership may be applicable to the modern world. However, there is always a limit to the utilization of his singularity in leadership. In fact, the narrative may depict a Moses who tended to downplay this component. Uffenheimer, I believe, has misinterpreted Moses' difficult situation and his leadership style when he writes,

In fact, the Bible by no means portrays Moses as a decisive, strong hero, exercising personal initiative. such properties figure only in the legend of his youth: his mediation between two quarreling Hebrews, his rebuking of the stronger of the two and his slaying of the Egyptian taskmaster. This impulsive streak reappears in Moses' reaction to the Golden Calf, when he destroys it and orders all its worshipers killed (Ex. 32:15-30). At all other times, Moses is always dependent upon the word of God. So much so that at times of crisis, when the people appeal to him for help, or when they mutter against him and rebel against his leadership, he is helpless and cries to God for help. The

<sup>56</sup> Gray, A *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers*, 126; Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 96.

<sup>57</sup> Rodney R. Hutton, *Charisma and Authority in Israelite Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 34-5.

miracles and wonders he performs are not the result of his own esoteric knowledge; they are generally preceded by a divine command, telling him what to do.<sup>58</sup>

The narrative characterization of Moses should not be viewed as a strong Moses that developed into a weak leader. Instead, the complex institutional infrastructure must first be taken into consideration. This infrastructure may have had a narratological purpose. In T. S. Frymer-Kensky's depiction of the בני ישראל, we may have a hint. She writes:

These people who came out of Egypt had been "chosen" by performing an act of faith at a considerable risk to themselves. Lest we think that they were in this way (although not genetically) superior, the Book of Exodus immediately presents a "history" of the group which shows that they did not have the ability to sustain a life of trust. All of the events subsequent to the actual exodus reveal the people as insecure, unable to endure a life of risk and, in effect the people as insecure, unprepared for a life of freedom. The narrative portions of Exodus and Numbers are almost a case study of the evolution of such a group. The "plotline" demonstrates their initial lack of the qualities necessary for independence and their resultant ever-increasing dependence on their leader, along the lines of an authoritarian "cult." It dramatizes the crisis to which this led, but then details the subsequent steps that were taken to prevent the group from becoming and staying an authoritarian "cult."<sup>59</sup>

I would contend that if any equivocation is detected in Moses' leadership it is due to the characterization of the בני ישראל and the leadership that was necessary to prevent a cult-like dependency on an authoritarian leader. The complex institutional infrastructure provided a parameter for Moses to lead the בני ישראל. As Propp has suggested Moses' sin in the infamous Numbers 20.2-13 may have been an infringement on these parameters. He argues

. . . the sin of Moses is striking the crag with Aaron's rod and addressing the people instead of displaying the rod and

<sup>58</sup> Uffenheimer, *Early Prophecy in Israel*, 204-5.

<sup>59</sup> Tikva Simone Frymer-Kensky, "Moses and the Cults: The Question of Religious Leadership," *Judaism* 34, no. 4 (1985), 446.

commanding the rock to produce water... this rod was a monitory sign to the rebellious Israelites. It was also a symbol of the primacy of the tribe of Levi and in particular of the exclusive priesthood of the house of Aaron, which had just been confirmed in the Korah rebellion. In illegitimately employing the rod of Aaron, the Levite Moses disobeyed Yahweh and deserved death.<sup>60</sup>

Even, after this failure, Moses is able to regroup and plays a decisive role in the appointment of his successor in Num 27.12-23, showing his faithful and tenacious leadership.

### 7. Conclusion & Applications

1. Moses as a heroic leader is a difficult model that needs to be applied with caution due to his canonical role. He has been depicted as a "superhero," with a singular power that is not intended to be repeated. Furthermore, the social-political infrastructure as can be pieced together from the book of Numbers makes quick applications questionable.

2. Although Moses has been used to promote a "servant leadership" model, the meaning of servant in light of Numbers 12.6-8 is quite different. It refers to Moses' unique position as having a special or singular leadership position. It may be that the special needs of the people of Israel at that time, combined with the positive restrictions of a social-political infrastructure that gives us a picture of a weaker Moses.

3. Quite often in Fundamentalist and Pentecostal/Charismatic circles, leaders, if they have been "appointed" or "elected" into a leadership role/office are viewed as being divinely authorized, but the fallibility of these leaders are not taken seriously enough. The book of Numbers and the Bible as a whole challenge such naive, Christian cultic-like notions. Numbers teaches, "All Leaders are Fallible!" Moses, Aaron, the tribal leaders, and even the *עֲרֵה* are all found wanting at one time or another. The importance of regrouping and renewing the plan in a tenacious manner is the lesson that Moses' leadership teaches.

4. Furthermore, when Moses and/or Aaron come under attack, they rely on divine affirmation rather than taking legal or even military actions via the *עֲרֵה* or judge/military tribal leadership. The demise of Korah, Dathan, Abiram and the 250 tribal leaders are a good case-in-point. It is divine intervention that both affirms the divinely appointed leaders and administers justice to the rebels. A corollary is that in cases when the *עֲרֵה*, בני ישראל, or

the Miriam and Aaron contest Moses' leadership or murmur, it is Moses as an empathetic leader that is shown in the narratives. Here Moses plays the role of the loyal opposition that intercedes on their behalf.

5. The book of Numbers attests to the importance of a deep and rich variety of leadership infrastructure. The *עֲרֵה* speaks volumes against a dictatorial model of leadership. It also checks the tendency to develop an elite leadership group that does not take seriously the *hoi polloi*. Furthermore, the possibility that propheticism was found even in the narratives of the wilderness wandering yields a grassroots check on a pyramidal leadership structure.

6. The importance of a revelatory element in leadership, although difficult to apply, is another factor in the presentation of leadership in the book of Numbers. Once again, the singularity of Mosaic revelation must be taken into account.

The importance of leadership in the book of Numbers is now clearly evident. The social-political infrastructure works with and at times against the singular leader, Moses. We may mistakenly think that it was just Moses who exhibited the heroic leadership in the wilderness narratives, but I contend that it was the whole community, the בני ישראל, failing and yet renewing their commitment to YHWH.

<sup>60</sup> Propp, "The Rod of Aaron and the Sin of Moses," JBL 107, no. 1 (1988), 26.